



# Storytelling for a republic of childhood: rebranding China's national images in children's literature

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## Abstract

This article delineates the discursive trajectory of Chinese children's literature and explicates its specific storytelling strategies to integrate nation and narration, tradition and modernity, nationalism and internationalism. At the intersection of nation building, storytelling and comparative literature, it is argued that Chinese children's literature, developed from a comparative perspective and as an alternative vision of Paul Hazard's "universal republic of childhood," not only manifests paradoxical literary features, given the asymmetry of global literary distribution and power relations, but also converges with and enriches world children's literature in China's ongoing process of raising its cultural soft power. The paradox inherent in globalising Chinese children's literature leads to the reconceptualisation of translation and cross-cultural readability of genres as essential to a richer construct of national images on the world literary map.

**Keywords** Chinese children's literature · Comparative literature · Storytelling · National image · Translation · Bildungsroman · Genre

## Introduction

In the 1930s, Paul Hazard entertained an idealistic view in his *Books, Children & Men* that children worldwide can understand each other through the exchange of children's books from all nations: "smilingly the pleasant books of childhood cross all the frontiers, there is no duty to be paid on inspiration" (Hazard, 1944, p. 147). By celebrating the community in which children from all nations read together, Hazard's vision pays respect to a boundless world of imagination, freedom and childhood

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innocence: “Every country gives and every country receives—innumerable are the exchanges—and so it comes about that in our first impressionable years the universal republic of childhood is born” (Hazard, p. 146). Envisaged during World War II, the “universal republic of childhood” illustrates Hazard’s hope for children’s literature as a springboard for internationalism, which, however, is rooted in idealism without identifying various cross-border issues such as language, culture and politics. Straying from Hazard’s conceptual vision, Chinese children’s literature is less an idealistic hypothesis than a result of various forms of exchange, translation and circulation, which furnishes us with a vivid perspective on the transcultural complexity of worlding a peripheral children’s literature.

Chinese children’s literature, above all, is inherently and indelibly a comparative literary practice, since it is a literature that first arose through the translation and interaction of dissonant ideologies that oscillate between nationalism and internationalism, between local cultural tradition and Western literary aesthetics in the early twentieth century (Farquhar, 1999). Such a comparative perspective that continues to illuminate different stages of its development to date, in essence, is to engage in the service of China’s nation-building project at home and abroad. The targeted symbiosis of nation and narration reached its heyday in 2013 when President Xi Jinping advocated for “telling China’s stories well” at a national conference (2013, p. 2). Much of the impetus for this storytelling renewal comes from China’s rich literary heritage, as well as an ideological revisionist way of rebranding the country’s national image in international society. The storytelling enterprise, henceforth, purports to enact an open and righteous plea for nation building by adamantly defining particular themes to be integrated into transmissible stories about China’s positive national images in the world.

Storytelling is a dynamic and interactive event that can strengthen individual, community, national and international bonds. “To achieve an amplitude that information lacks,” as Benjamin (2006) famously states, “half the art of storytelling [is to] keep a story free from explanation as one reproduces it” (p. 366). Does the literary project of “telling China’s stories well” recognise such amplitude, thereby piquing international readers’ interest and promoting cross-cultural affinity? What is the meaning and merit of these stories for children as they are positioned against, or juxtaposed with, Western stories? Moreover, what are the main storytelling strategies adopted to elevate Chinese children’s literature on the world literary map? Within the contexts of nation, storytelling and comparative literature, this article delineates the trajectory of how China’s national images are discursively constructed in its own comparative children’s literature. It further examines a series of topical texts to explicate the specific strategies in (re)branding Chinese children’s literature and how the genre is variously shaped as a symbiosis of nation and narration, tradition and modernity, nationalism and internationalism. Through a historical overview and textual analysis, the study sheds light on the possibility of globalising a peripheral literature, one that emphasises a protectionist notion of childhood and subscribes to systematic moral education.

## Chinese children's literature in the process of nation building

Chinese children's literature came to the literary scene to disrupt and clash with negative cultural heritage elements. As Farquhar (1999) writes, "modern Chinese children's literature was cast as an ideological tool to reshape China" during the New Culture Movement between 1915 and 1923 (p. 1). Prior to this period, it was not yet developed as an autonomous genre, nor was childhood respected as an independent stage of life, but a trite indoctrinated preparation for adulthood (Farquhar, pp. 26–27). Behind the progress of Chinese children's literature was the force of a national rejuvenation motivated by translating Western texts into Chinese, primarily embraced as a means through which Western ideas and ideals were imported and built into Chinese modernity. As Wang (2008) points out, it was during this period that "Chinese literature started to have a consciousness of totality and internationalisation" (p. 108). This was also the period that saw the rise of China's ambivalent attitude towards modernity—a necessary step to break free from the shackles of its "semi-colonial" and "semi-feudal" past, as well as a "hazardous terrain of ideological contestation fraught with ambiguities and contradictions" (Wang & Sun, 2008, p. 4). Translations from the West, such as Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, the fairy tales of Hans Christian Anderson and Oscar Wilde, proved to liberate Chinese children from the heavily indoctrinated Confucian dogma in their native readings, and pushed the liberal educational agenda among co-existing contradictory forces in China. Lu Xun, Zhou Zuoren, and Zheng Zhenduo, to name a few, are among those writers and translators who favored child-centred education and sought in translation to scrap the degenerate cultural legacy and rebuild knowledge resources. They were committed to cultivating a new children's literature along "a cosmopolitan patriotic impulse" (Shen, 2015, p. 546), whose endeavours can be seen as the prelude to, or the outcome of, China's early literary ambition to find a proper place in the global system with its social-communal particularities. Concomitantly, such a Chinese form of international nationalism related itself to the development of a brand-new national image for a globalising world.

China's hope of emerging from the world as a promising country is well inscribed in Tang Xiaopu's "Chrysanthemum" (1922/2009), a short fairy tale published during the New Culture Movement. In the story, the daughter of the Creator, Flower Fairy, hesitates about the country to which the first-class flower, Chrysanthemum, should be delivered as a gift. To her, the country should be "a super country with resourceful people, great weather, and first-class development" (p. 61). The Creator nominates China, but Flower Fairy suspects that Chinese people would prosper too slowly due to their mild temperament and rigid obedience to the rules. The Creator responds that "China is indeed growing too slowly, but he is moving forward step by step. If he thrives in the future, he will be more prosperous than any other country" (Tang, 1922/2009, p. 61). Although this patriotic pride, moralistic as it sounds, seems subversive of some of the worthy goals of internationalism, it is abstracted from the love of one's own country and people, which is, in and of itself, a token of love for humanity.

Zheng Zhenduo (1898–1958), a pioneering and prolific children's writer and translator, especially embodies the "transnational" character of children's literature

in the New Culture Movement. Zheng (as cited in Shen 2014) remarks that “love for mankind and the advocacy for national liberation co-exist peacefully [...] There is no contradiction between the two” (p. 7), which echoes Hazard’s (1944) statement that “children’s books repudiate instinctively antagonisms and hatred, mixing indissolubly with a sense of patriotism a sense of humanity” (p. 144). Despite scholarly claims about Zheng’s cosmopolitan consciousness (Shen, 2014, 2015), he also upholds a fundamentally conservative credo that “children’s literature is the best means to convey moral precepts and necessary knowledge in childhood” (Zheng, 1922/1989, p. 212). To a certain extent, his recommendation of fables, such as *Reynard the Fox*, as an ideal approach to strengthening moral impact is reminiscent of Locke’s (1968) firm stance on the positive influence of the pedagogy of *Aesop’s Fables*—“the only Book almost that I know fit for Children” (p. 259). Still, whereas Locke’s view on the guiding effect of fables was later rebuffed in Rousseau’s (1911) argument that a “child is not only amused by the apologue but misled by it [the false system of morals]” (p. 91), Zheng’s recognition of fables with didactic advantages has held its abiding appeal in China.

From its inception, the comparative lens through which Chinese children’s literature is viewed and developed has shed light on the degree of authorial emphasis on “play or preach,” and the inclination to synthesise individualistic values. Specifically, the tension between moral tradition and literary modernity, localism and cosmopolitanism is perennially felt in this subject domain—a site of negotiating the dominant influences of the West on Chinese autonomous aesthetic forms, techniques and ideologies. However, during the Maoist era (1949–1976), when China was frequently embroiled in political campaigns, including the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), the generic ethos underlying the socialist representation of childhood was inward-looking nationalist. Simultaneously, in the 1950s, Western Europe and the US promoted international exchange deriving from Hazard’s “universal republic of childhood” (O’Sullivan, 2005, p. 128), which substantially cemented the foundation of Euro-American centric literary internationalisation. As China forestalled its internationalisation process, forging a socialist national identity was a priority on China’s educational agenda during the period, for which children’s works scored on socialist values with an ingrained sense of seriousness, uniformity and duty, in lieu of playfulness and personal spontaneity.

A case in point is Feng Zikai (1898–1975), an artist and writer famous for portraying children’s play, who drew heavily from Chinese and Western intellectual, aesthetic and moral traditions. His creative portfolio, however, reveals a drastic transformation from a personal, lyrical and humanistic approach in the 1920s and the 1930s to a highly passionate and nationalistic one during the Maoist era. In a series of sketches titled “Investigation” (*yanjiu*) published in 1927 (Feng, 2001a, pp. 43–46), a child is shown, in Feng’s minimal brushstrokes, fumbling with his hands inside a spittoon, switching an oil lamp on to study its possibly magical function, pressing the ink from a fountain pen and squeezing a tube of toothpaste for exploratory play. All of these behaviours associated with a child’s mischief are endowed with fresh conceits to connote individual play as a form of free experimentation. An artistic shift, however, is observed from such a visual portrayal of play for sheer fun and intuitive creativity to that of goal-oriented collective labour that engaged a group of children

in the 1960s, such as planting trees, sewing, and chanting national slogans (Feng, 2001b). The latter was more impelled than the New Culture Movement by a patriotic desire to foster national pride and unity in the nation-building process. Indeed, during this period art and literature were dipped in high socialist realism, serving to model children's socialist behaviours and rehearse their personalities.

After China's opening to the outside world in the late 1970s, its children's literature again fell under the spell of Westernization, yet there were conscious attempts not to lose sight of mobilising local educational resources for the country's international literary modernity. This tolerant socio-political environment enabled the revitalisation of the "child-centred" perspective and the creative diversities it elicited. Fairy tale, an imported genre, became a vicarious outlet of this representational shift and people's hope for political recuperation and individualistic expressions. Two schools of fairy tales, the *lyrical school* and the *bustling school*, took shape in the 1980s. The lyrical school stresses the aesthetic beauty of fairy tales, whereas the bustling school weighs on children's sense of play and entertainment. The former is less favoured, as its fairy tales are overloaded with didactic messages, while the latter, represented by Zheng Yuanjie (1955- ), China's most famous fairy tale writer, strives to cater to the fantastic needs of children and gains pervasive recognition (You, 2017, p. 95). The adapted animations of Zheng's *Shuke and Beita* series especially have become collective childhood memories for the post-1980s generation (approximately 240 million people born between 1980 and 1990). This internal branding strategy soon promoted external alignment with more Western bestsellers that were translated, read and assimilated into the local production. The *Harry Potter* series, for instance, has granted Chinese readers access to the gothic magic mode, which in turn, has brought about local authorial intentions to engage the gothic semiotically or thematically to extend the general scope of children's reading (You, 2017).

Storytelling has been a *sine qua non* for China's modernisation over the past hundred years. Despite the varying effects of socio-historical changes, the momentum of storytelling for international integration is to reconcile two seemingly dichotomous forces: didacticism and pleasures, individualistic and collective interests. Moral education, camouflaged in multimodal forms, gradually interchanges with a tendency to diminish moral transgression in reading materials for children, which ultimately distinguishes Chinese children's literature from its Western counterpart it has been emulating. As Tang (1989) suggests, "Western children's literature focuses on individuals' subjectivity and explores the means and meaning of their ontological existence, whereas Chinese children's literature is subject to the ethical tradition which situates individuals within the collective expectations of social, interpersonal, and behavioral norms" (p. 101). The balance between literary dichotomies, such as educational/aesthetic, normative/creative, realistic/fantastic and ordinary/peculiar, thus proves hard to achieve, given China's attachment to, among others, its consanguinity-based family tradition, socialism underlying individuality and the time-honoured literary ideal of writing to convey "moral truth."

Since 2013, which marks the start of a global age in which national image construction has become increasingly functional in international politics, how the storytelling function, following Xi's "telling China's stories well," is geared towards a symbiosis of nation and narration permeates almost every aspect of Chinese cul-

tural life. Not only does Chinese children's literature now delve into, assimilate and invigorate local cultural resources, but it resorts to what Hazard heartily admires as the universal "innocence" of childhood to break national boundaries in that "Children are not proud of their egoism. They are incapable of raising it to a system, to a rule of conduct" (p. 167). To reverse literary traffic from the centre to the periphery and become more export-oriented, China plays an influential role in the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY) and the Bologna Children's Book Fair, with a growing number of copyright trades and international collaborations year by year (People's Daily, 2020). It is against a similar background that Hayot (2011) enquires about the future of comparative literature: "Will the now-mandatory recognition of China's relevance to the modern world, as evidenced by its economic 'rise' and the ideologies of a new Asian century, significantly undermine the long-standing cultural habits that have governed the discipline of comparison?" (p. 103). This question remains unanswered as we move into the post-COVID-19 era, a seemingly apocalyptic world. It is nevertheless certain that a homogeneous global culture has drastically lost its appeal worldwide, as divergence turns into conflict on an array of political, cultural and economic frontiers, which complicates the dissemination of shared values through children's books.

From the above storytelling trajectory emerges a national image of China that constantly navigates its relationship with its past and the West. It is both engaged with and resistant to these two poles by changing its comparative lens in response to shifting socio-historical conditions. The process invokes Bhabha's (1990) claim that the "irredeemably plural" spaces of the modern nation are turned into "a signifying space that is archaic and mythical, paradoxically representing the nation's modern territoriality, in the patriotic, atavistic temporality of traditionalism" (p. 300). Nevertheless, the nature of storytelling, from a nation-building perspective, is filled with discontent, as stories are told with an ideological awareness of reaching more readers abroad. And to increase the global circulation of literature, any potential "patriotic" and traditionalist overtones need to be neutralised, diluted or even diminished in the aesthetic form, rather than vice versa. This paradox coheres with Bhabha's (1990) observation of "the pedagogical" (narrative authority and historical sedimentation in the national construct) and "the performative" (boundary disruption and subjectivity questioning in the process of cross-cultural identification), the double strands of which disrupt nation as a conjunctive, cohesive and self-generated text. Whereas national image may be reconstructed and rebranded in so doing, it remains a great challenge that the periphery could possibly journey towards the centre through the image it projects from its complex and volatile historic-political course. While China actively practices storytelling, the image that a country portrays of itself may not align with which it enjoys in the international community. Accordingly, the yawning gap in knowledge about the Eurocentric and the peripheral in a literary polysystem induces the unequal global distribution and translation of children's books, laying bare the shy traces of cultural proximity, either actual or conceptual. The awareness of such a gap, as it signifies power imbalance, is a critical prerequisite for investigating how a peripheral literature could go global.

## Strategies for worlding a national literature

O'Sullivan (2005) delineates the history of comparative children's literature, from Hazard's enthusiastic internationalism to a system of comparative criticism that includes comparative historiography, comparative genre studies, intertextuality and image studies. Most of these categories are comparable, as they are mostly situated in the Euro-American cultural and aesthetic realm. From an alternative perspective, then, O'Sullivan's investigation of comparative literature (2005; 2011) unmask the peripheral position of Chinese children's literature in the global literary world, although the latter aspires to rise above the scope of domestic consumption. Likewise, it exposes the problematics of "world literature," that is, despite its inclusion of an increasingly broad range of different languages and cultures, it is still largely evaluated by a homogeneous aesthetic and ethical point of view that ultimately coincides with that of the dominant. In Juvan's (2019) words, "Texts and conventions that are produced or mediated by the major Western languages and cultural metropolises spread throughout the planet, whereas peripheral or dependent cultural spaces only passively adapt them" (p. 13). Such interliterary practice endorses a "hegemonic model of cultural diffusionism" (Juvan, 2019, p. 13), implying that it is an arduous task to internationalise national aesthetic language, which is constantly engaged in simulacra of its western counterpart and further augments the cultural imbalance of power.

More than a mimetic literary convergence, however, there are preferred strategies that peripheral literature frequently adopts to seek its cultural renaissance and legitimise its literary values in relation to world literature. Here I refer to Terian's (2013) three interliterary strategies, which are interlinked in serving the pragmatic end of enhancing a nation's soft power for international recognition. First, to assert the value of the Chinese literary system, comparisons of authors, children's texts and genres are formulated as a praise of the uniqueness of this national literature, in tandem with Terian's observation of "the favorable comparison of one's own writers or literature with foreign authors or other literatures" to boost national aesthetic impact (2013, p. 5). In the light of this strategic imperative, a diachronic juxtaposition would place Edith Nesbit and Zheng Yuanjie on the same par to explain the manifold variations of fairy tale, although the two are from different socio-cultural backgrounds. Interests in comparison also underscore Ye Shengtao's fairy tale *Daocao ren* (The Scarecrow, 1922) and Oscar Wilde's *Happy Prince* (1888). The comparison of key literary figures and styles thus serves as a self-regulatory strategy for illustrating how aesthetic codes developed by national writers are cosmopolitan literary and worthy of respected literary status in some of their manifestations.

Terian's (2013) second strategy draws out the innovative and pioneering role of national writers, through which "the construction of a 'national character' start(s) from (generic, thematic, formal, geographic, social, etc.) characteristics which should illustrate literary excellence or even universality" (p. 5). For global literary exchanges and networking, thereby, a national image to be externalized needs an articulate goodwill spokesperson. Carrying Zheng's translation-based cosmopolitan vision forward and beyond, Cao Wenxuan (1954- ), the laureate of the 2016 Hans Christian Andersen Award, keenly elevates the writing of national literature to a higher plane.

In particular, he pursues a universal vision of aesthetic beauty bound together by love: “The Chinese story has its particularity, but what it contains are indeed the themes of all mankind, and it is, therefore, cosmopolitan” (Cao, 2016). By and large, such belief echoes Zheng’s manifesto that “literature’s foundation in a universal form of humanity allows it to possess a global unity, which is, precisely, world literature” (as quoted in Liu 2015, p. 2).

About one hundred years since Zheng’s time, Cao is a direct beneficiary of China’s growing economic, political and linguistic-cultural strength, through which the world shows more interest in knowing the literary dynamics of Chinese children’s stories. I note that Cao’s oeuvre is not dissociated from the literary nation-building project but instead an evolution from his original aesthetic pursuit to shape national character in children’s literature. As Cao (2016) upholds “aesthetic and humanistic education” as a superior function of children’s literature, most of his stories feature resilient rural teenagers, in which poetic country landscape and compassion for tragic beauty unite with the growth of children. In his signature work *Bronze and Sunflower* (2015), translated by Helen Wang and illustrated by Meilo So, Cao tells of an orphaned girl who is befriended by a mute boy and adopted by his impoverished family, and how she weathers hardships with them in a lifeworld beset by catastrophes, such as reed fires, famine and swarms of locusts, during China’s Cultural Revolution. The story is evocative of the serene southern Chinese countryside, collectivist family values and the inevitable ebbs and flows one would experience in the symbolic path of growth, all of which are specifically Chinese. In the meantime, it chimes perfectly with Cao’s proposed aesthetic form, to be analysed in the following section, as universal as “a good foundation for humanity and a correct and accurate moral outlook” (Qin, 2016). A vital aspect of children’s literature in twenty-first-century China, as Cao’s passion for aesthetic creed resounds, leans towards the lack of polarisation between internationalism and nationalism, for nationalism also capitalises on universal values for its internal empowerment.

In addition, Chinese literary heritage contains abundant resources with which to practice Terian’s (2013) third strategy of worlding a peripheral literature—“to appropriate an archaic or regional literary heritage which would ‘elevate’ that particular literature” (p. 5). As Tan (2020) notes, contemporary Chinese children’s literature, if interwoven in the rich national heritage, should make fewer demands for “three dominant (imported) types: picture books, fantasy novels and cartoons” (p. 155). The unflagging enthusiasm for creating original Chinese-language picture books, for example, offers a glimpse of how China’s export-oriented books defend national storytelling resources. Below is a basic typology of the mainstream stories we could identify in the picture book market:

- (1) *Chineseness*: stories that retell Chinese canons, historical anecdotes, traditional festivals and other distinctive cultural elements in five thousand years of civilization;
- (2) *Minority myth*: stories based on the cultural traditions of its fifty-five ethnic minorities;
- (3) *Cultural heritage*: stories about tangible and intangible cultural heritage at the provincial and national levels;



- (4) *Folk visual art*: stories that are illustrated and “re-packaged” in typical Chinese visual art forms, such as ink painting, paper cuttings and clay sculpture (Chen, 2021);
- (5) *Core socialist values*: stories that feature patriotic and socialist moral values, in which the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, is encapsulated into three main plots—“leaving and returning home,” “stories of unity and cooperation” and “stories of disaster relief”—to “convey truth, goodness and beauty and spread positive energy” (Wu, 2020).

Despite the literary aspirations for self-canonisation, these mainstream narratives evoke a lukewarm response abroad. One of the few exceptions is *A New Year's Reunion*, written by Yu Liqiong and illustrated by Zhu Chengliang, which was listed as one of the Ten Best Illustrated Children's Books of 2011 by *The New York Times Book Review*. It is a bittersweet story about a Chinese migrant rural worker who long lives apart from his wife and daughter and returns home to celebrate the Chinese New Year. Painted in Zhu's gouache red and bright colours, every joyful moment of how the daughter enjoys her absent father's presence betrays the poignant backstory that the family reunion is only temporary. The successful marketing of this picture book to English speakers was derived in no small part from the social theme of migrant rural workers (most of whom can only return their rural home once a year due to their jobs in the city), which is also a resonant theme of family love in spite of all geographical boundaries. Yet, scant such stories touch upon the conundrums brought by China's economic and social reforms, while appealing to common experience. Synthesising universality and social specificity in Chinese stories, without doubt, requires a delicate balance, and always in risk of tipping over into an ideological commitment—toward, that is, a conflict-free narrative. As Wang (2020) observes, Chinese mainstream literature is “a narrative sequence informed by moral dogma and political mandate, narrated (or performed) in such a way as to be intelligible and accepted as legitimate in both public and personal spheres” (p. 2). It is in this respect that many stories of national images tend to impart verifiable information and moral correctness more than, as Benjamin (2006) extols, a deeper form of wisdom “woven into the fabric of real life” with multiple meanings (p. 364). The tepid reception of these mainstream picture books again reveals the discrepancies between various Chinese representations of China's reality and Western understandings of it.

One may ask in this regard: How could the mission of “telling China's stories well” contribute to bridging the gap between “nationalising” and “worlding”? Worlding a peripheral literature, according to Juvan (2019), means to “determine its actual and desired positions in the global literary space and, starting from this act of imaginary or analytical comparison with other literatures, attempt to export national repertoires across ethnic and language borders” (p. 16). An immediate goal for China's storytelling project is to open up the space of comparative literature with the translation of texts and traditions from its language. Nevertheless, it seems an unresolvable paradox that the export-led Chinese stories, combining the local aesthetics and storytelling traditions, generate some routine hypotheses of a political rather than an aesthetic nature, and for that reason, the export becomes a detour that returns to and even reinforces national stereotypes.

Therefore, the contribution of Chinese children's literature to the totality of world literature, often overshadowed by various centre-periphery dynamics, is contingent upon the extent to which the literary value could be transmitted in translation. To this end, an effective translation would ideally lead Euro-American-dominant thinking away from its stereotypical constructions or representations of China's foreign otherness. Many comparatists exhibit a similar optimism in how translation could facilitate transnational literary traffic, as in Juvan's (2019) statement, "There can be no proper worlding of peripheral literature without translations [...] that are motivated by durable or raising demands of the transnational literary market" (p. 251). However, in traversing power asymmetries and ideological differences, translation is automatised as a solution, with little thought about the multiple-choice question of what translation strategies are most suitable when the text is transferred from periphery to centre.

Qin Wenjun's picture book *Wo Shi Hua Mulan* (2017), illustrated by Yu Rong, presents a justifiable case that transcreation may be more influential than a strict linguistic equivalent for international audiences. Two international versions of this book, *I Am Hua Mulan* (Qin, 2019, 2022), one bilingual and the other English, were released by different publishers for an English-language readership. The bilingual version is intended as a conversation between parallel texts, capable of greater imaginative value in tandem. The English version is a standalone work, with much re-illustration, rewriting and re-typography. Compared with the original, which is abstract in culture-specific details and notions, the translations are not subject to evaluation by their loyalty to the original, but instead engaged in a cultural synthesis and perspectival nuances. The translations, in this way, allow for diversity in the readership of non-Chinese readers without alienating those who lack specific contextual knowledge. As such, the aesthetic language of source picture books, recontextualised to meet the target readers' horizon of expectation, better enables a dialogical rapport between the two.

Since translation forms a bridge to cross-cultural kinship, worlding a national literature gravitates toward its cross-cultural readability. For the translation to thrive in one or another area where the two lexical or cultural taxonomies differ, when the translator "sets out to localise a distanced text," as Pym (2004) says, "the new and the old locales [resist] the movement, [and] wide-ranging transformations [become] necessary" (p. xvi). To necessitate cultural translation, then, some untranslatable terms have to be rendered translatable and adaptable. Accordingly, the translation of Chinese children's literature, which exclusively focuses on thematic and moralising content, is "part of one and the same process of constant material distribution, which starts in one culture and may continue in many others" (Pym, 2004, p. 5). The vitality of translation, in this view, endures only through necessary transformations of the original stories. Following further this line of thoughts and Terian's scheme, I consider the reconceptualisation of translation as additionally essential to a richer construct of China's national images, and under this direction, I also suggest the need to account for the (in)commensurability of genres across the China–West divide.

## **Bildungsroman and the commensurability of genres**

According to O'Sullivan (2005), an account of a literary genre's development in one culture begins, as it does so often, by comparatively looking at its predecessors in another culture from which it was transferred (p. 37). When genre travels across national borders, the global circulation strengthens its malleability to different conventions, reception attitudes and social functions. However, the geographical broadening and empowering of genre, as noted in the circulation of E. T. A. Hoffmann's fantasy *Nutcracker and Mouse King* (1816) from Germany, Denmark, England, Sweden back to Germany, is only contextualised in European societies (O'Sullivan, 2011, pp. 193–194). Is an essentially Western genre transplanted to local Chinese soil an enrichment or disadvantage from the point of view of the target culture? Fairy tale, (mis)translated as *tonghua* in Chinese (literally, children's story), was highly culture-specific, when it was imported to Chinese children's literature—a discourse then that did not share the same context of development, cognitive mechanism or cultural saturation with its western counterpart. In the 1930s, when fairy tales were widely translated in China, local authorities wanted to ban “talking animals” from primary school textbooks for the allegedly “toxic” effect of fantasy on “children's mental health” and “tenets of socialist realism” (You, 2017, p. 93). Although the censorship was soon backlashed and retrieved, it became a reality during the Cultural Revolution, in which talking animals disappeared from the literary arena. Since the threshold of the global age, fairy tales in China, represented by Zheng Yuanjie's *bustling school*, have flourished, notwithstanding the tendency to purge radical narrative themes and assist with utilitarian moral education. In this, the ideological manipulation of the genre reminisces Benjamin's (2006) reverence for “the teller of fairy tales” as “the first true storyteller,” and his insight into the genre's social function in “meet[ing] the forces of the mythical world with cunning and high spirits” and wielding “liberating magic” (p. 374). For an ideologically saturated demand, of course, how much “liberating magic” the genre is allowed to have remains debatable.

The problematic commensurability of genre at both ends of the China–West ideological spectrum, I argue, constitutes a new norm of comparative children's literature. Bildungsroman, wedged between the convergences and changes of generic circulation, manifests itself as a pertinent glocal case. Song (2015) explores the master plot of Chinese bildungsroman over different historical movements as simultaneously an individual's personal development and a discourse of national rejuvenation, occurring through a process of “writing youth into history” (p. 114). For Song (2015), the Chinese bildungsroman, compared with its European original, evinces the ideological nature of literature that is inevitably mimetic of China's own journey and is thus more closely associated with the themes of modernity and national revival. Whereas Song's chronological textual analysis closes with the year 1959, the era of the Maoist youths, China's youth discourse still proliferates. Jones (2011) contends that educating the child cannot be separated from the “hard imperatives of development and developmentalism, imperatives central to the ideology of nation building in Republican and post-1959 China alike” (p. 104). Coming to the fore as a persistent marker of the continuity between development imperative, nation building and liter-

ary history, the domesticated genre has gradually acquired a serious status, providing a non-normative body of cultural assumptions and ideological references.

Grounded in the communally shared meanings of Chinese bildungsroman, Cao's *chengzhang xiaoshuo* (1998) is a genre that features the growth trajectory of typical Chinese teenagers. Although a functional equivalent of bildungsroman, or coming-of-age novels, the new literary genre does not deliberately foreground teenagers' social-oriented growth "by integrating the social process with the development of a person," for "[the bildungsroman] bestows the most frangible justification on the order determining it" (Benjamin, 2006, p. 365). Cao's generic practice instead stems from his belief that children's literature should cultivate "sophisticated, strong-minded and polemic" qualities within teenagers, and prepare them to inherit the national legacy, rather than indulge in the simplistic forms of mere entertainment (Cao, 1998, p. 112). Accordingly, Cao's novels accentuate resilience in personal growth, which connects more with the young protagonists' ability to thrive in trial and tribulations than their ambition to change the outside world. As he further postulates, Chinese stories should open up a venue for the world to see China's "national image as cheerful, vigorous, strong, inspiring and heroic" (Cao, 1998, p. 112).

That the protagonist's journey into maturity is a signifier of rebranded national identity finds a prototypical sense in Cao's *Bronze and Sunflower*. As the story unravels a series of traumatic events that only make the title characters more resilient, we see the quality of perseverance stamped in the individual characters and the whole nation. In Damaidi Village, for instance, the symbolic national community, the endless young reeds that "pointed up at the sky like swords" forebode an eventful future (Cao, 2015a, p. 12). Against this background, individual characters are shaped by and, in turn, shape the community. Bronze, tough and resolute, as his name implies, holds onto his character despite his disability, the peer discrimination he endures and the natural disasters that befall the village. As personal tragedies bind him and Sunflower, he never fails to support Sunflower when all odds are against her. Like a responsible father figure, he hoists Sunflower on his shoulders for hours so she can watch a circus, puts a dozen fireflies in pumpkin flowers to illuminate her schoolbook during a blackout and even volunteers to give up his chance at education for the latter's good. Initially a city girl, Sunflower gratefully joins the poor, warm and close-knit country family and is equally capable of making every sacrifice with the same grace throughout the story. Predictably, she will grow into a matriarch like Nainai, a wise, loving and selfless granny who makes the decision to adopt Sunflower: "We're poor. But we'd sell everything we owned in order to raise this child" (Cao, 2015a, p. 90). This story manifests how the bildungsroman genre blends with the Chinese values of filial piety and social self, localised as a Confucian fairy tale. In spite of socio-historical tragedies, the story yet presents a lyrical narrative, free from any substantive interpersonal conflict, and could therefore be construed idealistic. Indeed, ideological hailing is not on the horizon, but the didactic aesthetic codes are constructed as a spontaneous connection with, rather than a departure from, the political correlations between the individual identity, the family and the nation.

To ensure the success of its global message, as earlier mentioned, the translation of a Chinese literary work, from lexical modulation and syntactic transposition to cultural rewriting, may necessarily undergo some inevitable loss in order to yield a

flexible and recontextualised target text. Wang's translation of *Bronze and Sunflower*, winner of the 2017 Marsh Award for Children's Literature in Translation, adds legitimacy to this claim. Despite Cao's acknowledgement that Wang's translation contributes enormously to his award (China Publishers Magazine, 2018), a comparison of the source and the target texts unveils a subtle process of ideologically and culturally motivated renegotiation in translation: Wang consequently softens "the sense of [local] space in the target context" (Zhao et al., 2022) and adapts scenes that may chafe western moral values, such as the father bathing and intimately smelling his seven-year old daughter. In the original bathing scene, "When he bathed his daughter and saw her scarless body, he felt an unspeakable surge of emotion" (literal translation of the original from Cao 2015b, p. 38). In Wang's version, such context is removed and made vague: "In daylight, when he saw her skin as flawless as the purest white jade, the thought of even a scratch on it tormented him" (Cao, 2015a, p.37).

Besides, the elaboration of figurative language, as poetically conceived in the source culture, is sometimes liable to repetition and sentimentality from a Western-style perspective. Thus Wang's translation keeps to a minimalist style by reducing overwrought descriptions, as in the following scene of "reeds as warriors":

Source text: Thousands of warriors, wielding long green swords, ceremoniously hacking off each other under the sky, carrying the rustling sound everywhere. (literal translation of the original from Cao, 2015b, p. 6)

Target text: The long swords slashed the air. (Cao, 2015a, p. 12)

These textual transformations—generally the more effusive and descriptive in the source text, the more succinct and action-oriented in the target text—are valuable indicators of the stylistic reformulation necessary to Chinese children's literature in translation. In conjunction with target-oriented translation, the paratextual elements, too, are in operation, assigning new appearance and tone to the target text. So's cover image of the title characters on a sentient cow in fluid watercolours, inviting readers to a pastoral world of Chinese childhood with a visual conviction of friendship and innocence. And it is markedly different from the photo-realistic painting style adopted in almost all the local editions, the covers of which frame the characters as a resonant figuration of nostalgia for that era. On the whole, the version is an outcome of translation, alteration, re-illustration and repackaging, typifying the need to promote a peripheral literature through translation, and of equal importance, recontextualisation.

In more of Cao's original stories, the characters are cast, per his literary patriotism and humanism, with qualities, habits, mannerisms and traits associated with ideal Chinese national identities. The localised shift from *bildungsroman* to *cheng-zhang xiaoshuo* well enacts Beebee's (1994) proposition that "generic differences are grounded in the 'use-value' of a discourse rather than its content, formal features, or its rules of production" (p. 7). In this sense, a bifurcation point lies in the pragmatic and active function of the genre and its original benchmark. The *bildungsroman*'s derivative in China, although attesting to the genre's malleability in an autonomous culture, follows an utterly different path unlike that of fantasy mapped by O'Sullivan within the European context. As for the Chinese domesticated genre, the production

of the target text is conditioned by the acceptability of such a “back translation,” that is, the global genre (from the centre) is domesticated to fit the local context (to the periphery), and the adapted genre eventually aims to go global (to the centre). Given the predominantly Euro-American-centric literary polysystem, the translation still lends itself to an incommensurate condition where Westernised aesthetics lead the dominant mode of appraisal. A recontextualised translation, as a result, may benefit from the choice of translation strategies, which include, as *Bronze and Sunflower* indicates, mitigation of moral didacticism, reduction and reformulation of prosaic details of particularities, and translator’s crucial points of reference to the aesthetic scruples, viewpoints and cultural environment of the prospective reader. The main focus of textual retention, if not pessimistically articulated, could be placed on the details of universality or archetypal representation. The translation from the periphery to the centre, as a sort of ad hoc contextual compromise, bears Juvan’s (2019) blueprint that a peripheral literature should establish “imaginary or intertextual affiliations to the international literary repertoire allegedly transcending linguistic, historical, and cultural particularity” (p. 54).

In retrospect, Cao’s aesthetic reconstruction of bildungsroman is a continuum of how children’s literature was envisioned at its outset in China, in which, the protagonists’ journey toward love, self-esteem and self-empowerment is alchemised into a national destiny. Generally speaking, it represents a national quest wrapped up in the drive to renew the country’s image, no less than a necessary step on its way up from the periphery. To dismantle the ideology of generic incommensurability, ultimately, is to mobilise the relevance and practical value of translation according to the aesthetic criteria that enable the appropriate reception of the genre when it is received and interpreted.

## Towards a people’s republic of childhood

Chinese children’s literature is internally representative of the nation-building process. Integral to this process is how it appropriates Western genres to recalibrate Chinese universal canonicity. Simultaneously, Chinese children’s writers, publishers, agents and critics take part in international literary competitions to rebrand China’s national images, in line with Casanova’s (2004) advocated sociological use of the universal literary value and “literary capital” for national literature to enable multicultural literary recognition (p. 17). Since “the Utopian idea of a world republic of childhood has become the worldwide children’s market” (O’Sullivan, 2005, p. 128), Cao’s Hans Christian Anderson award achievement in 2016 testifies that a nation-building aesthetic pursuit, as it is anchored in the global literary web, gradually leverages its forms of cultural capital in the world republic of letters.

Involved in the development of Chinese children’s literature, undeniably, is the strategic execution of storytelling in the interests of the nation. As a significant force in rebranding China’s national images, the literature, of a comparative nature, enacts Casanova’s (2004) pattern of worlding through the universal literary value and Juvan’s (2019) narrative about “aesthetic autonomy” without abandoning local themes. Even though the positional struggle still exists, an international breakthrough

is undeniable, which leads to what I call the vision of a *people's republic of childhood*. With a contrastive reference to Hazard's *universal republic of childhood*, a boundary-crossing ideal woven with the enduring allure of the myth of childhood innocence, the Chinese vision is oriented towards "people," connoting a set of universal use-values, such as social solidity, positive affect and conflict-diluted moral education. This vision between nationalising and worlding emanates from the commensurability aesthetics of Chinese bildungsroman, through which what is allegorically expressed in the new generative form is the necessary transformation of youth from adversities as much as the Chinese nation's hopeful rise from its history and vicissitudes.

As stories create and perpetuate the past, they also bring about the utopian openness towards the future. There is no closure yet to the comparative route of Chinese children's literature that commences from the translation and emulation of canonical values, through conscious ideological underpinnings, to the converging of aesthetics with local themes. At the point of moving closer to the centre, the peripheral literature rebrands its national image vis-à-vis the West, undeterred by the ideological differences it represents and seeks to transcend. It is proposed in the study that a storytelling return to the archetypal childlike innocence and universal values would usefully serve as an efficacious interliterary rebranding strategy for global circulation. Along the lines of critical inquiry, Chinese children's literature would gain a deeper international appreciation not in the sense of transmitting didactic aspiration, but rather in the process of recuperating generic ethos as suitable for intellectual interpretation through diversified translation strategies. To engage with the universal sphere of literary and aesthetic humanism, it would hopefully actualise a desirable national image, "the image for a collective experience to which even the deepest shock of every individual experience, death, constitutes no impediment or barrier" (Benjamin, 2006, p. 373).

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