

Transmission and Adaptation of Rural Cultural Elements in the English Translation of *Cao Fangzi*—From the Perspective of Western Child Readers' Reception

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ABSTRACT: This paper takes *Cao Fangzi* and its English translation as the research objects, with the reception of Western child readers as the core perspective, to explore the translation strategies of rural cultural elements therein. Through specific case analyses of material and spatial elements, social behavioral elements, and linguistic expression elements in the English translation of *Cao Fangzi*, this paper examines how translators comprehensively employ strategies such as transliteration, free translation, cultural substitution, and foreignization to handle rural culture-loaded items, seeking a balance between the authenticity of the source culture and the cognitive habits of target-language child readers, thus effectively lowering the threshold of cultural understanding. However, the translation also reveals issues such as the dissipation of the childish delight in nursery rhymes, which further highlights the core value of “the transmission of childish delight” in children’s literature translation.

KEYWORDS: the English translation of *Cao Fangzi*, children’s literature translation, rural cultural elements, reader reception

I. INTRODUCTION

For a long time, research on children’s literature translation has occupied a relatively peripheral position within the broader field of literary translation studies in China. Both practical exploration and theoretical development in this area remain notably underdeveloped. “Due to a lack of recognition and fulfillment of children’s independence and their unique needs, children’s literature has long been overshadowed by adult literature. Similarly, compared to literary translation and its research, children’s literature translation and its research have also lagged behind” (Lan Hongjun & Xiong Jinru, 2022: 99). However, children’s literature holds

an irreplaceable and significant position within China's literary system—it serves as an early carrier of the nation's cultural genes, integrating ethical values, aesthetic paradigms, and cultural concepts into narratives in ways perceivable to children. Children possess strong plasticity and cultural absorption capacity, which means children's literature can act as an enlightening medium for cultural cognition, influencing child readers' cognition and emotional tendencies towards heterogeneous cultures in a subtle and imperceptible manner. In this sense, research on the translation of Chinese children's literature not only facilitates the global dissemination of Chinese children's literature but also represents a forward-looking integral part of China's cultural "going global" strategy.

In 2016, Cao Wenxuan won the Hans Christian Andersen Award, becoming the first Chinese writer to receive this honor—an accolade often referred to as "the Nobel Prize of Children's Literature" and recognized as the highest international distinction in the field. Cao Wenxuan's representative works include *Goats Don't Eat Heaven Grass* (《山羊不吃天堂草》) (1991), *The Straw House* (《草房子》) (1997), and *Bronze and Sunflower* (《青铜葵花》) (2005), among others. His 1997 novel, *The Straw House* (《草房子》) has enjoyed enduring popularity since its publication, successively winning major domestic awards such as the Bingxin Literature Award, the National Outstanding Children's Literature Award, and the Soong Ching Ling Children's Literature Award. It is widely regarded as a classic of Chinese rural children's literature.

The English translation of *Cao Fangzi* (*The Straw House*), co-translated by Chinese and foreign translators Sylvia Yu, Julian Chen, and Christopher Malone, was published as early as 2006. However, relevant research findings have only been sporadically documented in a limited number of domestic journal articles and theses: Qian Jiaying (2019) took the English translation of *Cao Fangzi* as a case to demonstrate the manifestation of translators' subjectivity in intersubjective dialogue; Zhang Yun (2020) explored the translation strategies of the English translation of *Cao Fangzi* from the perspective of eco-translatology; Wu Xiuqun et al. (2021), starting from the perspective of children-orientation, conducted a comparative analysis of the English translations of nursery rhymes in *The Straw House* and *Bronze and Sunflower* from the three aspects of sound, form, and sense; at the specific linguistic level, Xiao Can (2013) discussed some specific English translation methods for Chinese serial verb constructions in *Cao Fangzi* in her master's thesis; Zhang Shufang (2017), under the theoretical guidance of the Rivalry Theory, studied the translation techniques of poetic elements in the English translation of *Cao Fangzi*; He Miao (2022), based on the perspective of reception aesthetics, analyzed and compared the two English translations of *Qingtong Kuihua* (《青铜葵花》) and *Cao Fangzi* from three aspects: childish delight, musicality and readability; in the latest research, Liu Yanping (2024) explored the English translation of conceptual metaphors in *Cao Fangzi*.

In 2023, *The Straw House* ranked fourth among the top 10 Chinese children's literary works in the comprehensive star ratings on Goodreads (Long Xiaoxiang & Hu Mu, 2024: 117-118). In light of this, this paper takes *Cao Fangzi* and its English translation *The Straw House* as research objects. Through case studies, it examines what specific strategies translators adopted to render the rural cultural elements in *Cao Fangzi* under the premise of being oriented towards Western children's cognitive and reading habits, so as to provide insights

for the “going global” of Chinese children’s literature.

II. RURAL CULTURAL ELEMENTS IN *CAO FANGZI*

The story in *Cao Fangzi* unfolds in the early 1960s in a small town named “Youmadi”, whose prototype is the rural hometown in northern Jiangsu where Cao Wenxuan was born and raised. As he stated in Postscript II “*Literature Is Immortal*” of *Cao Fangzi*: “*Cao Fangzi* constitutes a relatively complete part of my personal experience” (Cao Wenxuan, 2009: 298). Most of Cao Wenxuan’s works are rural narratives rooted in the water towns of northern Jiangsu, characterized by distinct regional features and a strong rural flavour, and *Cao Fangzi* is no exception. The rich rural atmosphere in the work stems precisely from the unique landscape and humanistic heritage of this land. Beauty, sentiment, artistic conception, poetic quality, inspiration, compassion, and goodness—all these are indispensable elements of literature, and *Cao Fangzi* is the convergence of these elements (ibid.).

In the following sections, drawing on specific examples from the English translation of *Cao Fangzi*, this paper will analyze how the translators handled the abundant rural cultural elements present in the original text from the perspective of Western child readers’ reception.

2.1 Material and Spatial Elements

Cao Fangzi is densely populated with material and spatial elements that carry rural narratives: straw houses, Youmadi, red oilcloth umbrellas, wild ducks, Tu Bridge, wheat ears, low banks of earth between fields, Jin Yue Temple, country paths, small single-lane bridges... Concrete descriptions of scenery make readers feel as if they are immersed in that land filled with the warmth and vitality of daily life.

Example (1) ST: 油麻地小学是清一色的草房子。(Cao Wenxuan, *Cao Fangzi*)

TT: It was all straw houses in Youmadi Primary School. (Translated by Sylvia Yu, Julian Chen and Christopher Malone)

The novel takes Youmadi Town as its narrative core, unfolding a series of stories about the life and growth of “Youmadi people”. Translators adopted transliteration for the iconic place name “油麻地(Youmadi)” to preserve cultural heterogeneity. In fact, regarding the translation of place names in *Cao Fangzi*, “translators mostly used transliteration, with only ‘Jin Yue Temple’ receiving semantic supplementation to show readers the aesthetic conception attached to the name ‘Jin Yue’ (immersing the moon)” (He Miao, 2022: 42). As the novel’s title and core image, “草房子(cao fangzi)” serves as a place for “Youmadi people” to live and study. Translators rendered it as “the straw house” (literally meaning “a house made of straw”), which has a certain discrepancy with the original text’s “cao fangzi”—Cao Wenxuan clearly stated in his introduction to the “cao fangzi” in the book: “They were not made by common straw or wheat straw, but cogongrass from a beach three hundred li away” (Cao Wenxuan, 2009: 6). Thus, a more appropriate translation would be “the thatched cottage” or “the thatched hut”. The translators’ choice of “the straw house” might stem from considerations of Western children’s cognitive characteristics: In the West, *The Three Little Pigs* is one of the classic fairy tales well-known to children, telling the story of three little pigs building houses with different materials to defend against wolf attacks, among which

the eldest pig built a straw house. This translation therefore helps Western children quickly connect with their local cultural memories, thereby lowering the threshold of understanding and arousing emotional resonance.

2.2 Social Behavioral Elements

Cao Fangzi contains unique traditional folk customs specific to the Jianghuai Region. These customs are closely linked to people's daily lives, and some of them continue to be practiced to this day, such as:

Example (2) ST: 他知道，这叫“曝伏”，就是在最炎热的伏天里将棉被棉衣拿到太阳光下来晒，只要晒上那么一天，就可以一直到冬天也不会发霉。(Cao Wenxuan, *Cao Fangzi*)

TT: He knew this practice was the so-called “drying in hot summer days”. If one dried quilts and cotton-padded clothes in the hottest days of summer for a whole day, they wouldn't become mildewed, even in winter. (Translated by Sylvia Yu, Julian Chen and Christopher Malone)

“曝伏” (Pu fu) is a unique traditional folk custom in China's Jianghuai Region, referring to the traditional practice of exposing clothes to the intense heat in the hottest days of summer. It embodies the local people's life wisdom of adapting to the seasons to prevent moisture and mildew. In the text, Sang Sang's mother, while taking advantage of the hottest summer days to dry quilts and cotton-padded clothes in the sun, beats the quilts and cotton-padded clothes hanging all over the yard with a rattan stick. “曝” (Pu) means “to expose to the sun”, and “伏” (fu) here specifically refers to “the hottest days”, the hottest period of the year. The translators use free translation here as “drying in hot summer days”, which accurately conveys the cultural connotation of “曝伏” (pu fu).

Example (3) ST: 仲夏时节，传来一个消息，有人在江南的一座美丽的小城看到了纸月与慧思和尚。那小城本是慧思的故乡。他已还俗了。(Cao Wenxuan, *Cao Fangzi*)

TT: In mid-summer days, there was news that people had seen Zhi Yue and Monk Hui Si in a beautiful small town in the region south of the Yangtze River. It was Hui Si's hometown. But he was no longer a monk. (Translated by Sylvia Yu, Julian Chen and Christopher Malone)

“还俗” (Huan su) is a Buddhist term, referring to “a monk or nun resuming his or her secular identity”. However, in the Christian-dominated English-speaking world, there are significant differences in religious and cultural backgrounds compared to Buddhism—Christianity has no equivalent concepts or behavioral norms regarding the practice of “leaving home to become a monk or nun” (出家) followed by “returning to secular life” (还俗). Coupled with the fact that the target readers are children, who have limited understanding of religious terminology, the translators directly adopted a free translation of “还俗(huan su)” as “be no longer a monk”. This concise and straightforward expression conveys its core meaning, not only avoiding potential comprehension barriers caused by religious and cultural differences but also aligning with children's language reception habits.

2.3 Linguistic Expression Elements

2.3.1 Colloquial Sayings

“Colloquial sayings not only demonstrate the linguistic characteristics of a certain culture in a unique form, but also reflect, to a certain extent, the local customs, habits, and cultural traditions” (Zhou Lingshun, 2016: 78).

Cao Fangzi contains a wealth of rural language with regional colour. For the translation of these colloquial sayings, the translators adopted such strategies as free translation, substitution, and literal translation.

Example (4) ST: 关于白三的脾气，油麻地人有最确切的评价：“嘴里叼根屎橛子，拿根麻花都不换。”(Cao Wenxuan, *Cao Fangzi*)

TT: Youmadi people had a very appropriate comment on Bai San's temper: "He is so stubborn that he wouldn't replace a rotten stick on his lip with a doughnut." (Translated by Sylvia Yu, Julian Chen and Christopher Malone)

“嘴里叼根屎橛子，拿根麻花都不换” (Holding a fecal stick in one's mouth, and refusing to swap it even for a fried dough twist) is a rural-flavoured folk saying, a playful and sarcastic expression in folk language that implies “being foolishly stubborn and failing to distinguish good from bad”. In this saying, a stark contrast is formed between “屎橛子” (a filthy and useless object) and “麻花” (a crispy, tasty traditional snack), making the language straightforward yet rich with the vitality of daily life. The translators' handling of this folk saying reflects a dual strategy: For the vulgar image of “屎橛子”, (shi jue zi) they avoided literal translation and instead substituted it with “rotten stick”. They also extracted the core semantic essence of the vulgar expression “叼根屎橛子(holding a fecal stick)” in the context, transforming the vivid satirical portrayal of Bai San into an abstract characterization of his personality traits. This was rendered as “He is so stubborn that...” to deliberately circumvent offensive language while preserving the critical essence. “In Western culture, words related to human excrement are often regarded as vulgar and dirty, so people tend to use euphemisms to express them or simply avoid them, making them taboo words” (Qian Jiaying, 2019: 104). As for “麻花(ma hua)”, a traditional Chinese specialty snack, the translators adopted a cultural adaptation strategy by replacing it with “doughnut”, which is more familiar to English-speaking child readers. Both doughnuts and ma hua belong to fried flour-based snacks, enabling Western children to intuitively grasp the contrast with the “rotten stick” mentioned in the previous clause.

Example (5) ST: 母亲说：“这是太阳从西边出来了，你也知道要新衣服了。”(Cao Wenxuan, *Cao Fangzi*)

TT: His mother said, "Is the sun coming up from the west? You want new clothes?!" (Translated by Sylvia Yu, Julian Chen and Christopher Malone)

“太阳从西边出来了” (The sun is rising from the west) is a Chinese common saying. As is commonly known, “the sun rises in the east and sets in the west”—this is a natural law, and the sun can never rise in the west. Therefore, Chinese people use this saying metaphorically to mean that something nearly impossible has happened. In the Western world, a similar meaning is usually expressed as “when pigs fly”. However, the translators here adopted a foreignization strategy and rendered it as “Is the sun coming up from the west?”. This is because “the sun rising in the east and setting in the west” is a universal natural cognition shared by all humanity, with absolute universality and stability. Even if English readers are not familiar with this Chinese common saying, they can understand the sense of “abnormality or unexpectedness” conveyed by the phrase based on their common knowledge of the sun's movement. Thus, target readers and source readers can

experience the same feeling.

2.3.2 Swearing Language

In the rural context of *Cao Fangzi*, the use of swearing language is often closely tied to character traits, interpersonal relationships, and emotional states. Below, several examples of swearing language with varying emotional overtones and degrees of emotional intensity are selected. By combining these examples with specific contexts, this section analyzes how translators handled such swearing language in a targeted manner.

Example (6) ST: 母亲也不去呼唤他回家，还对柳柳说：“不准去喊他回家，就让他死在外面！”(Cao Wenxuan, *Cao Fangzi*)

TT: His mother didn't come to bring him home. She said to Liu Liu, "Don't call him home, let him rot outside!" (Translated by Sylvia Yu, Julian Chen and Christopher Malone)

Example (7) ST: 桑桑的母亲走到河边上，不知是因为桑桑的样子很好笑，还是因为桑桑大声嚷嚷着的乡谣很好笑，就绷不住脸笑了：“小猴子，冻死你！”(Cao Wenxuan, *Cao Fangzi*)

TT: Sang Sang's mother walked to the riverside. Was it because Sang Sang looked funny, or his song was funny? She couldn't hold her laugh. "Little monkey, aren't you cold?" (Translated by Sylvia Yu, Julian Chen and Christopher Malone)

Example (8) ST: 白三骂骂咧咧地穿衣起了床，解了牛绳，牵着它就向门外走：“畜生，活活冻死你！”(Cao Wenxuan, *Cao Fangzi*)

TT: Bai San scolded him, then got up and put on his clothes. He untied the buffalo's rope to the buffalo and pulled it outside the door. "Damn you, freeze in the cold!" (Translated by Sylvia Yu, Julian Chen and Christopher Malone)

In Example (6), after Sang Sang snatched Lu He's hat and teased him, he feared being scolded by his mother and dared not go home. His mother then said to Sang Sang's younger sister Liu Liu: “就让他死在外面！(Let him die outside!)”. Here, the word “死(die)” does not truly curse Sang Sang with “losing his life”; instead, it amplifies the anger through an extreme expression, highlighting the mother's mixed state of anger and anxiety. When handling this “angry remark”, the translators took into account both the mother's anger and the acceptability for child readers, rendering it as “let him rot outside!”. This translation carries sufficient semantic intensity to convey the mother's anger while avoiding the heaviness or terrifying associations that “die” might evoke, thus better aligning with children's understanding of emotions like “anger”.

Additionally, “死(die, death)” can also function as a degree adverb. In Yancheng, Jiangsu Province—the hometown of Cao Wenxuan—the degree adverb “死(die, death)” in the local dialect “does not carry concrete meanings such as the verb or adjective senses of ‘losing life’ or ‘being dead’; it only expresses the speaker's psychological feelings” (Zhu Rui, 2014: 97-98). In Example (7), Sang Sang was on the quay, splashing river water to wash himself while singing out loud folk ballads. Shuddering repeatedly from the cold, he caught his mother's eye. Smiling, she said, “小猴子，冻死你！(Little monkey, freeze to death if you want!)”. On the surface, this sentence carries a hint of “reproach” in tone, but in reality, it hides deep affection and fondness. The translators accurately captured this emotional core of “being harsh in tone yet soft at heart”, transforming the

seemingly sharp-tongued “冻死你!” in the original text into the caring “aren’t you cold?”. This straightforward care conveys the mother’s worry and affection, better aligning with Western children’s understanding of how “family care” is expressed.

Example (8) is Bai San’s scolding of his buffalo, with a tone and emotion far more intense than those in Examples (6) and (7). In modern Chinese, “畜生” (literally meaning “domestic animals” such as cattle and horses) is here transformed into a typical swearing word due to Bai San’s fury. It directly refers to the buffalo while being filled with reproach and venting, fitting Bai San’s rough image as a grassroots farmer. In the translation, instead of choosing intense insults like “beast” or “brute” that match the emotional intensity of the original text, the translators opted for the relatively less aggressive and more colloquial “damn you”. This term sufficiently conveys Bai San’s extreme impatience at the moment while aligning with the implicit norms of Western children’s literature regarding abusive language—it avoids the discomfort that overly vulgar vocabulary might cause to child readers, while striking a balance between “emotional transmission” and “cultural appropriateness”.

2.3.3 Nursery Rhymes

As a children’s literary work, *Cao Fangzi* intersperses many childlike nursery rhymes (and songs). These nursery rhymes are not only vivid imprints of rural life but also add a rich sense of childish delight to the text. Pan Wenchen (2012), in her master’s thesis, specifically analyzed the translation of nursery rhymes and onomatopoeia in the English translation of *Cao Fangzi*. She pointed out the issue of lost childish delight resulting from the use of translation methods such as non-poetic translation and static translation, and explored the connection between translation quality and the transmission of childish delight.

Example (9) ST: 一个孩子平常叫顺了口,就大声地叫起来:“新娘子,白鼻子,尿尿尿到了屋脊子……”大概是他的母亲赶紧踢了他一脚,那孩子知道自己不该乱叫,不吭声了,很老实地站在河边上。(Cao Wenxuan, *Cao Fangzi*)

TT: A child loudly chanted a familiar ballad: “The bride with white nose pissing on the ridge...” Perhaps his mother kicked him and the child knew he was not supposed to shout things like that. He went quiet and stood at the riverside obediently. (Translated by Sylvia Yu, Julian Chen and Christopher Malone)

Example (9) is taken from the scene in the text where Jiang Yilun marries his bride, who arrives by boat. The nursery rhyme chanted by the child—“新娘子,白鼻子,尿尿尿到了屋脊子……”—has a brisk rhythm and distinct rhyme, making it catchy and easy to recite. The three words “新娘子(xin niang zi, bride)”, “白鼻子(bai bi zi, white nose)”, and “屋脊子(wu ji zi, ridge of the house)” all end with the character “子(zi)” as a light-toned function word. “子” is pronounced light and short in spoken language but forms a stable syllabic repetition, greatly enhancing the singability of the nursery rhyme.

However, the translators broke this rhythm by merging the three lines into one sentence: “The bride with white nose pissing on the ridge...”. As a result, both the rhythmic beauty and childlike playfulness of the original nursery rhyme vanished. Moreover, “piss” is considered relatively crude in daily English context, which contradicts the innocent and playful atmosphere of the original line and is likely to cause discomfort to Western

child readers.

III. CONCLUSION

Translations of children's rural literary works face dual challenges: First, the characteristics of children's literature, such as its pedagogical value and playful appeal, require translators to fully consider the cognitive development, reading habits, and language acceptability of target-language child readers, striving to stimulate their reading interest through vivid and accessible expressions. Second, the rich cultural traits embedded in rural literature demand that translators seek a balance between cultural transmission and cultural adaptability—preserving the uniqueness of rural charm while avoiding comprehension obstacles for child readers caused by cultural barriers, thereby achieving the effective transmission of cultural value. As a classic of children's literature, *The Straw House*, benefiting from the collaborative strengths of Chinese and foreign translators, has seen its cross-cultural dissemination of rural cultural elements fully take into account the cognitive characteristics and reading acceptance habits of child readers. However, as a work with children as its core readers, the dilution or loss of childish delight remains a major taboo in translation. Overall, promoting the “going global” of Chinese children's literature must remain oriented toward the acceptance of target-language children. It requires establishing a dynamic balance between preserving childish delight and ensuring cultural adaptability, reducing the cognitive load of target-language children while maintaining the perceptibility of the literary characteristics of the source text.

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