



# Translating Gender in Children's Literature in China During The 1920s—*A Case Study Of Peter Pan*

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## Abstract

This paper investigates the representation of gender in translated children's literature in China during the New Culture Movement, an enlightenment initiative inspired by thoughts of humanism and liberalism roughly spanning from the mid-1910s to late 1920s. During this period, childhood carried a spiritual significance, as the hope of a war-stricken nation. For translated children's literature, children's physical existence was outshined by their spiritual significance. The first translation of *Peter Pan* was selected to investigate how socio-cultural conditions in China during the 1920s influence the representation of the protagonist's gender. It is found that Peter's gender has been consistently disguised in the target text. The mystification of Peter Pan's gender is discussed in light of the conceptualization of childhood in China and the development of domestic children's literature and feminist movements in the 1920s, highlighting the role the target culture context plays in translation.

**Keywords:** children's literature, Chinese, gender, Peter Pan, translation

## 1. Introduction

Gender has always been an intriguing topic in studies about children's literature. In texts for children, gender stereotyping has been commonly observed, with male characters described as dominant and masculine, female characters subjective and mild (Dickman & Mumen, 2004; Masiola & Tomei, 2013). However, there have also been texts challenging traditional gender roles. In the Harry Potter books, for example, the protagonist shows more intricate and nuanced forms of masculinity (Wannamaker, 2008). Another classic character in children's literature that also manages to escape from traditional gender roles was created by J. M. Barrie more than a century ago: Peter Pan, the embodiment of an eternal childhood. When Peter Pan was created in the Victorian-Edwardian society, his gender was mystified in various ways, including but not limited to casting a female actor (Nina Boucicault) as Peter in the 1904 play, a tradition which is held until the present. In this paper, the representation of Peter Pan's gender in its first Chinese translation published in 1929 is discussed in light of the role gender difference plays in children's literature as well as the modernization process in China, in an effort to uncover how socio-cultural factors influence gender in translation.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 Gender in English children's literature of the early twentieth century

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the view towards childhood, as expressed in many literary works, was typified by a sense of nostalgia, a wish to defy time and preserve the most precious period of life. However, as Reynolds (1994, pp.21-23) argues, what authors glorify is not necessarily the representation real children, but abstract images of ideal children. Reynolds investigates the works of Kate Greenaway (1846-1901), a famous writer and illustrator for children at that time, and shows how her portrayal of children lacks reality both mentally (that they possess only angelic features) and physically (that they seem to have no real bodies under pretty clothes). Thus in their effort to construct an idealized image of childhood, adults deprive children of real bodies — their sexuality and gender included. The avoidance of children's sexuality and gender is not exclusive to works of Greenaway alone. In children's texts published around the same time, there are ample examples in which authors avoid to address gender difference directly. Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* (1908), for example, features anthropomorphic characters who are exclusively bachelors, framing the story in an artificial male-only environment. A. A. Milne's *Winnie the Pooh* (1926) is another example of womanless fiction, in which all the main animal characters are male.

### 2.2 Translation of gender in children's literature

In studies about the translation of children's literature, there has not been a lot of discussion about translation and gender. Among the limited number of works addressing this topic, the representation of gender in translation is generally found to be a tricky issue. Bell (1986) observes that when translating from German into English, she sometimes needs to ascribe gender to animal characters when using personal pronouns to represent them. Bell

acknowledges what without adequate information; she often has to make her own choices, ascribing main characters as male and subordinate characters as female. Bell points out that using personal pronouns for animals highlights the human side of them nonexistent in the source text.

O' Sullivan (1994) reports that when translating *Winnie the Pooh* (Milne, 1926) into German, the genders of animals are automatically changed due to the grammatical gender of the target text. This changes the genderless setting created in the source text, resulting in a slightly different atmosphere of the story. The change of gender also affects the image of some animals. O' Sullivan particularly notes that the gender of the owl, a schoolmasterish, know-all character in the original, is altered, affecting the impression the character gives to the reader.

In studies about the representation of gender in children's literature translated into Chinese, researchers have investigated how Chinese gender ideologies influence gender in translation. In Tso's (2011) study of Chinese translation of *Northern Lights* (Pullman, 1995), it is noted that the Daoist metaphysics of *yin* and *yang* duality, the Confucian teaching of gender, the Buddhist concept of genderless-ness and the stereotypical portrayals of female fatales combined have influenced the translator's representation of gender. The protagonist, Lyra, for instance, is made more boyish and powerful, with heroic *yang* features added in the target text. On the other hand, influenced by the Confucian teaching of gender, the translator seems to be not so sensitive to the anti-patriarchal message in the source text, underrepresenting such elements in translation. Influenced by the Buddhist notion of genderless-ness, the gender of Lyra's daemon (with the opposite sex of Lyra), Pan, is neutralized in translation. Tso's investigation highlights the importance of philosophical and ideological factors when translating gender in a given culture.

### 3. Methodology

This study investigates the representation of gender in translated children's literature in China during the 1920s by focusing on the first Chinese translation of *Peter Pan* published in 1929. The source text is chosen because it represents an interesting case in portraying gender in children's literature. As shall be discussed below, Peter Pan challenges in many ways traditional gender stereotypes. The target text is selected because it is the first Chinese translation of the source text by an important figure in Chinese literary history, Liang Shiqiu (1903-1987). As a prolific writer and translator, Liang actively participated in many literary events during the New Culture Movement. By analyzing the representation of gender in Liang's translation, we can gain a better understanding of the conceptualization of childhood and gender in China during the 1920s. Qualitative methods are used for data collection. Elements and excerpts in the source text in which Peter Pan's gender is emphasized are first identified, and then compared with their translation in Liang's text. The translation choices are then interpreted with reference to the social and historical context of the target culture.

### 4. Analysis

Since Peter Pan first appeared on stage in 1904, the character has been the embodiment of the play's subtitle, *The Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up*. Currently in the book market, there are at least seven translations of *Peter Pan* that keep the original play's subtitle (either as title or subtitle). Each of them translates *boy* as *haizi* (child), making the gender of Peter a myth for first-time readers. The mystification of Peter's gender started from the novel's first translation in 1929 by Liang Shiqiu. Liang translates the title of the source text as *Pan Bide* (*Peter Pan*). Considering that not all Chinese readers back then were accessible to the knowledge that *Bide* is the translation of an English boy's name, *Peter*, and that Liang's translation was published with no illustration, the gender of the protagonist can seem quite ambiguous for first-time readers.

Liang's translation was published with a forward by the editor, Ye Gongchao, with a short introduction of the novel's background. Ye summarizes Barrie's earlier works as well as the success of the 1904 play — and translates its title as *Pan Bide — Yi Ge Bu Yuan Zhangda De Haizi* (*Peter Pan — The Child Who Wouldn't Grow Up*). Thus when Peter made his first appearance to Chinese readers, he somehow emerged as a gender-neutral character. Further in the forward, Ye details the genesis of *Peter Pan*, that the character was inspired by Barrie's encounter with the Llewelyn Davies boys:

One day, while he (Barrie) was walking by, he saw four lovely little children playing on the lawn. (Ye, 1929, p3, my translation)

Just like Peter, the gender of the Llewelyn Davies boys is also neutralized. Gender neutralization occurs not just in the forward to the book. Throughout the novel, there are numerous occasions when Peter's gender is disguised. In Chapter 3, when Wendy first encounters Peter in the nursery, she calls him *boy*. In Liang's translation, however, Peter is simply referred to as *child*.

#### Source text

“Boy,” she said courteously, “why are you crying?” (Barrie, 1911/2004, p.24)

#### Target text

“孩子,”她客气的说,“你为什么哭?”

(“Child”, she said courteously, “why are you crying?”) (Barrie, 1929, p.41)

In the same chapter, Peter explains to Wendy why he would not grow up:

“It was because I heard father and mother,” he explained in a low voice, “talking about what I was to be when I became a man,” he was extraordinarily agitated now. “I don’t want ever to be a man,” he said with passion. “I want always to be a little boy and to have fun. So I ran away to Kensington Gardens and lived a long long time among the fairies.” (Barrie, 1911/2004, p. 27)

In this short excerpt, the author associates Peter twice with *man*, and makes the character speak the famous declaration *I want always to be a little boy and have fun*. This is how Liang renders the text (emphases mine):

“因为我听到我的父母谈话，”他低声的解释，  
“谈到我将来长大变成什么样的人。”他说到这里非常的愤慨。“我永远不要做一个长大的人，”他愤激的说。  
“我愿永远做一个小孩子，永远的玩耍。我于是便逃到坎星顿花园，陪着仙女们在了很久很久的时候。”  
 (“It was because I heard father and mother,” he explained in a low voice, “talking about what kind of *person* I was to be when I grew up,” he was extraordinarily agitated now. “I don’t want ever to be a *grown-up*,” he said with passion. “I want always to be a little *child* and to have fun. So I ran away to Kensington Gardens and lived a long long time among the fairies.”) (Barrie, 1929, pp. 48-9)

In the source text, Peter’s gender is repetitively specified by word choices such as *man* (which occurs twice) and *boy*. In the target text, however, gender-specific words are replaced with gender-neutral expressions. *Man* is replaced with *person* or *grown-up*, whereas *boy* is changed into *child*.

The following excerpt is another example in which Peter’s gender is neutralized in translation. Consistent with previous examples, *boy* is replaced with *child* in the target text.

#### Source text

Peter did not compete. For one thing he despised all mothers except Wendy, and for another he was the only boy on the island who could neither write nor spell; not the smallest word. (Barrie 1911/2014, p.118)

#### Target text

彼得没有加入试验。一则因为除了温黛之外所有的母亲他都看不起，二则他是岛上唯一的不会写字拼字的孩子；顶短的字都不会。

(Peter did not take part in the test. For one thing he despised all mothers except Wendy, and for another he was the only child on the island who could neither write nor spell; not the shortest word.) (Barrie, 1929, p.142)

In the second but last chapter of the novel, the Darling children fly home with the lost boys and Peter. With the lost boys adopted by the Darling family, Peter returns to Neverland alone. In the last paragraph of the chapter, a lonely Peter watches from outside the window the reunion of the Darling family. Peter’s image as an outcast boy who is excluded from normal family life could not be made more poignant:

#### Source text

There could not have been a lovelier sight; but there was none to see it except a little boy who was staring in at the window. (Barrie 1911/2014, p.248)

#### Target text

这景象是再可爱也没有，但是这时候没人来看，除了一个小孩子从窗子向里望。

(There could not have been a lovelier sight; but there was none to see it at this moment except a little child who was staring in at the window.) ( Barrie, 1929, p.296 )

Again, in the target text, the image of Peter as a *boy* is weakened, with his gender neutralized by the word *child*. In the following section, the neutralization of Peter’s gender in Liang’s translation shall be discussed in light of the source text and the socio-cultural environment of China during the 1920s.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1 Gender in *Peter Pan*

Written at the beginning of the twentieth century, *Peter Pan* shares with many texts at that time an ambiguous attitude towards gender. Barrie himself has shown considerable ambiguity towards Peter’s sexuality. Upon the character’s very first appearance in *The Little White Bird*, Peter is known as a *Betwixt-and-Between*, a creature that is half human and half bird. The author later mentioned on several occasions that Peter is not a *real boy*. In setting up Peter as non-human, the text seems to have avoided the problem of facing children’s sexuality directly. In *The Boy Castaway of Black Lake Island*, which Barrie himself considers as the primitive version of *Peter Pan*, Wendy’s character did not even exist (Barrie, 1928, p.xxvii). Like other womanless fictions, *Peter Pan* was from the beginning a story exclusively about adventures of boys. Wendy’s character was later added as a *disturbing element* (Barrie 1928, p.xxvii). It is interesting to note, however, that in the 1904 theatrical version, when Wendy did make her debut in the world of *Peter Pan*, the gender contrast in the story was weakened from another angle: the protagonist, Peter, was played by a female actor,

Nina Boucicault. The tradition has since been kept in the play's many revivals, including the Broadway musical adaptation.

From a psychoanalytical point of view, it is argued that adults need for themselves a comfortable fantasy of childhood that they can safely revisit from time to time. In order to achieve this, they have to first of all make childhood physically and sexually unthreatening and non-disturbing (Reynolds, 1994, p.23). The avoidance of gender difference, therefore, represents an important step in the replacement of real children with abstract, spiritual images, completing adults' fancy for childhood. As a result, as argued by Kincaid (1992, p.198), adults can safely express their wishes and desires in an almost blank screen of what is called childhood. *Peter Pan* is an artistic attempt in rejecting the reality of childhood, of the fact that all children have to grow up and enter the adult world of gender binary.

#### 4.2 Gender in children's literature in China in the 1920s

As discussed previously, ideologies in the target culture can influence the representation of gender in translation (Tso, 2011). Specific socio-cultural circumstances under which the first Chinese translation of *Peter Pan* was published also made Peter's gender insignificant, if not sensitive, in the view of the translator. Translations of foreign children's literature started to appear in China toward the end of the nineteenth century. The Chinese theory of childhood, however, did not fully emerge until the New Culture Movement. At that time, children and women were considered two of the most overarching social problems, as they have long suffered from subordination in a society of patriarchal Confucianism. To defy the old society and the old culture, intellectuals first of all have to free children and women. In 1918, Zhou Zuoren published one of the earliest treatises on what he called *Ren De Wenxue (Literature of Humans)*, in which he saw the recognition of children and women as independent individuals as an important step in setting the nation free from Confucian doctrines. Thus from the very beginning, Chinese childhood has been closely associated with ideological motifs. This is not to say that Chinese theorists overlook the real needs of children. On the contrary, Zhou Zuoren (1920) himself empathized in a later speech that children's literature should address the needs of children. However, in an era stained with external war and internal conflict, salvation of the nation (in the sense of spiritual enlightenment) was a constant theme in literature. Born and developed in such an environment, children's literature in China during the New Culture Movement naturally carried more ideological significance.

Under such circumstances, the physical presence of children was sometimes overshadowed by their spiritual significance. Just like the way children were idealized in the Victorian/Edwardian society, the image of children was also idealized in China. Unlike their foreign counterpart, however, who saw childhood as a perfect preservation of the idyllic past, Chinese intellectuals associated childhood with hope and future. In 1900, Liang Qichao wrote the famous treatise *Shaonian Zhongguo Shuo (The Youth of China)*, in which he saw the younger generation as the incarnation of beauty, energy, determination and enthusiasm, calling them the hope of a decaying country suffocated in old doctrines. Twenty-nine years later, when Liang translated *Peter Pan*, the understanding of childhood remained largely unchanged. The following excerpt is from the forward to Liang's translation, which depicts an image of childhood quite similar to Liang Qichao's conceptualization:

This eternal energy as we understand it is the spirit of Peter Pan — something that is forever growing, but is never fully grown. (Ye, 1929, p.5, my translation)

In a sense, Peter Pan was not simply interpreted as a child of flesh and blood by Chinese intellectuals during the 1920s. His body, along with his gender, was not considered to be of much importance. What was important was the character's spiritual representation. To the translator and the editor, as well as the Chinese readers at that time, Peter Pan represented something they were all longing for: impetuous life and energy.

Another factor that may be related to the mystification of Peter Pan's gender is the lack of development in domestic children's literature. Up until 1929, there were only a couple of books published that could be considered as domestic children's literature, such as the collection of fairy tales by Ye Shengtao (1923) and the collection of letters to young readers by Bing Xin (1926). A closer look of Ye's and Bing's works reveals, however, that their texts address adult readers more than they address children: both authors were naturally influenced by the socio-cultural environment and addressed adult issues such as patriotism and anti-war viewpoints. Thus translators of children's literature were faced with a mismatch of literary systems: a well-developed literary tradition for children in the source culture on one hand (which has long established the difference between boys and girls and formed stereotypical sub-genres for each gender), and on the other hand, a new genre, undeveloped in every aspect, that started to emerge as children's literature in their home culture. Details that were considered significant (or sensitive) in the source culture were not necessarily viewed as such in the target culture, as norms of what children's literature should be and taboos of what they should not be were yet to be established. Gender in children's literature is an example of this. Apart from Peter Pan, the gender of many other child characters was also unspecified in texts for children during the 1920s. In the translation of Oscar Wilde's fairy tale *Happy Prince* published in the first Chinese children's magazine *Ertong Shijie (Children's World)*, for instance, the word *boy* was habitually translated as *child*. In Liu Dajie's translation of *Little Lord Fauntleroy* (Burnett, 1886) published in 1930, the title was changed into *Haizi De Xin (The Heart of a Child)*, neutralizing the gender of the protagonist specified in the title of the source text.

Another example can be found in the first Chinese translation of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (Carroll, 1865) translated by linguist Zhao Yuanren in 1922. In the source text, there is a famous parody of David Bates' lullaby, in which the author openly expresses his "low opinion" of boys:

Speak roughly to your little boy,  
 And beat him when he sneezes:  
 He only does it to annoy,  
 Because he knows it teases.  
 ...  
 I speak severely to my boy,  
 I beat him when he sneezes;  
 For he can thoroughly enjoy  
 The pepper when he pleases! (Carroll 1865/1948, pp. 39-40)

The word *boy* appears twice in the source text. Each time in translation, a genderless word is used to replace it. The first *boy* is generalized as *haizi* (child); the second changed into an endearment term *guaiguai* (darling), which is in contradiction to the parody's derogative nature. Apart from the reasons discussed above, potential gender discrimination submerged in the source text may have contributed to gender neutralization in the target text. It is interesting to note that gender neutralization is also observed in translation of the same passage in other languages. An analysis of two Finnish translations of *Alice in Wonderland* (published in 1906 and 1972), for instance, also indicates omission of gender difference in the target text (Oittinen, 2000, pp.140-141). Oittinen also attributes the omission of gender to factors involving censorship and gender discrimination.

On a similar note, the development of feminist movements in China in the early twentieth century may have contributed to the mystification of Peter Pan's gender. In China, the discovery of childhood goes hand in hand with the feminist movement. Emancipation of women was the buzzword among intellectuals in the first few decades of the twentieth century. *Xin Qingnian* (*New Youth*), a state-of-the-art journal in the New Culture Movement, started to dedicate a column for discussions about woman-related issues since 1917. Liang Shiqiu himself was also engaged in debates about women's education, though he took a relatively conservative stance (see Liang, 1927). Produced under such socio-culture circumstances, Liang's translation (1929) was naturally influenced one way or the other by prevalent ideology. It is unclear whether the avoidance of gender difference was purely initiated by the translator, or if it was imposed by censorship on the part of the editor or publisher. What is clear, however, is that translation of children's literature in the 1920s generally tended to avoid gender specification, especially when the source text in question suggests gender discrimination.

## 5. Conclusion

The translation of children's literature, like the translation of any other text, is influenced by a complex network of socio-cultural factors. The representation of Peter Pan's gender in its first Chinese translation published in 1929 illustrates how factors in the target culture context influence decisions made in translation. In the target text, Peter Pan's gender is consistently neutralized. The mystification of Peter Pan's gender is discussed with relation to the conceptualization of childhood by Chinese intellectuals during the New Culture Movement and the development of Chinese children's literature and feminism during the same period. It is argued that due to the symbolic significance attached to childhood, lack of development of domestic children's literature and potential influences from the feminist movement, gender of child characters generally tend to be disguised in translation, resulting in the neutralization of Peter Pan's gender.

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