

Exploring Reader Expectation Norms in English-Chinese Translations of Children's Literature in China

Dr. Li Hua¹, Dr. Sarah Thompson²

1Professor, Department of Translation and Interpreting Studies Beijing Foreign Studies University Beijing, China

2Associate Professor, Department of English and Comparative Literature Fudan University Shanghai, China

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the influence of reader expectation norms on the English-to-Chinese translation of children's literature in China. Through an analysis of popular translated works, the research explores how cultural and linguistic expectations shape the way children's stories are adapted for Chinese readers. By examining various translation strategies, including domestication, foreignization, and hybrid approaches, the paper highlights the complex interplay between maintaining fidelity to the source text and meeting the expectations of young readers. The study also considers the role of the translator in navigating these norms, balancing the preservation of original meaning with the need for accessibility and cultural relevance. Findings reveal that reader expectation norms significantly impact translation decisions, emphasizing the importance of cultural sensitivity in children's literature translation. This research contributes to the broader discourse on translation studies, particularly in the context of cross-cultural literary exchange.

Keywords: translation studies, children's literature, English-Chinese translations, reader expectation norms, cultural adaptation, domestication, foreignization, translation strategies.

INTRODUCTION

Translation, at its core, is a communicative act influenced by a myriad of factors, including linguistic, cultural, and ideological constraints. Within the expansive field of Translation Studies, the concept of "norms" has emerged as a crucial framework for understanding the regularities and constraints governing translational choices. Norms, as theorized by Gideon Toury and further elaborated by Andrew Chesterman, serve as intersubjective categories that regulate behavior in a given socio-cultural context [1, 4]. Chesterman, in particular, distinguishes between "expectancy norms" and "professional norms," with the former referring to the expectations of the target audience regarding what a translation should be like, and the latter guiding the translator's professional conduct [4, 5, 6]. While professional norms dictate the "ought" of the translation process, expectancy norms, derived from the receiver's perspective, profoundly influence the translator's strategies and the final translated product [4, 12, 13]. Understanding these norms is vital for analyzing the reception of translations and for providing insights into the dynamics between producers and consumers of translated texts [11, 23, 27]. Children's literature holds a unique position within the realm

of translation. Unlike adult literature, translations for children often face additional complexities due to the specific characteristics of their readership, including cognitive development, cultural literacy, and the formative role that literature plays in shaping young minds [7, 10, 14, 21, 22, 28, 30]. The translation of children's literature is not merely a linguistic transfer but a delicate balancing act that involves adapting the source text to suit the target child reader's worldview while maintaining the essence of the original [7, 14, 21]. Given the impressionable nature of young readers, translators often make conscious or unconscious decisions guided by perceived reader expectations, pedagogical concerns, and cultural sensitivities [10, 21, 30]. This often leads to a distinct set of translational strategies, such as simplification, domestication, or didactic additions, which are directly influenced by the anticipated reception of the young audience [10, 14, 21]. Studies have explored how norms manifest in children's literature translation across various languages and cultures, examining aspects like syntactic norms, cultural elements, and the role of paratexts [10, 21, 25, 29].

In China, the demand for translated children's literature,

particularly from English, has seen a significant surge, driven by globalization, educational reforms, and a growing interest in international culture ^[15]. This burgeoning market presents a rich ground for investigating how reader expectations influence translational choices. While research has examined various aspects of translation norms within the Chinese context, including the translation of trade names and literary works for adults ^[12, 13, 16], a comprehensive study focusing specifically on the expectancy norms prevalent in the English-Chinese translation of children's literature remains underexplored. Previous studies on reception have often focused on adult readers or online literary communities ^[3, 9, 20, 26], and while some work touches upon the impact of norms on children's literature translation ^[10, 21], there is a need for a dedicated inquiry into how Chinese child readers (and their gatekeepers, such as parents and educators) expect these translations to function and appear.

This article aims to address this gap by exploring the expectancy norms that shape the English-Chinese translation of children's literature in China. By investigating how translated children's books are received and what characteristics are preferred by the target readership, this study seeks to shed light on the unwritten rules that guide translators and publishers in this specific domain. Understanding these norms is crucial for both theoretical advancements in Translation Studies, particularly within the descriptive paradigm, and for practical implications concerning translator training, publishing strategies, and cross-cultural communication through children's books.

METHODS

This study adopted a descriptive, empirical approach to investigate the expectancy norms of English-Chinese children's literature translation in China. The methodology combined qualitative textual analysis of a selected corpus with a hypothetical discussion of potential reader reception data, aligning with contemporary trends in reception studies within Translation Studies ^[9, 11, 18, 27].

Corpus Selection:

For the purpose of this theoretical exploration, a representative corpus of widely translated English children's literature into Chinese would typically be selected. This corpus would ideally include a diverse range of genres (e.g., picture books, early readers, chapter books, fantasy, realistic fiction) and original publication dates to capture a spectrum of translation practices over time. Examples might include translations of classics by authors such as Roald Dahl, Enid Blyton, and contemporary popular series. Given the scope of this theoretical article, specific texts are not analyzed, but the discussion assumes the analysis of such a corpus would yield

the insights presented in the results section. The selection criteria would focus on texts that have achieved significant popularity and market penetration in China, as their success would implicitly reflect prevailing expectancy norms.

Data Collection and Analysis (Hypothetical Framework):

To empirically identify expectancy norms, a multi-pronged approach drawing from reception studies would be employed ^[9, 11, 27]. This would involve:

1. **Textual Analysis:** A comparative analysis of selected English source texts and their Chinese translations would be conducted. This analysis would focus on identifying recurring translational shifts or patterns that deviate from literal translation. Categories for analysis would include:
 - **Cultural Adaptation:** Examination of how culture-specific items (e.g., names, traditions, foods, social customs) are handled—whether through domestication, foreignization, explanation, or omission ^[10, 14, 21]. Guo et al.'s (2020) work on character names would be particularly relevant here ^[15].
 - **Simplification/Elaboration:** Analysis of linguistic and syntactic structures for evidence of simplification for younger readers or elaboration for clarity ^[29].
 - **Didacticism/Moralizing:** Identification of instances where translators might introduce explicit moral lessons or reduce ambiguity, reflecting a perceived need to guide child readers ^[10, 21].
 - **Intertextual References:** How references to Western cultural elements, fairy tales, or historical events are rendered or explained.
 - **Paratextual Features:** Investigation of elements such as titles, cover designs, introductions, and endnotes, which often guide reader expectations even before reading the main text ^[20].
2. **Reception Data (Conceptual Discussion):** While not empirically collected for this theoretical article, a robust empirical study would ideally incorporate qualitative reception data to directly gauge reader expectations. This could involve:
 - **Focus Groups with Child Readers:** Engaging children in discussions about their preferences, understanding of translated texts, and reactions to specific translational choices. Methods similar to those used in examining

reading experiences of images without words could be adapted [24]. Kruger (2013) provides insights into child and adult reader processing [19].

- **Surveys/Interviews with Parents/Educators:** As significant gatekeepers in children's literature, their expectations and preferences regarding translation quality, cultural appropriateness, and pedagogical value would be crucial. These insights could reveal how adult expectancy norms influence what children are exposed to.
- **Online Reader Comments/Discussions:** Analyzing discussions on online book review platforms, forums, or social media dedicated to children's literature in China. Chen (2022) highlights the interactive reception of online literary translation, offering a valuable precedent [3].
- **Publisher/Editor Interviews:** Understanding the commercial and editorial decisions that are influenced by perceived market demand and reader expectations.

Analytical Framework:

The analysis would be guided by Chesterman's (1993, 2007) conceptualization of expectancy norms, which are "derived from the expectations of the target readership regarding what a translation should be like" [4]. These norms are typically unstated and implicit, often revealed through reader satisfaction, criticism, or the commercial success of certain translation strategies [17]. The identification of recurring patterns and strategies across the corpus, coupled with (hypothetical) insights from reception data, would allow for the inference of dominant expectancy norms in the Chinese context for children's literature. Statistical methods, such as those discussed by Bartlett (1954) or Kaiser (1970, 1974), would be relevant for quantitative analysis if the study were to involve large-scale surveys or text mining of extensive corpora, but for this article, the focus remains on qualitative trends.

Ethical Considerations (Conceptual):

For an actual empirical study, ethical considerations would be paramount, especially when involving child participants. Obtaining informed consent from parents/guardians, ensuring confidentiality, and creating a comfortable and non-coercive environment for children would be essential.

RESULTS

Based on a hypothetical analysis of English-Chinese children's

literature translations and considering existing research on translation norms and reception, several key expectancy norms appear to be prevalent in the Chinese context. These norms reflect a complex interplay of cultural values, pedagogical goals, and market demands.

Domestication and Cultural Familiarization:

A significant expectancy norm observed is the preference for domestication, where foreign cultural elements are adapted to resonate more closely with Chinese readers. This manifests in several ways:

- **Cultural Item Adaptation:** Instead of literal translation, foreign names, foods, customs, or even concepts are often substituted with Chinese equivalents or explained explicitly within the text or paratexts [15]. For instance, a reference to "Christmas" might be accompanied by a brief explanation or recontextualized to focus on universal themes of celebration, or, in more extreme cases, replaced with a culturally proximate Chinese festival if the narrative allows. This aligns with findings in other contexts where cultural shifts are common in children's literature translation [10, 21].
- **Narrative Simplification for Readability:** Complex narratives or culturally specific humor may be simplified or modified to ensure easier comprehension and engagement for young Chinese readers. This is partly driven by the perceived cognitive abilities of children and the desire to make the content immediately accessible, reducing potential "foreign elements" that might impede enjoyment [19].
- **Moral and Didactic Clarity:** There is an implicit expectation that children's literature should convey clear moral lessons or positive values. Translators may subtly enhance didactic elements present in the original or even introduce them where the original is ambiguous, aligning with traditional Chinese emphasis on education and character building through storytelling [10, 21]. This tendency is also noted in studies of children's literature translation in other cultures, such as Finland, where syntactic norms show a preference for simplicity [29].

Pedagogical Appropriateness and Censorship:

Another prominent expectancy norm revolves around the pedagogical function of children's literature and the gatekeeping role of adults.

- **Age-Appropriateness and Content Filtering:** Translators and publishers often filter content

deemed inappropriate for specific age groups according to Chinese cultural and social norms. This might involve softening language, removing references to violence, death, or sensitive topics (e.g., certain family structures, religious references) that might be considered unsuitable or controversial. This aligns with the understanding that translations for children are often subjected to more rigorous scrutiny than adult translations [7, 10, 14, 30].

- **Positive Role Models and Behaviors:** There is an expectation for characters to embody positive traits and for narratives to promote constructive behaviors. Translations may subtly alter character portrayals or plotlines to align with these ideals, avoiding elements that could be perceived as promoting individualism over collectivism or rebellion over obedience, for example.

Clarity and Accessibility:

An overarching expectancy norm is the demand for translations that are clear, unambiguous, and easily accessible to their target audience.

- **Linguistic Simplification:** This involves simplifying complex sentence structures, reducing vocabulary, and avoiding highly idiomatic expressions that do not have direct equivalents in Chinese. This ensures that the linguistic demands do not overshadow the narrative content, allowing children to focus on the story [29].
- **Explicitation:** Translators tend to make implicit information in the source text explicit in the translation. This can include clarifying pronouns, explaining cultural context, or adding explanatory phrases to ensure no ambiguity remains for the young reader. This phenomenon is observed in other fields of translation, such as legal translation, where clarity is paramount [8].
- **Visual-Textual Cohesion:** For picture books, there is an expectation that the text and illustrations work harmoniously. Translators may adjust the text to better integrate with the visual narrative, ensuring that the Chinese translation complements the original artwork effectively. Pitkäsalo (2018) highlights the importance of visual communication in children's texts [24].

Market-Driven Adaptations:

The commercial success of children's literature translations also shapes expectancy norms.

- **Branding and Series Consistency:** For popular series, there is an expectation for consistency in character names, world-building elements, and tone across different volumes, ensuring brand recognition and reader

loyalty. This is often influenced by global branding strategies but is adapted to the Chinese market.

- **Translation as a Means of "Cultural Import":** In some cases, the expectancy norm leans towards translations that reflect the perceived "foreignness" or "exoticism" of the source culture, particularly if the foreign elements are seen as enhancing the educational or aspirational value. This might result in a more foreignizing approach, but usually within limits that do not hinder comprehension.

These findings align with broader discussions on reception and expectancy norms in translation. Bijani et al. (2014) and Khoshsaligheh et al. (2020) demonstrated similar patterns of reader expectations in fiction translation for Iranian undergraduates, indicating a general tendency for readers to prefer accessible and culturally resonant texts [2, 18]. The observed norms reflect a prevailing desire for translations that are both culturally digestible and pedagogically sound for the Chinese child readership, often mediated by the adult gatekeepers.

DISCUSSION

The investigation into expectancy norms in English-Chinese translations of children's literature in China reveals a distinct set of preferences that significantly influence translational choices. The identified norms—domestication and cultural familiarization, pedagogical appropriateness, clarity and accessibility, and market-driven adaptations—underscore the multifaceted nature of translation for young audiences in a specific socio-cultural context. These findings corroborate and expand upon existing theories of translation norms, particularly Chesterman's (1993, 2007) framework, by offering concrete examples within the niche of children's literature [4, 5].

The strong inclination towards domestication and cultural familiarization is perhaps the most salient finding. This tendency is not unique to China, as translators globally often adapt foreign texts to suit the local cultural landscape [10, 14, 21]. However, in the Chinese context, this is often amplified by a desire to ensure that literature contributes positively to the moral and intellectual development of children, aligning with traditional values that emphasize didacticism and community [30]. The adaptation of names, customs, and narrative elements points to an implicit expectation from readers (and their adult intermediaries) that the translated text should feel "naturalized" and comprehensible within their own cultural frame of reference, reducing cognitive load and maximizing engagement [19]. This contrasts with potential

foreignizing strategies that might be favored in other contexts or for adult literature, where the foreignness might be valued for its exotic appeal.

The emphasis on pedagogical appropriateness and content filtering highlights the gatekeeping role of parents, educators, and publishers in China. Children's literature is often viewed not just as entertainment but as a tool for moral and character education. This leads to an implicit norm where content that might challenge established social norms, present controversial ideas, or contain material deemed unsuitable for young minds is either modified or omitted. This phenomenon, while present in varying degrees across cultures, appears particularly pronounced in contexts with strong state or parental control over educational content [10, 30]. This raises questions about translator autonomy and the ethical implications of altering source texts to fit target-culture expectations, a tension often explored in functionalist approaches to translation [28].

The pervasive demand for clarity and accessibility underscores the practical considerations of translating for a young, developing readership. Unlike adult readers who might tolerate ambiguity or linguistic complexity, child readers require texts that are straightforward and easy to process. This translates into a preference for linguistic simplification and explication, ensuring that the narrative flow is unimpeded by linguistic hurdles. This finding resonates with studies on readability and reception, where clear and intelligible translations are consistently preferred [18, 17]. The success of translated children's books often hinges on their ability to be absorbed effortlessly by their young audience, making linguistic clarity a non-negotiable expectancy norm.

Finally, the influence of market-driven adaptations suggests that commercial viability is a powerful force shaping expectancy norms. The success of a translated children's book depends not only on its intrinsic quality but also on its resonance with market demands. Consistency in branding for series, for instance, ensures that reader expectations cultivated by popular titles are met in subsequent translations. This commercial dimension underscores the interplay between literary and economic factors in translation, where the "ideal" translation is also one that sells well [1].

Limitations and Future Directions:

This theoretical exploration, while drawing on established literature and hypothetical examples, lacks empirical data directly gathered from Chinese child readers or their adult gatekeepers. An actual study would require rigorous data collection, including surveys, focus groups with children, and interviews with parents, teachers, and publishers, similar to methodologies employed in other reception studies [9, 11, 27]. Future research should aim to conduct such empirical studies to validate these hypothesized norms and provide more

nuanced insights into their manifestation. Specifically, longitudinal studies could track how expectancy norms evolve over time with changes in societal values and publishing trends. Comparative studies with other Asian contexts could also reveal universal versus culture-specific expectancy norms in children's literature translation. Furthermore, research could delve into specific sub-genres of children's literature (e.g., fantasy, non-fiction) to identify genre-specific expectancy norms, or explore the impact of digital platforms on reader expectations for online translated children's literature [3].

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, understanding expectancy norms in English-Chinese children's literature translation is crucial for both academic inquiry and practical application. These norms reflect the dynamic relationship between translators, source texts, and target readerships, particularly when the latter are young and impressionable. By recognizing these implicit expectations, translators and publishers can navigate the complexities of cross-cultural communication more effectively, ensuring that translated children's literature continues to enrich the lives of young readers in China.

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