European Girl Travelling across China: The Reception History of *Little Red Riding Hood* in China from the Perspective of the Variation Theory

Weirong Zhao,
Professor, Sichuan University
Yufan Che, Ph.D. Student, University of Arizona

Abstract:

The European fairy tale, *Little Red Riding Hood (LRRH),* was first introduced into China in 1909. Over the next half-century, several translations and adaptations had emerged. Based on the original story, these new versions displayed conspicuous Eastern characteristics, including Confucian ethics, enlightenment thoughts and nationalism. Using the variation theory of comparative literature, this paper reviews the reception history of *LRRH* in China and analyzes the concomitant variations. We argue that the reception of Western fairy tales in modern China was not a simple translation on the linguistic level but an innovative re-creation based on the historical context, traditional culture and realistic needs. Chinese intellectuals never thought the perception of Western civilization was a passive one-direction process. In fact, they showcased initiative at every step and utilized the West as an intermediary to launch revolutions.

Keywords: Little Red Riding Hood, Modern China, Variation Theory, Translation, Reception

In 1697, Charles Perrault (1628-1703) completed a collection of eight fairy tales named *Les Contes de la Mere L'oye* which included the original version of *Little Red Riding Hood* (*LRRH*). In 1812, *LRRH* was adapted by the Brothers Grimm (1785-1863, 1786-1859) and was featured in *Children's and Household Tales*. Since then, it has gradually become a classic. Nearly 100 years later, Sun Yuxiu (1871-1922) edited a series of *Fairy Tales* for the Commercial Press in 1909 and *LRRH* was included in the first volume. This was the first time when the story captured the attention of Chinese readers.

Over the next half-century, translations and adaptations of *LRRH* had continued to emerge and prevail. According to Zhao Jingshen (1902-1985), "Chinese kids who have read fairy tales promoted by Sun Yuxiu must be familiar with *Thumbling* and *Little Red Riding Hood*" (1929, p. 98).

It is worth noting that the reception of exotic literature is different from the reception of foreign imports. When a country's literature faces its exotic counterparts, it does not accept them universally but chooses to absorb specific elements. Ji Xianlin (1911-2009) asserted:

> A beautiful allegory is destined to spread with travelers, especially itinerant traders. The story travels from one person to another, one village to another, one country to another and finally spreads everywhere. Depending on different narrators' interests and different nations' customs, some elements are added to or cut out from the story. The literary work will undergo more and more changes as it travels farther and farther (1989, p. 452).

Looking back on *LRRH*'s journey in modern China, we find its characters, plot and theme were all in continual fluxes. Underneath these fluctuations were diverse social currents in different periods of China. What Chinese readers saw was not a European girl living lightheartedly in France or Germany, but a child in turbulent China. She strived to overcome difficulties, spared no effort to help others and acted as a moral exemplar. That was why she was so popular in the Chinese book market.

The circulation of *LRRH* has consistently attracted scholars of all ages. Alan Dundes (1934-2005) edited an anthology called *Little Red Riding Hood: A Casebook* (1989) containing 11 papers on the topic. 13 years after the casebook, Catherine Orenstein (1968–) completed *Little Red Riding Hood Uncloaked* based on her thesis, reassessing the history of the dissemination of *LRRH* in Europe and North America with feminism. Nevertheless, it is quite unfortunate that both of them focused on the West and neglected the resources in Asia. To some degree, Yang Xun (1976–) filled in this gap with *The Chinese Translation of Little Red Riding Hood* (2018), introducing numerous Chinese versions of *LRRH*. Based on previous research, our paper makes a contribution to this topic by describing the reception history of *LRRH* in modern China and delving into the deep variations in this transcultural communication with the variation theory proposed by Cao Shunqing (1954–).

> The Variation Theory is a conceptual change in terms of the construction of the discipline, enabling the study of comparative literature to transform from seeking homogeneity to seeking heterogeneity. In other words, not only homogeneity and affinity but also variation and heterogeneity should be the focus of the Variation Theory. Only when these four aspects are systematically combined together will the discipline of comparative literature be satisfactorily constructed (2013, p. xxx).

The innovative theory attempts to reveal the unchanging laws beneath the ever-changing cultural phenomena. From this perspective, we re examine *LRRH*'s journey in China and analyze the variations when the fairy tale entered the Eastern culture.

The Early 20th Century: When *LRRH* Was Translated into Chinese

At the beginning of the 20th century, most Chinese translations of *LRRH* were based either on Perrault's or Grimm's text. The poet Dai Wangshu (1905-1950) translated the whole book of *Les Contes de la Mere L'oye* and his version is still popular among today's readers owing to its high quality and prestige. Interestingly, while Chinese translators were generally faithful to the original text, they all deleted Perrault's admonishment: "cajoling sweet-talkers who follow young ladies right into their homes, right to their bedsides. But alas! Everyone knows these smooth wolves are the most dangerous of all." (2002, p. 37) The seemingly insignificant abridgment actually distorted Perrault's motif. As a fairy tale not for children, Perrault's story warned virgins to rigorously retain their chastity. The explicit promotion of sexual morality was neither compatible with Chinese traditions nor suitable for educating pupils, which was why translators abridged the text unanimously. Dai defended the faithlessness with his sincere dedication to the Chinese younger generation.

> *Mr. Perrault added some boring and oppressive admonishment to his lovely stories. I would absolutely refuse to let these old-fashioned sentences confine children's free mind and lively soul. That's why I dare to remove them from my translation without permission* (1929, p. xiii).

Another modification intended to decrease the violence of the story. Perrault's *LRRH* may be unacceptable to Chinese readers considering its gruesome ending that the wolf ate the innocent girl atrociously. Dai simplified the brutal ending as "the merciless wolf then jumped to the front of *LRRH* and ate her" (p. 27) to skim over the horrible plot. Later after his death, the Juvenile and Children's Publishing House released a new version based on Dai's translation. This time, the heroine was saved by a group of woodsmen, which was very similar to the ending of the Brothers Grimm's *LRRH*.

Throughout the early 20th century when Chinese translators received and translated *LRRH*, they often considered the social needs and then added some personal touches to the story. That explained why most translators made the remarkably similar choice: To allow the young girl to survive. In pursuit of the deep rationale beneath the choice, we must examine the Chinese structure of feeling. Wang Guowei (1877-1927) stated:

> Chinese people's spiritual world tends to be optimistic and worldly. Traditional operas and novels are all profoundly influenced by the inclination. All literary works begin with sadness, separation and poverty, but all end with happiness, reunion and richness. If not so, they can hardly satisfy their readers (2001, p. 12).

Growing up in an optimistic culture, modern Chinese readers were used to happy endings in which what goes around comes around. Perrault made the pure young kid inevitably killed and this would not only upset the children but also make some adults reluctant to accept. The banishment of Perrault's ending demonstrated how the national structure of feeling influenced translations.

The Brothers Grimm made important changes to Perrault's original work by introducing a hunter to rescue the heroine from the brutal beast, which catered to the Chinese taste of art much better. The warm ending together with the authors' high prestige made the version more popular among Chinese translators. Aside from Sun Yuxiu, Wei Yixin (1898-1986) contributed the most outstanding version. Wei was the first one to translate all Grimm's stories into Chinese and his translation is still irreplaceable in today's book market.

In addition to translations discussed above, many other Chinese versions of *LRRH* did not clearly introduce the original works on which they were based. Nevertheless, there were still some distinctive works worth discussing. One of them was the version offered by ZL (?-?). In 1913, an unknown translator with the pseudonym "ZL" translated *LRRH* into classical Chinese and named it *Cute Red Cap*. The version replaced the wolf with a fox and added some new content. On the heroine's way to her grandmother's house, she showed kindness to small bees, little birds and an old lady. When the fox chased the heroine, these animals immediately came to offer help. Finally, a hunter, who was an acquaintance of the old lady, arrived in time to shoot the fox. Although the main structure of *LRRH remained*, ZL did add many typical Chinese elements to the story.

We can now jump to the following conclusion. When translating *LRRH* in the early 20th century, most Chinese translators were true to the original texts. However, faithfulness did not necessarily mean rigidity. Their translations were by no means a passive word-by-word product. Chinese intellectuals' inherent views of literature and personal intentions played a crucial role in the process, from choosing the original version to abridging or supplementing the text. In their opinions, the translation was an art requiring initiative rather than a monotonous skill. This inclination had been further strengthened over time.

The Mid-20th Century: When *LRRH* Was Deeply Re-created

As time went on, more profound variations emerged inside *LRRH*. As Gustave Le Bon (1841-1931) stated, "neither language, religion, arts, or, in a word, any element of civilization, can pass, intact, from one people to another" (2002, p. 45). Cao Shunqing also insisted that deep changes are to take place during the journey of literature from one civilization to another. From their perspective, exotic works of art have to undergo a series of variations before being incorporated by the new culture. This type of variation is the very concentration of our paper.

With the growing popularization of *LRRH* in modern China, Chinese intellectuals were discontent with simple translations. More epochal features were added to the story and several adaptations with Chinese characteristics came forth. Among these adaptations, the musical drama *LRRH* written by Lu Luo (?-?) appeared to be particularly suitable for comparative literature studies for its vivid reflection on the Second Sino-Japanese War.

Facing the severe war in the 1940s, Lu found it necessary to make his new work suitable for China's reality. Comparing Lu's drama with Perrault's and Grimm's texts, we can uncover significant differences. The protagonist in the European *LRRH* was kind-hearted. However, she was neither intelligent nor brave. Taking no heed to the crafty wolf, Perrault's heroine was unaware that her carelessness would place her grandmother and herself at risk. The Grimm's heroine would also be killed if the hunter failed to arrive on time. On the contrary, Lu's heroine inherited her European ancestor's gullibility, but in face of the catastrophe, the Chinese girl presented commendable traits which her predecessors did not have. For instance, upon seeing her grandmother lying in a pool of blood, Lu's Little Red Riding Hood cried out: "Granny! God! Blood! Oh, no! Granny was killed by someone! But crying is useless. I must find a way to avenge her" (1940, p. 19). Although shocked by the disaster, Lu's heroine was not overwhelmed by fear and sorrow. She calmed down quickly and transformed her sadness into an impetus to seek revenge.

Lu significantly modified the girl's personality to endow the musical drama with epochal characteristics. When Lu completed his work in 1940, Wuhan had already fallen into the enemy's hands and Chinese people were inundated with pessimism. Under such circumstances, the Chinese Little Red Riding Hood could no longer endure or wait passively for other's help. In Lu's drama, the heroine stood with her friends and they worked together to determine how to win the fight. In the decisive battle, she asked to be the vanguard and fought vigorously against her enemy. The two identities, a lovely girl and a valiant warrior, were then perfectly combined. Here, we find Catherine Orenstein's opinion is quite enlightening for an analysis of this variation.

> Fairy tales tend to follow a familiar pattern. [….] In the popular literary fairy tales, the heroine tends to follow a passive version of the rite of the passage. Sleeping Beauty, Snow White, and the Grimm's Little Red Cap all wait, asleep or in a deathlike state, for rescue by a prince (or hunter-woodsman) who frees the heroine from her slumber in a castle, a glass coffin, or the belly of the wolf (2002, p. 78).

Generally speaking, fairy tales aim to educate the youth, while legends are dedicated to praising heroes' great achievements. Therefore, fairy tales usually depict trifling daily matters while "the accomplishment of the my-

thic hero is world-historical, represen-ting macrocosmic human triumphs" (2002, p. 80). From a vulnerable girl to a gallant fighter, the transformation from the European story into the Chinese drama is an evolution from a bedtime story to a national fable.

The profound changes of the characters and plot led to a dramatically different theme. Perrault promoted sexual morality in France in the 17th century when marriages were viewed as a form of trade, in which women's chastity was the most precious merchandise. Over 100 years later, the Brothers Grimm, representatives of bourgeois, showed more sympathy for women by removing the stern warning. But their story still aimed to preserve the discipline of the patriarchal family in the Victorian age. The European girl might have the chance to submit herself to paternity in exchange for a safe life. But the Chinese heroine had to understand the harsh reality and fight to survive.

A song called *Hunt the Wolf* was inserted in the second act of Lu's drama: "Pick up your stick and knife. Hey hey! It's time for us to unite. Let's fight for a safe and sound life. Kill the wolf then everyone can dance under the sunshine." (1940, p. 19) The personal revenge had been integrated into the campaign to protect the whole community. During the War of Resistance against the Japanese, all Chinese people faced the dilemma of whether to await their doom solitarily or fight unitedly for independence. Lu's protagonist chose the latter and grew into a valiant warrior. Her personal goal was combined with the collective interest and blended in with the zeitgeist consequently.

The Destiny of *LRRH* in Modern China: Gradual Integration into National Children's Literature

The analysis of *LRRH*'s destiny in modern China helps us understand the reception of other Western literary works as well. "There's no doubt that modern Chinese literature is influenced by Western literature. However, Chinese writers did not accept this influence passively. They utilized Western literary works in a way Luxun called 'making the choice with our independent thought'." (Zhang, 1986, p. 92) *LRRH* has been constantly sinicized according to the historical background ever since it entered China. As Andre Lefevere (1946-1996) pointed out, translation does not occur in a vacuum; the historical context and social environment should always be borne in

mind (1992, pp. 1-13). When we start the research on Chinese *LRRH*, we should never exclude the historical context in which they were translated, created and published.

In 1895, China was defeated by Japan in the first Sino-Japanese war and the failure led to an ideological emancipation. Most Chinese intellectuals realized the importance of learning Western culture and that was when *LRRH* entered China for the first time. Despite the fact that so many Western books were introduced, the traditional culture was still hard to budget for at the moment. The conservative literati were shocked by Western morality which was radically different from Confucian ethics. A writer with the pseudonym "Iron (?-?)" was so incensed that he alleged: "Translated fictions, especially those about love affairs, would do great harm to our ethos. I suggest that every translator abridges those immoral contents in Western books" (1908, p. 184). Thus, the prevailing translation strategy at that time were similar to what Lawrence Venuti (1953-) called "the domesticating method," meaning "the reader ought, if possible, to forget that it is a translation at all, and be lulled into the illusion that he is reading an original work" (1995, p. 121).

Conservative Chinese translators tamed exotic texts with native values. Some of them went so far that they almost created an independent work. In ZL's *Cute Red Cap*, the heroine helped small animals and an old lady. In return, they saved the girl from the deadly beast: "This allegory proves the value of causationism. You reap what you sow. I hope this story can be a warning to wicked people and comfort for warm-hearted men simultaneously" (1913, pp. 11-12). A fairy tale with eroticism went so far as to become a fable promoting traditional Chinese values. The heterogeneity of the European *LRRH* was assimilated by Eastern culture. Although *Little Red Cap* did not conform to the original theme, Chinese readers used to welcome and appreciate this type of translation.

Drastic reforms took place in ideology after the May 4th Movement, declaring the end of the Chinese feudal culture and the rise of individualism and humanitarianism. These trends created a new context for Chinese children's literature. Zhou Zuoren appealed for children's independence: "although children are different from adults physically, they have their unique self-awareness just as the parents." (2009b, p. 212) He averred that writers should focus on children's well-being so as to create first-class literary works and cultivate a generation of modern citizens. Subsequently, the May 4th

intellectuals translated Western literature into Chinese enthusiastically without censorship. The modernity in the original works was preserved. Dai's *LRRH* was "translated from the French original work with great faithfulness" (Perrault, 1929, p. xiii). With beautiful and elegant language, Dai's version successfully introduced this story to young Chinese readers. Meanwhile, to preserve Chinese youth's lively soul and ensure they became adults longing for independence and liberty, Dai and his peers unanimously deleted Perrault's admonition. Whether following the original works or not, they were devoted to China's education wholeheartedly.

Chinese children's literature would have continued to develop in a children-oriented way if the Second Sino-Japanese War had not broken out. Unfortunately, the destructive war soon forced out individualism and humanitarianism. Salvaging China from subjugation became an urgent mission in every regard. In 1931, *The Little Friend* published two special issues, *The Movement Against Japanese Invasion* and *A Discussion on How Teenagers Contribute to Our Country*, to encourage Chinese youth to protect their hometown. Maodun (1896-1981) claimed the core mission of Chinese children's literature was to urge the youth to face reality. As the war was threatening the nation, it was improper to welter in daydream created by Andersen and the Grimm anymore. Maodun urged: "Please stop writing stories about the prince, princess, elf and magic" (2015, p. 503). Hence, if Chinese writers still wanted to make use of works like *LRRH*, innovative transformations were indispensable.

In this respect, Lu Luo's musical drama turned out to be a paradigm. Inspired by China's wartime needs, Lu created a brand-new composition consisting of three parts: The first condemned the cruel enemy; the second called for a united army to win national independence; and the third encouraged the audience to remain optimistic and prophesied that the righteous side was destined to enjoy the victory. This work was published in 1940 in the *Journal of Wartime Education*, whose founder was the educator Tao Xingzhi (1891-1946). Tao took part in the founding of the Shanghai Literature and Arts Association with Song Qingling (1893-1981), Zou Taofen (1895-1944), and other patriots in 1935. They appealed to different parties and camps to stop the civil war and unite as one nation. Lu's drama can be seen as a reflection of this appeal. Through Lu's creative reception, *LRRH* was reborn with a strong realistic atmosphere, clear educational intention and dramatic effect.

Conclusion

According to Peter Hunt (1945–), children's books are always linked to the educational and ideological environment. (1994, p. 21) Thus, it is wise to begin the research on Chinese versions of *LRRH* by identifying the environment where they were completed and published. When analyzing the changes with the variation theory, we clearly see that the destiny of *LRRH* was tied to Chinese national children's literature. The sinicization of this European fairy tale was a rebirth, during which the story had been gradually integrated into Chinese literary history. Through translations, the Western civilization strongly affected Chinese culture. But no matter how strong the influence was, Chinese intellectuals managed to function latently, intentionally and strategically. Instead of being silent and invisible, they utilized the West as an intermediary to vocalize their own ideas.

In conclusion, the research on the reception of Western children's literature in other countries with the variation theory is feasible and necessary. Douwe Fokkema (1931-2011) commented: "The Variation Theory is an answer to the one-sided emphasis on influence studies by the former 'French school' as well as to the American focus on aesthetic interpretation, inspired by New Criticism, which regrettably ignored literature in non-European languages" (2013, p. v). With a broadened horizon, we can exploit abundant academic resources in the non-English world and reveal the complex relationships established in transcultural communication. Therefore, we can develop a comprehensive understanding of different cultures and start effective intercultural literary conversations.

References:

Cao, S. Q. (2013). *The variation theory of comparative literature*. Springer-Verlag.

Fokkema, D. (2013). Foreword. In S. Q. Cao, *The variation theory of comparative literature* (v-vii). Springer-Verlag.

Hunt, P. (1994). *An introduction to children's literature*. Oxford University Press.

Iron. (1908). Ash in the iron urn. *Novel Forest*, 12, 181-185.

Ji, X. L. (1989). A study on fables and fairy tales from the perspective of comparative literature. In Institute of Comparative Literature of Peking University (Eds.), *Essays in modern Chinese comparative literature, 1919-1949* (449-453). Peking University Press. (Original work published 1947)

Le Bon, G. (2002). *The crowd: A study of the popular mind* (T. F. Unwin, Trans.). Dover Publications, Inc. (Original work published 1895).

Lefevere, A. (1992). Introduction. In A. Lefevere (Eds.), *Translation/History/Culture: A source book* (1-13). Routledge.

Lu, L. (1940). Little Red Riding Hood. *Wartime Education*, 10(5), 18-20.

Maodun. (1989). About children's literature. In Q. G. Wang (Eds.), *Anthology of children's literature theory in modern China* (395-401). Guangxi People's Publishing House. (Original work published 1935).

Orenstein, C. (2002). *Little Red Riding Hood uncloaked: Sex, morality, and evolution of a fairy tale*. Basic Books.

Perrault, C. (1929). *Contes de ma mère l'Oye* (W. S. Dai, Trans.). Kaiming Bookstore (Original work published 1695).

Perrault, C. (2002). Little Red Riding Hood. In C. Orenstein, *Little Red Riding Hood uncloaked: Sex, morality, and evolution of a fairy tale* (37-38). Basic Books (Original work published 1695).

Venuti, L. (1995). *The translator's invisibility: A history of translation*. Routledge.

Wang, G. W. (2001). *Guowei Wang's three literary essays*. The Commercial Press (Original work published 1904).

Zhang, L. X. (1986). Professor Qian Zhongshu talks about «la littérature comparée» and «la comparaison littérature». In Comparative Literature Section Chinese Department Beijing Normal University (Eds.), *Essays in comparative literature*. Beijing Normal University Press: 89-95 (Original work published 1981).

Zhao, J. S. (1929). *Basic study on fairy tales*. The World Book Co. Ltd.

Zhou, Z. R. (2009b). Children's literature. In S. H. Zhong (Eds.), *Complete works of Zuoren Zhou's prose, 1944-1949* (211-212). Guangxi Normal University Press (Original work published 1944).

ZL. (1913). Cute Red Cap. *Xuehai Journal*, 8-12.