Alice’s Adventure in Cross-Cultural Wonderland

Archival Alice Essay by Rui Lin

Little Alice has been an international heroine. When she bumps into Wonderland through the rabbit hole, Alice encounters a world of strange culture; when her story travels worldwide, Alice upgrades her adventure by traveling through a whole lot of different cultural contexts. Among all the versions of Alice in Wonderland showcased in Illustrating Alice: An International Selection of Illustrated Editions of Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and through the Looking-Glass (2013), two editions will be highlighted in this archival Alice essay. One is an American pop-up version designed by Robert Sabuda (2003); the other is a Chinese version adapted by Hu Baiyuan and illustrated by Shi Huimin (2000). It would be interesting to look at the two distinct versions with a comparative curiosity: How does an American artist invite the reader to explore his pop-up interpretation of Wonderland “alongside” Alice, and how are Victorian British Alice and her creator Carroll treated in the twenty-first century Oriental land? What is the significance of Alice’s story within the different contexts?

In Sabuda’s Wonderland, the pop-up effects make the version stand out from the rest by bringing the reader into three-dimensional scenes through physical interaction. What does it feel like compared to watching a 3D movie in the cinema? What kind of role does “Director” Sabuda offer the reader? What are the rules of the pop-up kingdom?

In the Sino-Wonderland, Alice travels through an exotic culture, transforming into an Oriental girl with short haircut who sings Chinese folksongs. How are Alice and other
characters acclimatized for Chinese young readers? What kind of ethos and ideas have the illustrations revealed about Chinese culture?

**The Outsider’s Cultural Shock in Pop-up Toyland**

The pop-up Wonderland welcomes the reader with a whimsical forest where Alice chased the rabbit who’s anxiously looking at his watch. Unlike the reader, Alice is too small to look at the forest with a bird’s-eye view, otherwise she might be able to discover some hints the creator has left—the green treetops actually outline the dim figures of three characters of the Wonderland story: The Cheshire Cat, the Hatter with a teacup, and the Queen of Hearts. And just like Alice, the reader gets the chance to experience the temptation of “Pandora’s box:” Following the directions, the reader opens the paper band, pulls the box up and look inside from the small hole, the vista of Alice’s falling extends surprisingly as if it has gotten the magic power to draw the reader into the “kaleidoscope” that forebodes the colorful yet complex environment of Wonderland.

The pop-up form seems to provide all the excitement an outsider needs to initiate an adventure to the book by releasing the child identity. Alice looks so small and helpless with the free falling gesture, facing up the peeping hole as a perfectly identifiable child, which counters Suchan’s claim that when Alice falls down the rabbit hole to “escape the boredom of the aboveground world, her identity as a child is closed to her because she has already assumed adult values” (87). The reader’s child identity resonates more with Alice by opening up a series of embedded smaller pages with embedded elements of the story. The rule of thumb for exploring this maze, however, is to obey the directions and
rules. If the reader views Alice’s fall from the uncovered sides of the extendable box rather than the peeing hole, he or she would discover the secret of the “kaleidoscope”: it is merely made of seven layers of colored hollow paper. Sabuda’s purpose of not covering the “backstage” of the “peep show” is uncertain, but it seems to have provided an opportunity for rule-breakers to withdraw midway and return to the adult identity: the lateral view somehow turns the reader from a dreamer/game-player to a manipulator/bystander. With this perspective, Alice’s relationship with the reader shifts from a companion to a toy.

The aerial panorama landscape of the pop-up book enhances the toy-manipulator role of the reader. Unlike the enclosed immersing atmosphere that a 3D movie theater creates, it is much easier for the reader to “take off the 3D glasses,” shut the book, and alienate themselves from the “Toyland” just like a double-minded play child. Despite Sabuda’s creative illustration of several scenes such as Alice’s falling down the rabbit hole and the pig-baby’s interchangeable faces, the popup form inevitably fails to convey certain literary depth (e.g. the chaotic state of dead Time at the tea party) due to its intrinsic limitation along with abridged passages. Nevertheless, it does make sincere attempts to observe and enrich narrative via artistic visual surprises, rather than “relying only on gimmicks to sell the product” (Piehl, 1987). For someone who has read the original book, it could be a thrilling experience to watch and interact those material classic characters.

While the pop-up form may facilitate reader’s understanding, it may also create misunderstanding. As mentioned above, Alice is illustrated as a pure innocent child who stumbles through Wonderland, which has nothing to do with her conflicting identities that have assumed the adult values from the aboveground world. As an outsider to Wonderland,
Alice is portrayed with innocent expressions that are confused, frightened, curious, or irritated in the pop-up scenes. Even in the end, she is hardly recovered from the “cultural shock,” snuggling up in her dear sister’s arms. On the contrary, many other characters are portrayed with a sophisticated look. Through interaction with the murderous-looking rabbit at the scene of “Sending a Little Bill,” the cunningly smiling Hatter and Cheshire Cat, the fiery Queen of Hearts…the reader might find himself/herself sympathetic to the disconcerted poor Alice. In the pop-up kingdom, this simple little girl does not quite seem like a “serpent,” a “child-judge,” or a “fabulous monster,” not to mention the sadist-transformed masochist (predator) as some harsh critics have asserted (Suchan, 1978).

“Mixed and Matched” Alice in a Reconstructed Wonderland

British writer Richard Newnham had a hard time investigating copyright issue in China. The original author, Lewis Carroll, is never credited in the particular Chinese adapted version of Alice published in 2000 by the Inner Mongolian Young People’s Publishing House. Newnham states in his article selected for “Alice in China” in *Illustrating Alice: An International Selection of Illustrated Editions of Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and through the Looking-Glass* (2013), “Carroll would love this puzzle: language problems, logic not ours to fathom, unknowables, drawn in a distant land” (21). To him, “the book’s acknowledgement to Popular Publishers of Taiwan for ‘supplying copyright’” (20) is a mystery due to the complicated relationship between Taiwan and Mainland China. Interestingly, Newnham somehow becomes another Alice in the Wonderland of China, exploring the chaotic state of publishing industry with great perplexity.
Unfortunately, Alice could not escape the fate of bumping into “doors after doors” in the exotic culture. She seems to have gotten through a series of cosmetic surgeries to become an Asian girl whose face and dressing somehow shows the trace of mimicking some Japanese cartoon characters prevalent in early twenty-first century China. This multiracial Alice has short blonde hair, and wears three bowknots in her costume—one on the hair band, one on the collar, and one on the back side of her waistband. Compared with Sabuda’s book cover with the grinning cat watching Alice chase the white rabbit, Chinese Alice shows up in bigger size in the cover, leaning on a large chessboard that illustrates the one in *Through the Looking-Glass*. Unexpectedly, this supposedly great creation is messed up by three strange characters that never appear in the actual story. The three western-face chessmen dress up as one soldier and two officials from the royal court of some ancient Chinese dynasty, which are commonly seen in some classical Chinese TV plays of fairy tales. More absurdly, one of the officials seem to be playing the role of the white rabbit in the court, holding an unfolded “imperial edict” in one hand and a huge pencil in the other. Behind him, big-size Alice holds the tail end of the pencil, seemingly trying to tamper with the content in the parchment. Thus, Alice is interpreted as a naughty girl in a bizarre “mixed and matched” tale.

The Chinese Wonderland welcomes the reader with a pure Chinese New Year picture with a group of frolic children, where any element of the Alice story is completely without a trace. This sort of “jumping” style between two cultures that runs through the whole book is certainly going to puzzle the reader with dual absurdity—what a Wonderland within a Wonderland! As the reader dives into this simplified version, he or she would
discover that a great many elements and descriptions of metalinguistic, philosophical, and literary values are reconstructed, if not spoiled, to fit the climate of the new land. Also, as Feng points out in *Translation and Reconstruction of a Wonderland: Alice’s Adventures in China* (2009), most “metalinguistic elements are left out” because simplified version re-writers encounter “difficulties to find alternative linguistic resources to rephrase or paraphrase” those features (250). Particularly, the poetic “nonsense,” the parody, the riddles and puns “logically and linguistically challenges translation if one wishes to keep both the form and the meaning—if there is any at all” (243).

In most cases, adapter Baiyuan Hu chooses to maintain the form and dismiss partly or wholly the meaning (either literal or figurative, or even both). For instance, the “Twinkle” song sung by the Hatter at the Queen of Hearts’ concert is replaced with a funny classic Chinese children’s folksong, “Two Tigers.” Another example is the Chinese version of the poem “You are old, Father William,” of which each verse starts with a different statement, respectively being “How old you are,” “how heavy you are,” “how weak you are,” and “you are shaking!” The rule of thumb that Hu obeys is to keep the number of verses and use rhymes. Thus, a Chinese reader still understands that Alice is reciting a rhyming poem about old William, although the role of “Father” is altered into “Master,” which is a common role in Chinese culture (e.g. Chinese people would call a driver “Master Driver”).

“Localization” of elements is frequently used in Hu’s adaptation, with the most interesting case of the animal characters. Dodo, a strange alien in Chinese culture, is substituted with Magpie, whereas the original Magpie turns into a yellow warbler.
Gryphon, the legendary creature originates from the Ancient Greek lore, is translated into Chinese Fenghuang (an analogue to Phoenix,) which is a mythological bird traditionally welcomed by Chinese people for the symbol of blessing and auspiciousness. From the perspective of cultural adjustment, this is a considerate translation worth applauding.

Similarly, Bill the Lizard gets its Chinese name of “old gentleman Bi;” Alice’s thimble becomes sewing kits, the game of croquet becomes the game of golf, the pig-fig rhyme becomes zhu (Chinese pronunciation of pig)-shu (Chinese phonics of book;) “Witchcraft” is one of the courses for the Mock Turtle, the trick of homophones “lesson” and “lessen” turns into a song named “The Turtle Soup!” Shillings and pence turn into “silver money,” a common currency in ancient China. The dish of tarts on the court table turns into cookies; those tarts allegedly stolen by the Knave of Hearts funnily turn into “mutton,” a popular dish in Inner Mongolia where the publishing company locates; and later, these same tarts magically become “steamed bun with ground pork stuffing” during the dialogue between the King and the cook…Mr. Hu must be pretty hungry while translating the story!

Additionally, the illustrations of the story have demonstrated a certain temperament of Chinese culture, which can be sensed from the classic scene of Alice’s conversation with the Caterpillar. In the Norton Critical Edition edited by Gray, the mysterious Caterpillar shows only his high-above rough sketch to the reader, with Alice standing on tiptoes alongside the edge of the mushroom. In Sabuda’s edition, the reader gets to see Mr. Caterpillar’s blue face as he arrogantly turns his back to little Alice. Whereas in the Chinese Wonderland, the Caterpillar is faithfully portrayed as a “large” figure, leisurely smoking the long hookah. This time, the reader is able to see his face clearly—wait, is this
his face or hers? There, the caterpillar looks a lot alike the traditional “grandma” figure who is usually caring, benevolent or serves as a role of “spiritual guide.” Compared with Caterpillar’s great sacrifice of gender-transformation for the cross-cultural enterprise, those alien characters who change their name, consume, and diet, etc. should have called themselves lucky.

**Everyone Has an Alice at Heart**

“For my sister, Wendy, who fell down a hole too, but had the strength and courage to find her way back out again.”

This is a small note printed on the back cover of Sabuda’s pop-up version. Evidently, Sabuda has his own significant interpretation of the rabbit hole. To a stray adult, it might also become an incipient stage of a struggling dream filled with temptations, obstacles, frustrations and illusions. There are issues and topics that have no boundaries of language, ethnicity and culture. In Chinese culture, the idea of “Wonderland” is somehow similar to that of “The Hidden Peach Garden,” an imaginative place created in a classical ancient prose. Regardless of its different state of paradisiacal peace, the Peach Garden is also discovered accidentally by an outsider and is considered an escape from the real world. Also, since Chinese literature has an old tradition of creating tales with fairy characters in it, many Chinese versions of *Alice in Wonderland* have translated the word “Wonderland” as “Fairyland” in Chinese, while the original masterpiece has little to do with fairies (The Queen of Hearts might be very happy to hear this compliment to her territory).

Taking that into consideration, lots of Chinese readers or audiences, including myself, might just view the rabbit hole as an entrance to a magic land full of exciting wonders
when they were a child with curious eyes. Many years have passed, as I assume the adult values, experience the “mad” facts and rules of the real world, and explore strange cultures as an alien, I get to understand the complex interpretations and critics of “Monster Alice” and her chaotic Wonderland. Evidently, just like the aboveground world, little Alice is not as simple as I might have thought. But the story of Alice has always served as a nostalgic memory to me, which reminds me of the carefree childhood as well as the longing for the unknown future. Perhaps everyone has or had been an Alice in “Wonderland” within some kind of cultural and life context; and perhaps, the story of Alice somehow has the significant power to speak to everyone in some sense, despite the variety of differences.
References


