

Implications of Jimmy Liao's Picturebooks and Their Translations for Theories of Crossover Narrative

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Abstract Crossover literature generally denotes literature that blurs child readership and adult readership, in other words, literature that transgresses the age boundaries. Crossover yet can refer to boundary crossing in more than one sense — generic and sociocultural. This article argues that a text's crossover potential is more about the way of representation than the subject matter itself, and the significance of the way of representation for the text's crossover potential comes to the fore when it is translated into another language. Focusing on crossover as a transgression of the sociocultural boundaries, this article moreover suggests that the investigation of crossover literature should situate the text in its context of production and reception. The arguments are illustrated with a close analysis of Jimmy Liao's picturebooks *When the Moon Forgot* and *The Sound of Colors*, alongside their English translations — in particular, how the themes of loneliness, family relationships, and death are rendered in different ways in the Chinese and English versions.

Key Words crossover literature; Jimmy Liao; picturebooks

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Studies of the crossover phenomenon in children's literature started around the 1990s, and the recent three decades saw a surge in both the production of crossover literature and its critical studies. Crossover in children's literature criticism is

generally employed to denote a blurring of the boundaries between adult readership and child readership, that is, a crossing of the age boundaries, as pointed out, amongst others, by Sandra Beckett (*Transcending Boundaries* xi-xx) and Rachel Falconer ("Crossover Literature" 557). One of the most notable examples of crossover literature is the *Harry Potter* series (1997-2007), labeled by Beckett as the "landmark" of crossover literature (*Crossover Picturebooks* 1). That the child and the adult editions of the *Harry Potter* series differ only in terms of covers rather than contents evinces the books' appeal for a wide range of audience. Scholarship of crossover literature can be dated back to Ulrich Knoepfelmacher and Mitzi Myers' seminal paper "From the Editors: "Cross-writing" and the Reconceptualizing of Children's Literary Studies" in 1997. The book *Transcending Boundaries* edited by Beckett is one of the earliest and most comprehensive collections of essays examining crossover literature in a wide range of countries and through various critical lenses. More recent studies have often focused on a particular form of crossover literature, for instance Falconer's *The Crossover Novel*, and Beckett's *Crossover Fiction* and *Crossover Picturebooks*. The term crossover literature is now included in various encyclopedias and reference books of children's literature, such as the entry "Crossover Books" in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Children's Literature*, "Crossover Literature" in *Key Words for Children's Literature*, and "Crossover Literature" in *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature*.

Apart from transgressing the age boundaries, crossover can refer to boundary crossing in more than one sense. Crossover may involve the blurring of the generic boundaries. Maria Nikolajeva points out that genre eclecticism contributes to the ambivalent status of a text's audience ("Children's, Adult, Human" 63-80). Beckett explains that what gives picturebooks appeal with both children and adults is their experimental nature, the source of which lies in their capacity for blending and creating genres (*Crossover Picturebooks* 2 309). I shall argue that crossover is moreover a historical and transcultural movement from one category to the other. The focus of this article is precisely on crossover as a transgression of the sociocultural boundaries. For instance, a text may be published and marketed for adults in one culture, yet when it is translated or transposed into another culture, the target audience may change to children, or vice versa. This article will go on to argue that crossover literature is more about a way of representation than the subject matter itself, and the investigation of crossover literature should situate the text within its context of production and reception.

The arguments will be illustrated with a close analysis of Jimmy Liao's

picturebooks *When the Moon Forgot* (henceforth *The Moon*) and *The Sound of Colors* (henceforth *The Sound*) alongside their English translations. The decision to illustrate the arguments with the analysis of picturebooks stems from the uniqueness of the picturebook medium, that is, the dynamic relationship between words and images.¹ Though, as Perry Nodelman asserts, the picturebook medium stays “firmly connected to the idea of an implied child-reader/viewer” (11), it can be inherently more crossover than other forms of children’s literature because in picturebook reading, adults and children can fill in verbal and visual gaps differently, as explained by Nikolajeva and Carole Scott (261-62). They further suggest that the dual narrative of picturebooks affords a unique opportunity for “the collaborative relationship” between adults and children, as it empowers them more equally (261). Exemplifying with the close analysis of picturebooks may therefore also afford glimpse into a form of crossover literature, whose potential for facilitating the transgression of the age boundaries needs particular justification.

Liao is a Taiwanese picturebook creator born in 1958. Since his first picturebooks *A Fish That Smiled at Me* and *Secrets in the Woods* came out in 1998, Liao has authored around forty picturebooks, many of which, originally in Chinese, have been translated into several languages and earned him wide acclaim among children and adults. Liao’s works are of particular concern for the focus of this article in two main ways. First, his picturebooks blur the boundary between child readership and adult readership, triggering much debate about the target audience. Though Liao does not consider himself as a creator of children’s picturebooks, and his official website markets him as a pioneering picturebook creator for adults, his works, especially early ones, have received numerous awards as picturebooks for children. Additionally, among children’s literature critics, there is no consensus on the target audience of his works. Martin Salisbury and Morag Styles for instance include Liao among “regional book artists who help to make up the current landscape of children’s book illustration” (43), whilst Mieke Desmet applauds him for creating adults’ picturebooks (68-84). Picturebooks for adults may seem self contradictory, given the medium’s once firm association with the child audience. Åse Marie Ommundsen though investigates picturebooks for adults as a distinct, recently arising literary phenomenon, especially in the Nordic countries (72). Liao’s works therefore with their appeal for both children and adults, and their ambivalent status, provide a suitable and rich repertoire for the discussion.

Second, the close analysis of Liao’s picturebooks can help develop a more sustained international dimension to the study of crossover literature, as most current relevant criticism examines texts that are rooted in the Western tradition.

Given Liao's own background and his non-Western primary readership, it is important and relevant to explore how certain aspect of his works originally in Chinese may resonate more strongly with the reader in the context of production. Moreover, since *The Moon* and *The Sound* have been translated into English, it is feasible to conduct an analysis of their original Chinese versions alongside English translations. Some changes made to the original versions may seem prevalent in the translation process in general. For instance, Gillian Lathey suggests that the shift in audience has been recurrent throughout the history of translating for children, exemplifying with French fairy tales and Aesop fables, which were appropriated for the child readership in the subsequent translations (2). Lathey describes the role of the translator, especially the translator for children, as mediating "unfamiliar social and cultural contexts" and "the values and expectations of childhood encoded in the source text" (196). The focus of this article is on what these changes, whether immanent in the translation process or particular to Liao's texts, reveal about crossover literature. Therefore, for the abovementioned reasons, Liao's picturebooks offer excellent material for discussing crossover literature as a transgression of the sociocultural boundaries. When analysing the primary texts, I draw on the notion implied reader, that is, the reader as inscribed in and evoked by the text regardless of the authorial/editorial intention, rather than the actual, flesh-and-blood reader who approaches the text.

Publishing Information

There are in general two Chinese versions of *The Moon* and *The Sound*, one in simplified Chinese characters mainly distributed in China, and the other in traditional Chinese characters mainly distributed in Taiwan. These two versions do not differ in terms of contents. This article focuses on the production and reception of the versions in simplified Chinese characters. When *The Moon* and *The Sound* were translated into English, so many significant changes were made that the English versions could hardly be called translations, but, more accurately, adaptations. The English version of *The Moon* was published by Little, Brown in 2009, a Publishing Division for Young Readers under Hachette Book Group based in New York. It is the same publishing house that was responsible for the English version of *The Sound* (2006). The publishing house's name in itself suggests the target audience of the two books' English versions – mainly children. Furthermore, the two books' English versions are specially marketed as a Children's Book when sold on Amazon. However, the first editions of the two books in traditional Chinese characters did not make any specification as to for whom the books were published,

neither did Dolphin Books (the publisher of *The Moon*) in 2010 or People's Literature Publishing House (the publisher of *The Sound*) in 2009. The significant changes made to *The Moon* and *The Sound* when they were adapted into English may have to do with the translator's and the publisher's assumption of what a children's book should be. Since the translator does not always interact with the author, as Lathey suggests (188), it is difficult to ascertain whether the author was aware or approved of these changes.

Summary of the Plots

In the Chinese version of *The Moon*, a boy's story is framed within a man's story. The man is injured from falling off the balustrade, whilst the boy becomes friend with a tiny moon that he picks up from the pond, and helps the moon get back to the sky. The English translation however completely removes the man's story, within which the boy's story is framed. *The Sound* is about a blind girl roaming alone in the subway, and her feelings of loss, anxiety, helplessness, and hope. Throughout the picturebook, the verbal text is mostly the protagonist's soliloquy. The language of her soliloquy is poetic and philosophical, resembling an unrhymed poem. The pictures transfer what the soliloquy expresses into concrete and vivid images, which render the protagonist's mindscape in colourful and powerful brushstrokes.

In the following analysis, I will examine the significant changes made to the original Chinese versions, grouped on the basis of the representation of different themes, explore how these changes impact on the texts' crossover potential, and then move on to discussing what these changes and the consequent impact on the crossover potential may reveal about crossover literature.

The Representation of Loneliness

The English adaptation of *The Sound* makes changes to the Chinese version's representation of the pervading sense of loneliness. On the thirteenth spread of the Chinese version, the protagonist walks alone down a long and dark passage. The accompanying verbal text says, "I walk down, down, down, to the subway platform where the wind never blows and the rain never falls. I can hear the echo of my *lonely* footsteps in the *lonely* air" (my emphasis).² However, the English translation omits the second sentence of the verbal text. The next spread in the Chinese version develops the protagonist's sense of solitude: the girl walks down to the subway platform and the verbal text says, "I'm used to being alone and talking to myself" (my translation). Interestingly, the English translation completely removes

this spread. The English translation diminishes the sense of loneliness, whilst the original Chinese version brings it to the fore.

In terms of the representation of loneliness, the Chinese version of *The Moon* also differs from its English translation. The English translation omits several spreads that strongly convey the boy's loneliness. For instance, on the wordless twenty-seventh spread of the original Chinese version, the little boy, holding his moon, stands in front of four huge paintings hung up on the wall. The boy and his moon, with their crestfallen expressions, look extremely lonely and sad when compared to the paintings that depict smiling moons in the company of twinkling stars. Another example is the thirty-second spread, where the boy and his moon occupy the small lower right corner, whilst on the rest of the spread are dark woods and rows of lamp-posts casting long and gloomy shadows on the ground. The boy and his moon, extremely small in size, are overwhelmed by the massive woods and lamp-posts. The reader can sense the loneliness and helplessness from the dark grey background colour, the position of the boy and the moon on the spread, and their extremely small size. Neither of these two spreads is included in the English version of *The Moon*.

As can be seen from these examples, the English versions of *The Moon* and *The Sound* tone down the overwhelming sense of loneliness that is apparent in the Chinese versions. Though loneliness in itself is just a kind of emotion and inner state of mind, in these two books loneliness has negative connotations. In *The Moon*, the boy feels lonely because of the insufficient attention from his cold parents. The protagonist's blindness in *The Sound* imparts a touch of poignancy to the pervading sense of loneliness. It seems that when adapting the texts into English, the translator and possibly the English publisher act as mediator of the expectation of the implied child reader embedded in the source texts – too much of a depiction of loneliness, and the subsequently evoked negative connotations, are not appropriate for children.

This pervasive sense of loneliness that the child reader is expected to understand can though be well placed within the contemporary Chinese context. Neither of the protagonists in the two picturebooks is depicted to have a sibling or cousin. Though picturebooks by convention may tend to portray a single child protagonist, the child reader embedded in the Chinese context may more strongly resonate with the pervasive sense of loneliness through drawing on similar real-life experience. Because of the One-child Policy implemented from 1979 to 2015, many children do not now have siblings, or even cousins. China is undergoing a time of social upheaval, in which many parents leave home for work in another city

or country. This exerts a deep influence on the husband-wife relationship and the child-parent relationship, loosening family ties, complicating family relationships, and challenging a traditional understanding of “home,” as demonstrated for instance by Yuesheng Wang (118-36). Insufficient care and attention from parents give rise to children’s feeling of loneliness. When asking the moon “do you know where your home is” (spread 28),³ the little boy in *The Moon* is expressing his doubt as to whether the place where he lives with his mother is really a home for him. Therefore, the expectation of the child reader to understand an overwhelming sense of loneliness is closely related to the contemporary Chinese context.

A close analysis of the translator and the publisher’s changes to the original representation of loneliness affords new insight into crossover literature: the translator’s role as mediator of the child reader inscribed in the source texts precisely demonstrates the variedness of the demand and expectation of the child reader in different contexts. It follows that crossover can be context dependent – a text may evoke both the child and the adult readership in one context, yet in another context, without certain adaptation, its capacity for addressing a particular readership may be diminished.

The Representation of Family Relationships

The Chinese version and the English translation of *The Moon* also differ from each other in the representation of complicated family relationships. In the Chinese version of *The Moon*, Liao challenges an idealised view of family relationships, presenting them as complex and problematic – parents are by no means loving or caring, nor are children carefree or obedient. Four spreads in the Chinese version elaborate on how the boy engages in various kinds of mischievous play in an attempt to attract his mother’s attention, whereas she does not even care. The English version retains only two of the four spreads that show the parent’s coldness, and makes changes to the verbal text to mitigate the negative portrayal of the parent, as if it were afraid that the child reader would discover that parents have their own faults and cease to respect and trust them. The sentence “Mum is too busy to come to his aid” (spread 22) in the original Chinese version is adapted into “They don’t need Dad to save them” (spread 14) in the English translation. Thus a negative portrayal of the parent’s negligence becomes a positive depiction of the child’s independence. In the Chinese version, when the boy calls his father and tells him in excitement that he has a real moon, “Dad only answers, ‘Be a good boy. Do what Mum says’” (spread 31). The word “only” heightens his father’s authoritarian insensitivity. The English translation though removes the word “only,” with its

disapproving implication, which makes the verbal text less judgmental (spread 20).

Neither parents nor child are perfect. The boy plays as a monster, unleashing his disappointment and aggressiveness. The fortieth spread of the Chinese version displays the boy's change into a monster in a strong, visually impactful way.⁴ The spread is frameless, conveying intense emotions that cannot be restricted into frames. The pure white background brings to the fore the process of the boy's change, ensuring that the boy's disappointment and aggressiveness should not elude the reader's attention, whilst at the same time leaving sufficient room for their imagination. The English version cannot leave out this spread without obstructing the reader's understanding of the plot, but it cuts down on the boy's mischievous play that foreshadows this change. On the one hand, for didactic purposes, the translator and the publisher may be worried that too many negative feelings on the part of the child protagonist can create a negative role model for the child reader. On the other hand, the translator and the publisher may think that such a conflicting and problematic family relationship between the cold parents and the hurt, mischievous child is too challenging, and potentially disturbing, for the child reader. It seems that the English version attempts to offer shelter from a harsh reality for the child reader.

The boy's play as a monster in *The Moon*, Max's play as a wild thing in Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963) (henceforth *The Wild Things*), and Bernard's possible transformation into a monster in David McKee's *Not Now, Bernard* (1980) (henceforth *Bernard*) constitute an intertextual network. Delving into this intertextual network can uncover more of the crossover potential of the Chinese version of *The Moon*, and how it is destroyed in the English translation. In all of the three texts, the parents' indifference leads to the accumulated anger and aggression of the child protagonist, who unleashes the previously repressed emotions in turning wild or even into a monster. I suggest that compared to *The Wild Things* and *Bernard*, the Chinese version of *The Moon* has more crossover potential because the porousness of the boundaries between different diegetic levels that are layered atop each other invites the reader to occupy different temporal positions, and moreover to pose different temporal perspectives against each other.

Several pictorial details suggest the connection between the framing narrative of the man's story and the framed narrative of the little boy's story in the Chinese version of *The Moon*. The entire narrative starts with the spread that portrays a man gazing at the full moon. On the second spread, the man, a flowerpot, a yellow slipper, and interestingly, the moon fall down from the sky. The next spread shows the smashed flowerpot and the yellow slipper lying on the ground. These spreads

are the beginning of the man's story. Towards the end of the man's story, a red chair goes flying in the air, and on the ground are the smashed flowerpot, a broken yellow umbrella and a yellow slipper. The images of the smashed flowerpot and the yellow slipper echo those on the third spread, whilst the flying red chair and the yellow umbrella also appear in the framed boy's story, where the wind sweeps away the boy, his moon, the red chair and the yellow umbrella. Towards the end of the man's story, the huge blooming white lilies beside the man remind the reader of the verbal text which puts an end to the boy's story: "The moon spins tenderly. The boy falls asleep. In his dream is a faint fragrance of lilies" (spread 55). Given the connotation of the word "dream" and the image of the man's bandaged head, the boy's story is very probably the man's dream or illusion when he falls into coma because of his injury. The man projects what he sees: the red chair and the yellow umbrella, and what he smells: the lilies, into his dream or illusion. The boy's story may also be the man's remembrance blended with illusory elements.

The end of the framing narrative resonates with its beginning – in the visual, the same man who falls from the balustrade leans against a walking stick, wrapped in bandages, and again gazing at the moon. The moon is a key element that connects the framing narrative and the framed narrative – on both of these diegetic levels, it first falls down from the sky and is then restored. Compared to the framed narrative that gives a happy ending to the little boy through visually portraying his reunion with the moon, this last image of the framing narrative seems rather uncompleted. Since the end of the framing narrative also constitutes that of the entire narrative, the reader is invited to immerse themselves in a feeling of something more to come. The last image of the framing narrative moreover places the man and the moon diagonally, with the man at the lower right corner, the moon at the upper left corner against the huge blue background. The image foregrounds the moon as the object of focus, both on this spread and in the eyes of the man. The reader is therefore encouraged to explore the man's interiority when he gazes at the moon. Since the protagonists of the two levels of the narrative are portrayed to occupy different temporal positions, one adult and one child, exploring the man's interiority involves an interplay of different temporal perspectives. This is particularly the case if we see the framed narrative as the man's remembrance blended with illusive elements – the protagonist in the framed narrative is the child self of the man in the framing narrative. The position of the moon at the upper left corner on the last spread seems to imply that the man is looking backwards, because in picturebooks, by convention, the left is associated with backwards. This again supports the interpretation that the framed narrative is part of the man's

remembrance. The interplay of temporal perspectives then becomes, on the one hand, condensed in one person, and on the other hand, dispersed across different stages of life. The reader is encouraged to ponder over these significant issues: whether the man has recovered from the anger and aggression he suffered in childhood, whether he has reconciled with his parents, how he may think of that experience now, how his childhood experience may have to certain extent shaped him, and so on. Given that in the framing narrative, the moon follows the same track of movement (falling down – being restored) as in the framed narrative, the man may still be under the shadow of his childhood experience. Since in the real life the moon cannot fall down, the entire narrative contradicts the reader's real-life experience, which moreover shrouds the narrative in mystery and magic.

Both *The Wild Things* and *Bernard* are very complex and ambiguous regarding the modality, that is, whether in the fictional world, Max and Bernard have indeed turned into a wild thing or monster, as demonstrated, amongst others, by Maria Nikolajeva and Carole Scott (180-84, 195-97). The Chinese version of *The Moon*, I shall argue, has more crossover potential because it deliberately encourages (the thinking about) the interplay of different temporal perspectives. By removing the framing narrative of the man's story, the English translation however completely destroys the crossover potential. Analysing the Chinese version of *The Moon* alongside its English translation in an intertextual network challenges Beckett's claim that problematic family relationships are "a recurrent theme in contemporary picturebooks that fall into the crossover category" (*Crossover Picturebooks* 213). *The Wild Things*, *Bernard*, and the two versions of *The Moon* all portray complicated family relationships, yet they clearly vary in crossover potential. This demonstrates that the representation of specific themes, for instance "cross-generational themes" as defined by Beckett (209-72), or "epic" "adult" "universal" themes as proposed by Maija-Liisa Harju (31-33), does not make a text crossover. Rather, crossover is more related to the way themes are represented.

The Representation of Death

Another point where the English version diverges from the Chinese version is in the representation of death. In the Chinese version of *The Sound*, the topic of death is intimated and the joint efforts of words and pictures tone down the potentially damaging effect. On the seventy-ninth spread, the verbal text says, "I'm ready to say goodbye to the city of so many dangers" (my translation), whilst in the accompanying picture, the blind girl walks on a tightrope, feeling her way forward with a walking stick. Though neither the verbal nor the visual explicitly mentions

death, the words “say goodbye” may intimate the girl’s idea of suicide. Moreover, the picture of the blind girl walking on a tightrope implies the danger that she may face. On the ninety-third spread, the liveliness of green grass and colourful birds in the picture help to soften the potentially disturbing effect of death that is explicitly brought up in the words “I think of the silent *funeral* under osmanthus trees in childhood” (my translation and emphasis). These are the only two spreads related to death in the Chinese version of *The Sound*, but neither of them is retained in the English translation.

The way that the theme death is represented in the Chinese version of *The Sound* seems to evoke both the adult and the child readership – immanent in the evocation of the child readership is the adult idea that the representation of death should be toned down to cater for this particular readership. The picturebook medium has a particular advantage in appropriating the representation of death for the child reader because rather than explicate death in the verbal, it can make the most of the ambiguity of the visual. In John Burningham’s *Granpa* (1984), for instance, the empty chair, where the grandfather used to sit, intimates his death. Similarly, the last spread in Lane Smith’s *Grandpa Green* (2011) portrays a topiary image of the great-grandfather, which may signal that he has become the past, a memory to be passed down, just like various topiary images that he himself carved in the lifetime. It seems that whereas original children’s texts are allowed to be subtle in the representation of death, translators are much more hesitant.

Beckett suggests that the representation of the theme death in itself is cross-generational because it is “part of the human condition” irrespective of age (*Crossover Picturebooks* 249). In a similar vein, Harju includes death in a group of themes, the representation of which can distinguish crossover literature (32). Contrary to Beckett’s claim that death is often considered to be the “ultimate taboo” for children (*Crossover Picturebooks* 249-72), Nikolajeva contends that the theme death is recurrent in children’s fictional narratives by connecting the development of the theme death in children’s literature to the changing socio-historical context (*From Mythic to Linear* 6 82-83). It seems to suggest that treating the theme death as a taboo in children’s literature more relates to adult idea in a specific socio-historical context of what children can deal with than what children are really capable of dealing with. The representation of the theme death does not immediately rob the text away from the child reader. It again demonstrates the significance of taking into account the specific way of representing a theme rather than the theme itself, when crossover literature is under examination.

Crossover Literature: Investigating the Way of Representation in Context

A close analysis of the changes made to Liao's original picturebooks shows that when translated into English, their crossover potential is undermined or even in some cases destroyed. This has to do with the translator's and the publisher's adaptations to the original texts, especially when they may have children in mind as the target audience. As Riitta Oittinen observes, the translator for children makes choices based on the individual and collective adult understanding of what the target audience needs and is capable of (902-05). The translator of Liao's picturebooks *The Moon* and *The Sound* seems to show a less informed understanding of the target audience, that is, children cannot very well deal with complicated, potentially disturbing subject matter, even in a toned down representation. The consequence is a serious diminishing of the original texts' crossover potential.

Investigating the originals alongside the translations moreover reveals that crossover is at the core a way of representation rather than the subject matter itself; situating the text within its context of production and reception foregrounds the context dependency of crossover. When the text is received in its context of production, a particular readership may be more likely to resonate with certain aspect of the text. For instance, the child reader in the Chinese context may more strongly resonate with the pervasive sense of loneliness in *The Moon* and *The Sound*. The investigation of crossover literature therefore cannot be separated from the discussion of a particular text's context of production and reception. On the whole, we can only arrive at a more comprehensive picture of crossover literature, if we explore its way of representation situated in context.

Notes

1. This article discusses picturebooks in which the narrative relies on the interaction between words and images rather than wordless picturebooks, where "the visual image carries the weight of the meaning and where ... the absence of words is 'not simple feat of artistry [instead it is] totally relevant and in keeping with topic'" as defined by Everlyn Arizpe (94).
2. The second sentence is my own translation.
3. This is taken from the Chinese version of *The Moon*.
4. It is the same as the twenty-fifth spread in the English version.

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