



A Multimodal Metaphor Perspective on the Globalization of English Translations of Chinese Children's Picture Books: A Case Study of Book Covers

Chen Yang

School of Culture and Education, Shaanxi University of Science and Technology, Xi'an, China

Email: 799739098@qq.com

How to cite this paper: Yang, C. (2026) A Multimodal Metaphor Perspective on the Globalization of English Translations of Chinese Children's Picture Books: A Case Study of Book Covers. *Open Access Library Journal*, 13: e14867.
<https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1114867>

Received: January 12, 2026

Accepted: February 9, 2026

Published: February 12, 2026

Copyright © 2026 by author(s) and Open Access Library Inc.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

Abstract

This study examines the influence mechanism of cover design in English translations of Chinese children's picture books on cultural transmission from a multimodal metaphor perspective. By analyzing representative picture books, such as *The Water Dragon*, and *Reunion*, it becomes clear that a complex interplay exists among visual symbols, color metaphors, and typography, collectively constructing a metaphorical system for cross-cultural communication. Research indicates that successful cover designs often achieve a creative translation of multimodal metaphors, preserving Chinese cultural characteristics while adapting to the cognitive habits of international readers. From the ideological perspective, such designs skillfully integrate translation strategies of domestication and foreignization. This paper proposes that cover designs for English translations of Chinese children's picture books should emphasize the modern reconfiguration of symbols, the cross-cultural adaptation of colors, the visual treatment of text, and the distillation of universal themes. This approach maximizes cultural transmission during the initial visual impression stage.

Subject Areas

Linguistics

Keywords

Multimodal Metaphor, English Translation of Children's Picture Books, Cover Design, Cross-Cultural Communication, Domestication, Foreignization

1. Introduction

As a unique multimodal text, children's picture books entrust their cover designs with the primary responsibility of cultural dissemination. In the international publishing market, picture book covers serve not only as visual elements to attract readers but also as metaphorical carriers conveying cultural significance [1]. Metaphors for objects are often constrained by cognitive models within different cultural contexts; varying cognitive models lead to different cognitive outcomes. Even universally applicable concepts like metaphors can evoke distinct mental images across cultures [2]. In recent years, the international dissemination of original Chinese children's picture books has shown positive momentum. Works such as *The Water Dragon* and *Reunion* have garnered international awards and entered major overseas libraries and bookstores. However, significant challenges remain in effectively conveying Chinese culture through cover design.

Multimodal metaphor theory provides a powerful analytical tool for examining the cultural transmission function of picture book covers. This theory posits that metaphors exist not only at the linguistic level but can also be expressed and conveyed through multiple modalities such as visuals, color, and typography. As the "first impression" of a picture book, the synergistic effect of its multimodal elements—images, colors, and text—directly influences international readers' understanding and acceptance of Chinese culture.

This study examines four English translations of Chinese children's picture books—including *The Water Dragon* and *Reunion*—using Serafini's multimodal text analysis framework. It explores the operational mechanisms of multimodal metaphor in the cover designs of these translations across three dimensions: perceptual, structural, and ideological. From the ideological perspective, the study explicitly links the design changes to established translation strategies of domestication and foreignization, aiming to provide a stronger theoretical basis for the observed phenomena [3]. The research further investigates how cover design can be optimized to enhance cultural transmission effectiveness.

2. Multimodal Metaphor Theory and Cover Analysis Framework

2.1. Overview of Multimodal Metaphor Theory

Multimodal metaphor theory, proposed by Forceville, Kress, and others, extends the conceptual metaphor theory within cognitive linguistics. This theory posits that metaphors can exist across multiple symbolic systems—such as imagery, color, typography, and sound—with meaning co-constructed through interactions between different modalities. Forceville notes that visual metaphors often leverage familiar cultural symbols to evoke specific emotions or concepts, while multimodal metaphors form richer, multi-layered expressions of meaning through modal synergy [1].

Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar theory provides a methodological foundation for analyzing cover imagery [4]. They propose three dimensions of

image analysis: representational meaning (what the image depicts), interactional meaning (the relationship between image and audience), and compositional meaning (the arrangement of image elements). These dimensions correspond to linguistic functions, enabling systematic analysis of how images convey cultural metaphors.

2.2. Theoretical Framework Construction

This paper constructs a cover analysis model based on Serafini's multimodal text analysis framework, unfolding from the following three perspectives:

Perceptual Perspective: Analyzes the intuitive visual impact of cover design, including the recognizability of image symbols, the emotional conveyance of colors, and the visual appeal of typography [5].

Structural Perspective: Examines the layout and interactive relationships among modal elements (images, colors, text) on the cover, such as visual weight distribution, color-image harmony, and text-image complementarity [6].

Ideological Perspective: Explores how cover designs metaphorically express cultural values and identity, and how multimodal metaphors facilitate cross-cultural translation. This perspective is explicitly connected to translation strategies of domestication and foreignization [2]. Domestication refers to adapting cultural elements to the target audience's cultural context to reduce comprehension barriers, while foreignization retains the source cultural characteristics to introduce unique cultural connotations to the target audience.

This framework enables a comprehensive analysis of multimodal metaphorical characteristics in cover design, providing theoretical support for examining its cultural communication effects [1].

3. Case Study: Multimodal Metaphorical Expression in English Translations of Chinese Children's Picture Book Covers

In the process of opening overseas markets for English translations, book covers play a crucial role. A child's motivation to pick up a book often originates from its cover. Across different cultural contexts, people perceive images through distinct imagery [7]. The dragon is a highly symbolic figure in Chinese culture, yet its connotations differ significantly from the Western concept of "dragon". A corpus-based comparison of Chinese "loong" and English "dragon" reveals that in Chinese culture, the dragon symbolizes justice, authority, and power, whereas in Western culture, it represents evil, demonic forces, and ferocity [8]. Beyond objective environmental factors and the quality of the English translation itself, the cover design plays a pivotal role in disseminating children's picture books with distinct Chinese cultural characteristics.

Using *The Water Dragon* and *Reunion* as case studies, this paper applies Serafini's multimodal text analysis framework to compare the Chinese and English covers from three perspectives: perception, structure, and ideology (with the latter

linked to domestication and foreignization strategies).

This comparative analysis explores the importance of cover design in disseminating English translations of Chinese children's picture books.

3.1. English Translation of Chinese Children's Picture Book: *The Water Dragon*

The Water Dragon is an original ink-wash picture book created by Li Jian. It tells the story of a boy named A Bao who transforms into a water dragon to save his village from drought, blending traditional Chinese ink-wash techniques with elements of folk tales. The book's copyright has been exported to countries including the United States, France, and South Korea, and it is held in over 100 overseas libraries. In 2015, it won the Fifth China Excellent Publications Award (Figure 1). The cover of *The Water Dragon* features an ink-wash dragon as its central visual element, occupying three-quarters of the space. While the dragon's overall form is majestic, its rounded snout, horns, and large, round eyes convey a sense of child-like charm and approachability. This design skillfully distinguishes the cultural differences between the Chinese "loong" and the Western "dragon", avoiding potential negative associations Western readers might have with dragons [9].

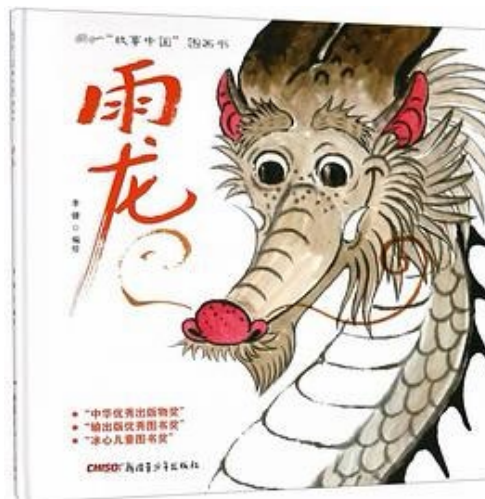


Figure 1. The cover of *The Water Dragon*.

From a perceptual perspective, the English edition's cover (Figure 2) primarily uses gray, black, and red, though the colors are subdued, resulting in a weaker visual impact. The dragon image occupies over two-thirds of the right side of the cover, with its horns confined within the border, conveying a sense of peacefulness and gentleness. The left side houses the title, author, and other details. The English title "*The Water Dragon*" appears first in light red, followed by the Chinese title "雨龍" and the story type "retold in English and Chinese" in black, and finally the author's name and publisher in black. Compared to the English edition cover (Figure 2), the Chinese edition's layout remains largely identical with subtle variations: its design primarily employs vibrant gray, black, and red hues, notably

featuring the culturally favored bright red. The dragon's horns extend beyond the cover's borders, creating a dynamic visual impact. On the left, the title "*The Water Dragon*" is rendered in red simplified Chinese characters, the author's name appears in black, the award information is highlighted in red, and the book category is indicated in black. When comparing the English translation cover of *The Water Dragon* with the Chinese edition, the English version omits the award information and book category. Both versions cater to their respective audiences: the vibrant red of the Chinese edition resonates strongly with Chinese readers, while the muted red of the English edition subtly tones down the dragon's aggressive aura, making it more approachable for English readers. Simultaneously, the dragon serves as a core visual symbol with high cultural recognition. Its rounded form softens the traditional dragon's majestic presence, enhancing its approachability and aligning with the cognitive characteristics of young readers (Figure 3).

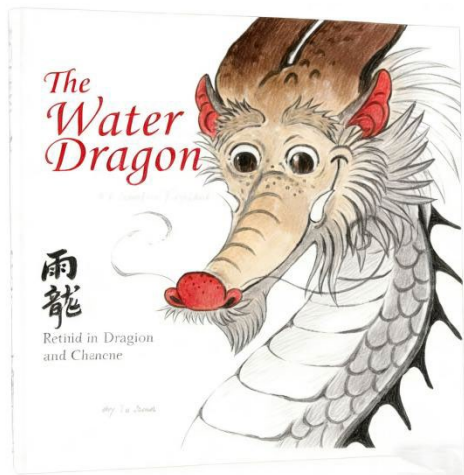


Figure 2. The cover of *The Water Dragon*.

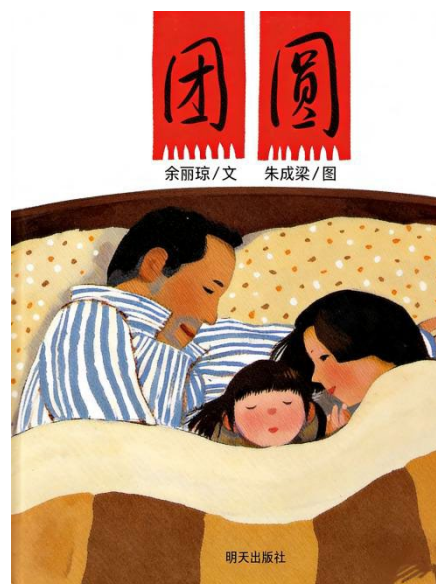


Figure 3. The cover of *Reunion*.

From a structural perspective, the cover employs a symmetrical layout where the English title “*The Water Dragon*” visually balances the Chinese title “雨龙”, preventing any single cultural symbol from dominating. Color-wise, the dragon’s azure hue contrasts sharply with the background’s negative space, preserving the ink-wash painting’s artistic conception while amplifying visual impact. Both the English and Chinese editions prioritize simplicity in cover text—displaying only essential book details. The English edition’s cover includes the English title, Chinese title, story genre, author, and publisher. The Chinese edition adds award information, reflecting its focus on Chinese readers—emphasizing accolades to convey the work’s prestige to its domestic audience. Beyond the English title, the English edition deliberately renders the Chinese title in traditional characters, likely to appeal to foreign enthusiasts of Chinese culture. This exemplifies the interpersonal function of structure within Serafini’s multimodal theoretical framework—the cover uses language to establish a relationship with readers, creating deeper connections for English-speaking audiences.

From an ideological perspective, closely linked to translation strategies of domestication and foreignization, the Chinese edition’s domestic sales necessitate consideration of the target audience’s sociocultural context [10]. The dragon, a traditional Chinese symbol of auspiciousness, undergoes successful cultural translation through modern ink painting. This translation adopts a foreignization approach by retaining the core cultural symbol of the dragon, achieving deep decoding of cultural DNA and aesthetic reconstruction. The cover adopts the style of traditional Chinese painting. The dragon’s eyes are large and expressive, its head held high and chest thrust forward, yet its expression remains gentle. The absence of claws in the illustration perfectly captures the gentle and approachable demeanor of *The Water Dragon*. This cover conveys an initial sense of warmth and friendliness to readers, an impression that will entice many to eagerly open the book and explore its story. To navigate international markets while accounting for differing socio-cultural contexts, the English translation distinguishes the Chinese dragon from the Western “dragon” through a combination of domestication and foreignization. The foreignization strategy is reflected in retaining the dragon as the core visual symbol to introduce Chinese dragon culture to Western readers. The domestication strategy is manifested in specific adaptations: the English title “*The Water Dragon*” and subtitle “A Chinese Legend” appear in light red on the left side, while the original Chinese title “雨龍” is rendered in black. This color treatment lends the cover a gentler feel, softening the dragon’s aggressive aura and preventing potential misinterpretation during the book’s international dissemination. Additionally, the rounded and approachable shape of the dragon adapts to Western readers’ cognitive habits of dragon images, which is a typical domestication strategy. Both the Chinese and English editions of *The Water Dragon* prioritize perceptual adaptation in promoting Chinese culture abroad, shaping the dragon’s image to resonate more readily with English-speaking readers based on their distinct sociocultural contexts through the flexible use of domestication and

foreignization.

The cover design of *The Water Dragon* successfully conveys elements of dragon culture from traditional Chinese heritage. Overseas readers widely acknowledge that this design preserves the distinctiveness of Chinese culture while possessing contemporary artistic expression. Its library acquisitions (held in over 100 overseas libraries) and reader reviews demonstrate that the cover design plays a significant role in cultural dissemination.

3.2. English Translation of Chinese Children's Picture Book: A New Year's Reunion

Illustrated by Zhu Chengliang, Tuanyuan tells the story of Mao Mao, a left-behind child, spending the Spring Festival with his father, who returns from afar. It won the inaugural Feng Zikai Children's Picture Book Award in 2010, and its English edition received the New York Times Best Illustrated Children's Book of the Year award in 2011. The book was written by Yu Liqiong. The cover of Reunion features the most heartwarming scene from the book: the entire family snuggled together, with Mom and Dad gazing at their sleeping daughter in the center [11]. Dominated by warm tones, the red lanterns and orange-yellow lamplight evoke the festive atmosphere of the Spring Festival while conveying the warmth of family reunion.

From a perceptual perspective, the English edition's cover (Figure 4) uses red as its background, with the title "A New Year's Reunion" highlighted in yellow, evoking a festive atmosphere. The cover depicts parents and a child sharing tuanyuan at the dining table. This scene occupies two-thirds of the cover, conveying a sense of fullness and reunion. In the image, the father's body occupies half the cover, while the mother's body fills two-thirds. Both parents are positioned on the left side of the cover, with the child on the right, depicted in full. This composition draws the viewer's focus to the child, whose raised hands radiate

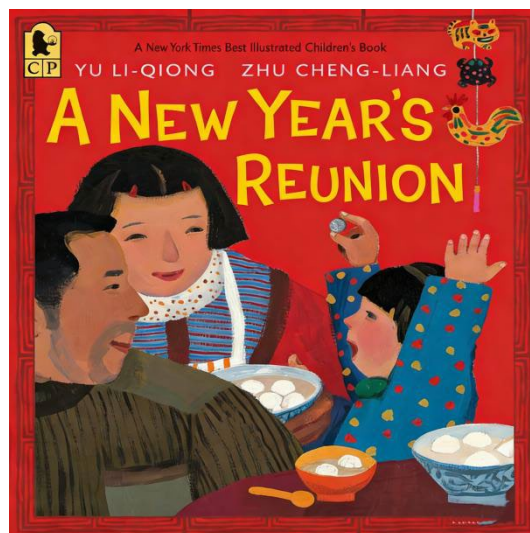


Figure 4. The cover of *A New Year's Reunion*.

pure joy. The Chinese edition's (Figure 3) cover depicts a family of three (father, mother, and child) sleeping together on a bed, with the image occupying two-thirds of the cover. The child lies between the parents, embraced by the mother, while the father holds both the mother and child. The top third of the cover features the Chinese characters “团圆” (reunion) written in traditional Chinese calligraphy on red paper. The characters “团圆” are set against a black background, suggesting nighttime. Overall, the Chinese edition's cover radiates the festive atmosphere of the Chinese New Year, brimming with warmth. The entire composition also conveys the traditional Chinese family ethos centered around children. The scene of the family nestled together visually communicates the theme of “reunion”, while the use of warm tones enhances the emotional expression. Red symbolizes celebration and good fortune in Chinese culture, though it may carry connotations of danger or warning in Western contexts [12]. By pairing red with specific cultural symbols like lanterns and lights, the cover successfully translates the positive symbolism of red, adopting a domestication strategy to adapt the color's cultural connotation to Western readers' cognitive habits.

From a structural perspective, the cover designer fully considered the interpersonal function of picture book covers, enabling readers to resonate with their respective social and cultural backgrounds. In terms of discourse, the English translation of the title effectively makes the meaning of the Chinese title “Reunion” explicit. For Chinese readers, seeing the characters for reunion and understanding the picture book's content, we easily grasp that the cover's “reunion” refers to family gatherings during the New Year. However, English-speaking readers lack a similar social and cultural context, which is a domestication strategy to reduce cultural barriers. The English title directly translates the implied meaning of “reunion” into explicit terms. The English edition's cover design differs entirely from the Chinese version.

From an Ideological perspective, closely connected to domestication and foreignization strategies, the cover designer fully considered the starkly different social contexts of the two audiences. The Chinese edition's cover depicts a nighttime scene where the child lies between the parents, with the parents embracing the child, reflecting the traditional Chinese family ethos centered around children. This design retains the source cultural characteristics, adopting a foreignization strategy to convey Chinese family values [13]. In contrast, the English edition cover depicts parents and child sharing tangyuan together, with parents positioned on the left and the child on the right—reflecting Western culture where the parent-child relationship consistently takes precedence over the marital one. This design adapts to the target audience's cultural values, which is a domestication strategy. Additionally, the core cultural theme of “reunion” is retained (foreignization), while the expression form is adjusted to align with Western family cultural contexts (domestication).

As a core value in Chinese culture, reunion is successfully conveyed through this concrete depiction of family dynamics. The cover design not only preserves

the cultural essence of the Spring Festival (foreignization) but also lowers the cultural comprehension barrier through a universal emotional theme: family reunion (domestication). The cover design for Reunion has garnered high praise from international readers, described as “heartwarming” and “moving”. Its success lies in the synergistic effect of multimodal metaphors and the flexible use of domestication and foreignization strategies, which both retain Chinese cultural characteristics and evoke emotional resonance among international readers. The English edition’s receipt of the New York Times Best Illustrated Children’s Book of the Year award in 2011 further validates the effectiveness of its cover design in cross-cultural communication.

4. Conclusions

This paper examines the cultural communication function of cover designs in English translations of Chinese children’s picture books from a multimodal metaphor perspective, with a specific focus on linking the ideological perspective analysis to translation strategies of domestication and foreignization. The study finds that successful cover designs often construct cross-cultural metaphorical systems through the synergistic effects of visual symbols, color metaphors, and typography, while flexibly applying domestication and foreignization to balance cultural preservation and audience adaptation. Cover design serves as the initial gateway for picture book cultural transmission, where the creative translation of multimodal metaphors—coupled with the strategic use of domestication and foreignization—directly influences international readers’ comprehension and acceptance of Chinese culture.

The case studies of *The Water Dragon* and *A New Year’s Reunion* provide concrete empirical evidence for these findings. For *The Water Dragon*, the English edition’s cover design adopts a combination of foreignization (retaining the dragon as the core cultural symbol) and domestication (softening the dragon’s image and muting red to adapt to Western readers’ cognitive habits). This approach has led to the book being held in over 100 overseas libraries and receiving positive feedback from international readers, demonstrating that the balanced use of the two strategies can effectively promote the dissemination of Chinese dragon culture. For *A New Year’s Reunion*, the English edition’s cover uses domestication to adjust the family scene and color connotations to align with Western cultural contexts, while retaining the core cultural theme of “reunion” through foreignization. This design not only won the New York Times Best Illustrated Children’s Book of the Year award but also received widespread acclaim from international readers, proving that such a strategic combination can enhance the cross-cultural appeal of picture books.

For other Chinese children’s picture books aspiring to reach global audiences, future translations would benefit from theoretical frameworks guiding cover design. Serafini’s (2010) multimodal text analysis theory, combined with the principles of domestication and foreignization, provides an excellent framework for pic-

ture book designers.

Designers can consider three dimensions—perceptual, structural, and ideological (with the latter incorporating domestication and foreignization)—when designing English-translated picture book covers, extending these principles to covers for translations into other languages. Cover designers must specifically consider how to reorganize textual elements, reconfigure borders, orientation, color schemes, and positioning, while flexibly applying domestication and foreignization based on the target audience’s sociocultural background. They should also examine the relationship between visual imagery and multimodal texts within a sociocultural context. Beyond English-translated picture books, this theoretical framework can also inform the design of the book’s interior content. For Chinese children’s picture books to gain greater international recognition, their translations must avoid simply replicating the original illustrations or providing literal translations of the text. Publishers should reference Serafini’s multimodal text analysis framework and the strategies of domestication and foreignization, prioritizing sociocultural considerations to ensure visual imagery and text complement each other. This approach will enhance the resonance of English translations with readers, thereby promoting the dissemination of Chinese children’s picture books globally.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

References

- [1] Forceville, C. (2006) Non-Verbal and Multimodal Metaphor in a Cognitivist Framework: Agendas for Research. In: Kristiansen, G., Achard, M., Dirven, R. and Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez, F.J., Eds., *Cognitive Linguistics: Current Applications and Future Perspectives*, Mouton de Gruyter, 379-402.
<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110197761.5.379>
- [2] Cai, Y.N. (2014) An Interpretation of Cultural Cognitive Patterns and Metaphorical Relationships from the Perspective of Multimodal Metaphor. *Foreign Language Journal*, No. 4, 48-51.
- [3] Serafini, F. (2010) Reading Multimodal Texts: Perceptual, Structural and Ideological Perspectives. *Children’s Literature in Education*, **41**, 85-104.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10583-010-9100-5>
- [4] Carey, J. and Kress, G. (2010) Multimodal, Literacy and School English. In *Routledge Handbook of International English, Language, and Literacy Teaching*, De Gruyter Morton Publishing Company, 342-353.
- [5] Frank, S. (2020) Understanding Visual Imagery in Picture Books. In *Beyond the Picture Book Page*, Routledge, 10-25.
- [6] Kress, G. and van Leeuwen, T. (2001) *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- [7] Fang, S.Z. (2013) *The Era of Picture Book Reading*. Zhejiang Children’s Publishing House, 2 p.
- [8] Li, J. (2012) *The Water Dragon*. Tuttle Publishing House.

- [9] Li, J. (2015) *The Water Dragon*. Xinjiang Youth Publishing House.
- [10] Zhao, X.F. (2011) New Developments in Conceptual Metaphor Research-Multimodal Metaphor Research—A Review of Forceville & Eris-Apari’s “Multimodal Metaphor”. *Foreign Language Research*, No. 1, 1-10, 112
- [11] Yu, L.Q. (2013) *New Year Reunion*. Candlestick Publishing House.
- [12] Li, X.J. (2019) Multimodal Textual Analysis of Picture Book Stories—Taking the Picture Book “Sounds in the Park” as an Example. *Northern Literature*, No. 35, 135-136.
- [13] Ma, W.L., Chen, Z. and Zhou, Y. (2020) A Corpus-Based Comparative Study of the Metaphor of “Dragon” in Chinese and English. *Journal of Changchun University*, **30**, 38-44.