


<p><b>HUIQIN WANG: SLOVENIAN-CHINESE ILLUSTRATOR AND AUTHOR OF A MULTICULTURAL AND MULTILINGUAL PICTUREBOOKS TETRALOGY</b></p>		<p><b>Humanities</b></p> <p><b>Keywords:</b> Huiqin Wang, picturebook analysis, cross-cultural narration, chronotope, cultural memory, Alma Karlin, Sino-Slovenian art.</p>
--	--	---

<p><b>Milena Mileva Blažić</b></p>	<p>Full Professor at Faculty of Education. University of Ljubljana, Ljubljana, Slovenia</p>
------------------------------------	---

**Abstract**

This study presents a hermeneutic analysis of four major picturebooks by Slovenian-Chinese artist-scholar Huiqin Wang. It positions her authorial trilogy (Ferdinand Avguštin Hallerstein, Giuseppe Castiglione, and I, Marco Polo) as a cohesive model of "individualised universality" for narrating historical East-West encounters, while examining the collaborative *Little Alma on a Great Journey* as a distinct expansion into psychological interiority. Drawing on frameworks from picturebook theory (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006), chronotopic analysis (Bakhtin, 1981), and cultural memory studies (Juvan, 2008), this study argues that Wang's multilingual, multigenre works constitute sophisticated artistic research functioning as polysemic instruments of cultural translation. Her work "worlds" Slovenian historical figures within the global imagination by mapping the spatial, temporal, and emotional coordinates of cross-cultural subjects. Wang's tetralogy represents a significant contribution to visual narratology and Slovenia's literary heritage.

## INTRODUCTION

The picturebook has evolved from a juvenile medium into a complex literary and artistic form capable of conveying sophisticated historical and intercultural narratives (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006). The work of Huiqin Wang (b. 1955) exemplifies this evolution, serving as a paradigmatic case of scholarly illustration and cross-cultural synthesis. As a Chinese-born artist who immigrated to Slovenia in 1983 and now teaches Chinese painting at the University of Ljubljana, Wang embodies the interstitial identity her work explores (Wang, n.d.). Her picturebooks transcend children's literature, functioning as meticulous acts of cultural cartography.

### *Purpose and Scope*

This study analyses Wang's four major works as an interconnected tetralogy, examining how her authorial trilogy constructs a model of historical biography through word-image synthesis and how the collaborative *Little Alma on a Great Journey* adapts this model to explore psychological interiority. Through hermeneutic analysis, this study investigates Wang's use of multilingual text, symbolic illustration, and chronotopic structure to represent experiences of cultural displacement and synthesis.

### *Research Questions*

1. How does Wang employ verbal-visual complementarity to construct cross-cultural biographical narratives?
2. What structural and thematic patterns unify her authorial trilogy?

3. How does *Little Alma on a Great Journey* diverge from and extend Wang's established narrative model?
4. What contribution does Wang's tetralogy make to cultural memory and visual narratology?

## **METHOD**

### *Analytical Framework*

This study employs a tripartite theoretical framework integrating three complementary analytical approaches.

### *Picturebook Theory and Intermediality*

Nikolajeva and Scott's (2006) taxonomy of word-image relationships – symmetry, complementarity, and counterpoint – provides the foundation for analysing how Wang's verbal and visual texts interact to generate meaning. Their framework allows examination of how illustrations expand, contradict, or parallel the written narrative. Wang's work operates primarily in the complementary mode, where images deepen and extend textual content.

### *Chronotopic Analysis*

Bakhtin's (1981) concept of the chronotope – the intrinsic fusion of temporal and spatial relationships in narrative – enables analysis of how Wang structures biographical narratives. The chronotope reveals how geographical movement (spatiality) and historical duration (temporality) intertwine visually and textually, particularly through cartographic representation. Bakhtin's journey chronotope is especially relevant for understanding Wang's narrative architecture.

### *Cultural Memory Studies*

Juvan's (2008) framework on cultural memory and the "worlding" of national literatures provides sociocultural context for Wang's project. "Worlding" describes the process by which marginal or national cultural figures gain transnational significance. This lens enables examination of how Wang performs mnemonic recovery, inserting peripheral Slovenian figures into global cultural memory through their cross-cultural engagements.

### *Corpus and Data Collection*

The corpus comprises Wang's four published picturebooks:

1. Ferdinand Avguštin Hallerstein: *Slovenec v Prepovedanem mestu* (2014)
2. Giuseppe Castiglione: *Slikar v Prepovedanem mestu* (2015)
3. Jaz, *Marco Polo* (2018)
4. *Mala Alma na veliki poti* (2022, with Milan Dekleva)

The analysis examined original Slovenian editions, supplemented by exhibition materials and artist statements where available.

### *Analytical Procedures*

Analysis proceeded through iterative close reading of both visual and textual elements across all four works. Specific analytical procedures included:

1. Structural mapping: Documenting narrative architecture, page sequences, and organisational patterns
2. Visual rhetoric analysis: Examining compositional choices, colour palettes, spatial arrangements, and symbolic systems
3. Textual analysis: Analysing narrative voice, linguistic choices, explanatory apparatus, and intertextual references
4. Intermedial analysis: Investigating word-image relationships using Nikolajeva and Scott's (2006) taxonomy
5. Comparative analysis: Identifying patterns, divergences, and developments across the tetralogy

The study employed both “distant reading” of overarching patterns and “close reading” of specific illustrative and textual moments (Moretti, 2005), enabling multilevel interpretation of Wang's artistic choices.

## **RESULTS**

### *The Authorial Trilogy: A Model of Cross-Cultural Biography*

Wang's first three picturebooks establish a rigorous, replicable model for narrating cross-cultural lives through consistent structure, technique, and thematic concerns.

### *Narrative Architecture: The Tripartite Quest Structure*

Each book follows an identical narrative architecture mirroring the folkloric quest structure identified by Lüthi (2012): (a) Departure from Europe, (b) Trials and Transformation in China, and (c) Finding a New Home. This universal framework is particularised through deep historical research into each protagonist's specific contributions—astronomy (Hallerstein), painting (Castiglione), and exploration (Polo). The protagonists' extended residencies in China (35, 51, and 24 years, respectively) position them as permanent cultural mediators rather than temporary visitors.

### *Verbal-Visual Complementarity*

Wang employs a dual-level narrative strategy balancing accessibility with scholarly rigour. The primary text uses first-person narration with child-accessible vocabulary and sentence structure. Simultaneously, diegetic explanatory notes provide cultural and historical context (e.g., etymological explanation of “Taklamakan”). This two-tier system respects readers’ intelligence while ensuring comprehension across age groups.

Visual content establishes strongly complementary relationships with text (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006). Illustrations expand historical contexts by depicting figures unmentioned in the text – Chinese scholars, Jesuit colleagues, local populations – creating rich, plausible social worlds. This visual scholarship layers meaning without textual overload, demonstrating sophisticated understanding of picturebook affordances.

### *Cartographic Narrative: Maps as Chronotopic Devices*

Double-page spread maps function as primary narrative devices rather than supplementary decoration. These cartographic elements serve three distinct functions:

1. Spatial narration: Charting physical journeys with aesthetic precision and geographical accuracy
2. Temporal visualisation: Integrating timelines, historical periods, and duration through graphic design
3. Symbolic representation: Blending cartographic convention with poetic and artistic interpretation

Maps make Bakhtin’s (1981) chronotope visually manifest, enabling simultaneous “distant reading” of grand historical trajectories and “close reading” of specific events (Moretti, 2005). They function as what might be termed “chronotopic consciousness” – visual representations of the spatiotemporal fusion central to travel narratives.

### *Characterisation Through Visual Implication*

Characterisation employs notably indirect methods. Protagonists’ psychological states – isolation, dedication, wonder, cultural displacement – are implied through visual rhetoric rather than explicit psychological narration. For example, a single illustration depicting Hallerstein observing celestial phenomena alone, silhouetted against the Forbidden City’s architecture, conveys both scientific purpose and profound isolation more effectively than descriptive prose. Wang maintains what might be termed “biographical distance,” focusing textually on actions, achievements, and legacy while allowing illustrations to suggest subjective experience. This approach respects historical subjects’ alterity while acknowledging the impossibility of accessing their full interiority.

### *Little Alma on a Great Journey: Expansion and Divergence*

The Alma Karlin picturebook, created collaboratively with poet Milan Dekleva, represents significant evolution in Wang's approach, applying established visual techniques to markedly different narrative priorities.

### *The Interior Turn: From Geography to Psychology*

The titular structure – "Little Alma" (diminutive, personal) paired with "Great Journey" (vast, external)—signals a fundamental shift from geographical to psychological exploration. While the trilogy maps external frontiers, this work charts internal landscapes. Dekleva's lyrical text foregrounds Karlin's psychological experience: linguistic genius, interpersonal relationships, depression, and professional burnout. The "great journey" becomes metaphorical, taking place "on the wings of a dragon" within cognitive and emotional space.

### *Narrative Economy and Hermeneutic Gaps*

This psychological focus creates a different narrative economy. Karlin's extensive global travels receive condensed treatment compared to the epic scope given to Polo's journeys. Notably, Wang's signature explanatory notes – consistent across the trilogy – are entirely absent. Crucial contextual information, such as Selma Lagerlöf's Nobel Prize nomination of Karlin, appears allusively without explanation.

This produces interpretive gaps that require reader knowledge or tolerance for ambiguity. The narrative prioritises phenomenological, subjective experience over comprehensive, objective biography, aligning with Dekleva's poetic methodology but diverging from Wang's authorial documentary approach.

### *Visual Continuity and Psychological Expression*

Despite textual divergence, Wang's visual language provides continuity across the tetralogy. She engages in rich intertextual dialogue with Slovenian cultural symbols (Celje Castle, Barbara of Celje) while demonstrating mastery of psychological expression through form. The depiction of Karlin in a foetal position powerfully conveys vulnerability and introspection through body language alone. Colour palettes, compositional choices, and facial expressions consistently articulate internal states referenced in the text. However, maps shift from narrative engines to symbolic backdrops, serving atmospheric rather than structural functions.

### *Characterisation: Explicit Psychology Versus Implicit Biography*

This work employs explicit psychological characterisation, in sharp contrast to the trilogy's implicit biographical approach. Readers understand Karlin through affective states and inner

experience, whereas Hallerstein, Castiglione, and Polo emerge through deeds and contributions. This shift from historical biography to psychobiography reflects broader cultural tendencies to mythologise Karlin's dramatic life over her literary achievements.

### *Structural Patterns: The Left/Right Spatial Dialectic*

A subtle yet consistent visual chronotope operates across all four works: the left/right spatial dialectic. Left pages or positions consistently symbolise origin, Europe, or departure, while right pages or positions represent destination, China, or transformation.

In the trilogy, Hallerstein and Castiglione narratively and visually conclude "right" – buried in Beijing, having achieved cultural integration and found new homes. Marco Polo returns "left" to Venice but bears indelible transformation from Eastern experience. In *Little Alma*, Karlin departs from Celje (left) and returns to Celje (left), but this homecoming is visually coded as resignation and defeat rather than triumphant completion.

This structural consistency demonstrates Wang's architectural control over narrative space as a meaning-generating system, extending Bakhtin's (1981) chronotope into a consistent visual grammar.

## **DISCUSSION**

### *Synthesis: The Tetralogy as Coherent Artistic Research*

Viewed collectively, Wang's four picturebooks reveal a coherent artistic research project concerned with navigation in its broadest sense – geographical, cultural, psychological, and memorial.

### *The Polysemic Picturebook as Legitimate Medium*

All four works operate simultaneously on multiple levels: they are polysemic (generating layered meanings), multilingual (presenting Slovenian, Chinese, and English as coexisting textual layers), multigenre (synthesising biography, history, fiction, and art book), and multimodal (integrating text, image, and design as inseparable elements). This complexity challenges conventional hierarchies that position picturebooks as pedagogical or juvenile rather than artistic or scholarly. Wang demonstrates that picturebooks are legitimate media for serious intellectual and aesthetic engagement, particularly suited to intercultural narratives where visual and verbal languages must negotiate meaning across semiotic systems.

*Contribution to Cultural Memory and "Worlding"*

Wang's tetralogy undertakes significant cultural curation, retrieving historically marginal figures and positioning them within globally resonant narratives. This "worlding" (Juvan, 2008) does not assimilate subjects into Western canons but celebrates hybrid identities as intrinsically valuable. She creates transnational memory sites connecting Slovenia and China through shared narratives of exchange, reciprocity, and mutual transformation. The project is amplified through international exhibitions, extending these picturebooks beyond private reading into public cultural diplomacy. Wang's work thus functions simultaneously as artistic creation, scholarly research, and cultural mediation.

*Theoretical Implications for Visual Narratology*

Wang's practice offers theoretical implications for visual narratology and picturebook studies. Her consistent use of the complementary word-image mode (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006) across varied biographical subjects demonstrates the flexibility and robustness of this technique. Her cartographic innovations suggest new possibilities for visualising Bakhtin's (1981) chronotope, making abstract spatiotemporal concepts materially present through graphic design. The tetralogy also shows how visual rhetoric can perform characterisation traditionally reserved for prose, suggesting expanded vocabularies for analysing illustrated narrative.

**LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

This study focused exclusively on Slovenian editions, potentially missing nuances in translated versions. Future research could examine reception across different linguistic and cultural contexts or investigate Wang's broader artistic practice, including gallery exhibitions and pedagogical work. Comparative analysis with other cross-cultural picturebook artists could contextualise Wang's distinctive contributions within wider artistic movements.

Additionally, reader-response studies could explore how diverse audiences interpret Wang's multilayered narratives, particularly regarding the balance between accessibility and scholarly depth.

**CONCLUSION**

Huiqin Wang's picturebook tetralogy represents a significant achievement in visual storytelling and cross-cultural mediation. Through her authorial trilogy, she developed a replicable model of "individualised universality," employing sophisticated verbal-visual synthesis to narrate East-West dialogue through specific biographical subjects. *Little Alma on a Great Journey* adapts this model to foreground psychological interiority and gendered experience, creating productive contrast within her oeuvre and demonstrating the model's adaptability.

Collectively, these works establish the picturebook as a medium for rigorous artistic research. Wang, leveraging her unique position as a Chinese-Slovenian academic artist, has created what might be termed "portable monuments" – meticulously researched cultural cartographies mapping not only continents and trade routes but also territories of identity, memory, and the human impulse to bridge divides. Her tetralogy makes essential contributions to understanding global cultural heritage and demonstrates art's capacity to navigate interstitial spaces between worlds, languages, and historical moments.

## References

- Bakhtin, M. M. (1981). *The dialogic imagination: Four essays* (C. Emerson & M. Holquist, Trans.). University of Texas Press.
- Blažič, Milena, Wang, Huiqin (2020). Slovensko-kitajski slikaniški svet Huiqin Wang. *Sodobnost (1963), letnik 84, številka 6, str. 842-846*.  
URN:NBN:SI:DOC-0TERRUJ1 from <http://www.dlib.si>
- Juvan, M. (2008). *History and poetics of intertextuality*. Purdue University Press.
- Lüthi, M. (2012). *The European folktale: Form and nature*. Institute for the Study of Human Issues.
- Moretti, F. (2005). *Graphs, maps, trees: Abstract models for a literary history*. Verso.
- Nikolajeva, M., & Scott, C. (2006). *How picturebooks work*. Routledge.
- Wang, H. (n.d.). About. <https://www.huiqinwang.net/about/>
- Wang, H. (2014). Ferdinand Avguštin Hallerstein: Slovenec v Prepovedanem mestu. [A Slovenian in the Forbidden City.] Mladinska knjiga.
- Wang, H. (2015). Giuseppe Castiglione: Slikar v Prepovedanem mestu. [The Painter in the Forbidden City] Morfemplus.
- Wang, H. (2018). Jaz, Marco Polo. [I, Marko Polo] Mladinska knjiga.
- Wang, H., & Dekleva, M. (2022). Mala Alma na veliki poti. [Little Alma on a big journey] [Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, 2020].