



# Overview of Feminism Translation Theories in Western Countries and China

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**Abstract**— *This study aims to explore the development of feminist translation theory in both Western and Chinese contexts, as well as its significance in translation studies and society at large. Feminist translation is inseparable from the backdrop of the feminist movement and its relationship with language, where language plays a pivotal role in constructing social roles, highlighting the close relationship between feminism and translation. The paper not only emphasizes the contributions of Western feminist translators such as Flotow and Simon but also analyzes the dissemination and developmental trajectory of feminist translation theory in China. It delineates the characteristics and impacts of different developmental stages. The radical nature and cultural diversity inherent in feminist translation theory result in varied developmental processes across different countries. Overall, this theory continues to evolve, warranting a dialectical perspective, and the process of localizing feminist translation theory in China presents both challenges and potentials, offering new perspectives for further research.*



**Keywords**— *feminist translation theory; cultural diversity; localization; Western and Chinese contexts.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The emergence of feminist translation theory is closely tied to the rise and development of the women's rights movement. Due to the actual inequality of women's power in society, awakened women have sparked numerous movements advocating for equal rights and power.

The women's rights movement first emerged in the United Kingdom and France and went through three waves of movements. The first wave, which occurred from the mid-19th century to the 1920s, primarily aimed to secure three major rights: the right to vote, the right to education, and the right to employment. The second wave, occurring in the 1960s and 1970s, aimed to eliminate gender disparities, focusing not only on the public sphere (politics and law) but also on the private sphere (culture and customs) concerning women's inequality. It also emphasized women's bodily autonomy, issues related to violence against women in society and within families, and the problem of sexual harassment. After the 1990s, the third wave of the feminist movement placed a greater emphasis

on the internal diversity of women, recognizing that women's issues encompass a variety of factors, including race, ethnicity, religion, cultural practices, sexual orientation, and diverse values. They advocate breaking free from the original feminist thought framework, calling for the elimination of societal gender roles and biases (Jin Li, 2009). By examining the evolution of feminist demands within the women's rights movement, we can observe the permeation of feminist ideas in various aspects of society, continually awakening female consciousness across different societal domains.

## II. FEMINISM AND LANGUAGE STUDIES

### 2.1 Feminism and Language

The women's rights movement is a struggle for women's freedom and equality within patriarchal systems, and as Xu Lai (2004) notes, 'Language is not merely a tool for discourse but also a battleground for the contestation of meaning. Within the framework of patriarchal language,

patriarchal discourse exerts control over the creation, reading, and interpretation of texts, gradually molding women into the societal roles it demands (Ge Xiaochin, 2003). Therefore, women must naturally strive for linguistic equality, and this endeavor extends beyond mere cultural implications; it also involves political and power struggles. As Simon (1996) argues, the liberation of women must commence with addressing language.

## 2.2 Feminism and Translation

Since language is a crucial battleground for feminist liberation, it is only natural that the feminist movement's influence extends into the realm of translation. The pervasive feminization and marginalization of translation have metaphorical connections to the status of women in society. In the relationship between translation and the source text, translation is often derogated to a subordinate position: Lu Xun, Mao Dun, and Guo Moruo have all mentioned that 'translation is the matchmaker, and creation is the virgin.' Lu and Mao held a negative attitude, while Guo held an affirmative one. Goethe once bluntly stated that translators are lowly professionals, like matchmakers (Luo Xinzhang, 1984). The Western saying "Pretty women are not faithful; faithful women are not pretty" is used as a metaphor to describe the relationship between the translation and the original text. This essentially employs gender-discriminatory language from society to metaphorically address the issue of fidelity in translation, extending gender bias into the field of translation studies (Ge Xiaochin, 2003). Hence, the marginalization of translation is not only a form of discrimination against translation but also a form of discrimination against women. This, in fact, overlooks the significant role of translation. Regardless of how authoritative or eloquent the source text may be, in the vast majority of cases, the translation is the only text available to readers in the target language. The social function that a translation serves within the target language culture is something the source text can never replace (Liao Qi'yi, 2002). Hence, feminist translation theory emerged with its primary viewpoint focused on eliminating discrimination against women in translation research practice and redefining the relationship between translation and the source text. It asserts that translation is not merely a matter of language skills but also encompasses issues of culture, ideology, and more (Jiang Xiaohua, 2004).

evolution of the feminist movement. It has paralleled the three waves of the feminist movement, dividing into three distinct developmental stages.

The first stage occurred during the initial wave of the feminist movement, in the mid-19th century. During this period, Western women were often not allowed to engage in creative writing, but they could work as translators. Many of their translated works were confined to religious texts. However, some female translators quietly subverted the original intent by infusing their own political declarations into the translations (Flotow, 1997). Even in the face of severe restrictions, they persevered in expressing themselves during the translation process, marking the beginnings of feminist translation (Xu Lai, 2004).

The second stage took place during the second wave of the feminist movement, in the 1960s and 1970s. As the feminist movement thrived in the United States and began to influence the world, its impact on the field of translation also started to take a more theoretical direction. One of the most notable developments during this period was Flotow's translation strategies, which included prefaces and footnotes, supplementation, and hijacking. To be more specific, "supplementing" involves compensating for linguistic differences between languages. "Hijacking" refers to the appropriation or diversion of texts that may not necessarily have feminist intentions. "Prefacing and footnoting" include explaining the original text's intent, summarizing one's translation strategies, and allowing readers to gain a comprehensive understanding of the translator's translation process, thus serving as a pedagogical tool for feminist translation (Ge Xiaochin, 2003).

The third stage occurred during the third wave of the feminist movement, which began in the 1990s. During this period, feminism became even more diverse and encompassed a wider range of issues. Consequently, feminist translation also saw a more enriched development. On one hand, feminist translators have increasingly engaged in body translation, recognizing that "the female body plays a unique role in conveying translation themes." In translation, contrary to the phallic worship prevalent in patriarchal societies, efforts are made to convey women's self-perceptions, transmit their unique sexual desires, and share their sexual experiences (Liu Junping, 2004). On the other hand, since the 21st century, Western scholars have increasingly shifted their focus from their own countries to the world. Flotow has expressed a desire to change the prevalent tendency in translation studies and the feminist movement, which is centered around the European and English-speaking cultural sphere. Due to the emergence of social gender

## III. ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF WESTERN FEMINIST TRANSLATION

### 3.1 Three stages of Western feminist translation theory

The development of Western feminist translation theory can be seen as closely intertwined with the ongoing

terminology, feminism has been replaced by a more diverse and multi-category range of social gender labels. Female texts and identities have become blurred, transcending the binary opposition of male and female categories. Feminist translation theory thus faces challenges as a result (Luan Haiyan, Miao Ju, 2015).

#### IV. FEMINIST TRANSLATION: DISSEMINATION AND DEVELOPMENT IN CHINA

##### 4.1 Dissemination of Feminist Translation Theory Works in China

Chinese feminist translation theory research originated from the translation of related Western theories. In the 1980s, Professor Zhu Hong introduced feminist translation theory to China, although it received relatively little attention from the academic community (Zhu Yunmei, Li Zhiqiang, 2015). By 2004, Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press had imported Flotow's work "Translation and Gender: Translating in the Era of Feminism." There were also domestic publications introducing feminist translation theory, such as "Language and the Politics of Translation" (2001), "Translation and Postmodernism" (2005), and "Contemporary Foreign Translation Theory" (2008). These books respectively translated the theoretical articles of feminist translators like Sherry Simon, Lori Chamberlain, Barbara Godard, and Luise von Flotow. In China, Professor Liu Junping has provided a relatively comprehensive exposition of feminist translation theory in his book "A Comprehensive History of Western Translation Theory," particularly in Chapter Twelve, where he delves into feminist trends and feminist translation theory. Renowned translator Fang Mengzhi also included "Feminist Translation Perspective" in both the "Dictionary of Translation Studies" (2004) and the "Chinese Dictionary of Translation Studies" (2011), marking the formal acceptance of feminist translation theory within the Chinese translation community (Yang Sigui, 2014).

##### 4.2 Stages of Development of Feminist Translation Theory in China

Research on feminist translation theory in China started relatively late, and Tan Sirong has divided its development into three stages (Tan Sirong, 2010):

First Stage, 1999-2003: This stage is referred to as the introduction stage of feminist translation theory in China. Notable figures include Murray, Liao Qi'yi, Ge Xiaochin, and others. Research topics during this period encompassed female translators, women in translation, feminist translation studies, and the essence of feminist translation. In 1999, Murray conducted an interview with

the female translator Jin Shenghua and introduced the concept of "gender" into the field of translation studies. This marked the beginning of the introductory stage of feminist translation theory in China. Liao Qi'yi's "Exploration of Contemporary Western Translation Theory" (2001) also began to touch upon the profound influence of feminism on translation studies. Subsequently, scholars like Murray, Ge Xiaochin, and Liu Yaru made significant contributions in citing and disseminating these ideas (Wang Wei, 2020).

Second Stage, 2004-2007: This stage is characterized by research on feminist translation practice. Key figures during this period included Jiang Xiaohua, Liu Junping, Xu Lai, and others. The focus during this stage broadened significantly, marking a golden era for female translation in China. This stage was marked by the introduction of Flotow's works. Feminist translation theory in China evolved beyond mere theoretical introduction, and more translators began adopting a feminist perspective in translation research. For instance, a search for "feminism, translation" in the "Wanfang Database" (2004-2007) yielded 94 related journal articles, indicating that research on feminist translation reached a peak stage in China during this period.

Third Stage, 2008-Present: This stage represents interdisciplinary research on feminist translation. Li Wenjing and Murray introduced the concept of "androgyny" (dual-gender) (Zhang Xinfang, 2015). In this new stage, there has been the emergence of research on ecological feminist translation and "body writing" feminist translation studies, marking a continuous expansion of research areas (Wang Wei, 2020). In the realm of translation practice, feminist translation theory has gradually influenced more and more translators to adopt a feminist perspective in their translations. For instance, Wang Aizhen has explored the expression of translator subjectivity in the three translated versions of "Gone with the Wind" based on feminist translation theory. Furthermore, this influence is not limited to the translation of literary works. For example, Sun Yang and Sun Liting conducted a comparative analysis of subtitle translation for the first season of the TV series "Why Women Kill" based on feminist translation theory.

#### V. ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

Some critics argue that Western feminist translation theory can sometimes come across as overzealous and overly focused on emphasizing women's experiences, potentially bordering on erotic literature. Critics have pointed out that some of the language used in the theoretical exposition of feminist translation theory, such

as terms like "appropriation," "occupation," and "hijacking," can be seen as too extreme and may contribute to the formation of new binary oppositions. Additionally, there are contradictions in translation strategies and their effects (Ge Xiaochin, 2003). Feminist translation theory's emphasis on "manipulating" language and the translator's "intervention" has garnered criticism from some in the translation field (Hu Zuoyou, Hu Xiaojuan, Li Erwen, 2013). Furthermore, according to Lu Yuling, Western feminist translators sometimes adopt a condescending academic attitude when dealing with texts from "the Third World" women. According to Lu Yuling, when Western feminist translators attempt to deconstruct Western male-centered discourse within "Third World" women's texts, they unintentionally construct a binary opposition between the "self" and the "other" in their own theories, which she refers to as a form of Western female-centered thinking (Lu Yuling, 2004). This new inequality in discourse power is also contradictory to Western feminism, as it suggests that feminist translators' translations may exhibit elements of neocolonialism (the domination of one culture over another). Additionally, the widespread acceptance of the concept of "gender" in the 1990s introduced uncertainty in gender categorization. This blurring of boundaries in terms of gender categories in feminist translation has led to a decline in research on the translation of social gender categories (Luan Haiyan, Miao Ju, 2015).

Chinese female translators tend to adopt a milder approach when using feminist translation strategies compared to their Western counterparts. They are not as radical, and the radical ideas and methods of Western feminism have not significantly altered the Chinese female translators' dedication to the pursuit of "fidelity" and "faithfulness" in translation (Lü Xiaofei, Du Minrong, 2007). The reasons for this can still be traced back to China's historical and cultural background. The long-standing feudalism and Confucianism in Chinese history led to a lack of self-assertion among Chinese women. China also lacks a clear history of feminist movements, and women's awareness and awakening to feminist issues came relatively late. Additionally, the concept of "rewriting" advocated by feminist translation theory contradicts the mainstream translation practices in China (Li Yi, 2019). In China, feminist translation perspectives tend to remain primarily within the realm of literature and are less involved in the political discourse and contestation (Hu Zuoyou, Hu Xiaojuan, Li Erwen, 2013). As a result, feminist translation theory in China undergoes a process of localization and cannot simply replicate the radical theories from the West. It needs to be adapted to the specific cultural and historical context of China.

Furthermore, Ding Shanshan has pointed out the limitations of the first paradigm in feminist translation theory research. The first paradigm of gender studies refers to research influenced by feminist (radical) ideology and movements. The limitations of this paradigm manifest in several ways: the homogeneity of Western theoretical discourse, an excessive emphasis on translation purposes, narrow choices of translation texts, conventional thinking in translation practice, and a singular focus on the gender of the translator. At the same time, it has been noted that gender translation studies in China have introduced the second paradigm, which is the performativity paradigm, to a lesser extent (Ding Shanshan, 2017).

## VI. CONCLUSION

Feminist translation theory is undoubtedly evolving and expanding. We should approach this theory with a balanced perspective, recognizing its positive contributions at the societal level and acknowledging its efforts in promoting women's awakening. For China, as society continues to develop, women's self-awareness can further propel feminist translation theory to explore new possibilities within the country.

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