

On Comparative Interpretation of Couplets in English Versions of “A Dream of Red Mansions” Through Feminist Translation Theory

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ABSTRACT

In the context of globalization, the cross-cultural transmission of literary works has become a bridge connecting different cultures and ideas. “A Dream of Red Mansions”, as a pinnacle of Chinese literature, features couplets expressed in a unique literary form and profound emotional expression, serving as an important entry point for research. The article, based on feminist translation theory, analyzes the translation strategies and the presentation of female images in the translations by Yang Xianyi and David Hawkes. The study finds that, despite differences in translation strategies and expressive techniques, both translators’ works demonstrate attention to the female images and fates within the text, while preserving the cultural and societal nuances of the original work, aligning with the core principles of feminist translation theory. It is important to note that the application of feminist translation theory in practice also requires translators to adapt flexibly according to specific circumstances. This study addresses a new perspective and theoretical framework for classical literature translation in an aim to offer a certain reference value for the English translation practice and related studies of the couplets of “A Dream of Red Mansions”.

Keywords: *Couplets in “A Dream of Red Mansions”, Translation, Feminism, Comparative analysis.*

1. INTRODUCTION

“A Dream of Red Mansions”, as the pinnacle of Chinese classical literature, not only holds a significant position in the history of Chinese literature but has also profoundly influenced world literature. Among its many elements, the couplets are an integral part, showcasing the author’s deep insight into life, society, and history through unique artistic techniques and profound implications. With the deepening of cultural exchanges between China and the West, translating the couplets of “A Dream of Red Mansions” into English has become an important task. Translation is a kind of cross-cultural communication activity, so Chinese literature translation to a large extent shoulders the mission of spreading the excellent Chinese culture to the outside world.[1]P84 As a representative work of Chinese classical literature, the process of overseas dissemination and acceptance of “A Dream of Red Mansions” reflects the development trend of Chinese classical literature gradually

shifting from passive output to active output. It is the epitome of Chinese traditional culture. Therefore, it is advisable to spread red studies and tell Chinese stories well overseas, which is conducive to promoting the smooth implementation of the “going out” strategy of Chinese culture.[2]

Feminist translation theory, which focuses on gender, culture, and power relations, offers new thoughts and revelations for the translation of classical literature. Simon (1996) once said: “the process of translation must be seen as a fluid production of meaning, similar to other kinds of writing. The hierarchy of writing roles, like gender identities, is increasingly to be recognized as mobile and performative.” [3] Applying feminist translation theory in translating the couplets can help reveal and challenge the emotional neglect of female images shaped by the original Cao Xueqin found in existing translations, while preserving the cultural and societal values of the original work. Therefore, discussing the future application of feminist translation theory in the English translation

of the couplets from “A Dream of Red Mansions” holds significant theoretical and practical implications. Feminism originates from France. It asserts that women for rights (legal, political, familial, etc.) equal to those possessed by men, and then it has been spread in Britain and America. In the second-wave of feminism (1960s), feminism combined with translation of “cultural turn” which formed the feminist translation theory.[4] Transcultural and translingual developments in the women’s movement and its various offshoots since the 1970s have implicated translation in every aspect of text production and reception, and have enormously expanded the thinking about and research on translation and gender.[5] Feminist translation theory was introduced to China in the late 20th century. For a long time, the study of feminist translation theory in China mainly focused on its introduction and preliminary exploration of feminist translation.[6] This theory advocates that translation should not only be faithful to the original text but also reflect feminist thoughts and values. Feminist translation theory condemns the categorization of translators, translated works, and women into pervasive gender inequality in translation studies and broader society’s perspectives.[7] It aims to reproduce or highlight the female identity hidden in patriarchal culture in language and culture through many practical means or intervention or manipulation, which has aroused wide thinking and resonance in the academic circle.[8] The development of feminist translation theory has gone through several stages, including focusing on gender perspectives, cultural adaptability, ideology, and power relations, gradually forming a rich theoretical system. With the supplement of androgyny, feminism becomes more and more perfect, and it has become the indispensable theory to guide translation practice.[9]

“A Dream of Red Mansions” is a novel on women’s awakening in the feudal society. It depicts hundreds of women characters with vivid admirable characteristics.[10] Lv Qixiang proposes the typical significance and everlasting charm lies in the appeal for the integrity of feminine as well as the display of multiple cultural personalities of Chinese women.[11] The great artistic achievement of “A Dream of Red Mansions” is highlighted in the creation of groups of personalized characters with flesh and blood, which reveals the true face of the feudal system and society.[12] Some Marxist critics also insist that the novel is essentially a reflection of “class struggle” or “revolt against feudal marriages”. [13]

The English translation of the couplets from “A Dream of Red Mansions” is crucial for promoting cultural exchange between China and the West and spreading China’s excellent traditional culture. Through the English translation of the couplets, English readers can better appreciate the charm of Chinese classical literature and enhance their understanding and appreciation of Chinese culture. However, the current English translations of the couplets from “A Dream of Red Mansions” face several issues and challenges, for instance how to properly convey the cultural connotations of the original text and how to communicate the original gender concepts. Therefore, applying feminist translation theory to explore and study the English translation of the couplets from “A Dream of Red Mansions” holds significant practical significance. In this study, guided by feminist translation theory, the researchers will conduct a deep discussion and analysis of the existing English translation versions of the couplets from “A Dream of Red Mansions” to provide new perspectives and insights for the translation of classical literature.

2. PRINCIPLES OF FEMINIST TRANSLATION THEORY

Feminist translation theory is an important field of translation studies, which originated in the late 20th century and is closely related to the feminist movement. Feminist translation theory holds that translation is not only the conversion of language, but also the transmission of culture and ideology. According to this theory, traditional translation practices tend to ignore the existence of gender issues, while feminist translation theory emphasizes that the gender power relationship between the source and the target text, as well as between the target text and other cultural products, should be taken into account in the translation process.

Among the many feminist translation practitioners, Professor Flotow, a leading figure in the field, laid the necessary theoretical foundation for the popularization of feminist thought. When the feminist view of translation was introduced into the domestic translation circle, the translation strategy advocated by her changed from the text function to the action function, and she admitted that translation not only belonged to the category of literature, but also interwoven with politics and ideology. Taking a comprehensive view of the history of feminist translation theory research, the academic circle believes that the core views of

feminist translation theory mainly include the following four principles:

Feminist translation theory focuses on the role and impact of gender in translation practice. Gender refers not only to biological sex but also to social gender, which is the concept and behavior patterns of men and women constructed by society. From a gender perspective, translators are required to pay attention to the gender expressions and roles in the original text, to explore and challenge potential gender biases and discrimination. Through translation, translators should attempt to break down gender stereotypes, promoting gender equality and women's empowerment.

Feminist translation theory emphasizes cultural adaptability, meaning consideration of the target language and cultural background during the translation process. Due to differences between cultures, translators need to find appropriate ways to adapt to the cultural connotations of the original text, ensuring that the translation readers can understand and appreciate the cultural details and deep meanings. When translating the couplets from "A Dream of Red Mansions", cultural adaptability requires translators to deeply understand Chinese culture and the characteristics of feudal society, as well as how to convey these cultural connotations in a modern English context.

Feminist translation theory is concerned with the ideology and power relations behind the text. Ideology refers to the dominant ideas, concepts, and values in a certain society or culture, while power relations involve differences in rights and status among different social groups. In translation practice, ideology and power relations require translators to recognize their position and role in the translation process, pay attention to the operation of power and ideological influence in the original text, and challenge and subvert these unequal power relations through translation.

Feminist translation theory advocates for diverse translation strategies to better reflect women's voices and experiences. These strategies include annotation, free translation, and creative translation. Annotation involves adding explanatory notes to the translation to help readers better understand the cultural and historical background of the original text. Free translation emphasizes the form and style of the translation, making it more in line with the expressive habits of the target language. Creative translation is about translating creatively based on the target language's cultural background while respecting the original text,

making the translation closer to women's experiences and perspectives.

By focusing on gender perspective, cultural adaptability, ideology and power relations, and translation strategies, feminist translation theory provides a new interpretive framework and guiding principles for the translation of classical literature. In the following research, this paper will base on these core concepts to conduct an in depth analysis and discussion of the English translation of the couplets from "A Dream of Red Mansions" using the versions by Yang Xianyi and David Hawkes as examples.

3. GENDER CULTURE INTERPRETATION OF THE COUPLETS IN "A DREAM OF RED MANSIONS"

The couplets in "A Dream of Red Mansions" portray a diverse range of female images through the depiction of the Twelve Beauties of Jinling. These images include the naive and outspoken Lin Daiyu, the scheming yet abruptly exiting Wang Xifeng, the world detached Miaoyu, among others. These female characters not only possess distinct personality traits but also reflect the societal expectations and constraints on women at the time. In the couplets, the portrayal of women includes both victims of feudal ethical codes and rebels who dare to challenge traditional constraints. Through these images, the author reveals the low status of women in feudal society and the presence of female dependency.

The couplets in "A Dream of Red Mansions" profoundly unveil the impact of the feudal gender system on women's fates and their tragic destinies entangled in vast social and historical forces. In feudal society, men held a higher status than women, with women being strictly confined by gender roles. Female characters in the couplets often find themselves dominated and controlled by a patriarchal society, with their fates and life choices severely limited. By exposing the oppression and confinement inflicted by this gender system, the couplets critique the gender inequality of feudal society.

The couplets in "A Dream of Red Mansions" encapsulate rich feminist values. Through the characterization of female roles and attention to their fates, the couplets convey concern for women's rights and the pursuit of gender equality. The female characters in the couplets demonstrate

women's wisdom and strength, adhering to their beliefs and courageously challenging feudal ethics and gender discrimination. These feminist values are fully embodied in the couplets, offering valuable intellectual resources for future generations.

This study will combine with feminist translation theory to interpret the author Cao Xueqin's deep feelings towards these female images. It will explore how the couplets reflect women's fates and feminist values, and how these values influence contemporary society's perception and evaluation of women. This interpretation holds significant guiding importance for the academic community to better understand and apply feminist translation theory to literary works set against a feudal backdrop, such as "A Dream of Red Mansions".

4. ANALYSIS OF TRANSLATIONS OF THE COUPLETS IN "A DREAM OF RED MANSIONS"

4.1 Background and Purpose of the Translators

Yang Xianyi and David Hawkes are two renowned translators of "A Dream of Red Mansions", and their backgrounds and translation purposes significantly influenced their translation strategies.

Yang Xianyi, a Chinese translator, dedicated his life to translation work and is one of the key figures in introducing Chinese classical literature to the English-speaking world. He began translating "A Dream of Red Mansions" in the 1950s in collaboration with his wife, Dai Naidie, and their work was supported by the Chinese Foreign Language Press, seen as an important cultural exchange and a political task. Yang Xianyi's translation purpose was to preserve the style and charm of the original text as much as possible, to remain faithful to the Chinese cultural elements, and to convey the essence of Chinese society and the spiritual and cultural life to the Western world. His translation strategy focused on the accuracy of language and the transmission of cultural details, aiming to allow Western readers to appreciate the original work.[14]

David Hawkes, a British sinologist, has also made significant contributions to the international reputation of translation work. Hawkes studied Chinese at Oxford University and has long been

committed to the study and translation of Chinese literature. Unlike Yang Xianyi, Hawkes' translation purpose was to convey the meaning and emotions of the original text to the target readers. As both the translator and the actual client, Hawkes hoped to share the joy of reading "A Dream of Red Mansions" with readers. Therefore, he adopted a translation strategy that was vastly different from Yang's, focusing more on free translation and literary creativity to better suit the reading habits and expectations of the target audience.[14]

The translation purposes of both translators reflect their cultural backgrounds and personal translation concepts, as well as their profound understanding of how to spread and receive "A Dream of Red Mansions" in different cultural contexts. By comparing these two translations, one can deeply analyze how translation strategies are influenced by the translators' purposes, cultural backgrounds, and reader expectations.

4.2 Analysis of Two English Translations

4.2.1 The Couplet on Daiyu and Baochai

- 可叹停机德，堪怜咏絮才！玉带林中挂，金簪雪里埋。[15]

Alas for her wifely virtue, Her wit to sing of willow down, poor maid! Buried in snow the broken golden hairpin, And hanging in the wood the belt of jade.[16] — translated by Yang

One was a pattern of female virtue, One a wit who made other wits seem slow. The jade belt in the greenwood hangs, The gold pin is buried beneath the snow.[17] — translated by Hawkes

Yang's translation is more literal, attempting to retain the cultural atmosphere and artistic conception of the original couplets. Starting with "Alas," it conveys a lamenting tone, matching the original text's "可叹". By using "wifely virtue" and "poor maid", it highlights the virtues and unfortunate circumstances of the female characters. This translation strategy, in conveying female images, not only emphasizes their virtues but also reflects sympathy for their situations, aligning with feminist translation theory's advocacy for gender sensitivity and deep understanding of women's experiences.

Hawkes' translation focuses more on the overall meaning and fluency, with phrases like "One was a pattern of female virtue, One a wit who made other

wits seem slow.” highlighting the moral exemplariness and intelligence of the women. This translation, in portraying female characters, focuses more on their inner qualities, aligning with feminist translation theory’s goal of exploring and reinforcing women’s subjectivity. The descriptions “The jade belt in the greenwood hangs, the gold pin is buried beneath the snow.” maintain the original imagery’s beauty while also metaphorically depicting the tragic fate of women, demonstrating the translator’s grasp of the deeper meaning of the text.

4.2.2 *The Couplet on Xiang Yun*

- 富贵又何为？襁褓之间父母违。展眼吊斜晖，湘江水逝楚云飞。[15]

Nought avail her rank and riches, While yet in swaddling clothes an orphan lone; In a flash she mourns the setting sun, The river Xiang runs dry, the clouds over Chu have flown.[16] — translated by Yang

What shall avail you rank and riches, Orphaned while yet in swaddling bands you lay? Soon you must mourn your bright sun’s early setting. The Xiang flows and the Chu clouds sail away.[17] — translated by Hawkes

Yang’s translation emphasizes Xiang Yun’s background of losing her parents at a young age and growing up in loneliness, as well as the tragedy that her wealth could not compensate. The translation strategy unveils women’s vulnerability and independence when facing societal and familial pressures, aligning with feminist translation theory’s deep understanding and portrayal of women’s experiences. “In a flash she mourns the setting sun, The river Xiang runs dry, the clouds over Chu have flown” poetically expresses Xiang Yun’s reflections on the impermanence of life and the vicissitudes of home and country, portraying a woman of rich inner world and delicate emotions.

Hawkes’ translation is more concise and direct but effectively conveys the original imagery and emotions. “Orphaned while yet in swaddling bands you lay” succinctly depicts Xiang Yun’s orphan status and early misfortune. Soon you must mourn your bright sun’s early setting. The Xiang flows and the Chu clouds sail away.” metaphorically represents the transient nature of Xiang Yun’s life and tragedy, showing deep sympathy for her fate. Hawkes’ approach showcases respect for women’s subjectivity and complex emotional worlds, resonating with feminist translation theory’s

emphasis on exploring and respecting women’s experiences.

4.2.3 *The Couplet on Miao Yu*

- 欲洁何曾洁，云空未必空。可怜金玉质，终陷淖泥中。[15]

Chastity is her wish, Seclusion her desire; Alas, though fine as gold or jade, She sinks at last in the mire.[16] — translated by Yang

For all your would be spotlessness And vaunted other worldliness, You that look down on common flesh and blood, Yourself impure, shall end up in the mud. [17] — translated by Hawkes

Yang’s translation conveys the original’s artistic conception in a straightforward manner. By stating “Chastity is her wish, Seclusion her desire;” Yang’s version highlights Miao Yu’s pursuit of purity and a secluded life, reflecting her alienation from the secular world. However, “Alas, though fine as gold or jade She sinks at last in the mire.” reveals Miao Yu’s ultimate inability to escape fate’s tragedy, despite her noble intentions and pure spirit. This translation strategy, while depicting the tragic fate of women, also shows respect for women’s intrinsic values, in line with feminist translation theory’s focus on complex character and destiny of women.

Hawkes’ translation emphasizes the criticism and irony in portraying Miao Yu. “For all your would be spotlessness And vaunted other worldliness,” not only depicts Miao Yu’s efforts to maintain spiritual purity and detachment from the secular but also implies criticism of her aloof attitude. “You that look down on common flesh and blood, Yourself impure, shall end up in the mud.” directly conveys the irony of Miao Yu’s eventual fate, highlighting the discrepancy between her efforts to remain pure and her ultimate fall into the secular mire. This translation showcases a deeper critical interpretation of Miao Yu’s character, reflecting feminist translation theory’s requirement for a diversified and in depth exploration of female images.

4.2.4 *The Couplet on Feng Jie*

- 凡鸟偏从末世来，都知爱慕此生才。一从二令三人木，哭向金陵事更哀。[15]

This bird appears when the world falls on evil times; None but admires her talents and her skill; First she complies, then commands, then is dismissed, Departing in

tears to Jinling more wretched still.[16] — translated by Yang

This phoenix in a bad time came; All praised her great ability. 'Two' makes my riddle with a man and tree; Returning south in tears she met calamity.[17] — translated by Hawkes

Yang's translation emphasizes Feng Jie's talent and survival strategy in adverse times. "This bird appears when the world falls on evil times; None but admires her talents and her skill"; depicts Feng Jie as a phoenix rising in troubled times, admired for her wit and skill. "First she complies, then commands, then is dismissed," concisely summarizes Feng Jie's role changes within the family and society, from compliance to leadership to exile. "Departing in tears to Jinling more wretched still, reveals Feng Jie's tragic fate, highlighting her departure filled with tears and deeper sorrow. This depiction not only showcases Feng Jie's efforts and tragic end in a male dominated society but also meets feminist translation theory's requirements for a deep understanding and portrayal of women's experiences.

Hawkes' translation employs more metaphorical and subtle language to convey Feng Jie's image. "This phoenix in a bad time came; All praised her great ability." emphasizes Feng Jie's extraordinary emergence and capability during difficult times. "'Two' makes my riddle with a man and tree: Returning south in tears she met calamity." uses a riddle like narrative to hint at Feng Jie's life turning point and misfortune. This approach maintains the original's artistic conception and adds reflection on Feng Jie's complex fate, showcasing respect for women's agency and inner worlds, in line with feminist translation theory's advocacy for a nuanced exploration of female characters.

4.3 Findings and Insights from the Analysis of Yang and Hawkes' Translations

Through comparative analysis of Yang Xianyi and David Hawkes' English translations of the couplets from "A Dream of Red Mansions", the following findings and insights can be derived:

- **Presentation of Gender Awareness:** Both Yang and Hawkes' translations display gender awareness to varying degrees, reflecting feminist translation theory's focus on and respect for female images.

Through different translation strategies, the two translators reveal the complexity, independence, and societal and familial challenges faced by female characters in the couplets.

- **Diversity of Translation Strategies:** Yang's translations tend to directly convey the original's emotions and meanings, while Hawkes opts for more poetic and metaphorical language, emphasizing depth of feeling and social critique. This strategic difference showcases the subjectivity and creativity of individual translators and reflects the importance of gender awareness and cultural sensitivity in the translation process.
- **Social Responsibility and Personal Fate:** Both Yang and Hawkes explore how female characters navigate self-discovery and challenges within familial and societal frameworks. These translations reveal the predicaments of women in traditional society and the possibilities for their rebellion and self-realization.
- **Feminist Perspective in Translation:** The comparative analysis demonstrates the importance and value of applying feminist translation theory in literary translation. The process is not merely linguistic conversion but also a conveyance of culture and gender consciousness. Translators' awareness of gender can help target language readers understand gender issues and cultural differences more profoundly in the source text.
- **Creativity and Subjectivity in Literary Translation:** This study highlights the creativity of literary translation and the subjectivity of translators. The different choices and strategies by Yang and Hawkes show the artistry and personalized expression in literary translation, also pointing out the challenge of balancing fidelity to the original and adaptation to the target culture.
- **Implications for Literary Translation Practice:** This study reveals that translators need to be sensitive to gender issues and cultural differences when conducting literary translations. By deeply understanding the original's cultural background and gender consciousness, translators can convey the text's deeper meanings more accurately and comprehensively, promoting cross cultural communication and understanding.

5. CONCLUSION

From the perspective of feminist translation theory, this research conducts a case study and analysis of the couplets in “A Dream of Red Mansions”. By comparing the translations of Yang Xianyi and Hawkes, the authors gain a deep understanding of the principles of feminist translation theory in terms of gender perspective, cultural adaptability, ideology and power relations, and translation strategies. It is found that although the two translators differ in translation strategies and expression techniques, their works both show the attention to gender awareness and female images, which is consistent with the core concept of feminist translation theory. However, at the same time, the different strategies and translation styles of the two translators also indicate the diversity and complexity of feminist translation theory in practice.

Therefore, in the process of analyzing the translated versions of the two editions of the couplets, the authors realize that the application of feminist translation theory to the English translation of the couplets in “A Dream of Red Mansions” has extremely positive significance. Feminist translation theory provides us with a new interpretation framework and translation perspective, which helps to break the feudal gender bias and power relations, better convey Cao Xueqin’s complex feelings for the female characters in his work, and also shows his intention to fight against the tide of The Times. But, it should be noted that translators need to face problems such as cultural differences and language expression limitations in practice, which requires caution and flexibility in the application of feminist translation theory.

In the past, studies on the English translation of “A Dream of Red Mansions” were mostly focused on a single translation strategy such as Skopos theory. With the continuous development and improvement of feminist translation theory, it is believed that more translators will apply it to the translation practice of “A Dream of Red Mansions”. At the same time, with the deepening of cultural exchanges between China and the West, the target readers’ interest in Chinese culture and classical Chinese literature will increase day by day, which will promote the further development and innovation of the English translation of the couplets of “A Dream of Red Mansions”. In the future, the authors expect to see more excellent translation works, combining feminist translation theory and other translation theories, so as to better convey the

artistic charm and cultural connotation of the couplets of “A Dream of Red Mansions”.

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