

Research and Reflection on TCM Translation from a Feminist Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the application of feminist translation theory in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) translation and its contribution to gender equality and cross-cultural communication. By reviewing the development of feminist translation theory in the West and China, this paper reveals its core principles and challenges to traditional translation theories. Based on the three translation strategies proposed by Professor Flotow—supplementing, prefacing and footnoting, and hijacking—this paper analyzes the practical application of feminist translation theory in TCM texts through specific case studies. The research shows that feminist translation strategies not only compensate for information gaps caused by cultural differences but also highlight the importance of women's health issues through the translator's creative intervention, raising readers' awareness of gender equality. However, the application of feminist translation theory in TCM translation also faces challenges such as textual distortion and cultural differences. This paper argues that TCM translators should actively incorporate the principles of feminist translation theory, focusing on gender equality and women's rights in their practice while respecting and promoting the diversity of TCM culture. Future research could further explore the applicability and limitations of feminist translation theory in TCM translation, validating its practical effects through empirical studies.

Keywords: *Feminist translation theory, TCM translation, Gender equality, Cross-cultural communication, Flotow.*

1. INTRODUCTION

With the acceleration of globalization, the importance of translation in cross-cultural communication has become increasingly prominent. However, traditional translation theories often overlook gender issues in translation, resulting in the marginalization of women's voices in translated texts. In the 1970s, feminist translation theory emerged in the West, aiming to dismantle gender biases in traditional translation and empower both translators and women to move from the margins to the center. This theory not only focuses on linguistic transformation but also emphasizes cultural, ideological, and power relations in translation activities, providing new perspectives for translation studies.

In China, feminist translation research started relatively late, but with the deepening of academic exchanges, more and more scholars have begun to

pay attention to the importance of gender issues in translation. Especially in the field of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) translation, feminist translation theory offers translators new ideas, enabling them to pay greater attention to gender equality and women's rights in cross-cultural communication. As an important part of Chinese traditional culture, TCM translation involves not only linguistic transformation but also cultural dissemination and the transmission of values. Therefore, how to integrate a feminist perspective into TCM translation, while respecting the cultural connotations of the original text and embodying gender equality, has become an important topic in current translation studies.

This paper aims to explore the application of feminist translation theory in TCM translation and its contributions to gender equality and cross-cultural communication. By tracing the development of feminist translation perspectives in

both Western and Chinese contexts and combining the three translation strategies proposed by Professor Flotow — supplementing, prefacing and footnoting, and hijacking — this paper analyzes the practical application of feminist translation theory in TCM texts and points out the challenges it faces and future research directions.

2. FEMINIST TRANSLATION THEORY IN THE WEST

The term “feminism” originated in 1880 from the French suffragist movement’s concept of “feminiisme”. As the feminist movement expanded and permeated various social spheres, the pursuit of political equality—such as voting rights, employment rights, and educational rights, highlighted the urgency of dismantling patriarchal linguistic systems and empowering women’s voices in cultural domains (Zhang Pengrong, 2013). By the 1970s, the rallying cry emerged: “Women’s liberation must begin with linguistic liberation” (Ma Fuhua, 2008). Canadian feminists pioneered the integration of feminist principles into translation practice. From its inception, feminist translation theory absorbed insights from deconstructionism, postcolonialism, cultural studies, and postmodernism (Wang Xinjie, 2010), striving to shift translators and women from marginalized positions to central roles. Sherry Simon (1996) noted: “The femininity of translation is a historical metaphor. Both women and translators occupy subordinate roles within discourse systems.”

Driven by the feminist movement, Western feminist translation theory is evolved by challenging the traditional analogy of the translator’s status to women’s marginalization. It sought to deconstruct male-centered cultural systems and overturn the notion of translators as “servants” or “invisible hands” limited to linguistic conversion (Zhang Pengrong, 2013). Feminist translation theory redefined translation as “a collaborative writing act between readers and translators,” emphasizing that translation transcends mere language transfer and is profoundly influenced by the translator’s ideology and cultural contexts. Key proponents like Luise von Flotow and Sherry Simon (1996) advocated three principles: (1) eliminating gender discrimination in translation research and practice; (2) redefining the relationship between source and target texts, granting equal status to translations; and (3) recognizing translation as a multidimensional

endeavor involving culture and ideology, not merely linguistic “technique” (Li Mengru, 2017).

3. FEMINIST TRANSLATION THEORY IN CHINA

The emergence and evolution of feminism injected fresh and multidimensional perspectives into various fields, particularly translation studies, generating unique and profound academic impacts. In practice, feminist translation theory advocates an interventionist approach, encouraging translators to reinterpret texts creatively through a feminist lens (Ge Xiaoqin, 2003). The ripple effects of Western feminism also awakened female consciousness in literary translation, where translators engage with texts through women’s lived experiences and aesthetic sensibilities (Liu Junping, 2004).

In China, the inception of feminist translation studies was marked by Mu Lei’s keen recognition of the potential influence of translator gender on the translation process. Subsequently, Liao Qiyi (2000), in *Explorations of Contemporary Western Translation Theories*, became the first to examine the guiding significance of feminist thought for translation theory and practice. Since 2005, feminist translation studies in China have experienced remarkable growth. A review of recent research reveals a progressive trajectory—from initial introductions and critiques to systematic organization and localized application. Scholarly inquiries have expanded to encompass diverse themes, including translator identity, the essence of feminist translation, its challenges to traditional translation theories, and its broader impacts on translation studies. Topics such as female translator agency, ecofeminism, and queer theory have been rigorously explored, offering robust theoretical foundations and practical guidance for the diversification of translation studies and the innovation of translation methodologies.

Furthermore, feminist translation research has achieved breakthroughs in depth. Studies on translator subjectivity have evolved from a singular focus on the translator’s perspective to an exploration of intersubjectivity among translators, authors, and readers. The field has shifted from emphasizing strongly gendered female translator perspectives to examining male translators’ adoption of dual-gender perspectives during translation (Zhang Pengrong, 2013). Feminist translation theory prioritizes the translator’s active agency, encouraging the integration of feminist perspectives—particularly the concept

of androgyny—into textual analysis. This approach aims to counteract the one-sided radicalism that previously stemmed from purely feminist stances. Scholars have further proposed the dynamic and fluid nature of translator identity, arguing that such dialectical thinking fosters a more comprehensive and rational framework for addressing feminist translation issues (Ma Yue, 2010). These advancements in research scope and depth have enriched feminist translation studies with multifaceted insights, significantly enhancing both its theoretical framework and practical applications.

4. FEMINIST STRATEGIES IN TCM TRANSLATION

Among prominent feminist translation practitioners, Professor Flotow's strategies of supplementing, prefacing & footnoting, and hijacking have gained widespread recognition (Flotow, 2014). These strategies reflect the artistic nature of translation and embody the rise of female agency and self-awareness. This section applies Flotow's framework to TCM translation, aiming to enhance cultural dissemination through a feminist lens.

4.1 Supplementing in TCM Translation

Supplementation, akin to amplification in translation, compensates for cultural or contextual gaps in the target text. Feminist translators actively intervene by enriching texts with background knowledge to ensure accuracy and completeness (Fang Mengzhi, 2013).

- Example 1: Chanhou Yiyu Zhuangtai (产后抑郁状态 in Chinese): puerperal depressive state

Feminist Translation: Navigating the complexities of puerperal depressive state: addressing the unique social and cultural factors influencing women's mental health after childbirth.

Analysis: This translation approach emphasizes a gender perspective by introducing phrases such as "navigating the complexities" and "unique social and cultural factors," aiming to underscore the critical importance of this lens: Postpartum depression is not solely caused by biological factors, but is profoundly shaped by social and cultural elements. This framing serves to advocate for heightened societal awareness and concerted efforts to address the external environmental factors

impacting women's postpartum mental health.

- Example 2: Yuejing Butiao (月经不调 in Chinese): irregular menstruation

Feminist Translation: Irregular Menstruation, a common gynecological issue in Traditional Chinese Medicine, refers to irregularity in the timing, duration, or flow of menstrual bleeding.

Analysis: In the practice of feminist supplementing translation, the feminist-informed approach not only adheres to the literal translation of the term (irregular menstruation), but further supplements it with in-depth interpretations of its etiologies rooted in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) theories. This augmentation serves a dual purpose: firstly, to facilitate target-language readers' holistic comprehension of TCM cultural frameworks, and secondly, to underscore the translator's profound commitment and prioritized attention to women's health issues from a feminist perspective.

4.2 Prefacing and Footnoting in TCM Translation

Prefaces and footnotes serve as critical annotative devices in translation. When translators encounter information gaps, particularly concerning culture-specific terms, historical contexts, and unique cultural elements, they strategically employ footnotes to clarify culturally induced informational asymmetries without disrupting the original text's linguistic aesthetics and stylistic integrity. This strategy not only grants translators expanded creative agency but also embodies the innovative paradigm of feminist translation theory that advocates for an egalitarian dialogue between translators and authors.

- Example 3: Discussions on female physiological cycles in *Huangdi Neijing* (*Yellow Emperor's Classic of Medicine*)

Feminist Approach: Conventional translation methods typically render the source text directly without supplementary explanations. Feminist translation practices, however, augment this approach by integrating prefaces and footnotes as deliberate translational strategies.

Preface: The following excerpt delves into the intricacies of female reproductive health, emphasizing the importance of

balance and harmony in maintaining optimal well-being.

Footnote: Translator's note: In TCM, the concept of qi (vital energy) and its circulation throughout the body plays a central role in regulating all physiological processes, including menstruation. Imbalances in qi can lead to a variety of gynecological disorders, highlighting the interconnections of physical, emotional, and spiritual health.

Analysis: In translations of the *Huangdi Neijing* (*Yellow Emperor's Classic of Medicine*), feminist perspectives incorporate essential prefatory essays designed to provide necessary contextual grounding for the text's detailed discussions of female menstrual cycles. This approach not only foregrounds the centrality of these perspectives within the theoretical framework of TCM, but also underscores the profound concern for women's health issues. Concurrently, the feminist lens prioritizes the use of footnotes to elaborate on the TCM concept of "qi" (气 in Chinese), exploring its intricate interconnectedness with female reproductive health. These annotative interventions empower target readers to navigate cultural disparities that might otherwise impede comprehension, thereby facilitating deeper engagement with and mastery of TCM's essential tenets.

- Example 4: Women's tonic herbs in *Bencao Gangmu* (*Compendium of Materia Medica*)

Preface: This section, focusing on herbs that are particularly beneficial for women's health and nourishment, reflects the TCM of recognizing the unique physiological needs of women and the natural remedies that can support them. Through these herbs, we gain a glimpse into the rich history of women's healthcare in China.

Footnote: Translator's note: In Traditional Chinese Medicine, herbs such as dong quai (*Angelica sinensis*), red peony root (*Paeonia lactiflora*), and goji berries (*Lycium barbarum*) are revered for their ability to nourish blood, regulate menstruation, and support women's overall health and vitality. These herbs are often used in formulations tailored to women's specific health concerns, reflecting a holistic and gender-sensitive approach to healthcare.

Analysis: Prefatory essays provide readers with contextual grounding for entire chapters, emphasizing TCM's specialized focus on women's health. Footnotes meticulously explicate the therapeutic properties and applications of specific herbal ingredients, demonstrating TCM's nuanced understanding and unique solutions to female health concerns. This dual strategy not only expands the translator's creative agency by establishing a discursive space for contextual interpretation, but also materializes feminist translation theory's advocacy for egalitarian dialogue between translator and original author. The annotative practice transforms translation into a site of collaborative meaning-making, where cultural specificities are negotiated through layered textual interventions rather than unilateral linguistic transfer.

4.3 Hijacking in TCM Translation

The term "hijacking" in this context can be interpreted as a form of reinterpretation or adaptation of the original text. During the translation process, the translator places particular emphasis on preserving the original author's writing tone and stylistic nuances while simultaneously encouraging creative "treasonous" rewriting—that is, exercising personal creativity within the constraint of maintaining the source text's central themes. This strategic rewriting serves two primary purposes: first, to enhance the portrayal and salience of female characters' individuality; second, to appropriately revise and adjust potentially sexist content embedded in the original text.

- Example 5: Siqi, Jinggujian, Fazhangji, Shentishengzhuang. (四七，筋骨坚，发长极，身体盛壮 in Chinese) (in *Suwen Shanggu Tianzhen Lun, Huangdi Neijing* <*Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon*>)

Translation At the age of twenty- eight, her musculature and bone become strong, her hair grows long enough. (Li Zhaoguo, 2005)

Feminist Revision: At 28, her physique peaks in vitality, with robust musculature and hair reaching its full length.

Analysis: The term "发长极" (Fà Zhǎng Jí), according to Wang Hongtu and He Juan's (2014) research, refers to the stage when women reach their peak physical development and vitality at the age of

twenty-eight, during which hair growth also attains its most robust condition. The original rendering “grows long enough” may inadvertently convey the misinterpretation that “this state is sufficient for women in their four-seven cycle [age 28], suggesting no further growth should be expected.” To ensure more precise and equitable expression, we revised it as “reached its full length,” emphasizing the zenith of hair growth during this phase while avoiding any gender-biased implications or discriminatory connotations.

- Example 6: Wuqi, Yangmingmaishuai, Mianshijiao, Fashiduo. (五七, 阳明脉衰, 面始焦, 发始堕 in Chinese) (in *Suwen Shanggu Tianzhen Lun, Huangdi Neijing* <Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon>)

Translation: At 35, her face begins to wither; her hair starts to lose.

Feminist Revision: At 35, subtle signs of aging emerge: facial wrinkles appear, and hair gradually thins.

Analysis: The phrase “面始焦, 发始堕” describes the physiological changes occurring in women around the age of thirty-five, when facial skin begins to show visible signs of aging and hair starts to fall out. In Li Zhaoguo's translation, the use of “wither” and “lose” presents certain interpretive challenges. The term “wither”—commonly associated with plants withering and decaying—creates an impression of extreme facial aging, while “lose” may evoke imagery of severe or extensive hair loss. Such rendering risks exaggerating the degree of aging experienced by women at this life stage compared to actual physiological changes.

Notably, when translating the male counterpart's “发堕” at age forty, Li's version employs “drop” (“his hair begins to drop”) rather than “lose”. This lexical choice inadvertently creates a gendered contrast: the male's hair condition is described with a milder term (“drop”) than the female's (“lose”), subtly reinforcing the severity of female aging. To achieve more accurate textual representation while demonstrating gender respect and equality consciousness, it is proposed to revise “wither” as “wrinkle” (indicating the appearance of facial lines) and “lose” as “fall” (describing the natural shedding process of hair).

This adjusted phrasing not only aligns with the actual aging process of women but also adopts a

more euphemistic and humanized expression. By avoiding pathologizing descriptions, such translation choices contribute to reducing gender bias and promoting the dissemination of equality-conscious discourse in cross-cultural communication. The substitution of “wrinkle” for “wither” mitigates the plant-based metaphor's connotations of decay, while “fall” maintains neutrality in describing hair loss without invoking excessive medical or aesthetic judgment.

5. CONCLUSION

Feminist translation theory, since its inception, has been committed to dismantling gender biases in traditional translation and empowering both translators and women to move from the margins to the center. By tracing the historical development of feminist translation perspectives in both Western and Chinese contexts, this paper reveals the significant role of feminist translation theory in translation studies and its challenges to, and innovations of, conventional translation theories. Particularly in the field of TCM translation, feminist translation theory offers translators new perspectives and methodologies, enabling them to pay greater attention to gender equality and women's rights in cross-cultural communication.

Guided by the three translation strategies proposed by Professor Flotow — supplementing, prefacing and footnoting, and hijacking - this paper explores the application of feminist translation theory in TCM translation through specific case studies. The research demonstrates that feminist translation strategies not only compensate for information gaps caused by cultural differences but also, through translators' creative interventions, highlight the importance of women's health issues and raise readers' awareness of gender equality. For instance, when translating classics such as the *Huangdi Neijing* (Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon) and *Bencao Gangmu* (Compendium of Materia Medica), translators can better convey TCM theories' unique perspectives on women's health by supplementing contextual information and prefacing and footnoting. Furthermore, by employing the “hijacking” strategy, translators can appropriately rewrite potentially gender-biased content in the original text, avoiding stereotypes and discrimination against women.

However, the application of feminist translation theory in TCM translation also faces certain challenges. Firstly, TCM texts prioritize medical knowledge, with gender issues not being their

primary focus. Forcibly introducing a feminist perspective may lead to distortion or over-interpretation of the text. Secondly, the interventional nature of feminist translation strategies requires translators to carefully balance fidelity to the original text and the promotion of gender equality. Additionally, the uniqueness and complexity of TCM culture necessitate that translators fully consider cultural context and reader receptivity when applying feminist translation theory, so as to avoid misunderstandings arising from cultural differences.

Despite these challenges, feminist translation theory provides new ideas and methods for TCM translation, enabling more precise and sensitive expressions of gender issues in cross-cultural communication. This paper argues that TCM translators should actively embrace the concepts of feminist translation theory, paying attention to gender equality and women's rights in their practice while respecting and promoting the diversity of TCM culture. In this way, TCM translation can not only better disseminate TCM culture but also contribute to promoting social gender equality and female awakening.

Future research can further explore the applicability and limitations of feminist translation theory in TCM translation, combining more empirical studies to verify its practical effects. Furthermore, attempts can be made to integrate feminist translation theory with emerging trends in contemporary translation studies, such as eco-translatology and digital humanities, to explore its new applications in digital translation tools and cross-cultural communication. It is believed that with further research, feminist translation theory will bring more innovations and breakthroughs to TCM translation and the entire field of translation.

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