

# Feminist Translation in Practice: The Case of Her Story's Subtitles

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores the English subtitles of the Chinese feminist film *Her Story* from the perspective of feminist translation theory. Drawing on Luise von Flotow's strategies—supplementing, prefacing and footnoting, and hijacking—it analyzes how gendered meanings are reconstructed in translation. By examining key subtitle examples, the paper highlights how the translator negotiates between linguistic accuracy and feminist expression, revealing the role of translation in amplifying women's voices and challenging patriarchal discourse in cross-cultural contexts.

## KEYWORDS

Feminism; Translation strategies; Movie; Luise von flotow

## 1 Introduction

In recent years, as Chinese cinema has increasingly gained visibility on the international stage, a growing number of female-centered films have received wide acclaim and critical recognition. *Her Story*, a representative example of feminist-themed Chinese cinema, challenges conventional gendered narratives through its realistic storytelling and multidimensional portrayals of women. The film vividly depicts the awakening, resistance, and solidarity of Chinese women in the face of adversity. Beyond its notable success in both domestic and international markets, the film has emerged as a significant cultural vehicle for articulating and transmitting the voices of Chinese women globally.

Concurrently, the global rise of feminist consciousness since the twentieth century has brought gender-related issues to the forefront of academic and public discourse. In the field of audiovisual translation, the question of how to effectively convey gender awareness and avoid gender bias has become a critical concern. Luise von Flotow, a pioneering scholar in feminist translation studies, has proposed a set of feminist translation strategies that provide both methodological guidance and theoretical insights for translation practices informed by feminist perspectives.

Drawing on feminist translation theory, this study examines the official subtitles of *Her Story* as a case study. Through a close analysis of selected translation instances, it investigates how feminist translation strategies are employed in the subtitling process and how translators engage in the construction of gendered meanings. This research further explores how translation functions as a form of cultural reproduction and plays a vital role in the cross-cultural transmission of feminist values.

## 2 Overview of feminist translation theory

### 2.1 The emergence and core concepts of feminist translation theory

Feminist translation theory emerged under the influence of Western feminist movements in the 20th century, as growing attention to women's rights and gender equality spurred the development of gender and women's studies. With the "cultural turn" in translation studies during the 1980s, scholars began to explore ideology and power in translation, challenging traditional notions of linguistic equivalence. Gender, as a cultural construct, gradually entered the theoretical framework, contributing to the rise of feminist translation theory.

Key early contributors include Canadian scholars Luise von Flotow, Sherry Simon, and Barbara Godard, who introduced feminist literary criticism into translation studies and emphasized the translator's gendered identity and subjectivity. Simon questioned the traditional ideal of "fidelity," advocating for a broader understanding that includes the translator's voice.<sup>[1]</sup> In *Translation and Gender*, Flotow outlined three influential strategies—supplementing, prefacing, and hijacking—which have become central tools in feminist translation practice.<sup>[2]</sup> Their work laid the foundation for feminist translation theory and expanded its relevance across intercultural studies, postcolonial discourse, and literary research.

### 2.2 Feminist translation theory in China

Feminist translation theory began to attract academic attention in China in the early 21st century, initially through the introduction and interpretation of Western theoretical frameworks. Notable early works include Liao Qiye's *Rewriting Myth: Feminism and Translation Studies* and Ge Xiaoqin's *The Essence of Feminist Translation*, both of which explored the

relationship between feminist translation and gender studies, with a focus on the theory's adaptability and potential within the Chinese context.<sup>[3][4]</sup>

As research progressed, scholars began to examine localized approaches and the practical applicability of feminist translation strategies. Given that Chinese translation traditions have long emphasized the principle of "faithfulness," the expression of translator subjectivity has often been constrained, posing challenges to feminist translation practices. Wang Luzi observed that Chinese feminist translators have increasingly expressed agency through lexical choices and the reconstruction of female images, challenging the conventional role of the translator as a "faithful mouthpiece."<sup>[5]</sup> Wang Yi proposed strategies such as rejecting sexist idioms, avoiding pejorative Chinese characters with the "female" radical, and even creating new characters, blending traditional methods with feminist agency to enhance the translator's discursive power.<sup>[6]</sup> These efforts not only heightened gender awareness in translation but also opened new avenues for feminist translation in China.

Applied research has largely focused on the Chinese translation of Western literature. For instance, Li Hongyu's comparative study of various Chinese translations of *The Color Purple* highlights how gender consciousness influences translation strategies, while cautioning against overly absolutist gender interpretations.<sup>[7]</sup> Other studies have extended to the English translation of Chinese literature—such as Wang Dan's analysis of *Water Margin* and Lang Jing's research on *The Three-Body Problem*—demonstrating that feminist translation strategies can transcend both gender and genre, contributing to greater gender sensitivity and cultural expressiveness in translated texts.<sup>[8][9]</sup>

### 3 Overview of the subtitle translation in her story

*Her Story* is a female-authored film characterized by a distinctly female perspective, combining social realism with the unique style of its creator. The narrative centers on Wang Tiemei, a single mother who moves to a new home with her daughter Momo and befriends their neighbor Ye. The film vividly portrays the resilience and complex emotions of contemporary women facing societal pressures, as well as the emotional bonds forged through mutual understanding and empathy among women. It expresses respect for female subjectivity in a gentle yet resolute manner, while offering a profound reflection on and reconstruction of traditional gendered narrative structures.

Regarding the English subtitle translation of the film, although only the official theatrical version is currently available and detailed information about the translator Lu Qi remains undisclosed, the director has revealed on social media that the English subtitles underwent three rounds of refinement to ensure quality. The director personally participated in the translation and revision process. The linguistic strategies employed in the subtitles not only achieve precise conveyance of emotion and contextual nuances but also demonstrate the creators' careful cultural adaptation efforts and sincere intent to communicate authentically with international audiences.

## 4 Analysis of the english translation from the perspective of feminist translation theory

### 4.1 Supplementing

The supplementing emphasizes the translator's active role, guided by gender awareness, in filling the gaps where female experiences and voices are omitted in the source text. This approach goes beyond mere linguistic representation; it constitutes a discursive reconstruction that brings hidden female perspectives to the forefront. By supplementing cultural and emotional elements, the translator asserts subjectivity and engages in creative meaning-making.

Example 1

Original:

小鹿:好多前辈都是因为生了孩子不当记者了,你也是吗?

铁梅:我不是,但我是一个懦弱的人。

Subtitled Translation:

Miss Lu: So many journalists quit after having kids. Was that the reason for you too?

Tiemei: I don't have the courage to keep fighting the system. That's why I quit.

In the original text, "I am a coward" serves as a vague and open-ended self-assessment of character. However, the translated version renders this phrase with greater specificity, not only clarifying the implications of "cowardice," but also embedding a critique of the systemic oppression faced by women in the journalism industry. This strategy transforms Tie Mei's "cowardice" from a seemingly personal weakness into a reflection of the structural challenges that prevent women from sustaining resistance within patriarchal institutions.

Example 2

Original:

前夫:怎么这么帅啊。

小马:可能我妈比较帅。

Subtitled Translation:

Tiemei's ex-husband: He's too handsome to be a teacher.

Ma: Got it from my mom. Not much I can do about that.

In the original text, “怎么这么帅啊” is deliberately ambiguous—it could be a genuine compliment or an expression of jealousy. However, in the English translation, the use of the “too...to...” structure along with the added context of the character's profession introduces new narrative information—namely, that Ma is the drum teacher. This rephrasing transforms a simple expression of shock and jealousy into a more evaluative judgment, revealing the ex-husband's insecurity and jealousy toward his romantic rival. Regarding Ma's response, the original line “可能我妈比较帅” (“Maybe my mom is handsome”) is a witty comeback. The translation retains this humorous tone but adds a second sentence, which amplifies Ma's confidence in the face of male-to-male tension. By attributing his charm to his mother, the translation also conveys a subtle endorsement of female generational influence, reflecting a positive recognition and celebration of femininity within a feminist framework.

## 4.2 Hijacking

The hijacking is the most subversive and creative approach within feminist translation. Guided by a feminist perspective, translators actively rewrite or omit patriarchal and gender-biased elements in the source text, giving it new life. Under this strategy, fidelity to the original is subordinated to justice for female experience, with the translator acting as a re-creator who endows the text with new gender-political significance, thereby enhancing the visibility of marginalized female voices. This strategy is extensively and characteristically employed in the official theatrical subtitles of *Her Story*.

Example 3

Original:

铁梅:追忆过去是油腻的开始啊。

Subtitled Translation:

Tiemei: You're sounding like a nostalgic old timer.

In the original text, the term “油腻” is strongly associated in the Chinese cultural context with a satirical portrayal of middle-aged men's nostalgic tendencies, carrying distinct gendered and culturally specific connotations. A literal translation as “greasy” would likely be misinterpreted in English as referring to poor hygiene, thus failing to convey its deeper social critique. Therefore, the translation adopts a typical hijacking strategy by rendering the phrase as “nostalgic old-timer.” This expression generalizes and satirizes both age and gender, successfully leveraging Anglophone idioms that mock the didactic tone often associated with older men. Through this cultural reframing, the translation rearticulates the original critique, transforming a local gendered stereotype into a form intelligible and resonant in the target culture.

Example 4

Original:

铁梅:你们公众号没那么差。就是带货嘛。

铁梅:很正常,不然怎么活下去。

Subtitled Translation:

Tiemei: Your WeChat Public account is alright, I guess. It's all sponsored content.

Tiemei: That's the game now, isn't it? Gotta pay the bills somehow.

The translator, mindful of cross-cultural interpretations of the term “fall,” employs a biblically inflected idiom that conveys a sense of irony regarding the decline of male heroes. This cultural allusion functions as a pointed critique, deconstructing the male-dominated heroic narrative through a satirical lens. Such intertextual intervention exemplifies a high degree of textual manipulation, intensifying the gendered discursive tension.

“Normal.” is rendered using the metaphor of “the game,” which subtly evokes notions of societal norms or unwritten rules. Through this reconstruction, the translator conveys the protagonist Tiemei's resigned and ironic stance toward socio-cultural structures—including gender dynamics, professional hierarchies, and ethical compromises. It not only underscores the protagonist's resilience in navigating a hostile workplace but also enriches the translation with deeper emotional and socio-political layers. This approach reflects a feminist translator's critical engagement with and rearticulation of existing power structures in gendered discourse.

Example 5

Original:

Subtitled Translation:

Mr. Hu: So you have written quite a few songs for her, huh?

In the original Chinese text, third-person singular pronouns are orally gender-neutral due to identical pronunciation,

with gender distinctions only emerging in written form through characters like “他” (he) or “她” (she). Additionally, when the referent’s gender is unknown, the default pronoun often used is “he.” In the translation, however, the translator deliberately uses “her,” thereby concretizing a potentially heteronormative ambiguity. Through this selective gender specification, the translator effectively foregrounds the female character, disrupting her previous invisibility and repositioning her at the narrative center. This choice constructs a more pointed gendered discourse and affirms the presence and agency of female figures within the translated text.

### 4.3 Prefacing

Feminist translators employ strategies such as adding prefaces and footnotes not only to clarify the author’s creative intentions but also to present their own translational stance and strategic choices. This approach makes readers aware that the translation is not a passive reproduction of the original text, but rather an active rewriting informed by gender consciousness, thereby facilitating an equal dialogue between source and target texts. However, due to the particular nature of film, subtitled annotations are rarely seen in theatrical releases. Observations of *Her Story* indicate that such manipulations of the original text do not occur in its subtitles; therefore, this translation strategy will not be further discussed here.

## 5 Conclusion

Female characters play a pivotal role in the film *Her Story*. With the growing attention to feminist issues in society, there is an increasing demand for the representation of women’s voices and status in literary and artistic works. *Her Story* deeply integrates the lived experiences of women within the Chinese social context with localized feminist reflections, using the film as a medium for global dissemination and interpretation. In this process, the role of the translation is particularly crucial. This study analyzes the official theatrical subtitles of *Her Story* through the lens of feminist translation strategies and finds that the translation frequently employs the three key strategies of supplementing, hijacking, and prefacing. The research demonstrates that applying feminist translation strategies enables the cross-cultural transmission of metaphors, emotions, and cultural symbols embedded in the local context, while reinforcing the visibility of feminist consciousness and the articulation of women’s discursive power in the target text. The official subtitles of *Her Story* provide a valuable model for the cross-cultural dissemination of feminist films, maintaining artistic integrity while effectively leveraging translation as a bridge to promote outstanding Chinese feminist cinema on the international stage, thereby achieving both contextual transcendence and emotional resonance in women’s narratives.

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