

The Rewritten "Her": A Study on the Diminishment Mechanism and Gender Bias in the Translation of Modern Feminist Works' Titles

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, numerous films and literary works centered on female protagonists have undergone significant gender-related alterations when their titles were translated into Chinese. This paper takes typical cases such as *All I Wanna Do* being translated as *Fen Sao Da Lian Meng* (roughly "Sexy Trouble League"), *Young Woman and the Sea* as *Yong Zhe Zhi Xin* ("Heart of the Swimmer"), and *Legally Blonde* as *Lü Zheng Qiao Jia Ren* ("Pretty Woman in Law") as entry points to systematically analyze the dual mechanisms of "stigmatization" and "erasure" behind such translations. The study finds that market logic, patriarchal discourse, and translation habits collectively shape gender bias in translated titles, forming a "paradox of the gaze": when female images can be exoticized or sexualized, the translation highlights gender; when female achievements deserve recognition, the translation erases gender. This paper further explores how such rewriting affects public understanding of women's issues and proposes the necessity of dialogue between academic research and public discourse, offering a critical perspective for gender studies in the field of cultural translation.

KEYWORDS

Feminist translation; Title diminishment; Gender bias; Stigmatization; Erasure

1 Introduction

The translated title of a film or literary work is its first face when entering a foreign cultural market. However, in recent years, a series of works centered on women have undergone significant gender-related alterations in their Chinese titles. For example, *All I Wanna Do*, a film about the coming-of-age friendships of young girls, was translated as *Fen Sao Da Lian Meng* (roughly "Sexy Trouble League"), where the original gentle meaning of "what I want to do" was replaced by the sexually suggestive character "sao" (promiscuous). *Young Woman and the Sea*, which tells the true story of the first woman to swim across the English Channel, was given the degendered translation *Yong Zhe Zhi Xin* ("Heart of the Swimmer"). *Legally Blonde*, originally playing on the legal term "legally blind" to satirize society's neglect of blonde women's intelligence, was translated as *Lü Zheng Qiao Jia Ren* ("Pretty Woman in Law"), redirecting the audience's attention to the protagonist's appearance rather than her wisdom.

These cases are not isolated linguistic errors but a systemic cultural phenomenon. This paper aims to answer the following questions: What types of "stigmatization" and "diminishment" exist in the translation of feminist works' titles? What is the underlying gender logic behind such rewriting? How does this rewriting affect public understanding of women's issues? Through the analysis of multiple typical cases from 2000 to the present, this paper seeks to reveal the discursive evolution of gender bias in film title translation and explore the possibility of dialogue between academia and the public.

2 Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Feminist Translation Theory

Feminist translation theory regards translation as a political practice. Liu Caixia points out that women have long used translation as a platform to gain writing space, releasing political and cultural stances through "rewriting," "translator's prefaces," "embedding," and other methods, making translation a political activity for gender equality (Liu, 2008). Habiba Nakhli (2025) further argues that translation is often compared to women, occupying a secondary position; feminist translators therefore reject traditional authority of the original text, claim co-authorship, and view translation as a "rewriting" act that subverts power hierarchies.

2.2 Manipulation Theory and the Gendered Critique of "Fidelity"

Li Yan (2008) introduces Lefevere's manipulation theory, analyzing the deep reasons for the prevalence of feminist translation rewriting from the perspectives of "poetics" and "patronage." Geng Qiang (2005) systematically critiques the gendered metaphors in the traditional concept of "fidelity," noting that the original text is viewed as male/subject/authority, while the translation is seen as female/derivative/subordinate. Although feminist translators' reinterpretation of

this concept brings a paradox of communication, it also provides an important epistemological impact on translation studies.

2.3 The Phenomenon of Female Erasure in Film Title Translation

Xu Yiqing's (2025) recent study systematically examines the symbolization, elimination, and addition of masculine nouns in film title translations across English, Chinese, and Korean, revealing how patriarchy systematically erases female voices through title translation. Discussions on Douban further enrich this issue, such as criticisms of the erasure of "mother" in the translation of *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter* and the degendered treatment of *Young Woman and the Sea* (Gudao Yixia, 2024; Xiexie ohayo, 2024).

2.4 Gaps in Existing Research and the Focus of This Paper

Existing research has made important progress in theoretical construction and empirical analysis, but there are still gaps: first, systematic analysis of "stigmatization" (e.g., labels like "powder/sex/desire/curse") remains insufficient; second, there is a lack of focused research on the "diminishment of female subjectivity"; third, cross-temporal and multi-type comparative studies are few; fourth, there is a disconnect between academic research and public discourse. This paper aims to use multiple typical cases as entry points, integrating theoretical resources and public discourse, to systematically analyze the distortion and diminishment of female subjectivity in translated titles.

3 Research Design

3.1 Research Methods

This paper employs case study, interdisciplinary, and textual analysis methods. The case study method selects representative feminist film titles translated since 2000 as the analytical object; the interdisciplinary method integrates feminist translation theory, manipulation theory, and gender critique; textual analysis compares semantic differences between original and translated titles to identify linguistic features of "stigmatization" and "erasure."

3.2 Case Selection

This paper selects the following typical cases for analysis:

- (1) *All I Wanna Do* (1998) → *Fen Sao Da Lian Meng* ("Sexy Trouble League").
- (2) *Young Woman and the Sea* (2024) → *Yong Zhe Zhi Xin* ("Heart of the Swimmer").
- (3) *Legally Blonde* (2001) → *Lü Zheng Qiao Jia Ren* ("Pretty Woman in Law").
- (4) *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter* (2013) → *Wo Men De Fu Bei* ("Our Fathers").
- (5) *Uptown Girls* (2003) → *Ma La Bao Bei* ("Spicy Baby").
- (6) *Freaky Friday* (2003) → *La Ma La Mei* ("Hot Mom, Hot Girl").
- (7) *Lady on a Train* (1945) → *Zhi Fen Zhen Tan* ("Powdered Detective").

These cases span from 1945 to 2024, covering both Hollywood mainstream productions and independent films, offering good representativeness.

4 Findings

4.1 Stigmatization and Erasure: The Dual Diminishment Mechanism

Through systematic analysis of the above cases, this paper identifies two main types of gender rewriting in feminist work titles:

4.1.1 Stigmatization: The Attachment of Sexualized Labels

All I Wanna Do originally means "what I want to do," telling the story of young girls' friendships in a boarding school. The Chinese translation *Fen Sao Da Lian Meng* adds the character "sao" (promiscuous), introducing sexual connotations absent from the original. Similarly, *Freaky Friday*, originally meaning "strange Friday," a fantasy comedy about a mother-daughter body swap, was translated as *La Ma La Mei* ("Hot Mom, Hot Girl"), where the character "la" (spicy/hot) directs attention to appearance and sexuality. *Lady on a Train*, originally meaning "woman on a train," was translated as *Zhi Fen Zhen Tan* ("Powdered Detective"), where "zhi fen" (powder/rouge) binds the female detective's ability to her appearance,

weakening her professional identity.

4.1.2 Erasure: The Removal of Gender Identity

Young Woman and the Sea tells the true story of Gertrude Ederle, the first woman to swim across the English Channel. The Chinese translation Yong Zhe Zhi Xin ("Heart of the Swimmer") deliberately omits "Woman" from the original title. One comment sharply notes: "It is extremely ironic that the translation of a film about a woman erases all traces of womanhood" (Xiexie ohayo, 2024). Similarly, Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter, originally meaning "Our Mothers, Our Fathers," was translated as Wo Men De Fu Bei ("Our Fathers"), directly deleting "mothers." A Douban user sarcastically remarked: "The mother is simply gone" (Gudao Yixia, 2024).

4.2 The Paradox of the Gaze: Double Standards in Gender Politics

These two mechanisms are not isolated but together constitute a "paradox of the gaze": when female images can be exoticized or sexualized, the translation tends to highlight gender (e.g., Fen Sao Da Lian Meng, La Ma La Mei); when female achievements deserve recognition, the translation tends to erase gender (e.g., Yong Zhe Zhi Xin, Wo Men De Fu Bei). This double standard reveals patriarchy's contradictory attitude toward female images: women can be "looked at," but their achievements are not worthy of being "named."

4.3 Mechanism Analysis: The Complicity of Market, Power, and Habitus

Title rewriting is not an accidental linguistic error but the product of multiple forces:

4.3.1 The Drive of Market Logic

Distributors, as "patrons," prioritize market appeal. Legally Blonde grossed \$142 million globally, and Freaky Friday \$161 million; commercial returns prove the popular acceptance of such translations, reinforcing distributors' motivation to continue similar strategies. Li Yan (2008) notes that publishers willingly publish feminist books due to economic interests; the same logic applies to film title production.

4.3.2 The Discipline of Patriarchal Discourse

Title choices reflect mainstream society's expectations and control over female images. When female images can be exoticized, the translation highlights gender; when female achievements deserve recognition, the translation erases gender. This "paradox of the gaze" is a concrete manifestation of patriarchy's symbolic discipline over women.

4.3.3 The Unconscious Reproduction of Translation Habits

Under the dual pressure of commercial demands and professional habitus, translators often unconsciously follow established title paradigms. For example, characters like "fen/sao/you/you/la/qiao" (powder/promiscuous/desire/curse/spicy/pretty) have become a fixed template for translated titles, and translators unconsciously reproduce gender bias in the process of catering to the market.

5 Discussion

5.1 The Impact of Title Rewriting on Public Understanding

How do rewritten titles affect audience understanding of women's issues? First, titles shape first impressions. Potential viewers of Fen Sao Da Lian Meng may enter the cinema expecting a "teen farce," creating cognitive dissonance with the original female coming-of-age narrative; viewers of Lü Zheng Qiao Jia Ren may be guided by the character "qiao" (pretty) to focus more on the protagonist's appearance than her legal intelligence.

Second, public critical awareness is awakening. Douban discussions such as "Women's Disempowerment in Film Translation: The Disappearing 'Woman'" and reviews like "The Disappearing 'Woman' in Translation" reflect the public's increasing sensitivity to title rewriting issues. One user noted: "Gender is emphasized when it shouldn't be, and erased when it should be retained. The underlying intentions are too obvious" (Gudao Yixia, 2024). Academic research (e.g., Xu, 2025) and public discourse are forming a dialogue, jointly advancing critical reflection on gender bias in translated titles.

5.2 Discursive Evolution: From Explicit Stigma to Implicit Erasure

Through cross-temporal comparison (2000–2024), this paper finds that gender bias in translated titles shows a shift from "explicit stigma" to "implicit erasure." Earlier cases more often involved direct sexualized labels (e.g., *Fen Sao Da Lian Meng*, *The Confession of an Evil Woman*), while recent cases more often involve seemingly neutral "degendering" (e.g., *Yong Zhe Zhi Xin*). This shift makes gender bias more concealed and deceptive—surface "neutrality" in fact erases women's presence in history and achievement.

This evolutionary trajectory is closely related to discursive characteristics of the "post-feminist" era. Against the backdrop of spreading feminist thought, direct sexism is no longer publicly acceptable, so bias persists in more hidden forms. This reminds us that advancing gender equality requires not only criticizing explicit discrimination but also vigilance against implicit erasure.

5.3 Limitations and Future Directions

This study has the following limitations: first, the case selection focuses mainly on English-language films, with insufficient analysis of works in other languages; second, empirical research on audience reception effects is lacking; third, investigation of translator subjectivity needs deepening. Future research could extend to comparative title studies across multiple languages and cultural contexts, combined with surveys or audience interviews, to further verify the actual impact of title rewriting on public cognition.

6 Conclusion

This paper takes the translated titles of multiple feminist films and literary works as entry points to systematically analyze the dual diminishment mechanisms of "stigmatization" and "erasure." The study finds that market logic, patriarchal discourse, and translation habits jointly shape gender bias in translated titles, forming a "paradox of the gaze": when female images can be exoticized, the translation highlights gender; when female achievements deserve recognition, the translation erases gender. This double standard reveals patriarchy's symbolic discipline over female images and reflects the trend toward the hidden transformation of gender bias in the "post-feminist" era.

The theoretical contributions of this paper are: first, constructing an analytical framework of the dual mechanisms of "stigmatization-erasure," providing a reusable tool for subsequent gender and translation studies; second, integrating Western feminist translation theory with local public discourse, exploring a research paradigm of "academic-public" dialogue; third, revealing the discursive evolution of gender bias in translated titles through cross-temporal comparison.

On a practical level, the findings of this paper can raise public and industry sensitivity to gender issues in title translation, encourage translators to seek a balance between commercial logic and gender equality, and promote respect for female subjectivity in translated titles. As a Douban user stated: "Erase women's names; if erasure is impossible, put a man's name on it; if that fails, use generic terms to obscure identity" (Gudao Yixia, 2024). When translation becomes an extension of power, renaming is an act of resistance. Only by persistently questioning at the smallest unit of language—a word, a character—can we truly see those rewritten "hers."

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