

# *A Review of the Study on the History of Chinese Female Translation*

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**Abstract:** In recent years, the study of translation history has witnessed remarkable growth in China. Nevertheless, a thorough review of existing research in this field reveals that male translators have predominantly taken center stage, with numerous female translators consigned to the obscurity of historical oblivion. Based on a self-established database, this study systematically reviews the current research status of the history of female translation in China from aspects such as the quantity and time of published works, research content, and research perspectives. It also summarizes the characteristics and deficiencies of existing research and puts forward suggestions, aiming to call on the academic community to attach importance to the research on the group of female translators.

## **1. Introduction**

In recent years, China has witnessed a rapid development in translation history studies, accompanied by the cultural turn in translation research, with remarkable progress made both in the quantity and quality of research achievements. However, a comprehensive survey of the extant scholarship on translation history indicates that the majority of research predominantly focuses on male translators, thereby relegating numerous female counterparts to historical oblivion. Zhang Gu and Wen Jun (2014)[1] analyzed 467 papers on Chinese Mainland translators published in 16 core foreign language journals between 1980 and 2013, and their findings revealed that only four of these papers adopted a feminist perspective, and none of the ten most renowned translators in the study-Yan Fu, Lu Xun, Fu Lei, Wang Zuoliang, Lin Yutang, Yang Xianyi, Zhu Shenghao, Qian Zhongshu, Hu Shi, and Lin Shu-were female. Similarly, there are few documentary records about women's participation in translation activities, and there are even fewer translations by female translators that have been passed down. In fact, the literary translation activities of female translators have been carried out almost simultaneously with those of male translators, and their active participation in translation is in no way inferior to that of male translators.

In 1898, Qiu Yufang's translation of Aesop's Fables was published in the first issue of the Wuxi Vernacular Newspaper. This is the earliest translated work officially signed by a native Chinese female translator, one year earlier than Lin Shu's translation of *La Dame aux Camélias*, which was published in 1899. After that, female translators first emerged as a group to engage in literary translation in the late 19th century and early 20th century. According to Zhu Jing (2007)[2], there

were 45 female translators whose identities were confirmed. Following the May 4th Movement, as women's status rose to an unprecedented level and educational opportunities expanded for them, a significant cohort of remarkable female translators emerged prominently onto the historical stage. The genres of their translations covered almost all literary fields, mainly including novels, dramas, poems, children's literature, films, etc. The languages involved in their translations included several languages from countries in Asia, Europe, and the Americas. They achieved remarkable translation achievements and were recognized by all walks of life. For example, in 1986, Yang Jiang was awarded the Grand Cross of Alfonso X the Wise by the King of Spain for her Chinese translation of *Don Quixote*. In 1991, Zhao Luorui, as the first translator of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, received the "Professional Achievement Award" from the University of Chicago in the United States. In 1995, Bing Xin was awarded the National Cedar Order by the President of the Republic of Lebanon for her translation of Kahlil Gibran's *The Prophet*.

However, before the publication of *Translator's Norms from Gender Perspective: A Study on the First Indigenous Women Translators in Early Twentieth-century China* in 2014, there had been no monograph specifically dedicated to the study of the history of Chinese female translation. Fortunately, in recent years, a group of scholars have recognized the research gap in the history of female translation, with Luo Lie, Wu Shufang, Liu Zequan, and others making successive attempts in this area; yet, to date, no systematic academic works on the history of female translation have been published. Therefore, this study aims to systematically examine the current state of research on the history of Chinese female translation, with the intention of encouraging the academic community to focus on the study of female translators. It is hoped that new vitality can be injected into the research on the history of translation from different perspectives, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of China's translation history.

## 2. Research Status of the History of Female Translation

This study adopts a dual-perspective approach, examining the subject from both macro and micro levels. By integrating qualitative and quantitative analysis methods, it aims to systematically review and synthesize the current research on the history of female translation. This study undertakes a comprehensive literature review of periodicals pertinent to the history of female translation, aiming to elucidate the current research status and diverse scholarly approaches, thereby identifying research lacunae and charting a course for future investigations.

Taking the documents collected in the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) as an example, it probes into the research status of the history of female translation by sorting out relevant documents. This study searches on CNKI with the themes of "female translators", "female translation masters", and "the history of female translation", and excludes the pure theoretical documents under the theme of "feminist theory". A total of 197 Chinese academic journal articles and 72 doctoral and master's theses are retrieved. To ensure the authority, accuracy and objectivity of the research data sample, this study takes academic journal articles as the data sample and conducts a manual screening again based on the retrieval results. The screening principles are as follows: whether the paper is a study on the history of female translation or female translators; and whether the paper is a study on a specific aspect of female translators. This study conducts a detailed screening according to the title, abstract and keywords in the retrieval results, and then screens out the documents with the highest relevance to the research on the history of female translation. Finally, a total of 138 papers are selected. This section aims to systematically analyze the current status of the history of female translation, covering aspects such as the annual trends of article publication, and research perspectives.

## 2.1 Annual Article Publication Trend

An in-depth analysis of Figure 1 indicates that scholarly focus on the history of female translation first took shape in the 1980s. In 1985, Zheng Yonghui's paper "The Eminent Female Translator-Yang Jiang" was published in *Chinese Translators Journal*, inaugurating the initial phase of academic inquiry into this particular field. Subsequently, a succession of scholarly articles delving into the history of female translation began to surface steadily. The year 2008 witnessed the first significant milestone, with the number of publications reaching 14, thus constituting the first research pinnacle, and after that, the publication volume exhibited a decline with fluctuations. In 2010, a secondary research surge occurred, with 11 papers being published. Starting from 2012, the number of publications embarked on a consistent upward trajectory, ushering in a five-year period characterized by prolific research output. However, since 2017, the publication volume has reverted to a pattern of fluctuating decline.

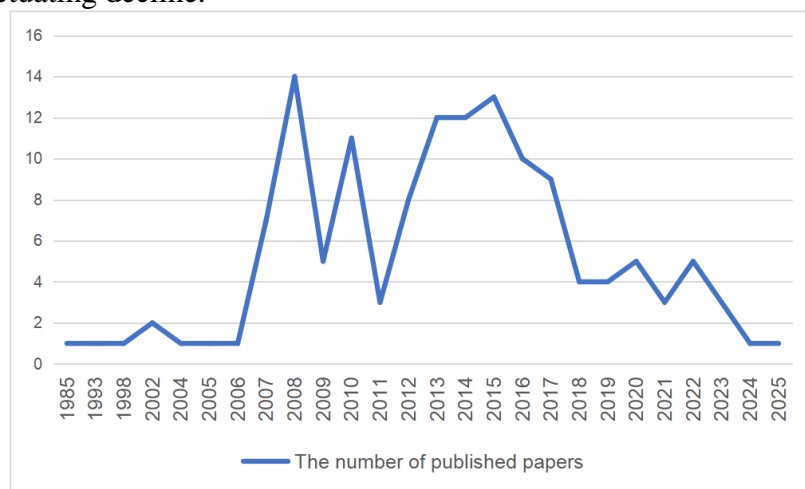


Figure 1: Annual Publication Trend of Research on "The History of Female Translation"

## 2.2 Research Perspectives

To conduct a further analysis of the current status of the history of female translation from research perspectives, this study has created a word cloud diagram based on the frequency of keywords that appear in the aforementioned 138 papers.

The word cloud diagram is generated based on the frequency of keywords in papers related to the history of female translation. In this diagram, the size of the text is directly proportional to the frequency of the keyword, signifying the degree of attention it commands within the research field. Prominently featured keywords, such as "literature, feminism, gender consciousness, drama, translator subjectivity, translation strategies, politics," along with names of female translators like Shen Xingren, Xue Shaohui, Bing Xin, Chen Hongbi, and Zhang Ling, are displayed in larger fonts, indicating their heightened significance in academic discourses. Notably, the history of literary translation emerges as the most extensively studied area, with a particular focus on genres such as drama, poetry, and detective fiction. Research often pivots around theoretical frameworks including feminism, gender consciousness, and comparative studies between male and female translators, while exploring topics like translator subjectivity, translation strategies, and the influence of political contexts. The primary subjects of these studies are the aforementioned influential female translators. Building upon the insights derived from this word cloud diagram, this study undertakes a more in-depth bibliometric analysis of research orientations, aiming to provide a comprehensive and detailed depiction of the current state of research on the history of female translation.

The research orientations can be primarily categorized into three aspects: studies on groups of translators, individual translator research, and comparative analysis of translations by male and female translators.

Firstly, 53 papers focus on groups of translators. Geographically, academic inquiries predominantly center on translator collectives on the Chinese mainland, with comparatively scant attention paid to those in Hong Kong China, Macau China, and Taiwan China. For instance, Liu Zequan (2017) leverages the entries of Chinese translators documented in Dictionary of Chinese Translators to conduct a “translation archaeological investigation” into female translator groups, summarizing their family backgrounds, birthplaces, translation domains, accomplishments, and analyzing the group characteristics of female translators and their correlations with social and historical contexts. Conversely, only two papers address translator groups in Hong Kong China, Macau China, and Taiwan China: “A Panaramic View of Taiwan China Female Translators in a Century” (Qu Jingfeng, 2018) and “Historicizing Women Translators’ Century-old Contributions to Literary Translation in the Chinese Mainland, Taiwan China and Hong Kong China”. The former meticulously collates historical materials, encompassing the biographies, translations, prefaces, postscripts, works, interviews, commentaries, and studies of female translators in Taiwan China spanning a century. It examines translator attributes and translation activities, delineating the identities of female translators across different periods, along with details such as their birth and death dates, backgrounds, roles in translation endeavors, languages translated, and achievements, while summarizing the nature and origins of their translation activities. The latter, after systematically reviewing the current research landscape of female literary translation, underscores the necessity of researching female translator groups in Hong Kong China and Taiwan China and proposes the significance and methodologies for constructing a centennial history of female translation research.

When analyzed within specific historical periods, research on groups of female translators encompasses various aspects, such as the literary history of female translation, reflections on current research status of female translation history, the manifestation of feminist consciousness within these groups, as well as overviews of the background of female empowerment, translation achievements, styles, features, and underlying causes. First, in terms of literary history research, Liu Lixia (2021)[6] systematically examines the characteristics of modern female translation literature. She analyzes aspects such as translation content, format, form, and target language, while also highlighting limitations like a relatively small corpus, varying language proficiency, prevalence of retranslations, and incomplete translation formats. Second, regarding the research status and reflections on the history of female translation, Wu Shufang (2013)[7] contemplates the research on the history of Chinese female translation from three perspectives: an overview of the group of Chinese female translators, the current research status of the history of Chinese female translation, and Western feminist research on translation history, and offers well -considered suggestions for improvement. Third, research on the gender consciousness within female translator groups is exemplified by Luo Lie’s (2013)[8] paper “Translation, Gender, and the Construction of Modern Identity: Search of Sexual Politics by Woman Translators in the Early 20th-Century China.” The study reveals how female translators expressed their gender-related political stances through prefaces, postscripts, translator notes, or the selection of translation topics, and it also categorizes their views on six key themes, namely the justification of romantic themes, women’s education, modern marriage and love, chastity, childbearing, and the pursuit of female independence. Fourth, papers exploring the background of female empowerment, translation achievements, styles, characteristics, and causes are illustrated by Peng Ying’s (2025)[9] research on Chinese native female translators in children’s literature translation during the Republic of China. This study delves into the unique features of their translations and elucidates the intricate relationship between

translation practices and gendered experiences. Jiang Lin and Pan Yuqing (2013)[3] conduct a comprehensive historical examination of Chinese female translators across four distinct epochs, analyzing the works, influence, and significance of major representative figures.

In addition, a total of 44 academic studies are devoted to the investigation of individual translators. The main subjects of these inquiries are renowned female translators, such as Shen Xingren, Xue Shaohui, Chen Hongbi, Xue Qiyang, Zhao Luorui, Huang Jingying, Wu Ruonan, Bing Xin, Yang Jiang, Gladys Yang, Zhu Hong, Eileen Chang, Zhang Ling, Yang Bi, and Zhang Baihua. Among these papers, two are interview transcripts, and eight papers conduct in-depth explorations of the translator behaviors, strategies, ideological constructs, and cultural identities of individual translators. Representative examples include “Translator Behavior Study of Female Translator Zhang Jinfen” (Liu Li, 2023)[4]. And nineteen papers offer comprehensive overviews, and fifteen papers focus on the translated works of individual practitioners.

Finally, there are 41 comparative studies on the translated works of male and female translators, which mainly cover the research on translated works from the perspectives of androgyny, habitus, cognition, gender differences, and feminist theory. Specifically, two studies conduct a comparative analysis of translated works by male and female translators from the perspective of androgyny. Focusing on children’s literature translation, these studies examine gender traits through the lens of androgyny, demonstrating that translators should effectively convey both the femininity and masculinity embodied in the original works to foster the development of children’s androgynous traits. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu’s core sociological concept of habitus, one paper studies the intricate relationship between translators’ habitus and their translation practices and concludes that male and female translators, shaped by family, education, occupation, and gender, develop distinct habitus, which in turn results in translated works with distinct styles. From a cognitive view of translation, one paper uses the translations of female and male translators as examples to compare their renderings of female and male descriptions in the original text, thereby revealing how gender-related cognitive differences among translators influence the translation process. Eighteen papers, focusing on the perspective of gender differences and taking the gender of translators as the starting point, compare the translated works of male and female translators in terms of women’s appearance, psychology, tone differences, vocabulary choices, and female appellations, discussing the influence of translator gender on the translation of original works and text-processing differences, and thus reflecting the subjectivity of the gender of translators. What’s more, nineteen papers from the feminist perspective conduct a comparative analysis of the translated works of female and male translators in terms of intonation, word selection, and semantic levels, showcasing the strategies adopted by female translators to manifest gender differences and gender consciousness.

### 3. Conclusion

Through an in-depth synthesis of current research status of the history of female translation, this study arrives at the following significant observations.

Firstly, current research demonstrates a notable tendency to dissociate the translation practices of female translators from their socio-cultural matrices. Many studies provide cursory examinations of the latent factors influencing translation phenomena, thereby failing to adequately explore the overarching consistencies, historical peculiarities, and broader cultural significance of translation within specific contexts. These studies often become mired in the granular details of individual translators and their works, constricting the scope of inquiry to overly specialized perspectives. Additionally, the extensive reliance on Western feminist theories frequently results in a procrustean approach, where empirical evidence is forced to conform to pre-established theoretical constructs.

Therefore, the research on the history of female translation should also be carried out from other perspectives and by using other methods.

Secondly, research on the history of female translation predominantly focuses on qualitative linguistic analysis while quantitative analysis remains relatively scarce, resulting in research viewpoints often lacking objective data support and showing a prevalent reliance on citing the perspectives of predecessors. Therefore, in future research on the history of female translation, a combined approach of quantitative and qualitative analysis can be adopted. By doing so, it is possible to significantly broaden the research horizon of the history of female translation, and effectively propel the refinement and development of translation history.

Thirdly, there is an urgent need to collect and expand new historical materials related to the history of female translation. Most existing research is based on secondary and tertiary sources, with a lack of exploration and collation of primary sources and new historical materials. According to Wang Jiankai (2007)[5], the study of translation history can obtain new historical materials mainly through three channels: writings about China by foreigners, modern Chinese literary and translation periodicals, as well as works of Chinese literature. Therefore, when conducting research on the history of female translation, we should not be confined to relevant domestic writings and periodicals. Instead, we should attempt to acquire new historical materials from sources such as writings about China by foreigners.

Furthermore, to further unveil the historical trajectories and cultural significance of female translation, in-depth research can focus on the following aspects: First, how do sociopolitical landscapes and prevailing ideological paradigms across distinct historical epochs shape female translators' practices? Second, to what extent do the translated oeuvres of female translators catalyze the reformation of social discourses and the metamorphosis of cultural zeitgeists? Third, what are the characteristics of female-translated works across different eras in text selection, translation style, and ideological content, and how have they evolved? Fourth, how do female-translated works differ from those of male counterparts in narrative perspective, aesthetic preference, and value conveyance? Fifth, what convergences and divergences can be discerned in cultural adaptability, translation methods, and reader reception among representative female-translated works at home and abroad within the same period?

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