Lecture Notes on Language and Literature (2025)
Clausius Scientific Press, Canada

DOI: 10.23977/langl.2025.080407
ISSN 2523-5869 Vol. 8 Num. 4

A Comparative Study on the Characterization in Chinese Translations of Gone with the Wind from the Perspective of Translator's Subjectivity

Ma Xiaohan

College of Foreign Languages, Qingdao University of Science and Technology, Shandong, Qingdao, 266000, China

Keywords: Translator's Subjectivity; *Gone with the Wind*; Character Description

Abstract: This thesis, from the perspective of translator's subjectivity, conducts a comparative analysis of the character portrayal in two Chinese translations of *Gone with the Wind*—one by Fu Donghua in the 1940s and the other by Li Meihua in 2005. The study finds notable differences in the translators' treatment of character appearance, linguistic style, and psychological depiction. These differences vividly reflect the influence of each translator's historical context, cultural stance, and individual aesthetic preferences. The research highlights the vital role of translator subjectivity in literary translation and suggests that it offers diverse possibilities for cross-cultural interpretation and transmission.

1. Introduction

Published in 1936, *Gone with the Wind*, a novel by Margaret Mitchell, is set against the backdrop of the American Civil War. Through the epic coming-of-age story of the heroine Scarlett O'Hara, the novel presents a vivid portrayal of the decline of the Southern plantation civilization and the complexities of its reconstruction. Since its introduction to China in the 1940s, *Gone with the Wind* has been translated multiple times. Among these versions, Fu Donghua's full translation in 1979 and Li Meihua's revised version in 2005 are the most representative, and their marked differences have made them exemplary cases for examining Translator's Subjectivity. Translator's Subjectivity refers to the translator's agency in the translation process, shaped by individual aesthetics, cultural stance, and value judgments. According to Li Dandi & Li Mengna (2023), drawing on the hermeneutic approach, translators are able to exercise their subjectivity by integrating their understanding of the source text into the translation.[1] Yang Yuyou (2017) pointed out, characters in novels are textual constructs shaped through language; their moral emotions, moods, temperaments, and behaviors are all expressed through the language of the narrative.[2] In literary translation, the portrayal of characters particularly highlights the role of the translator's subjectivity: from the depiction of physical appearance and speech style to the visibility of psychological descriptions, each aspect reflects the translator's anticipation of the target audience's horizon of expectations and the ideological imprint of their historical context. This thesis compares the two Chinese translations by Fu Donghua and Li Meihua, focusing on the differences in character portrayal—particularly of

key figures such as Scarlett O'Hara and Melanie Wilkes. It explores how Translator's Subjectivity influences the cross-cultural reconstruction of character images through choices in language. This study not only deepens our understanding of the original novel but also provides a theoretical reference for balancing subjectivity and fidelity in literary translation.

2. Translator's Subjectivity

According to Cha Mingjian & Tian yu (2003), Translator's Subjectivity refers to the translator's subjective initiative, manifested in the translation process under the premise of respecting the source text, in order to fulfill the intended purpose of translation.[3] Its fundamental features include the translator's conscious cultural awareness, humanistic qualities, and creative capacity in both cultural and aesthetic dimensions. Hu Gengshen (2014) put forward, in the process of translation, the original author and the target readers are, in fact, two "end points" of communication who play relatively passive roles, whereas the translator remains the only consistently active agent.[4] Translator's Subjectivity is essentially a form of dominance, agency, and creativity. It refers to the translator's active engagement in mobilizing their existing knowledge systems, linguistic competence, personal qualities, and inner cultivation. By continuously merging the translator's own horizon with that of the source text, the translator strives to achieve a thorough understanding and an expressive, nuanced rendering of the original. In literary translation, the translator is not merely a linguistic converter but also a cultural mediator and a re-creator of the text. In the Chinese translation of *Gone with the Wind*, Fu Donghua and Li Meihua, shaped by different historical contexts, cultural positions, and aesthetic preferences, presented divergent portrayals of the same characters. These variations fully reflect the multifaceted influence of Translator's Subjectivity.

3. The Importance of Character Portrayal in Literary Translation

Temmerman & Emde-Boas (2017) argued that characterization refers both to the way an author attributes traits to various types of characters within a text and to the process by which readers form their understanding of those characters through interpretation.[5] In literary translation, character portrayal is of vital importance, serving as a key medium through which the translator conveys the work's ideology, style, and cultural connotations. Characters are primarily constructed through the depiction of appearance, linguistic style, and psychological description. These dimensions not only embody a character's personality, fate, and social identity but also reflect the author's creative intent.

Physical description is often the reader's first point of contact with a character and serves as an externalization of their personality. It includes not only facial features but also clothing, skin color, and temperament—elements that typically reflect the character's historical and social context. A character's linguistic style—including word choice, sentence structure, and rhetorical features—directly reveals their social background and personal traits. The translator's handling of this dimension has a direct impact on how the character is perceived. Psychological portrayal constitutes the most profound aspect of characterization and requires nuanced linguistic rendering. The translator's interpretation and choices in rendering these elements significantly shape the target reader's perception and emotional engagement with the characters, thereby demonstrating both the translator's subjectivity and literary and artistic value.

4. Comparative Analysis

Fang Kairui (2005) pointed out that character is one of the core elements in narrative fiction, and its portrayal is thus a crucial component in literary translation, serving as an important benchmark

for assessing the quality of translated novels.[6] This section, from the perspective of Translator's Subjectivity, will conduct a comparative analysis of the similarities and differences in character portrayal between Fu Donghua's and Li Meihua's Chinese translations of *Gone with the Wind*, focusing on three dimensions: appearance, language, and psychology.

4.1. Appearance Description

The portrayal of characters' physical appearance in *Gone with the Wind* is notably rich, especially at the moment of their first appearance in the narrative. Such descriptions serve to construct character images, suggest personality traits, and reinforce readers' impressions. For instance, the depiction of Scarlett emphasizes her beauty and distinctive temperament, while Rhett Butler is described as tall, upright, and exuding a cynical, nonchalant demeanor—creating a strong contrast with Scarlett. Similarly, Ashley's gentle elegance and Melanie's delicate composure are conveyed through details such as clothing, facial expressions, and overall bearing. These descriptions not only produce vivid visual effects but also contribute to the construction of character traits and the development of interpersonal dynamics. They form an essential component of characterization in the novel.

Fu Donghua and Li Meihua exhibit distinct stylistic differences in their translations of character descriptions in *Gone with the Wind*. Fu's version adopts a domesticating approach, employing colloquial expressions (e.g. jawbone-er), rhotacized syllables, and localized terms. Through four-character phrases and classical Chinese expressions, he molds characters to align with traditional Chinese aesthetics, infusing the text with vivid local literary flair—though this risks diluting the original cultural nuances.

In contrast, Li's version adheres to a foreignizing strategy, using modern vernacular for literal translations and meticulously preserving original imagery and syntactic structures. Neutral terms accurately convey characters' traits, prioritizing fidelity to the source text at the potential expense of Chinese lyrical elegance. This divergence reflects both the evolution of translation strategies from the Republican era to modernity (localization to globalization) and the translators' contextual balancing of "readability" versus "authenticity".

Example:

ST: The green eyes in the carefully sweet face were turbulent, willful, lusty with life, distinctly at variance with her decorous demeanor.[7]

TT:

Fu's Version: Her green eyes, though set in a face of carefully cultivated composure, were turbulent, shrewdly calculating, and brimming with vitality—strikingly at odds with her meticulously maintained decorum.[8]

Li's Version:On that exquisitely sweet face, her green eyes appeared turbulent, willful and cunning, yet brimming with vitality—a striking contrast to her seemingly well-bred demeanor.[9]

Analysis: In this passage of physical description, Fu's version adopts literary expressions such as "shrewdly calculating", contrasting "a face of carefully cultivated composure" with the restless inner energy to construct an image of a traditionally elegant and refined woman. This translation reflects a classical aesthetic and evokes a graceful, reserved femininity. In contrast, Li's version uses expressions like "willful and cunning" and "brimming with vitality", grounded in contemporary Chinese, to portray Scarlett as a more rebellious, assertive, and even aggressive figure. By highlighting the tension between a "exquisitely sweet face" and her willful eyes, Li emphasizes that Scarlett does not conform to the stereotype of a submissive Southern belle, but instead embodies a bold and defiant spirit.

4.2. Linguistic Style

The characters in *Gone with the Wind* exhibit markedly distinct linguistic styles, which vividly reflect their social status, personality traits, and interpersonal relationships. Scarlett's language is direct, sharp, and often emotionally charged, revealing her passionate, headstrong, and willful nature. In contrast, Ashley's speech is refined and hesitant, frequently softened by euphemisms and modifiers, embodying his gentle, introspective, and indecisive character. These differences in linguistic style not only enhance the realism of each character but also contribute to the development of relationships and narrative tension, serving as a key element of the novel's storytelling appeal.

The translations of character dialogues in *Gone with the Wind* by Fu Donghua and Li Meihua exhibit distinct generational characteristics. Fu Donghua's approach incorporates addition, Republican-era colloquialisms, and parallel structures, skillfully adapting Scarlett's rebellious personality into traditional Chinese narrative frameworks. These methods preserve the character's stubborn nature while conforming to contemporary moral expectations for female roles. In rendering Mammy's dialect, Fu's translation creatively employs repetitive structures like "As long as I live here, you must not behave like this for a single day", endowing the character with linguistic features characteristic of Chinese domestic servants.

Li Meihua's 2005 translation strictly adheres to the original text's structure and maintains Western individualism through conditional clauses . It accurately conveys characters' emotions using modern Chinese expressions. In dialect treatment, Li's version remains more faithful to the original rhythm like "As long as I have a breath left" and enhances interpersonal dynamics with contemporary terms of endearment like "honey".

Example:

ST: "I wish to Heaven I was married, " she said resentfully as she attacked the yams with loathing. "I'm tired of everlastingly being unnatural and never doing anything I want to do."[7]

TT:

Fu's Version:[8] "I really wish I was already married," she said discontentedly while disgustedly dealing with sweet potatoes. "I always have to be pretentious and never get to do what I want to do. I'm just so sick of it."[8]

Li's Version: So she said angrily, "I really wish I had gotten married earlier! Who would have thought that unmarried people would be subject to so many restrictions! Everything feels so unnatural, and I can't do anything I want to do. I'm really getting impatient."[9]

Analysis: In translating Scarlett's complaint, Fu and Li adopt markedly different approaches. Fu renders "I wish to Heaven I was married" as "I really wish I had married earlier! Who would have thought that unmarried people have to be subject to so many constraints! Everything feels so unnatural, and I can't do anything I want to do. I'm really getting impatient", introducing explanatory content not present in the source text. This interpretive addition conforms to the narrative conventions of Chinese fiction, making the subtext more explicit and moralizing Scarlett's frustration. Expressions like "never get to do what I want to do" convey a tone of grievance and helplessness, shaping a Scarlett who appears more constrained and emotionally vulnerable—closer to traditional expectations of female propriety at the time. Li, by contrast, adheres more strictly to the source text's structure and tone. Her version captures the raw frustration and assertive voice of the original, emphasizing Scarlett's desire for autonomy and her aversion to societal expectations. This contrast illustrates how Translator's Subjectivity operates not only in lexical choices but also in the translator's ideological framing of female identity. Fu's translation aligns with a domesticated, morally coded image of womanhood, while Li's rendering underscores a more modern, psychologically realistic portrayal of female resistance. The divergence in tone and diction thus

reveals broader shifts in cultural attitudes and translation norms across generations.

4.3. Psychological Portrayal

Gone with the Wind features highly nuanced portrayals of characters' inner thoughts, especially through Scarlett's internal monologues and emotional fluctuations, which reveal the complexity and multifaceted nature of her personality. As the central figure of the novel, Scarlett undergoes continuous emotional and ideological shifts throughout the plot. These inner monologues and psychological depictions not only enhance the realism of the character but also lend greater emotional depth and narrative credibility to the story. They are an important embodiment of the novel's literary value.

The translations of characters' psychological depictions in *Gone with the Wind* by Fu Donghua and Li Meihua demonstrate distinct stylistic approaches. Fu's version (1940s) favors literary emotional reconstruction—rendering "cold sense of bewilderment and disaster" as "a cold awareness of confusion and impending doom" abstracts the original physical metaphor, while translating "fever" as "a seething indignation" ingeniously blends love and resentment. In portraying Scarlett's reaction to Ashley's voice, Fu employs onomatopoeic phrases like "her heart went pit-a-pat" and parenthetical dashes to create lyrical interior monologues.

Li's 2005 translation emphasizes psychological precision and completeness. She uses three four-character phrases like "a chilling sense of bewilderment and impending catastrophe"—to fully capture the triple psychological dimensions of bewilderment and disaster, while directly rendering "fever" as "the burning love" preserves the original imagery. For auditory descriptions, Li's version employs three meticulously matched adjective groups like "leisurely, resonant and mellow, melodious" maintaining both the progression of acoustic qualities and emotional intensity through fluent syntax.

This divergence reflects Fu's Republican-era translational aesthetics of literary recreation for enhanced emotional impact, contrasted with Li's globalization-era commitment to textual authenticity. The contrast particularly manifests in their treatment of physiological metaphors (Fu's abstraction vs. Li's literalism) and auditory imagery (Fu's lyrical embellishment vs. Li's technical precision), showcasing evolving norms in psychological representation across Chinese literary translation history.

Example:

ST: Some of the cold sense of bewilderment and disaster that had weighted her down since the Tarleton boys told her their gossip was pushed into the background of her mind, and in its place crept the fever that had possessed her for two years.[7]

TT:

Fu's Version: Ever since the twins broke this news to her, she had been oppressed by a cold awareness of confusion and impending doom. Now this consciousness was pushed to the back recesses of her heart, replaced by a seething indignation that had actually been smoldering within her for two full years.[8]

Li's Version: After the Tarleton boys inadvertently revealed their gossip to her, she had been weighed down by a chilling sense of bewilderment and impending catastrophe. But now, this feeling was cast aside, replaced by the burning love that had been kindled in her heart for two long years.[9]

Analysis: This example describes the moment when the Tarleton brothers reveal at a party that Ashley is about to become engaged to his cousin Melanie, which deeply devastates Scarlett. Li's version uses three four-character structures which more fully convey Scarlett's psychological state. Regarding the key emotional word "fever", Fu translates it as "a seething indignation", reflecting

Scarlett's intense passion for Ashley mixed with resentment from unrequited love. In contrast, Li translates it as "the burning love" which tends to emphasize Scarlett's feelings of love toward Ashley.

5. Interpretation of Differences

Yang Meng'en (2024) pointed out that in the act of translation, the translator assumes a dual role: both as a reader and as a re-creator of the text.[10] As a reader, the translator inevitably draws on their own imagination and emotions when interpreting the source text, offering a new interpretation shaped by personal understanding, and integrating individual values and cultural perspectives into the process of rewriting. Among all participants in translation, the translator is the most active agent. However, the exercise of Translator's Subjectivity is not entirely free; it is inevitably influenced and constrained by various factors—including the era in which the translator lives, the corresponding social and historical context, personal life experience, cultural literacy, and even religious beliefs.

The differences between the translations of Fu Donghua and Li Meihua reflect the distinct translation orientations shaped by their respective historical contexts. Fu's version, completed in the 1940s, reflects a time when Chinese society had limited exposure to Western culture. As a result, his translation adopts more localized expressions—for instance, rendering hoop skirts as traditional Chinese clothing—to better align with the cognitive habits of readers at the time. In contrast, Li's version emerged in the context of 21st-century globalization and emphasizes the retention of the source culture's distinctiveness, reflecting the increasing importance of cross-cultural understanding in modern translation. Their differing choices also embody personal differences: Fu, as a translator from the Republican era, exhibits a literary style characteristic of that time, while Li, as a contemporary translator, follows modern norms of Chinese expression. These contrasts demonstrate how translation practices evolve naturally alongside social development and reflect the nature of cultural exchange in different historical stages.

From a gender perspective, the two translators also exhibit notable differences in their approaches. As a male translator, Fu tends to portray female characters through the lens of dominant gender discourses of his era, using terms that highlight traditional feminine traits and employing subtle or euphemistic language to express female emotions. Li, as a female translator, presents gender in a more direct and diverse way, often retaining expressions that emphasize women's vitality and individuality. These differences should not be viewed in terms of superiority or inferiority; rather, they represent natural variations in the interpretation of literary images from distinct gendered viewpoints. It is also worth noting that both translators adhered to the prevailing translation norms of their respective times. The differences between their versions enrich the Chinese reader's understanding of the original characters and offer valuable insight into how gender perspectives, together with historical context, shape translation choices—making this a meaningful case study in translation research.

6. Conclusion

This thesis, from the perspective of Translator's Subjectivity, has conducted a comparative analysis of the character construction in two Chinese translations of *Gone with the Wind*—Fu Donghua's version (1940s) and Li Meihua's version (2005). The study finds that the two translators differ significantly in their handling of character appearance, linguistic style, and psychological portrayal. These differences vividly reflect the influence of their respective historical contexts, cultural positions, aesthetic orientations, and gender perspectives. Fu Donghua's translation features a mixed style of classical and vernacular Chinese, employing a large number of idioms and colloquialisms, and even domesticating certain cultural images, thereby making the characters more

relatable to Chinese readers of that time. This strategy enhanced the text's readability. In contrast, Li Meihua's version adopts contemporary vernacular Chinese, emphasizing the accuracy of literal translation and preserving the source text's syntactic structures and cultural features, thus presenting a faithful representation of the original novel. Specifically, in the depiction of physical appearance, Fu's translation constructs a "Sinicized" character imagery by blending Western traits into a traditional Chinese aesthetic framework, whereas Li's version aims to restore the original appearance of Western characters. In terms of language style, Fu tends to morally reframe and traditionalize the characters' speech, while Li more directly conveys the characters' rebellious personalities. Regarding psychological portrayal, Fu enhances emotional resonance through literary expressions, while Li focuses on the precise rendering of inner states. The translators' respective choices are all justifiable and together enrich the Chinese reader's understanding of *Gone with the Wind*. This study demonstrates that Translator's Subjectivity plays a vital role in literary translation, influencing the entire process of linguistic selection, cultural adaptation, and character reconstruction. As Guo Huixian (2024) observed, translators should actively exert their subjective initiative during the translation process, while also being constrained by various factors such as the original style and the expectations and reception of target readers.[11] Therefore, Translator's Subjectivity should not be understood in a rigid or absolutist manner. This thesis offers a theoretical reference for balancing subjectivity and fidelity in literary translation, and provides a concrete case study for the translation of *Gone with the Wind* in a cross-cultural context.

References

[1] Li Dandi, Li Mengna. Strategies for Translating Four-Character Idioms in The Conscience of Heaven and Earth: A Biography of Ma Yinchu under Hermeneutic Translation Theory [J]. Translation Research and Teaching, 2023 (02): 52-58.

[2] Yang Youyu. Research on Multi-Genre Literary Translation [M]. Beijing: China Water & Power Press, 2017.

[3] Zha Mingjian, Tian Yu. On the Subjectivity of Translators: From the Marginalization of Translators' Cultural Status [J]. Chinese Translators Journal, 2003 (01): 19-24.

[4] Hu Gengshen. From "Translator-Centeredness" to "Translator's Responsibility" [J]. Chinese Translators Journal, 2014 (01): 29-34.

[5] Temmerman, K. & E. Emde-Boas. Characterization in Ancient Greek Literature [M]. London: Brill, 2017.

[6] Fang Kairui. Ideology and the Distortion of Character Images in Novel Translation [J]. Foreign Languages and Their Teaching, 2005 (03): 52-56.

[7] Mitchell, M. Gone with the wind [M]. New York: Warner Books, 1993.

[8] Margaret Mitchell, trans. Fu Donghua. Gone with the Wind [M]. Hangzhou: Zhejiang Literature and Art Publishing House, 2018.

[9] Margaret Mitchell, trans. Li Meihua. Gone with the Wind [M]. Nanjing: Yilin Press, 2010.

[10] Yang Meng'en. A Study on Translator's Subjectivity in Literary Translation [J]. Today's Creative Writing, 2024 (23): 107-109.

[11] Guo Huixian. A Study of Xu Yuanchong's English Translation of Song Lyrics from the Perspective of Translator's Subjectivity [J]. Changjiang Novel Appreciation, 2024 (35): 99-102.