

Feminist Translation Studies at Home and Abroad: Review and Prospects

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Abstract:

This paper will first introduce feminism and translation studies; Then it reviews the research status of feminist translation theory at home and abroad by means of literature analysis and induction, and points out the reasons for its slow development in China in recent years through comparative analysis; Then it analyzes and summarizes the criticisms and doubts faced by feminist translation theory, and looks forward to the development of feminist translation studies from the perspectives of translators' text selection and the creation of feminist translation theory with Chinese characteristics in the new era. I hope this paper will contribute to the field of translation studies and promote the in-depth study of feminist translation studies.

Keywords:

Feminist Translation Theory, Feminism, Gender, Translation

1. Introduction

After the 1980s, with the emergence of psychoanalysis, new criticism, reception aesthetics, post structuralism, deconstruction, post-modernism and other western theories, feminist literary criticism and gender theory also emerged. Feminism is a part of post structuralism and post-modern theory. Post structuralism is an ideological movement that deconstructs all centers and strives for power for the marginalized. The “cultural turn” of translation studies has led people to shift from the space limited to the text to the complex translation phenomena outside the text, and began to conduct descriptive research, “committed to exploring the power relations existing in the text practice, which reflect the power structure existing in the larger cultural context” [36]. This paper discusses the complexity of translation in the context of post structuralism from the perspective of gender in order to critically and dialectically examine traditional translation theories.

Feminist translation theory, based on the theory of gender (difference), originated from liberal feminism in the 18th century. Among them, “feminism” originated from the word “feminism” put forward in the first French Women’s Political Participation Conference in 1880. Later, it spread to China through Britain, America and Japan, and was initially translated as “女权主义”. Since the 1980s, China’s social culture has undergone changes, and scholars have held various opinions on the translation of

“feminism”: Yang Liu tends to translate it into “女性主义”, and she believes that “女性主义” pays more attention to gender differences and cultural awareness than “女权主义”[34]; Yang Yang also believed that “女性主义” was more adaptable to and close to women’s natural nature, and “女权主义” did not seem to reflect the rich connotation of “feminism” [35]; Jiang Yongxia also called “女性主义” a more desirable translation method in the new era, which can better reflect the growing self-awareness of Chinese women and their concern for their own internal world[14]; Zhu Xiaomin suggested using “女性主义/女权主义” [37]. She examined the translation of “feminism” from the perspective of referential meaning and pragmatic meaning, and believed that “女性主义” and “女权主义” could not accurately summarize all the historical meanings and new development trends of “feminism”. The translation and evolution of “feminism” in China shows that translation is a dynamic process in which text, translator, reader and social culture work together[14]. In conclusion, in view of the connotation of the development of feminism culture in the new era and the growing self-awareness of Chinese women, so I prefers the term “女性主义”.

The translation of women’s literature began with religion, so in the Renaissance, the vast majority of English women’s translation works were about religion. Most of the works reflect women’s joy and desire to participate in social life after being released from the ban. Therefore, these works often have a certain political tendency: they strive to get rid of cultural discrimination and gender oppression by translating religious works, thus starting a movement for women's liberation. In this movement, the feminist movement and women’s translation activities were organically combined. With literary translation as a weapon, the focus of the struggle was shifted to gender issues, so as to achieve women’s self-identity, social identity, individuality and personality liberation.

The gender perspective of translation studies has a long history. Since the Middle Ages, European women have taken translation as a way to enter the literary world. Until the 20th century, translation was still a training for women to learn writing; Women regard translation as an important component of social activities; At the same time, translation is also a tool for women to promote the development of political movements and update the traditional literary trend. Feminism has much to do with translation studies. First, French neo feminist critics attributed women’s weak position in society to language, so they tried feminist writing and translation, attempted to deconstruct the traditional male dominated discourse, and rebuilt gender equality in language; Secondly, the cultural turn in translation studies has laid the foundation for the combination of translation and feminism, because in the past decades, gender has been one of the most powerful forms of cultural identity in language and social expression [25]. Finally, the internal relationship between translation and gender means that it is no coincidence that feminism has inspired translation studies, because they all involve marginal attributes, profound doubts about traditional hierarchies and distrust of traditional faithfulness. The original thrust of feminism is to resist the patriarchal standard, which is somewhat similar to deconstruction and anti-tradition. After the 1980s, influenced by post colonialism theory, its core content expanded to oppose all cultural hegemony. Influenced by modern theories such as post colonialism, deconstruction and cultural studies, feminists strive to deconstruct or “rewrite”, or at least have some influence on the traditional value comment system. They brought this hope into the study of translation theory, which ultimately led to the feminist translation view, which was interpreted and expressed from the feminist standpoint. Its theoretical function is mainly to serve women, that is, to “make women appear in

language as much as possible in translation, so that the world can see and hear women” [25]. After the 1980s, feminist literary criticism and gender theory gradually affected the study of translation theory, and gender awareness began to be increasingly incorporated into the theoretical practice of translation. Since the 1990s, feminist translation ideas have spread from Canada to North America and the world. The following will mainly introduce the review and prospect of feminist translation theory in China and the West.

2. Review of Feminist Translation Theory in the West

The French female writer, Simone de Beauvoir (1949) made the main point in *The Second Sex*, known as the “Bible of the Western Women’s Liberation Movement”: there is only one human nature in the world, that is male, and female is not “born”, but is constructed by the acquired “other” as male; In 1566, the English translator Thomas Drant boldly declared in the foreword to the translation of Horace’s work: “First of all, what I am doing now is like God commanding the Israelites to treat beautiful female captives: shave his hair (of Horace’s work) and cut off his nails, that is, I will delete all his vanity and luxury... I will Englishify him...; The French translator Gilles Menage (1613-1692) called Perrot D’Ablancourt’s liberals translated as “les belles infidelles”, or “unfaithful beauty”. “The saying that ‘translation is like a woman, faithful is not beautiful, beautiful is not faithful’, not only contains gender discrimination against women, but also includes discrimination against translations.” [33] This all shows the similarities between women and translators, that is, both are discriminated against and devalued, and this view of both demeaning translation and demeaning women has become a historical opportunity to promote the combination of feminism and translation research.

In the 1970s, the focus began to shift from the small space of the text to the complex translation phenomenon outside the text, trying to understand the complexity of translation from a gender perspective. After the 1980s, feminist literary criticism and gender theory gradually influenced the study of translation theory, and gender awareness began to be increasingly incorporated into the theoretical practice of translation. In 1988, Lori Chamberlain published *Gender and the Metaphors of Translation in Women in Culture and Society* to explore gender metaphors in translation, and she summarized the similarities between feminist translation theory and colonial translation theory during the same period, pointing out that gender roles in translation need to be reconstructed. In 1990, Barbara Godard’s book *Theorizing Feminist Discourse/Translation* criticized traditional translation as a process of mechanistic transformation and that traditional translation was entirely faithful to the original text, arguing that translation was a creative process and that translators should be of equal importance and respect as authors. In order to prove that “feminist translation is a feasible means of highlighting the translator’s presence and subjectivity”, Godard even proposed that translators can treat the original text in a variety of ways, such as using some word games in the translation to speak for themselves and improve their status. Godard took translation to a higher level, powerfully refuting the idea that “translation was secondary or that translation was merely parody”, echoing the wave of “cultural turns” of the time.

Canada is relatively mature in the study of gender and translation. Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood [18], a Canadian feminist translation theorist, published the first book in this field, *The Body Billgal: Translating as A Feminine Rewriting*. Harwood believes that translators can use a variety of methods to make women seen and heard

by the world in literary works and translation. For example, in order to avoid the use of masculine nouns, she created new words, such as *cyrin*, to describe women and their bodies. In 1996, Sherry Simon published her feminist translation monograph *Gender in Translation: Cultural Identity and the Politics of Transmission*, which is a comprehensive study of feminist translation theory and practice, emphasizing that “translators contribute to cultural debate and create new ways of cultural communication”. Simon seriously criticized the view that women and translators were placed at the bottom of culture and society, and commented on “faithfulness” in translation. She believed that it was unrealistic to be absolutely faithful to the original text in the current situation. She also believed that translation was a process of cultural intervention and a rewriting act. In 1997, Luise von Flotow published her academic monograph *Translation and Gender: Translating in the ‘Era of Feminism’*. This book first gives a comprehensive introduction to the historical background, and then discusses the relationship between gender and translation in detail, so as to clearly point out that feminist views and feminist works have an important impact on translation practice and activities. Flotow also pointed out that in the feminist era, translators usually have a high degree of political sensitivity, so translators will take various ways to modify the vague expression of political attitudes in the original text in the process of translation. She believed that translators should play their subjectivity and add their own understanding in translation. Canadian critic Eva C. Karpinski pointed out that the publication of the above two books has established Canada’s leading role in feminist translation studies, and has also made great progress in feminist translation. Since the 1990s, feminist translation ideas have spread from Canada to North America and the world.

Since then, despite the endless papers on feminist translation in recent years, the pace of its development has slowed down. Some studies on gender issues seem to fall into some fixed patterns and stereotypes, such as gender dualism, inappropriate voice for women, and the establishment of an idealized female language centralism and female superiority. Influenced by the post structural feminism school, some scholars represented by the Quebec school proposed to give up “gender issues”, return to the status of women as “the knower and the know”, and regain the name and nature of “women and translation/women in translation”. Luise von Flotow [7] suggested giving up the word “gender” and reinterpreting the word “female”. In 2017, *Translating Women: Different Voices and New Horizons* was published. In this book, Flotow and Farahzad reiterated the dominant position of “women as knowers and knowers” in translation studies. They proposed that in the theoretical framework of transnationalism, women’s translation experience in different regions and cultural backgrounds and the construction of translation discourse should be included[5]. In a word, under the influence of post structuralism, western feminist translation has gradually developed from feminist translation studies to gender and translation studies. The former is unavoidably suspected of being based on the assumption of binary opposition between the sexes, and is easy to criticize patriarchy through more radical feminism; The latter regards gender identity as a flowing process and emphasizes the role of discourse in shaping such identity.

According to the research of Flotow [5], the research on gender and translation in the past 40 years in the West has mainly followed two directions: one is along the traditional route, that is, there is a dualistic opposite gender model in whatever social culture. Such research often focuses on “misreading of female writers’ works by translation, lack of subjectivity of female translators Translation theory and

patriarchal factors in translation discourse” [6]. The second is to interpret the gender identity of women from the perspective of post structuralism, believing that gender identity is constructed by discourse and discourse, so “it is uncertain that women's gender identity is constantly rebuilt under the influence of history and social culture” [32]. Therefore, translation is a way to reconstruct gender identity, not a tool to resist another gender. Translation studies under this kind of thinking focus not only on the gender identity of women, but also on the broader gender identity, such as “works that question the traditional gender concept (including but not limited to homosexual works), and the translator’s unconscious gender representation or intentional gender concealment” [19]. Although the post structuralist gender theory based on the first route is gradually weakening in the dark, the focus of translation studies on gender identity issues has also shown an “interesting turn” [6], however, Flow also pointed out that “at present, most western studies on gender and translation are in the first way of thinking, and the research on the second way of thinking is still in the initial stage of exploration” [6].

3. Review of Feminist Translation Theory in China

Influenced by western feminist translation thoughts, Chinese scholars began to pay attention to gender as a very important factor in translation in 1999. Therefore, the author searched the relevant Chinese literature in CNKI with the theme of “feminist translation”, and found that there were 1240 search results from 1999 to 2022 (the overall trend analysis as shown in Figure 1 was obtained by quantitative visual analysis), including 449 master’s and doctoral theses, 637 academic journal theses, and 97 core journal theses. It can be seen from Figure 1 that the number of documents issued has increased significantly since 2003 and reached its peak in 2013; The number of documents issued from 2013 to 2022 is still relatively considerable, but the overall trend is downward. What is the reason for the slowdown of domestic research on this theory in recent years? What are the limitations of domestic acceptance of this theory? What impact does this theory have on the field of translation in China? Next, I will focus on the research and acceptance of feminist translation theory in China to explore the above issues.

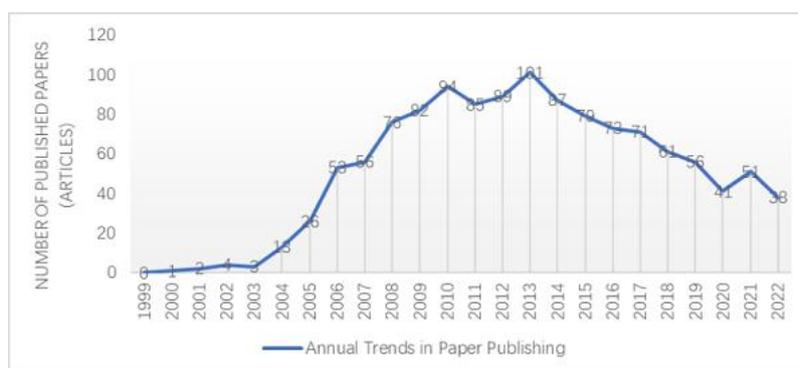


Figure 1. Overall Trend Analysis.

In 2000, Professor Liao’s *Exploration of Contemporary Western Translation Theory* laid the foundation for the development of feminist translation in China. In 2002, Chinese translation researchers began to pay real attention to translation studies from the feminist perspective. In the same year, another article by Liao, *Rewriting Myth: Feminism and Translation Studies*, was published in the *Journal of Sichuan University of Foreign Languages*. This article reviews the paradigms adopted by feminist translation and emphasizes the importance of feminist translation theory in

the field of translation in China. Ge [8] further pointed out that the essence of feminist translation is to subvert the unequal traditional translation discourse, subvert patriarchy and advocate the philosophy of difference. This article brings some enlightenment to the translation studies in China at that time.

In translation practice, Professor Meng [20] pointed out that women translators in China are deeply influenced by traditional translation views, and it is difficult for women translators in China to identify with the radical translation concepts and strategies of western feminism, which also hinders the organic integration of feminism and translation studies to a certain extent. However, representative translators with feminist consciousness, such as Kong Huiyi and Zhu Hong, have also emerged in China. Kong, a Hong Kong translator, once said that when she translated Wang Anyi's *Love in a Small City*, she was especially able to understand the author's feelings and the task thought in the work, so she often translated with tears [22]. Professor Zhu Hong once said in an interview: "My feminist consciousness has affected my choice of the translated text - I have two criteria for choosing the translated text: the author is a woman, and the protagonist is a woman. The reason for doing so is that female authors and female translators feel the same, and their feelings are deeper. Therefore, I think I can get into their hearts and understand the feelings they want to express, Agree with the author"[23].

In 2004, Zhang Jinghua, Jiang Xiaohua, Xu Lai, Liu Junping, Chen Lin, Geng Qiang and other scholars continued to study feminist translation theory. They proposed the influence of feminism on translation theory and pointed out that feminism has brought a new perspective to translation studies, namely gender. Since 2005, feminist translation theory has been summarized and analyzed in case studies. The first article is *Feminism and Translation Studies -- Taking Jane Eyre's Chinese Translation as an Example* written by Geng Qiang in 2005. Later, many scholars have conducted case studies under the guidance of feminist translation theory.

Under the influence of post structuralism, some domestic feminist translation theories have begun to shift from feminist translation studies to "gender-oriented translation studies". As Meng Lingzi [20] said, gender identity is regarded as a flowing process from the perspective of post structuralism. Li Hongyu [16] studied the history of translation from the gender perspective. She believes that studying the history of translation from the gender perspective can provide new broad space for the continuous development of feminist translation. Sun Ziyao [27] analyzed the different strategies for the post structuralist shift of the feminist gender paradigm in Chinese and Western translation studies in his article *Translation Studies from the Perspective of Gender Diversity*. Translation studies from the perspective of gender diversity have formed a subversive political force, which opposes Western centralism, essentialism and neo colonialism. Of course, these thoughts and views still remain at the theoretical level, it has not been widely used in translation studies.

Since feminist translation theory was introduced to China, there has been no lack of scholars to explore and summarize its reception in China. The earliest one was Shao Juan's *Feminist Translation Theory in China* published in 2005. She concluded that the introduction of feminist translation theory in China at that time was obviously lagging behind, and few studies focused on translation practice or other substantive in-depth studies[24]; In 2007, Yang Liu combed the influence of western feminist translation views on feminist translation theoretical research and practical research in China's translation field in her article *Feminist Translation Studies in the Chinese*

Context, and analyzed the reasons why feminist translation studies in China lag behind relatively from the perspective of “fusion of horizons”: there are differences between Chinese society’s expectations of women and feminist translation ideas[34]; In 2010, Tan Sirong, in his article *Review and Commentary on the Study of Feminist Translation Theory in China*, divided the domestic research on feminist translation theory during the ten years from 1999 to 2009 into three stages: theoretical introduction, practical research and interdisciplinary research, and emphasized that although there are some weaknesses in this theory, it is undeniable that the perspective of feminism points out the direction for future translation research[28]; In 2013, Hu Zuoyou, Hu Xiaojuan, and Li Erwen affirmed the subversion and deconstruction of feminist translation theory to traditional translation theory in the *Acceptance of Feminist Translation Theory in China*, and detailed the limitations of this theory[11]; In 2021, Wang pointed out in the *Review of Feminist Translation Studies in China in the New Era* that although the quality and speed of the current domestic research development have been significantly improved, there are still many problems such as more translation introductions, insufficient localization, partial extreme views, and lack of system in feminist translation studies[30].

To sum up, I believe that the reception of feminist translation theories in China is mainly related to China’s social, historical, cultural and translation concepts. a. The traditional values of Chinese gentleness and modesty make it difficult for Chinese feminist translators to accept the more radical translation strategies of the West, and Chinese translators tend to adopt more moderate strategies; b. For Chinese readers, the more radical feminist translation text is difficult to be widely accepted; c. Traditional translation theories are relatively systematic and comprehensive, so “feminist translation theories dare not easily deviate from the highest standard of traditional ‘faithfulness’” [11]; d. Although the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995 promoted the awakening of domestic women’s consciousness to a certain extent, it is undeniable that China does lack a complete historical sense of women’s liberation movement, so domestic women did not show too strong political purpose in the struggle for women’s rights and interests, but took a relatively moderate attitude and approach; e. The historical legacy of “three cardinal principles and five constancy”, “three obedience and four virtues”, “men are superior to women”, “women without talent is virtue” and other thoughts deeply affected the handling and judgment of gender status and rights for generations, and the solidified images (such as invisible, unstable, passive, closed, chaste, etc.) imposed on women by feudal thought [31] also led to distorted descriptions of women’s images, To some extent, it also hinders China’s acceptance of feminist translation theory.

The study of feminism and translation in China started late, and it was not until 2001 that the translation of feminist translation theories appeared, and in 2002 that Chinese translation researchers began to really pay attention to feminist translation. Since there is no western feminist movement in China, the research on feminist translation in China is rarely combined with practice, mainly focusing on the translation and introduction of the achievements of western feminist translation, including the introduction and sorting of western feminist translation theories and the case study of local female translators or translations. The main problems are as follows: the theoretical research perspective is single; The study of the history of native women’s translation tends to fall into the stereotype of feminist political demands, or lacks the necessary gender awareness; The translated case study lacks contextual awareness [20]. But there is no denying that exploring translation studies

from the perspective of feminism has opened up many unique research perspectives and provided us with many unique insights. The combination of feminist studies and translation studies is “necessarily the combination of language analysis and cultural/social criticism” [29]. In a word, the combination of feminism and translation provides a valuable perspective for the Chinese translation community.

4. Criticism and Vision

From the above-mentioned analysis of the research situation at home and abroad, feminist translation theory has brought far-reaching influence to translation research and achieved some results, but at the same time, there are also some problems and controversies.

4.1. Criticism and questioning

In *Translation and Gender Translating in the 'Era of Feminism'*, Flotow pointed out that the comments and criticisms obtained from feminist studies mainly come from internal members of feminism and external members of feminism. There are three main types of feminist translation judgments within feminism: a. Elitism: the presupposed target readers of “text elitism” have received good education and have a certain feminist knowledge base, which will directly lead to the obscurity of the translated text, thus forming a gap that hinders the reading of the majority of readers; b. Opportunism: This is reflected in the fact that when feminists claim to be “faithful” to the general idea of the text, they have to intervene and manipulate the translation. Rosemary Arrojo, a Brazilian female critic, commented on feminist translation theory, showing such self-subversive features as “opportunism”, “hypocrisy”, and “incoherence of theory” [1]; c. Hypocrisy: Spivak [26] pointed out that Western feminist translators imposed western power on the translation of feminist literary works in the third world, depriving women in the third world of the right to “be heard” and “be seen”, “so as to construct the third world and third world literature in the translated world according to western standards” [6]. There are mainly two kinds of external voices of feminism: Levine criticizes that feminist translation theory is too emotional, subjective, religious and idealistic to become a real and scientific academic research; Nida questioned the gender-neutral translation advocated by feminist studies in the translation of the Bible. He believed that gender neutrality did not have an effective cognitive model, and gender-neutral discourse could not solve the problems involved in gender neutrality [6].

In China, some scholars inevitably point out that feminist translation theory is still not perfect. Ge [8] pointed out that translation advocated by feminists may give people a sense of overcorrection. Jiang Xiaohua [13] proposed that there is no “generic personal pronoun” in the English language for men and women. After dozens of solutions were proposed by many grammarians and rhetoricians, it has not been agreed yet. Zhang Jinghua [36] believed that feminist translation theory overemphasized the manipulation of language and the intervention in translation, thus deviating from or even distorting the nature of translation to a certain extent. Yang Liu [34] pointed out that there are differences between the expectations of Chinese society for Chinese women and the ideas of feminist translation. Feminist translation has its own arduous road in China. Hu Zuoyou et al. [11] pointed out that feminist translation studies in China mainly have the following seven problems: Chinese feminist translation studies prefer to translate women’s works, while ignoring the opposite of gender can also speak for each other; The research on examples of female

translators' translated works is relatively scarce; The feminist consciousness of male translators is often ignored; Many scholars' criticisms of feminist translation theories are still confined to their own theories, and have not opened a dialogue with other theories beyond feminism itself; The research on the history of women's translation in China is in a blank state. Later, Li Hongyu [16] mentioned in the article *A Review of the Research on the History of Translation from the Western Gender Perspective* that the current research on the history of translation from the Western gender perspective lacks a perfect theoretical system, the gender theory resources are thin, the dimensions are monotonous, and the research is not balanced enough; Feminist translation theory overemphasizes the "manipulation" of language and the "intervention" of translators; Hu et al. also pointed out that some scholars believed that the cultural ideology and translation concepts between China and the West were quite different, so the signs of feminist treason in a few translations had little impact on the Chinese translation community. In addition, Cai Xiaodong and Zhu Jianping [2] reexamined feminist translation theory from the perspective of philosophical hermeneutics, believing that feminist translation theory ignored the influence of translators' limited vision on discourse, as well as the unique male vision and public vision.

4.2. Vision

Although there are still many aspects to be improved in feminist translation theory, and there is still a long way to go in developing it into a mature and comprehensive theory, we must be sure that it has brought a new focus to translation research with its unique perspective and distinctive diversified characteristics, and it also provides a broad platform for feminist research. What is the future of feminist translation theory?

Feminist translation researchers emphasize the subjectivity of women and advocate that women should get rid of the marginal position and become the center of translation. This makes us realize that gender is an important factor to be considered in text analysis. The addition of gender perspective makes people begin to shift from the space limited to the text to the complex translation phenomenon outside the text. "We are committed to exploring the power relations existing in the text practice, which reflect the power structure existing in the larger cultural context". Professor Zhu Hong was inspired by feminist translation thoughts, and thus she proposed two criteria for her own text selection: the author is female, and the protagonist is also female [23]. Therefore, when choosing the text, the translator should not only consider the reader's receptivity and the use of language, but also consider the gender factor in the work. Viewing the translation of female characters from the feminist perspective not only highlights the translator's subjective position, but also makes many feminist issues concerned by the public.

From the above review of feminist translation theories at home and abroad, we can see that there are differences in cultural and historical backgrounds and translation concepts between China and the West. It has been 20 years since feminist translation theory was studied in China. During this period, there have been many criticisms and doubts, but this is helping to constantly revise and improve it. In the new era, the feminist consciousness is generally awakened. At present, women are seeking to break the stereotype and create an independent, confident and brave female image in the new era. Therefore, China's feminist translation studies should combine the current aspirations and expectations of Chinese women for the future in the new era to build a feminist translation theory system with Chinese characteristics, so as to develop it into a more scientific and systematic theory. In addition, we should

maintain the dialogue between feminist translation studies at home and abroad and other theories, so as to maintain the vitality of feminist translation theories and avoid parochialism.

5. Conclusions

To sum up, although feminist translation theory still needs to be improved and faces many doubts and criticisms, we must acknowledge its positive significance and far-reaching impact. The combination of feminism and translation studies gives a new enlightenment to traditional translation theories: “Women, differences and otherness will continue to be the discourse subjects of translation studies” [17]. I believe that the feminist translation theory, with the joint efforts of scholars in the translation field and the Chinese cultural background, combined with the development characteristics of the new era, will always bring us new inspiration and influence.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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