

## Feminist Utopian Novel in a Transnational Context: with a Reference to Bai Hua's the *Remote Country of Women*

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### Abstract

The book *The Remote Country of Women*, written by Bai Hua has been regarded as a powerful feminist utopian novel. It strongly criticizes patriarchy and embodies women's dream to operate the world by the female principle or the Way of Nature. Nonetheless, due to political issues and language barriers, the novel has so far received little critical attention and has been under-researched in scholarship at home or abroad. The study sets out to investigate the novel and its corresponding English translation version by two translators. More importantly, it explores the way how the feminist awareness is manifested in translation. In order to examine the translators' feminist awareness, critical discourse analysis would be applied as theoretical as well as methodological framework for the researcher to go on a bottom-up examination. With the text analysis as support, the study hopes to demonstrate that the translated version of the feminist utopian novel plays an important role in enhancing more understanding of Chinese matrilineality and female principles for foreign readers during the 1980s.

**Key Words:** Bai Hua, *The Remote Country of Women*, Moso people, feminist utopian novel, English translation.

### 1. Introduction

The novel *The Remote Country of Women*, the first by the author Bai Hua, was published in 1988. The name Bai Hua, a pseudonym for Chen, You hua, has been recognized as one of the major contemporary Chinese writers. He was born in a small city of Henan Province, in 1930. In Wu (1991), Bai Hua's poetic sensitivity and love for literature were first shaped by his mother's folk songs and her poor and illiterate friends' devotional Buddhist songs. He joined the People's Liberation Army in 1947 and in that capacity began to write poems, short stories, and screenplays in 1951. He started his career as a creative writer on his own in 1964 and has been residing in Shanghai since 1985. In the Taiwan edition, the novel contains a map of the Country of Women, some photos of actual Mosonian life, a brief biography of Bai Hua, and a bibliography of his works. According to Wu (1991: 198), due to political reasons and language barriers, the novel has received little critical attention either at home or abroad. As a feminist utopian novel, it has gone entirely unnoticed. In addition, relevant scholarship remains very scant and therefore the researcher can only discuss the literary work as well as its translation based on little literature which is very precious to the current study.

The story, originally published in China in 1988, is set by two antithetical narratives which in the final chapters converge. One describes the utopian world focusing on a young woman, Sunamei of the Moso, a subgroup of the Naxi nationality in a remote but beautiful area at the border of Yunnan and Sichuan provinces in southwest China. In the alternative chapters, we follow the male protagonist, Liang Rui, to experience a labor camp and then a prison during the Cultural Revolution. The story shuttles back and forth from utopia to dystopia to present conflicts in two worlds in which Sunamei lives a matriarchal society where women freely take lovers and are responsible for home and family while Liang Rui lives under political and emotion repression in a patriarchal society. By means of Sunamei's happy growth and innocent questioning, an organic social system embodied in matrilineality is demonstrated and stressed, and through Liang Rui's imprisonment and ironic remarks, the absurdity and horror behind socialist China's revolutionary slogans is manifested.

In the story, when Sunamei is nearly thirteen years old, she undergoes the rituals of "Changing into Dress" at the age of thirteen and worshipping the Goddess Ganzhi, growing into a full-fledged independent woman and has free sexual relationships with two men, Longbu and Yingzhi, before she joins a Dancing and Singing Troupe in the civilized world. On the other hand, after he gets out of prison, Liang Rui, also the narrator of the story finds that his girlfriend has abandoned him.

In frustration, he volunteers to go to the most remote and primitive area of China for a self-desertion but finally he is posted as a jack-of-all-trades at a cinema in a country close to the Moso Community. In that county, he meets Sunamei, who is the horror of the town owing to the Moso women's notoriety for promiscuity. Nevertheless, Liang Rui boldly marries her. From this point on, Liang Rui becomes an ordinary patriarchal man, attempting to possess his wife, bond her with their marriage certificate, and master her. While visiting the Moso Community, Liang Rui becomes violent and angry when he catches Sunamei with her earlier lover Yingzhi, and as a result, he is abandoned by Sunamei as well as by the whole Moso Community.

The authorial intention of the novel, as Bai Hua states in the introduction to the Taiwan edition, is to "use the past as a mirror to see the present," to use the matrilineal values to challenge our traditional criteria concerning the primitive versus the modern, the barbarous versus the civilized, and the monogamous versus the promiscuous. In addition, according to Wu (1991), there are four elements in the story background. First, the story is filled with rebellious feminist concepts which are subversive to the oppressive authority. Bai Hua's sympathy for feminism could be partly attributed to his own rebellious spirits, further developed, and reinforced in the course of repeated setbacks in the Chinese Communist Party. Second, influenced by his widowed mother and her poor women's friends and personal experiences, Bai Hua often empathizes with the suffering of women. Third, Bai Hua is confused by the Chinese social system and modern civilization, especially when it comes to their patriarchal aspects, and thus he turns to matrilineality to look for moral strengths and for any possibility of a human future.

Lastly, Bai Hua is inspired by the powerful existence of a primitive society, the actual Moso Community, which still maintains its prehistorical matrilineality today. The novel was translated into English in the year of 1994 under the series of Fiction from Modern China with its General Editor, Howard Goldblatt, believing the novel as one of the "boldest new voices in China." The study sets out to investigate the novel and its corresponding English translation version by two professors working together, one Chinese-born and the other a native speaker of English. More importantly, the Chinese-born professor has done a thorough research on feminist utopian novels and contributed a chapter to the novel in her PhD thesis years before embarking on this translation activity. Therefore, it could be of importance to explore the way how the feminist awareness is manifested in translation.

## 2. Methodology

The research modifies Jing's adaptation (2007) of the classification of semantic shifts to fit the use and characteristics of the Chinese language. Indeed, the concept of shift is similar to that of translation technique in translation studies. Both are applied to deal with lower level decisions in translation with regard to differences between source and target linguistic elements; they are sometimes called local strategies<sup>1</sup>. In the following figure, we connect translation techniques to two semantic shifts for the convenience of text analysis.

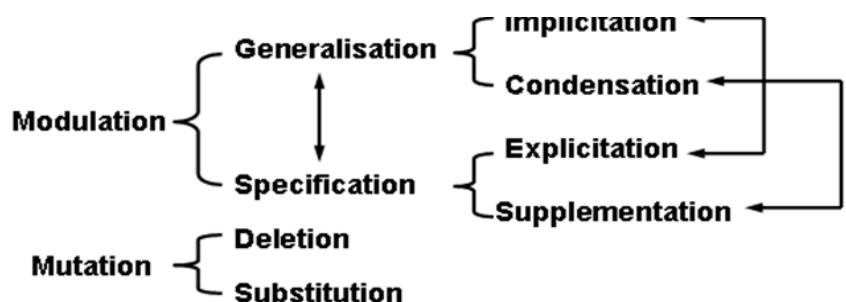


Figure: I Three ST and TT relationships at semantic levels

In the model, we find the modulation shift can be presented by specification and generalisation techniques and each can be further divided into subcategories. The former, similar to the concretisation technique proposed by Fawcett (1997), can be achieved by 'explication,' and 'supplementation.' Explication is based on the world knowledge of the author or the original text without adding new information. In other words, it concretes the source term: for example, a piece of furniture in the source text may be translated as 'that chair.'

1 The notion of the translation strategy is defined differently amongst scholars (e.g. Færch and Kasper, 1983; Krings, 1986: 268; Wilss, 1996: 154; Jääskeläinen, 1993: 116). The global definition used in this project is from Lörcher's (1991: 76) that it is 'a potentially conscious procedure for the solution of a problem which an individual is faced with when translating a text segment from one language to another.'

On the contrary, supplementation means the translator expands the original text by adding certain minor details on specific topics. The generalisation technique, exactly the opposite of specification, can be exhibited by its two subcategories: implicitation and condensation. Implicitation is contrary to explicitation, i.e. the translator tried to paraphrase or even euphemise the source text in translation. Condensation, as proposed by Fawcett (1997), is when the translator gives the same information but expressed more briefly than the source text.

A mutation shift deviates significantly from the source text, and may be re-presented by the techniques of deletion and substitution. Deletion occurs when the translator makes major modifications by cutting certain parts of the original item. Substitution here indicates that the translator deletes certain elements and adds new but unrelated information to the translation.

After charting the semantic shifts with each relevant linguistic item, we can suggest possible ideological concerns experienced by the translator from each shift. This step, an important procedure in critical discourse analysis (hereafter CDA), is useful for analysing the effect of the micro-structural shifts in translation. CDA, originating from Halliday's systemic-functional linguistics, regards language as communication and systematically relates a writer's linguistic choices to a wider socio-cultural framework (Munday, 2001: 90). It can be defined as an approach concerned with analysis of opaque and transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power, and control manifested in language (Wodak & Meyer, 2001: 2). Fairclough (1995:132) also pointed out that the thorough examination of linguistic features proposed by the proponents of CDA makes it possible to examine ways to 'demystify' discourses by deciphering ideologies. Here the term 'discourse' is applied using the definition given by Hatim and Mason (1997: 216): 'modes of speaking and writing which involve social groups in adopting a particular attitude towards areas of socio cultural activity.'

It is worth noting that the concept of 'discourse' is value-neutral here, as with the term 'ideologies' discussed earlier. According to this approach, linguistic features are adopted by language users to strategically process and re-present their ideology. In this, we can assume that the ideologies of translators and language users may be subtly signaled through linguistic items in translation. Therefore, the notion of critical discourse analysis will be useful for this research project when examining any ideologically driven concerns embedded in linguistic features in the translated texts.

To sum up, a modified model with the critical analysis of semantic shifts is used as the main methodology in this research project. This will enable the researcher to identify any female/feminist ideological consideration hidden in the translation. In the next section, we shall move on to the text analysis.

### 3. Text Analysis

#### 3.1 Criticizing patriarchy

Feminist utopias are usually used for judging on the patriarchal present and criticizing the societies which cause the oppression of women by individual men and the patriarchal system. In the story, the Mosonian sexual freedom is taken as an emancipator force and the author Bai Hua lets any Mosonian outshine his protagonist Liang Rui. Though acting as a hero struggling against mechanized modern society, Liang Rui could not suppress his chauvinist ego. When he finds his wife receiving her former lover Yingzhi:

[在她還沒來得及扣完所有的鈕扣的時候，我衝過去狠狠地抽了她兩個耳光。]

[...]我怎麼能容忍一個污辱了我的人來斥責我呢？你有甚麼權利！你這個壞蛋！趁我不在時溜進我的房子，爬上我的床，引誘我的妻子，我要狠狠地懲罰你！[...] 我正要用全力舉起那劈柴的一剎那，蘇納美大叫了一聲。這聲音很陌生，是一種撕裂心脾的叫，像野獸的叫聲](458)

But before she could button up, I dashed over and slapped her. [...] How could I tolerate a lecture from a man who had just insulted me? What right do you have, you scoundrel? What right do you have to steal into my room, to get into my bed, and to seduce my wife? [...] As I lifted it to strike at Yingzhi, Sunamei uttered a scream, a strange scream, a soul tearing cry like that of a wounded beast (364).

For the passage we have five underlined terms for discussion, but for the convenience of analysis, I will discuss these terms according to the semantic shifts they belong and that could make it clearer and easier for us to assume if any female/feminist awareness is hidden in translation and the potential ideological consideration the translators have for their transnational readers. Amongst these five terms, they are all shifted in semantics in comparison to the original Chinese version.

Yet if we look at them more closely, we could find that these five items are modulated in semantics while one of them is generalized and the other four are specificated. For the generalized terms, the original “在她還沒來得及扣完所有的鈕扣的時候,” back translated as “[b]efore she can finish buttoning up,” is translated as “But before she could button up” which meaning is slightly shifted. While the original indicates Sunamei is buttoning up but not fully finishes the act, the translation suggests she remains naked when Liang Rui rushes to slap her. The translation nonetheless manifests the condition of Sunamei with her former lover Yingzhi and strengthens the conflict between two cultures, Han and Moso people, for foreign readers.

For other four items raised for discussion here are specificated in two ways: one is explicitation and the others supplementation. The emphasis on the word “my” in the translation as found in the sentence, “[w]hat right do you have to steal into my room, to get into my bed, and to seduce my wife?” could be regarded that the translator explicitate the original for their target readers. In this way, readers could also enjoy the parallel structure the author produces and at the same time feel the anger of Sunamei’s husband, Liang Rui when he busts her wife naked with others. Lastly, there are three terms supplemented by the translators to further demonstrate the contrast of Liang Rui’s chauvinist ego and Sunamei’s grief. The first term describes Liang Rui’s act to lift a piece of oak in the original, but in translation the act is translated as “lifted it to strike at Yingzhi,” as the translators supplement the act of “strike” targeted at Yingzhi. Secondly, Sunamei’s cry in the original is illustrated as, “撕裂心脾,” which can be literally translated as “heart and spleen tearing.” Yet it could have been the reason that no such saying in English, and therefore our translators put it as “soul tearing,” probably in a hope of making the term fully understood. The last one, also about Sunamei’s cry, is supplemented with an adjective to describe the sound of a wounded beast which is no mention in the original.

In general, these five items we examine and discuss in this section suggest not merely the translators’ consideration for their target readers, but their demonstration of conflicts between two cultures, as especially reflected from the marriage of Sunamei and Liang Rui. As for the translators’ female/feminist awareness

### 3.2 Female Superiority

While the Mosonians perform strict egalitarianism in daily material distribution, the female always stands the center position and is superior to the male. The Moso women do not have to court men but have the right to choose among those who court them. The Moso women are independent in their relationship to men, whereas in civilized China, a man becomes a woman’s entire life as shown in the following by Sunamei:

[你以為我也像你們漢族女人那麼賤，丈夫夜晚沒回來，滿街去找；男人不要她，她哭天號地，向天塌地陷一樣？有一回在城裡就遇見了這樣的漢族女人，我問她：大嫂，你哭哪樣呀？她哭著說：我那個挨刀的男人不要我了呀！沒有良心的強盜呀！—像唱歌似的，我對她說：大嫂！她不要你，你不會不要他？她被我這句話嚇住了，眨巴眨巴眼睛，想了想又唱著歌哭起來：我的天呀！我的地呀！我的命呀！](449)

"Do you think I would lower myself as a Han woman does? If her husband does not come back at night, she searches high and low; if the man does not want her any more, she cries as if the sky is falling. [...] That heartless beast! It sounded more like singing than cursing. I said to her, 'Sister, if he has abandoned you, why don't you abandon him?' She was horrified by my words. Blinking her eyes for a moment, she wailed even louder: 'Oh, my heaven! My earth! My life!' (358)

This example contrasts different views about marriage by Moso and Han people and another interesting six items are raised for discussion here. For these terms, we find one example that the translators apply idioms for translating similar meanings in Chinese, as can be seen from the item “滿街去找,” back translated literally as “searches the whole street,” is translated as “searches high and low.” Nonetheless, the terms “沒有良心的強盜,” and the term “賤” in the original with back translations as “heartless gangster,” and “cheap” are translated as “heartless beast,” as well as the verb “lower.” As it can be assumed that the term “強盜” used by the Han woman to imply that “the gangster,” indicating her husband in fact steals her heart, the implication the translators used for these two terms is somewhat mitigating the importance of husband to his wife in Han culture.

Another three underlined terms are found to be specificated again by the translators with meaning explicitated as well as supplemented. The former can be demonstrated by the term “horrified” in translation to indicate the extent the Han woman is shocked after hearing Sunamei’s viewpoint about the marriage.

The translators' supplementation is shown when they deal with the two terms in Chinese, “像唱歌似的”and “哭起來” translated as “[i]t sounded more like singing than cursing” and “wailed even louder.” Although it can be argued that the supplementation is used for the sake of a much logical description without any particular intention, the effect these terms produce for target reader's further manifest the miserable state for the Han woman in a sharp contrast to Sunamei's Moso culture. Furthermore, these supplemented items, from the translators' language use can be assumed to be ideological as Fairclough (1995:132) proposes.

### 3.3 A harmony society

The actual Moso people of China insist on their natural right to free love and oppose to legal marriage because they know that the monogamous possession of women means the end of their matrilineality. By the end of the novel Bai Hua praises this Country of Women ardently through his mouthpiece Liang Rui:

[我真正看到了一個在遠古時代才有的母系社會，它真實地存在著，無論多麼大的外在壓力都不能使他們改變。摩梭人嚴肅地按照自己古老的生活方式相親相愛，繁衍不息……儘管有人對於他們的婚姻家庭形式不理解，看不慣，但誰也不能否認，這裡沒有因為情剝犯罪，沒有婆媳、妯娌這種天敵的存在，所以沒有家庭糾紛。大家庭而沒有爭奪繼承權的火拼，沒有出賣給金錢和權力的愛情，全世界只有這裡的女人是自主的，只有她們有權愛和不愛，要和不要，接受和拒絕，不依附於男性，沒有綑綁的夫妻，沒有寂寞的老人，沒有無人照管的孤兒……當然，也沒有現代化……](455)

Here I witness a matrilineal society that should have existed only in antiquity. Yet it exists today. No outside pressure has the power to change it. The Mosuo people live and love solemnly according to their own primitive way of existence. Although modern men cannot appreciate their sexual permissiveness, nobody can deny the fact that among them there is *no murder for love, no jealousy and hatred between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law or between aunts and sisters, nor even any family quarrels*. In their extended family there is no power struggle over inheritances and no selling of the body for money or position. Mosuo women are their own masters on earth. Only they have the right to love or not to love, to want or not to want, to accept or to refuse. They are independent of men. In their world, there are no spouses in bondage, no lonely old men, no homeless orphans – and, of course, no modernization" (361).

For this passage, we can enjoy the author Bai Hua's writing style as lyrical and sometimes rhapsodic to express the harmonious continuity the Moso people live with nature (Twitchell, 1995). Presumably familiar with his style, the translators apply plenty of parallels in translation, such as, “there is no murder for love, no jealousy and hatred between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law or between aunts and sisters, nor even any family quarrels,” and “[o]nly they have the right to love or not to love, to want or not to want, to accept or to refuse.” Yet from this translated passage we can also see how the two translators manage to domesticate the original terms for their transnational readers. In other words, they try hard to make the target readers understand the story by means of familiar terms, which in turn show their ideological considerations. For example, the original “不理解，看不慣,” which can be back translated as “don't understand and disapprove” is translated as “cannot appreciate.” In addition, the term “火拼,” meaning “fighting” is translated as “power struggle.” The use of domestication for target readers would inevitably implicate some important messages the author attempts to point out. Taking the sentence, “全世界只有這裡的女人是自主的” as an example, certain semantic shift does occur when translated as, “Mosuo women are their own masters on earth,” while the original means, “[o]n earth only women here are independent.” In this way, the focus of the original on “only women here” is more or less shifted in translation.

## 4. Conclusion

The study sets out to investigate the novel *The Remote Country of Women* by Bai Hua and its corresponding English translation version by two translators, one Chinese-born and the other a native speaker of English. By means of examining the semantic shifts while comparing the target and source languages in the text analysis, we could possibly find any hidden feminist/female awareness as well as the translators' ideological considerations for their transnational readers. From the three examples we raised for discussion on different themes, it is found that semantic shifts did occur in the translation when compared to the original. Also all semantic shifts found in this analysis are modulated; that is, they are either generalized or specified by the translators.

Except for few cases of generalization, mostly the two translators tend to explicitate the original in the translation, presumably in a hope of making the original semantics understood more by their target readers. In some cases, the use of explicitation to some extent reinforces the contrast between the utopian and dystopian worlds where Sunamai and Liang Rui are cultivated since childhood. In addition, the strategy also enlarges the gap between Moso and Han women in terms of their relationship with their husband.

From these cases, it can be safely to assume that the linguistic items these two translators apply in their translation in some way lead their readers to the differences between two cultures in China in the story, which could reflect their female/feminist awareness. Similar results could be found in translation scholarship such as Henitiuk (1999) and Santaemilia (2005: 117-136). In the former, a feminist translator, identifying herself with the female author of Kagerô nikki, faithfully translated a diary from the Japanese Heian period into English by leaving matters ambiguous and keeping the original's disjunctive narration in order to 'embrace' the unique language of the female author, while in the latter, it is reported that the female translator, identifying herself as a female character in the source text, operated self-censorship in scenarios where the character is abused while translating Cleland's English erotic novel, *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, into Spanish. Finally, in addition to potential female/feminist awareness hidden in the translation, it is also important to note that the target readers of the story could have been prioritized for these two translators as several linguistic items in the last example have shown. With the text analysis as support, the study demonstrates that the translated version of the feminist utopian novel plays an important role in enhancing more understanding of Chinese matrilineality and female principles for foreign readers during the 1980s.

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