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The Role of Translation in Transnational Feminism from China to Spain

Jiayu Dai

The Autonomous University of Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain
miriamjiayu@gmail.com

Abstract: *This paper explores the role of translation in facilitating transnational feminist exchanges between China and Spain. Through a comparative analysis of feminist movements in both countries and the Spanish translations of two major works by Chinese author Geling Yan—*The Flowers of War *and* The Ninth Widow*—the study investigates how translation mediates cultural narratives, ideological differences, and gender politics across linguistic and geopolitical boundaries. Drawing on Gideon Toury's theory of translation norms, the paper examines the strategies employed in the translation process and the criteria Spanish publishers use when selecting works by Chinese women writers. It argues that translation not only transfers language but also reflects existing power dynamics and affects how Chinese feminism is perceived abroad. Furthermore, the paper addresses structural and ideological barriers—such as cultural stereotypes, limited access to contemporary voices, and unequal discourse power—that hinder the formation of transnational feminist alliances. Ultimately, this study underscores the importance of translation as a transformative medium for intercultural feminist communication and solidarity.*

Keywords: *transnational feminism, translation studies, Chinese literature, Spanish publishing, Geling Yan, feminist discourse*

1. Historical and Theoretical Foundations of Feminism in China and Spain

1.1 Development of Chinese feminism

Since the beginning of the 20th century, Chinese feminism has made great progress, but there is still much room for improvement. And in the same way, Spanish feminism also began to develop at the beginning of the 20th century with a number of prominent feminists, such as María Lejárraga (better known as María Martínez Sierra), Margarita Nelken, Clara Campoamor.

The development of feminism in China was clearly influenced by Western feminist thought. During the May Fourth Movement, the first large-scale wave of feminist thought in the history of Chinese thought, there was a strong influence of Western feminism, as well as Marxism. All areas of interest to Western feminists, such as the right to marital autonomy, the right to education, personal independence and the limits of childbirth, also became the domain of Chinese feminist exploration. The Marxist view of women became the guiding ideology of Chinese feminism at the end of the May Fourth Movement, a period when Marxists had placed the women's question under the general objective of socialism and used the doctrine of class struggle to analyze the women's question in China.

In general, the construction of the Chinese female subject benefited from Western culture, and Chinese feminist theoretical resources came from the West. However, the Chinese women's liberation movement was always linked to the class/national revolution, and Chinese women's class/national group consciousness was always above or beyond their gender subject consciousness [1]. Thus, these ideological and social differences have also caused Chinese feminism to not have a large-scale diffusion and influence in Spain.

After 1976, following the fall of Franco's government, feminism in Spain began to flourish and became part of the country's democratisation process along with the political struggle. During this period, a huge number of feminist political initiatives were developed in all corners of the state, perhaps in this period of greatest number due to the growing atmosphere of freedoms that the state was experiencing as the final years of the 1970s progressed. An example of this is the celebration between 6 and 9 December 1975 in Madrid of the National Days for the Liberation of Women, which was the first

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major meeting of feminist organisations at the state level, and in a period of political transition to democracy and freedom [2]. So, in this climate, feminism in Spain developed even more rapidly.

In short, in order to achieve transnational feminist alliances and development, it is necessary, firstly, to know the degree of diffusion of Chinese feminism in Spain and, secondly, to find common ground in the development of feminism in both countries, in order to find progress in achieving transnational feminist alliances.

1.2 Development of Spanish Femenism

After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, feminism in China became closely integrated with state institutions. That same year, the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) was established as a governmental body aligned with the gender policies of the Communist Party of China (CPC). While this official feminist line enabled notable legal and institutional gains, it was also constrained by state priorities. Many Chinese feminists have criticized its top-down approach, calling for independent spaces of dialogue both domestically and internationally to address urgent gender issues beyond state-sanctioned frameworks [3].

In Spain, mainstream media has occasionally covered feminist developments in China, often highlighting their limitations. An article in *Nueva Sociedad* (2020) *(New society)* titled "Hard Times for Chinese Feminists" reported interviews with Chinese activists and noted the narrowing space for political dissent. Similarly, *La Opinión de Murcia （the opininon of Murcia)* ran the headline "Neither Geisha Nor Submissive," focusing on feminist stigma and the portrayal of feminism as radical or Westernized. *Pikara Magazine* traced the evolution of the feminist movement in China, particularly the challenges faced by the local *#MeToo* and *"Bloody Bride"* campaigns.

Academic attention in Spain remains limited. Some exceptions include Guarde's work on Chinese women in philosophical traditions and Lin's analysis of the evolving portrayal of women in Chinese advertising [4-5]. These efforts, while valuable, often emphasize cultural distance rather than shared feminist concerns.

In sum, Chinese feminism's state alignment complicates transnational solidarity, while Spanish media and academia tend to frame it through a lens of constraint and difference. These representational gaps underscore the need for more reciprocal, nuanced exchanges to build effective transnational feminist alliances.

1.3 Comparative Synthesis: Ideological Gaps and Convergences

A critical step in realizing transnational feminist alliances is identifying points of convergence between distinct national feminist movements. Despite their unique cultural and historical contexts, China and Spain share important feminist parallels: both experienced revitalization after the 1970s; both grappled with structural gender discrimination rooted in tradition or religion; and both witnessed legislative advances promoting gender equality.

In the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, Chinese feminism re-emerged within state institutions like the All-China Women's Federation, though it remained tethered to the political framework of the Chinese Communist Party. Meanwhile, Spain's transition from Franco's dictatorship catalyzed the rise of grassroots feminist mobilizations, such as the 1975 National Days for the Liberation of Women. These shifts signaled a broader reevaluation of gender norms in both societies.

Legal reforms further marked this progress. China's 2016 Anti-Domestic Violence Law broke from prior norms by addressing domestic violence as a public, not private, concern. In Spain, multiple regional laws were enacted to guarantee gender equality, revealing a widespread institutional commitment across autonomous communities.

Culturally, both nations are shaped by deeply ingrained patriarchal philosophies. In China, Confucian and Taoist frameworks historically enforced gender segregation and feminine subservience, internalized through collective social consciousness [6]. In Spain, Catholic doctrine promoted women's inferiority through the concept of original sin and the subordination of Eve [7]. These gender ideologies framed the backdrop against which feminist critiques emerged.

Scholars such as Morgan and Kaplan have critiqued the limitations of "global sisterhood," arguing that universalist feminist narratives often erase local struggles. Postcolonial theorists instead advocate for dialogical alliances that embrace cultural specificity and difference [8-9]. Building on this critique,

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Quijano's[10] concept of "coloniality of power" denounces global modernity's epistemic imperialism and calls for decolonial frameworks that center diverse, localized knowledge systems.

Transnational feminism, therefore, does not demand shared oppression or uniform identities. Rather, it recognizes difference as foundational to solidarity, encouraging mutual respect and a commitment to dismantling patriarchal structures across diverse contexts. This approach offers new possibilities for constructing meaningful feminist alliances between China and Spain.

2. Chinese Feminism through Spanish Eyes

2.1 Media Representations

As previously discussed, feminist discourse from the Global South has long been marginalized within dominant Western frameworks. This marginalization has led to the emergence of Third World feminism, which emphasizes the importance of context, difference, and self-determination. Scholars such as Sandoval[11] critique "hegemonic white feminisms" for neglecting the ways in which race, class, ethnicity, and culture shape the experience of gender.

A key figure in this discourse, Chinese-American scholar Shu-mei Shih, introduces the concept of "asymmetric cosmopolitanism" to describe the unequal dynamics between Western feminism and feminist voices from the Global South. Shih[12-13] criticizes the tendency of Western scholars to universalize feminist concepts—such as individualism and anti-statism—without recognizing the specific historical context of Chinese feminism, particularly its entwinement with anti-colonial and anti-feudal struggles led by the Communist Party of China (CPC).

Such Eurocentric projections often result in misunderstandings. For example, during the 1988 China–US Writers Symposium in Beijing, a Western participant asked whether Chinese women writers identified as feminists. A prominent Chinese writer responded, "There is no feminism in China," rejecting the Western term. Shih interprets this not as a denial of gender awareness but as a critique of imported ideological frames that fail to resonate with local realities.

Quijano's[10] theory of the "coloniality of power" further illuminates how global knowledge systems reproduce Western hegemony. Cultural production—including feminist theory—is often structured by unequal access to platforms, resources, and legitimacy. In transnational feminist discourse, scholars from the periphery must often adopt Western languages and idioms to gain recognition, while Western scholars rarely reciprocate. This linguistic and epistemic imbalance underscores the urgency of creating equitable spaces for dialogue.

In this context, translation emerges as a vital medium for cross-cultural feminist exchange. However, translation is not merely a linguistic act—it is also political, embedded in power relations. Before attempting to build effective transnational feminist alliances, we must first confront the structural inequalities within the field itself. Seeking "common ground while preserving differences" requires not only mutual respect but also the deconstruction of epistemic hierarchies.

To further explore this issue, the following chapter conducts a descriptive study of two Spanish translations of Geling Yan's literary works. By analyzing how feminist themes are conveyed and transformed in translation, we can evaluate how literary texts contribute to—or are constrained by—the broader project of transnational feminist dialogue.

2.2 The translation of Chinese feminist works in Spanish publishers

Compared to countries such as the United States, France, or Germany, the translation and circulation of Chinese literature in Spain has developed more slowly. As Wang[13] observes, although Japanese is not widely privileged in the global translation market, Japanese literature—particularly manga and poetry—has enjoyed significantly greater visibility in Spain than Chinese works. Within this already limited context, Chinese women's literature remains even more marginal.

Academic research on the translation of Chinese literature in Spain is also limited. While initiatives such as the TXICC research group at the Autonomous University of Barcelona have contributed to bibliographic and statistical tracking, the availability of comprehensive data remains scarce. This lack of visibility creates structural obstacles for fostering transnational feminist alliances through literature. According to Rovira-Esteva and Sáiz López[14-15], some of the best-known Chinese women writers in Spain include Xie Wanying, Ding Ling, Eileen Chang, and Sanmao. However, these writers largely

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represent earlier generations of Chinese feminism, which has delayed the exposure of contemporary feminist voices such as Geling Yan or Wang Anyi to Spanish readers.

Another persistent issue is the tendency of Spanish publishers to translate Chinese literature indirectly—via English, French, or German—rather than from the original Chinese. Rovira and López[14-15] note that, as of 2008, only eight works by Chinese women had been directly translated from Chinese into Spanish. This gap reflects broader challenges: limited interest from the Spanish book market, a shortage of qualified Spanish-speaking sinologists, and the relatively recent introduction of Spanish language education in China.

In general, publishers tend to select works by authors with international recognition or prestigious awards. For instance, Mo Yan's receipt of the Nobel Prize in 2012 sparked renewed interest in Chinese literature abroad. Similarly, writers such as Geling Yan or Zhang Jie—who have received national and international literary accolades—are more likely to be translated.

Biographical and cultural proximity can also influence visibility. Sanmao, for example, lived in Spain for many years and remains popular among Spanish readers. Her diary trilogy, translated by Irene Tor Carroggio, has received significant attention. Similarly, Jiang Yang, known as the first translator of *Don Quixote* into Chinese, is often referenced in literary-cultural dialogues.

In sum, the limited dissemination of Chinese feminist literature in Spain underscores the need for more active and direct translation practices. Promoting these works through accessible and culturally sensitive translation is essential to building stronger transnational feminist connections and closing the existing literary-cultural gap between China and Spain.

2.3 Geling Yan's Feminist Vision: Literary Phases and Philosophical Roots

Geling Yan (1958–), a prominent contemporary Chinese-American writer, represents a distinctive voice in transnational feminist literature. Born into a culturally rich family in Shanghai, she was exposed to both Eastern and Western classics from an early age. Her literary journey traverses four phases, mirroring her migration, cultural encounters, and evolving feminist consciousness.

Her early "military trilogy" (1986–1989), including Green Blood and The Female Grass, drew from her military background and reflected the tension between revolutionary idealism and individual humanity. After emigrating in the 1990s, Yan's works began to explore immigrant identity and cultural hybridity. Novels such as Fusang and The Young Fisherwoman interrogated modernity, cross-cultural values, and the role of Chinese femininity in a Western context.

In her mid-career phase (The Ninth Widow, The Epic of a Woman), Yan crafted complex female protagonists like Wang Putao and Tian Sufei—embodying strength, humility, and resilience. These characters merge Western notions of agency with Eastern ideals of compassion and endurance. Yan's portrayal of femininity centers on what she calls a "quiet strength," rejecting Western confrontational feminism in favor of a more fluid, intuitive, and spiritual vision. She once remarked, "I hide my feminism more deeply and cunningly. I don't like American feminism [16]." Her feminist ethos values traditional feminine traits—kindness, forgiveness, endurance—not as weaknesses but as transformative power. Femininity, in her view, is not defined in opposition to masculinity but as a spiritual force capable of transcendence. This aligns with Taoist philosophy, which she openly embraces.

Taoism emphasizes yielding over force, stillness over aggression, and feminine over masculine principles. Laozi's Dao De Jing presents femininity as a metaphysical strength—one that "overcomes the strong with softness." Yan integrates this worldview into her narratives, reframing female passivity not as subjugation but as strategic resilience. As she analogizes through Tai Chi: "Retreat and convergence are part of offense. Every backward step hides a forward strike [17]."

In parallel, Yan's Buddhism provides her feminism with ethical and spiritual depth. Buddhism advocates compassion, detachment, and moral strength—qualities her female characters embody. In The Ninth Widow, Wang Putao shelters her unjustly persecuted father-in-law for over two decades. Despite her marginalized status, Putao never succumbs to bitterness. Her simplicity, loyalty, and moral clarity emerge as radical acts of resistance. Such characters embody Buddhist virtues while subverting conventional power dynamics. By portraying compassion as a form of strength, Yan challenges binary oppositions of oppressor/oppressed and male/female.

Yan's feminism thus emerges not from Western liberal frameworks but from an interweaving of Taoist, Buddhist, and Chinese cultural ethics. It proposes a "defensive" yet potent femininity—gentle

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but enduring, nurturing yet resilient. Her work exemplifies a decolonial feminist practice rooted in Chinese philosophical traditions while engaging critically with transnational discourses on gender and identity.

2.4 The Flowers of War*: Gender, Class, and Sacrifice in Wartime*

Set during the Nanjing Massacre of 1937, *The Flowers of War* centers on a church sheltering three distinct groups: a group of female students from Jinling University, thirteen prostitutes from the Qinhuai River, and several wounded Nationalist soldiers. This confined setting becomes a microcosm of gendered hierarchy, social prejudice, and ultimately, moral transformation.

2.4.1 The Thirteen Despised Prostitutes

In the narrative, Geling Yan juxtaposes two groups of women from vastly different social backgrounds—the educated, “respectable” students and the marginalized sex workers. From the outset, the students view the prostitutes with disdain, perceiving them as morally corrupt and socially inferior. This tension is mirrored spatially: the schoolgirls reside in the attic, while the prostitutes are relegated to the basement—reinforcing symbolic stratifications of purity and disgrace. The church clergy's attitude further exemplifies this hierarchy. Father Inglemann, in particular, displays cold indifference. When the prostitutes enter the reading room to warm themselves, his reaction—"How do you let such things into my reading room?"—strips them of basic humanity [18]. At one point, he even considers using their lives as expendable to protect the students, underscoring how class and gender intersect to render certain lives more disposable than others.

However, the narrative culminates in a radical reversal. When the Japanese soldiers demand that the schoolgirls "perform," the thirteen prostitutes choose to sacrifice themselves in their place. Dressed in student uniforms, they march toward death with quiet dignity, reclaiming agency and moral courage. Their decision not only subverts social prejudices but also highlights the disproportionate vulnerabilities women face in wartime—not only as victims of military violence but as bearers of bodies objectified and controlled. Yan critiques how patriarchal war structures reduce women to symbols of shame or instruments of exchange, while granting men agency—even in choosing death. In war, the gendered power imbalance is magnified: men are combatants, decision-makers, subjects; women become passive objects, targets of violence, and sacrificial lambs.

Through *The Flowers of War*, Yan exposes both the brutality of war and the resilience of marginalized women, challenging hierarchies of virtue and elevating those whom society deems unworthy into heroines of moral clarity.

3. Conclusion

This study has examined the intersection of translation and transnational feminism through a comparative analysis of feminist movements in China and Spain, with a focus on the Spanish translations of Geling Yan’s *The Flowers of War* and *The Ninth Widow*. Drawing on Gideon Toury’s theory of translation norms, the analysis demonstrates that translation functions not only as a linguistic process but also as a site of cultural negotiation and ideological framing. The selection, adaptation, and reception of Chinese women’s literature in Spain reveal the asymmetries in power, discourse, and visibility that often accompany cross-cultural feminist exchanges.

The findings suggest that while translation offers a platform for disseminating Chinese feminist voices, it also risks reinforcing stereotypes or marginalizing contemporary perspectives when driven by market logics or limited publisher engagement. Despite these challenges, translation remains an indispensable medium for fostering mutual understanding, disrupting hegemonic feminist narratives, and enabling intercultural solidarity.

To build meaningful transnational feminist alliances, it is essential to address the structural inequalities that shape literary circulation and representation. This includes amplifying diverse voices, encouraging direct translation from Chinese, and recognizing the socio-political contexts that shape both production and reception. Translation, when approached critically and ethically, can thus become a transformative practice of feminist connection across borders.

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