A Study on the English Translation of Metaphors of Female Images in *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* from the Perspective of Cognitive Metaphor

Mengru Wang[1]

[1] Xi'an Polytechnic University, Shaanxi, China
Correspondence: Mengru Wang, Xi'an Polytechnic University, Shaanxi, China.

Abstract

This study focuses on *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, a classic work of contemporary literature by Wang Anyi. Based on the theory of cognitive metaphor, it conducts an in-depth exploration of the English translation of the metaphors of female images in this novel. By means of rich metaphorical devices, *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* creates unique female images and vividly presents the diverse living scenes in Shanghai's longtang as well as the vicissitudes of the times. The research findings indicate that in the English translation of *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, the strategies for handling the metaphors of female images mainly include retaining the vehicle, replacing the vehicle, and omitting the vehicle. Through a meticulous analysis of these translation strategies, this study aims to clarify the crucial significance of metaphor translation in cross-cultural communication for shaping female images and conveying cultural connotations. It provides new ideas and methods for the English translation of literary works and contributes to the understanding and communication between different cultures.

Keywords: cognitive metaphor theory, *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, female images, metaphor translation

1. Introduction

1.1 *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow and Its English Translation Version*

The Song of Everlasting Sorrow by Wang Anyi is a full-length novel with profound connotations and unique artistic charm. Set in Shanghai, the novel takes the life of the heroine Wang Qiyao as the main thread. Through delicate brushstrokes, it depicts the living scenes in Shanghai's longtang, the ways of the world, and the changes of the times. Wang Qiyao grows from an ordinary girl in Shanghai's longtang to the "Miss Shanghai". Experiencing many hardships, she finally meets a tragic end in the torrent of the times. Her fate is not only a portrayal of an individual but also an epitome of Shanghai women in that era.

In 2008, *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* was translated by Michael Berry and Susan Chan Egan, and published by Columbia University Press. Once launched, it was regarded as a "true classic" of contemporary Chinese novels. It received positive reports and enthusiastic

comments from mainstream media represented by *The New York Times*, and Wang Anyi was repeatedly called "one of the most outstanding contemporary Chinese writers". The English translation version of *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* has opened a window for Western readers to understand Chinese contemporary literature and Shanghai culture. Studying its English translation version is of great significance.

1.2 Review of the Studies on the English Translation of The Song of Everlasting Sorrow

In the existing studies on the English translation version of *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, Wu Yun (2012, pp. 98-102) explored the ethics of the translation and introduction of Chinese contemporary literature; Wang Xiaoli and Li Jiaojiao (2015, pp. 81-89) conducted a study on the intensification of degree adverbs in it based on a corpus; Cen Qunxia (2017, pp. 48-62) analyzed the dissemination of its English translation from the perspective of field theory; Hou Liangyan (2024, pp. 106-109) studied its English translation from the perspective of translation aesthetics.

However, despite the fact that the existing research achievements have enriched our understanding of the English translation of *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, the research on the English translation of the metaphors of female images in *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* from the perspective of cognitive metaphor remains relatively scarce. In *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, female images occupy a central position. The author skillfully uses metaphor, an important linguistic device, to construct a rich variety of female images with distinct personalities, presenting the fates and emotional worlds of women against the backdrop of a specific era.

Therefore, an in-depth study of the English translation of the metaphors of female images in *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* from the perspective of cognitive metaphor can not only fill the research gap in this field but also provide us with a brand-new perspective to examine the English translation process and translation effects of *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*. This study is not only helpful for deepening our understanding of the mechanism of metaphor translation but also can offer more targeted theoretical guidance for the practice of metaphor translation in literary works, which is of great

theoretical and practical significance.

1.3 Female Metaphors in The Song of Everlasting Sorrow

The author Wang Anyi skillfully and adeptly employs a large number of exquisite metaphorical devices, using delicate and meticulous strokes to create a series of vivid and distinct female images. These metaphors are like shining pearls in literary creation, not only endowing the female images with unique charm but also profoundly revealing the characters' personalities, fates, and the rich connotations contained in the work.

For example, Wang Anyi compares the core character Wang Qiyao in the novel to "the daughter of Shanghai longtang", and this ingenious metaphor has multiple profound meanings. On the surface, it clearly indicates Wang Qiyao's background, that is, she grew up in the specific living environment of Shanghai longtang. However, its profound significance goes far beyond that. It also implies an intricate and inseparable connection between Wang Qiyao and the culture of Shanghai longtang. As a unique form of regional culture, the Shanghai longtang has nurtured Wang Qiyao's character traits. Her life trajectory gradually unfolds under the nourishment and influence of the longtang culture, and her values are also shaped by the trivial details of longtang life. The daily gossip, neighborhood disputes, and the hustle and bustle of worldly life in the longtang have all left deep marks on Wang Qiyao's life, becoming an important part of her character and fate.

In addition, in the novel, expressions such as comparing a woman's beauty to "a dazzling pearl" are also used, highlighting the radiance of women's appearance and the attention they receive in society. At the same time, using "a fragile porcelain" as a metaphor for the vulnerability of women implies the pain and helplessness they bear in their hearts when facing the setbacks and hardships of life. These diverse metaphors are intertwined with each other, like a fine net, enriching the connotations of female images comprehensively and multi-dimensionally. They allow readers to penetrate through the words and delve deep into the inner hearts of women, truly experiencing their joys and sorrows, partings and reunions, thus having a more comprehensive and profound understanding of

their living conditions.

2. Cognitive Metaphor Theory

2.1 Brief Introduction of Cognitive Metaphor Theory

As an important part of cognitive linguistics, the Cognitive Metaphor Theory was first systematically proposed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in their book *Metaphors We Live By* in 1980. This theory holds that metaphor is not merely a rhetorical ornament at the language level, but a fundamental and universal way for human beings to perceive the world, construct concepts, and conduct thinking. It is widely embedded in human daily life and language expressions (Liu, 2005, p. 16).

From the perspective of the Cognitive Metaphor Theory, the essence of metaphor is based on the conceptual mapping relationship between the source domain and the target domain. This mapping is based on the similarities between the two. By projecting the familiar, concrete, and well-understood concepts, features, relationships, etc. in the source domain onto the relatively unfamiliar and abstract target domain, the cognitive goal of understanding the unknown with the known and explaining the abstract with the concrete is achieved. In the field of literary creation, metaphor plays an irreplaceable important role. It provides authors with a powerful creative tool, which can help them construct vivid and impressive images, accurately convey delicate and complex emotions, as well as profound and unique thoughts.

2.2 The Translatability of Metaphors

Although there are significant differences among different languages and cultures, from the perspective of cognitive linguistics, metaphors have a certain degree of translatability. This is because there are some commonalities in the process of human beings' cognition of the world, and some basic concepts and emotions are universal across different cultures. As Stephen Ullmann pointed out in his semantic research, the human perception and cognitive structure have a certain degree of universality, enabling corresponding expressions of certain basic emotions, concepts, and experiences to be found in different cultures. For example, emotions such as the pursuit of beauty, the longing for freedom, and the cherishing of family affection and love have a common psychological basis and expression methods in various cultures around the world.

These cognitive commonalities provide the possibility for the translation of metaphors, allowing translators to convey the meanings and emotions contained in metaphors between different languages.

However, it cannot be ignored that due to differences in cultural backgrounds, language habits, social history, and other aspects, the translation of metaphors also faces many challenges. In the translation process, the metaphors in the source language may be difficult to find direct equivalents in the target language due to the lack of cultural connotations or differences in language expressions. For example, some metaphors with specific cultural allusions or regional characteristics may not have a corresponding cognitive basis in the target language culture, making it difficult for readers to understand. Therefore, translators need to fully consider the cognitive level and language habits of the target language readers while retaining the meanings of the original metaphors and choose appropriate translation strategies.

For the translation of the metaphors of female images in *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, since the novel contains rich regional cultural characteristics of Shanghai and unique ways of shaping female images, the translator needs to carefully select appropriate translation strategies according to the characteristics of the target language culture to ensure that the female images can be accurately and vividly conveyed in the translation. For example, for some metaphorical expressions with the cultural characteristics of Shanghai longtang, the translator may need to adopt strategies such as adding annotations and free translation. While conveying the meanings of the metaphors, the translator should introduce the relevant cultural background knowledge to the target language readers to help them understand the deep meanings of the original text. Only in this way can the artistic charm and cultural connotations of the original work be maximally retained in a cross-cultural context, and effective cultural communication and dissemination be achieved.

3. The Translation and Construction of Metaphors of Female Images

3.1 Retaining the Vehicle to Restore the Image

In the English translation of metaphors in *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, the translator adopts the translation strategy of retaining the vehicle

and restore the female images in the original text. For example, for the metaphorical expression "她们吃饭只吃猫似的一口，走的也是猫步", the translator directly translates it as "When they eat, their appetite is no bigger than a cat's, and when they walk they take feline steps". This translation method retains the vehicle "cat" in the original text, enabling the delicate, light, and elegant image characteristics of women constructed through the image of "cat" in the original text to be continued in the English context. When reading the English translation, readers can, just like when reading the Chinese original text, intuitively feel the unique charm of the women depicted by the author in terms of their eating and gait, as if they can see those graceful women eating and walking like agile cats. This translation strategy can also retain the cultural connotations of the original text to a certain extent. When the translator uses the method of retaining the vehicle for translation, these cultural connotations are also transmitted to the English text along with the vehicle, opening a window for English readers to understand how female images are portrayed in Chinese culture and promoting cultural communication and understanding. In addition, there is:

ST: 女人还是那么不重要，给人轻松的心情，与生死沉浮无关，是人生的**风景**。

TT: Women are not that important. They have no power over matters of life and death, glory and decline: they are there to put you in a relaxed mood, to serve as **scenery**.

The original text compares women to "人生的风景", and the translation "to serve as scenery" directly retains the image, successfully presenting the description of women being like scenery in the original text in the translation. It allows readers to feel a similar sense of imagery in the English context, that is, women are regarded as a kind of existence that is relaxed and has nothing to do with important matters, just like the scenery in life. In both cultures, there is a recognition of the relatively secondary status of women in certain situations. The sense of powerlessness of women in the face of important matters (life and death, rise and fall) expressed in the translation "Women are not that important. They have no power over matters of life and death, glory and decline" reflects a common perception of women's roles in a culture. And comparing women to "scenery" shows a similar perception in both

Chinese and English cultures that women are regarded as an existence with ornamental value and can bring a sense of relaxation and pleasure. The translation reflects this similarity in cultural cognition, enabling English readers to understand the meaning expressed in the original text based on the similar perception of women in their own culture.

3.2 Replacing the Vehicle to Reconstruct the Image

Due to cultural differences, sometimes directly retaining the vehicle may make it difficult for target language readers to understand the metaphorical meaning of the original text. In such cases, the translator chooses the translation strategy of replacing the vehicle to reconstruct the female image. For example, regarding the metaphor in the novel that uses "pigeons" to symbolize the freedom and longing of women like Wang Qiyao, since "pigeons" have different symbolic meanings in Western culture, the translator selects a vehicle with a similar symbolic meaning in Western culture, such as "butterfly". Although the translation strategy of replacing the vehicle changes the vehicle in the original text, by choosing a vehicle with a similar meaning in the target language culture, the translation can better conform to the cognition and cultural background of the target language readers, thus effectively conveying the metaphorical meaning of the original text and reconstructing the female image. To a certain extent, this strategy sacrifices the cultural characteristics of the original text but improves the comprehensibility and readability of the translation. For instance:

ST：上海小姐却是过眼的**美景**，人人有份。

TT：Miss Shanghai, however, was a **feast for the eyes** and everyone got a share.

The translation replaces "美景" with "a feast for the eyes", adopting the translation strategy of replacing the vehicle. "美景" emphasizes the beautiful scenery, while "a feast for the eyes" places more emphasis on the rich and intense feelings brought to the eyes, which is a more dynamic and appealing expression. Through this replacement, the translator reconstructs the image in the original text, making the translation more distinctive in expression and more capable of attracting the attention of English readers. In Chinese culture, comparing women to "美景" is a relatively common and implicit expression, regarding women as existences with aesthetic value and pleasing to the eye, just like

appreciating beautiful natural scenery. This metaphor reflects the appreciation of women's external beauty in Chinese culture and also carries certain traditional aesthetic concepts. In English culture, the expression "a feast for the eyes" places more emphasis on the visual enjoyment and impact. The word "feast" itself implies richness and grandeur, suggesting that the visual experience brought by women is intense and diverse. This reflects that when describing women in English culture, there may be a preference for using more direct and expressive words and expressions, which is different from the relatively implicit "美景" in Chinese culture. Despite the difference in the vehicle, both "美景" and "a feast for the eyes" reflect a similar perception of regarding women as objects of appreciation. Both expressions focus on the external aspects of women, emphasizing that they can bring visual pleasure and enjoyment, indicating that there is a commonality in the perception of women at a certain level in both Chinese and English cultures, that is, both recognize that women's external charm has a certain ornamental value.

3.3 Omitting the Vehicle to Strengthen the Image

In some cases, the translator chooses the translation strategy of omitting the vehicle and strengthens the female images. For some metaphorical sentences describing Wang Qiyao's beauty, the translator omit the specific vehicle and directly emphasize the degree of her beauty. For instance, the Chinese idiom "闭花羞月" is translated as "stunningly beautiful" by the translator, omitting the vehicles "花 (flower)" and "月 (moon)". Since the idiom "闭月羞花" is uniquely characteristic of Chinese culture, and the meanings of "flower" and "moon" in Western culture are different from those in Chinese culture, in order to keep the translation concise, the translator adopts the strategy of omitting the vehicle here.

Omitting the vehicle can make the translation more concise and clear, highlight the key points, and strengthen the female image. It is applicable to situations where the metaphorical meaning is relatively obvious, or it is difficult to find a suitable equivalent for the vehicle in the target language culture. For example:

ST：于是社会上一时盛传这些小姐都已经**名花有主**，谁对谁也有名有姓。

TT：Suddenly rumors started flying around that the girls were all **kept women**, and people even gossiped about the famous men each was involved with.

In the above example, the original expression "名花有主" is a vivid metaphorical expression. It uses "名花 (famous flower)" to metaphorize these girls, comparing them to beautiful and precious flowers, and "有主 (having an owner)" implies that they already have a possessor. In the translation, the translator adopts the translation strategy of omitting the vehicle and does not directly translate "名花". Instead, the focus is on conveying the core meaning of "already having a possessor", directly translating it as "the girls were all kept women". This translation method avoids the difficulty of finding a specific equivalent for "名花" in English that can accurately convey the metaphorical meaning of the original text. Because in English culture, there is no exactly corresponding flower metaphor that can convey the idea of a woman being possessed by someone else in the same way. After omitting the vehicle, the translation is more concise and direct, and readers can quickly grasp the key information, that is, these girls already have specific relationship partners. At the same time, it also strengthens a certain characteristic of the female image, that is, their state of being possessed by others. Based on retaining the core meaning of the original text, this translation strategy makes the translation more in line with the expression habits of English, making it easier for English readers to understand the social phenomenon described in the original text and the passive situation of women.

4. Conclusion

This study has conducted an in-depth analysis of the English translation of the metaphors of female images in Wang Anyi's novel *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* from the perspective of cognitive metaphor, revealing the different ways of handling the metaphors of female images in the translation process and their roles in cross-cultural communication. During the translation process, taking into account factors such as cultural differences, the acceptance level of target language readers, and the artistic features of the original text, the translator adopts three translation strategies: retaining the vehicle, replacing the vehicle and omitting the vehicle, and selects appropriate strategies to deal with the metaphors of female images.

The study on the English translation of the

metaphors of female images in *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* not only helps to better understand the construction and conveyance of female images in the novel but also provides new ideas and methods for the English translation of literary works. In future literary translations, translators should pay more attention to the translation of metaphors, give full play to the role of metaphors in cultural dissemination and image building, and promote the understanding and communication between different cultures. At the same time, future research can be further expanded to the study of the English translation of the metaphors of female images in other literary works, as well as the impact of metaphor translation on the cognition and cultural concepts of target language readers, so as to promote the in-depth development of translation studies.

References

Berry, M. & S. C. Egan. (2008). *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*: A Novel of Shanghai. New York: Columbia University Press.

Cen Qunxia. (2019). An analysis on the translation of Wang Anyi's *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* in Shanghai from the perspective of field theory. *Journal of Beijing International Studies University*, (04), 48-62.

Hou Liang Yan. (2024). Study on the English translation of the novel *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* from the perspective of translation aesthetics. *Jingu Wenchuang (今古文创)*, (45), 106-109.

Liu Yunhong. (2005). A restudy of cognitive metaphor theory. *Foreign Languages and Their Teaching*, (08), 16-18+29.

Qu Huiyu. (2015). An analysis of women and time and space in the English translation of Wang Anyi's *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* from the perspective of feminism. Beijing Foreign Studies University.

Wang Anyi. (2004). *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House.

Wang X L, Li J J. (2015). A corpo-based study on strengthening degree adverbs in the English translation of *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*. *Journal of Shanghai University of International Business and Economics*, (22), 81-89.

Wu Yun, (2012). Overseas narration written in Shanghai: The dissemination and acceptance of the English translation of *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*. *Journal of Social Science*, (09), 185-192.

Wu Yun. (2012). A study on the translation ethics of contemporary Chinese literature — A case study of Bai Ruiwen and Chen Yuxian's *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*. Chinese Translation, (03), 98-102.

Xu Jun, Mu Lei. (2009). Introduction to Translation Studies. Nanjing: Yilin Publishing House.