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Hu Ying. Tales of translation : composing the new woman in China, 1899-1918

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Book Reviews

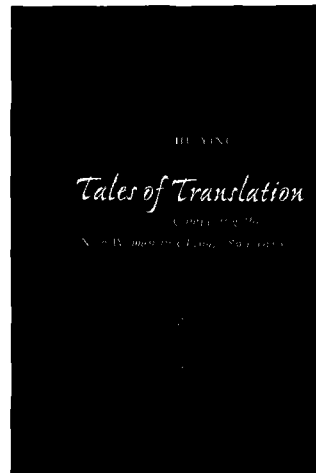
Tales of Translation: Composing the New Woman in China, 1899-1918. By Hu Ying. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000. 265 pp. ISBN 0804737746 (Cloth).

Reconstructing China's modernization process is like putting together a jigsaw puzzle. Scholars in the humanities and social sciences alike have taken various approaches to assemble a complete picture of how China has striven to modernize. Included in these efforts is the examination of how China reimagined and subsequently reinvented its womankind. This modern female personage, known as *xin nǚxing*, had inspired many women of the May Fourth era to embrace independence and political and social activism. Those who immediately come to our mind are: Lu Xiaoman, Bai Yang, Bai Wei, the Song sisters, Chen Boer, as well as Taiwan's Xie Xuehong and Hong Kong's Yan Shanshan, to name only a handful.

However, before these remarkable women were able to assert an iconoclastic identity, such a possibility must already have been contemplated and even experimented with. Hence, it begs questions like: Who were imagining a new woman for China at a time of intense political and cultural turmoil? How did this new identity fit in the larger scheme of nation building? Most of all, how did the West figure in these projects? Hu Ying's *Tales of Translation: Composing the New Woman in China, 1899-1918* is an attempt to answer these questions. Her study examines the pre-dawn period of the May Fourth Movement by focusing on how Western female icons were utilized by intellectuals such as Liang Qichao to propagate new visions and values for the nation. These icons also served—for popular fiction writers like Zeng Pu—as a lens through which the disquieting presence of Western culture could be comprehended. Standing at the crossroads between building a new China and sustaining its endangered traditional culture is the faint figure of China's

新女性

陸小曼 白楊
白薇 陳波兒
謝雪紅 嚴珊珊



曾樸

new woman, still in its early stage of conception.

Already prescribed in this figure are conflicts between the old and the new, between traditional China and the modern West, and between an inherited gender paradigm and a radical discourse ready to be launched by this figure. How this figure could contain, and find balance between, these conflicts would necessarily shape the trajectory of the modernization of China.

Hu's strategy of investigation is to come from the "other" side of the matter. Instead of tracing the development of China's "new woman," she follows the process of how imported Western female icons—"La Dame aux camélias," Sophia Perovskaia, and Madame Roland de la Platière—were imagined and appropriated by the late Qing and early Republican intelligentsia to forge the Chinese new-*cum*-modern woman. Hu argues that China's modernization, vis-à-vis the construction of *xin nǚxing*, is engineered not so much by the mechanism of westernization but cultural assimilation and manipulation of China's indigenous model of the *cainü*. Hence, the early blueprint for the new woman of modern China was not designed for her to emerge as an imitated product of Western feminism; instead, she was to be a composite of the traditional *cainü* dressed in Western clothes and possessing modern knowledge, with all her old virtues intact nonetheless.

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Hu begins her scrutiny with Fu Caiyun, the heroine of *Niehai hua* [Flower in a sea of retribution, 1905-7]. Read as a transgressor of gender, class and language, this figure embodies Zeng Pu's anxiety as a traditional scholar caught between Confucian learning and Western knowledge. On the one hand, Hu interprets Caiyun's power of transformation to indicate the possibility for Chinese women to step beyond the traditional boundaries that restrain her. But when Caiyun is compared with her Western counterparts, Hu shows her to be someone who is without the genuine feelings of the Lady of the Camellias. In Hu's analysis, Caiyun also lacks patriotic passion and virtue—unlike her teacher Sarah Aizenson, the Russian anarchist whose selflessness and idealism only make Caiyun appear bourgeois. Finally, when Caiyun is pitted against her historical foil, Sai Jinhua, her ability of self-liberation becomes nothing but a self-serving power.

賽金花

The relationship between Zeng Pu and his women characters, both Chinese and Western, is therefore ambiguous.

Hu's analysis of Caiyun suggests that the novelist intended to distance himself from his daring creation of such a "modern" woman. It is difficult to tell whether we see in Caiyun a revolutionary breakthrough of the courtesan stereotype or a denial of the possibility for a new woman to emerge. The model of this new woman, however, is more likely to come from female historical characters borrowed from the West. As Hu concludes in the second chapter of her book, Caiyun's primary function lies in her "threading" of the historical change Zeng Pu intended to depict in his novel. The ability of Caiyun, an unlikely player at a time of historical change, to transform herself and her lack of patriotism are what enables her to act. But acting to what end? And what does it mean for a traditional scholar like Zeng Pu to create a transgressor like Caiyun, while holding her back from attaining any importance in a novel that is set to record history?

In her third chapter, Hu discusses the "translingual" practice in Lin Shu's translation of *La Dame aux camélias*. Lin Shu's practice of face-to-face translation (*duiyi*) provides an intriguing and effective example for cross-cultural studies. Translation in the late Qing means a brazen appropriation of the original work. The translator usually usurps the original author's place and becomes the author of the novel. But it is also because of such unapologetic appropriation that allows translators like Lin Shu to make the Western world approachable and imaginable for the Chinese readership. The purpose, as Hu analyzes Lin Shu's practice, is to point out the moral decline in society, and the exotic Western landscape serves as a stage where new morals could be propagated. What seems contradictory to Hu, though, is that while making a great contribution in introducing Western culture to the Chinese public, Lin Shu also unreservedly condemns the decadent Parisian culture (which he helped to bring in) for corrupting Chinese morals.

According to Hu's reading, Lin Shu as a translator of culture (and not just literature) is "caught in different and conflicting roles" (88), who suffers from a lack of "coherence of self-image" (89). But, is it possible that Hu has overplayed the element of conflict here? Western literature to Lin Shu is a borrowed stage where he is able to play his role of the traditional intellectual who, in a time of crisis, must act as the conscience of

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his people. Therefore, appropriating and manipulating Western literary works as a means of moral expression would seem quite logical, if not at all natural.

The Lady of the Camellias was the conduit whereby many Chinese intellectuals of the early twentieth century conveyed their frustration with—and expectations for—China. Following her analyses of Lin Shu's translation of *La Dame aux camélias* and Lin's own re-creation of the same character in "Liu Tingting," Hu provides two more literary imitations of the famed fictional figure in *Yu li hun* [Jade pear spirit] by Xu Zhenya and in "Suizan ji" [Tale of the broken hairpin] by Su Manshu.

The analysis of *Yu li hun* is somewhat unfocused and its purpose is not clearly demonstrated. *Yu li hun*, one of the most important modern sentimental novels, in fact requires a much more detailed reading than Hu has given, which may explain the inadequacy of her analysis. Hu's reading of "Suizan ji," albeit thorough, somehow misses an important and relevant point: the varying attitudes between generations of Chinese intellectuals toward traditional learning and new learning. Separated by more than thirty years (Lin Shu was born in 1852 and Su Manshu in 1884), critical differences in these two intellectuals' value systems reflect China's modernization process. Contrary to Lin Shu's reliance on the Confucian classics as his moral authority in "Liu Tingting," Su Manshu's choice of a rather obscure source, *Yue jue shu* of the Eastern Han, is an intriguing switch. Does this change mean anything? A dialogue between these texts should be illuminating, but unfortunately it is not provided by Hu.

In the fourth chapter, Hu gives an interesting and wide-ranging study of the late Qing fascination with the Russian woman anarchist, Sophia Perovskaia. Hu traces various popular literary productions of Sophia, ranging from short biographies and photographic portraits (*xiaozhao*) to full-length novels. Collectively, these literary and photographic reproductions of the image of Sophia help create a figure of the female revolutionary in China, most "realistically" represented by Qiu Jin. Her fictional counterpart is to be found in an elaborate portrayal of Sophia (Su Feiya) in the novel *Dong'ou nühaojie* [Female heroes of Eastern Europe].

Paralleling the story of Su Feiya is that of Hua Mingqing, the novel's protagonist who is modeled after Liang Qichao's

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玉離魂 徐枕亞
碎簪記 蘇曼殊

越絕書

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華明卿

biography of the Chinese woman doctor, Kang Aide. Mingqing's overseas experience and her foreign education are the main characteristics of the new Chinese woman as imagined by the novelist. By juxtaposing this novel against Liang Qichao's biography and various portraits of Sophia, Hu presents the *xin nüxing* at this stage as a professional armed with western education (i.e., independent), who also possesses the virtues of a traditional Chinese daughter (i.e., moral) and leads a colorful life style (i.e. rebellious). Unaware that this reading of the *xin nüxing* can become positivistic, Hu focuses on her overarching theme of "translation" and continues to build the argument that, before the image of the new woman becomes conceivable, the exotic must be familiarized or domesticated first.

It is true that "familiarization of the exotic" has become, by now, a not-so-surprising critical observation; what can be equally unsurprising is the revelation of the novelist's questionable gender. Nonetheless, this is the very problem of the novel *Dong'ou nühaojie*. According to Hu, there has been speculation that a male writer might have freely borrowed a well-known woman doctor's pen name to write a novel about "modern" women. In order to avoid falling into the trap of explaining the appropriation as a manifestation of patriarchal desire to dominate the feminine other, Hu interprets this practice from a different angle. She argues that such authorial usurpation, in fact, provides the male writer an opportunity to create a "new man"—the new woman's perfect double (151)—as his modern (or modernized) identity. While this reading may yield exciting insights into how the late Qing and early Republican male intelligentsia reinvent themselves, Hu should not downplay the fact that authorial usurpation here does become gender usurpation. How, then, does this double crossing-over differ from the linguistic transgression as practiced by Lin Shu? If indeed Hu's attempt in this book is to prove that China's modernization is closely linked to the creation of the new woman via "translation," then she needs to establish a critical dialogue between her various cases of cultural/linguistic/gender translations of Western female icons. Without substantial contextualization, the figure of China's new woman at this early stage will remain pale.

The lack of comparison between Hu's case studies

黃綉球

becomes even more of a critical fallout in the last chapter. Here, she presents three very interesting examples of how the figure of Madame Roland is manipulated by a feminist writer, who is also a zealous political reformer, and the populace, to express interest in and desire for the new Chinese woman. Acknowledged by Hu as “a pioneering feminist work by Yi Suo” (154), the novel *Huang Xiuqiu* tells the story of how an illiterate Chinese woman is inspired by the Western figure, Madame Roland, and transforms herself into a feminist and an advocate of women’s education. The intriguing thing in the relationship between the two women, as Hu points out, is that the figure of Madame Roland is actually conjured up by the protagonist Huang Xiuqiu, who desires to be a feminist; Madame Roland does not simply “arrive” at Huang Xiuqiu’s dream.

法國女英雄彈詞

By Hu’s own account, not only is this novel written by a feminist; it is also a confluence of the *tanci* rendition of Madame Roland in *Faguo nüyingxiong tanci* [Tale of a French woman hero], also written by a woman, and Liang Qichao’s biography of Madame Roland. Introducing *tanci* as a gendered genre for women, Hu argues that in the *tanci* booklet, the foreign figure is nicely integrated into the popular literary tradition of romance, heroism, and tragedy. Liang Qichao’s biography of Madame Roland, on the contrary, curiously reflects a self-image that closely resembles the model woman. In Liang’s portrayal, Madame Roland comes alive as a tireless fighter for liberty, an excellent reader and writer, and a stunning beauty. Remarkably, she is also a modest woman who is always silent when in public. By projecting and writing his self-image of a passionate reformer and avant-garde intellectual onto this modern Western woman (and vice versa), Liang Qichao is at once the ideal (and mute) woman and her mouthpiece. Does this not also remind us of the same kind of desire to identify with, as well as to show dominance over, the Western female icon in Zeng Pu’s and Lin Shu’s cases? Most importantly, how does a woman writer’s identification with the Western female other differ from the case of a male writer? All these questions are crucial in our attempt to understand how China’s new woman was constructed to aid the national project of modernization.

Hu concludes her last chapter with Huang Xiuqiu expressing her new confidence in taking over the torch from

Madame Roland and becoming the new heroine for the dawning era. In the epilogue, Hu reaffirms the power of translation to create a space for the woman to assert her new cultural authority and identity. Nevertheless, the precariousness of border-crossing itself, be it linguistic, cultural, or gender, still makes it treacherous for the new woman of China to travel down the path of modernization.

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