

Original Paper

Reconstruction of Female Discourse in the Translation of Chinese Online Literature: A Case Study of The Legend of Fuyao

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Received: December 22, 2025 Accepted: January 28, 2026 Online Published: February 3, 2026
doi:10.22158/eltls.v8n1p34 URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/eltls.v8n1p34>

Abstract

With the global spread of Chinese online literature, translation has become a crucial factor influencing its reception. The Legend of Fuyao, as a representative female-centered web novel, demonstrates significant linguistic and cultural transformations in its English translation. Based on Fairclough's three-dimensional framework of Critical Discourse Analysis, this study examines the changes in the heroine Meng Fuyao's discourse style at the textual, discourse-practice, and social-practice levels. The findings reveal that at the textual level, the aggressiveness and authority of the heroine's language are generally weakened in translation; at the discourse practice level, the translator's strategies, the platform's operational logic, and readers' reception collectively contribute to a shift toward a more moderate and fluent style; at the social practice level, translation not only redistributes power discourse but also reflects differing cultural expectations regarding female representation.

Keywords

The Legend of Fuyao, critical discourse analysis, female discourse, cross-cultural communication

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

In recent years, with the rapid development of Chinese online literature, its translations have gradually gained attention in the global market. Translation, as the core link in its cross-cultural communication, directly affects its dissemination effectiveness worldwide. The Legend of Fuyao is a Chinese web novel set in an alternate historical context. Its English version, translated by Atlas Studios, was released on the Webnovel platform, comprising 345 chapters. It has accumulated approximately 1.8 million views and a rating of 4.42/5, receiving widespread acclaim among overseas readers.

Meng Fuyao begins her journey as a girl at the bottom of society, confronted with immense survival challenges. She is strong-willed, sharp-tongued, witty, and vengeful, fitting the typical “female heroism arc,” a narrative pattern in which a female protagonist acquires agency and authority through sustained resistance, struggle, and self-assertion. Some readers praise the female protagonist as “strong and independent,” while others find her character “sometimes too rebellious,” indicating divergent interpretations of female roles across cultures. Consequently, the translation of the novel is not merely a linguistic transformation but also a practical exploration of how female power discourse is received, adapted, and reconstructed in cross-cultural contexts.

Particularly noteworthy is the distinct characteristic of female power discourse exhibited by the heroine Meng Fuyao in the source text. Examples include the use of imperial self-references, violent language, and imperative tones, constructing a female discourse paradigm characterized by explicit power assertion and agentive subjectivity. However, during the English translation process, such pragmatic features representing female authority show a significant tendency to be attenuated, transforming into more implicit semantic expressions. This study employs Critical Discourse Analysis to trace the trajectory of gender identity changes during translation, thereby contributing theoretical value to gender-oriented translation studies.

1.2 Current Research Status

Supported by feminist translation theory, academia has extensively explored the transformation of female images in translation. Simon (1996) proposed that translation is an act of “discursive manipulation,” where translators, when handling female characters, are inevitably influenced by gender ideologies, emphasizing the complexity of gender discourse and the translator’s subjectivity in the translation process. Zhu et al. (2023) pointed out that in contemporary translation practice, female images still frequently undergo “depowerment” treatment, meaning translators tend to weaken their original dominant expressions to align with the gender perceptions of the target culture.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has gradually become an important method in translation studies for exploring the relationship between language and ideology. The three-dimensional analysis model proposed by Fairclough (1995) provides the core framework for this approach. This model consists of three interrelated dimensions: the Text dimension focuses on the specific manifestations of language, such as lexical choices, syntactic structures, and rhetorical strategies, aiming to reveal explicit or implicit ideological expressions within the text; the Discourse Practice dimension examines the production, distribution, and consumption processes of the text, emphasizing how language is constructed and interpreted in social interaction; the Social Practice dimension places discourse within macro-social structures, exploring its interaction with power relations and cultural ideologies. Through this tripartite analytical path, researchers can deeply excavate the social meanings behind discourse and its underlying power relations. This model provides a theoretical tool for analyzing the reconstruction of gender discourse in translation and has been widely applied in gender studies within political, educational, and media contexts (Henaku, 2023), but its systematic application in online literature

translation remains relatively scarce.

Simultaneously, existing research also indicates that due to factors such as platform norms, reader acceptability, and commercial censorship mechanisms, online literature is more prone to “softening” and “neutralizing” language styles during English translation (Cabrera & Niehues, 2023; Salman, 2024).

1.3 Research Significance and Positioning

This study selects the Chinese and English texts of *The Legend of Fuyao* as corpora. Utilizing Fairclough’s three-dimensional discourse analysis model, it investigates the transformation mechanisms of the heroine’s power discourse and the underlying cultural motivations from the textual, discourse practice, and social practice levels. This research aims to address the following three questions:

1. In the English translation of *The Legend of Fuyao*, how does the translator handle the linguistic features that construct the heroine’s power and subjectivity (e.g., imperial self-references, violent lexicon, and imperative tones)?
2. What ideologies, gender norms, or target-culture acceptability considerations drive the translator’s strategies in reconstructing the heroine’s linguistic style?
3. Is the translation influenced by external factors such as the translator’s identity, the power structure of gender discourse, the choice of translation strategies, and platform dissemination mechanisms?

2. Analysis

2.1 Textual Level Analysis

2.1.1 Weakening of Personal References

In the English translation, nearly all self-references have been standardized to the ordinary pronoun “I.” According to word frequency statistics generated by AntConc from the first chapter, “I” appears 638 times, “me” 143 times, “my” 108 times, and “myself” only 3 times in the English text. In contrast, self-references carrying identity or emotional connotations, such as “本宫” (this palace/I, the Empress) and “老娘” (your old mother/I, your elder), are entirely absent (See Table 1). The term “老娘” appears four times in the source text, serving to reinforce Meng Fuyao’s rebellious stance. A further examination of the full corpus reveals that this term occurs approximately 45 times in subsequent chapters, indicating its persistence and representativeness throughout the text. Thus, the use of “老娘” is not incidental; rather, it functions as a crucial self-reference that consistently constructs the character’s sense of power and subjectivity. By comparison, although the frequency of terms like “老娘” and “本宫” in the source text is far lower than that of “I,” they play a vital role in building the protagonist’s subjective identity.

Table 1. Comparison of Heroine's Self-References in Chinese and English

Category	Chinese Source Example	Frequency	English Translation Example	Frequency
<i>Ordinary Self-references</i>	我	496	I me my myself	638 143 108 3
<i>Identity-loaded Self-references</i>	老娘	4	Not translated	0

In the source text, Meng Fuyao often uses specific self-references to reinforce her status and authority. In the first chapter, as her identity has not yet transformed, courtly self-references like “本宫” do not appear; instead, she uses “我” (I) and the more Jianghu-style, provocative “老娘.” However, in the English translation, these differentiated self-references are almost entirely erased. The translator consistently uses “I” for all contexts, transforming the originally hierarchical and gender-charged language into ordinary first-person pronouns. This “de-differentiation” treatment makes the heroine’s language style closer to everyday speech and potentially more acceptable to target language readers. But simultaneously, the strong and unbridled image constructed through these specific self-references in the source text is significantly diluted.

2.1.2 Neutralization of Reprimanding Language

Reprimanding language refers to utterances used by characters in verbal communication to express strong dissatisfaction, criticism, or disparagement. From a pragmatic perspective, it can be defined as a strong critical speech act, often carrying obvious aggressiveness, sarcasm, or a coercive tone (Searle, 1969)[6]. Its function is to establish the speaker’s authoritative position through linguistic means.

In *The Legend of Fuyao*, Meng Fuyao’s reprimanding language not only reflects her “sharp-tongued” and rebellious personality but also serves as an important means for her to construct discursive power and showcase female subjectivity. However, the translation fails to fully reproduce the violence and directness of this language, leading to a weakening of her discursive power.

[Example 1]

Source Text: “祝你夫妻百年好合，犬寿无疆”.

Target Text: “I wish you a happy husband and wife for a hundred years.”

In the source text, the heroine sarcastically tells her opponent, “祝你夫妻百年好合，犬寿无疆”. “犬寿无疆” is actually a malicious parody and derogatory alteration of the traditional blessing “万寿无疆” (boundless longevity). “万寿无疆” originally was a respectful phrase wishing longevity to the monarch, carrying solemn and dignified semantic connotations; the “犬” (dog) in “犬寿无疆” is not just an animal term but a highly insulting metaphor, degrading the opponent to a lowly, dependent beast,

thereby intensifying Meng Fuyao's contempt and dominance. However, in the translation, this key sarcastic expression is completely omitted, retaining only the literal blessing of the first part, translated as "I wish you a happy husband and wife for a hundred years." This translation entirely eliminates the derogatory meaning conveyed by "犬," transforming the originally malicious sarcasm into a plain, and even somewhat incongruous, expression of goodwill. This treatment significantly weakens the aggressiveness and coercive force of the heroine's language. It indicates that the translator tends to reduce offensiveness when handling insulting vocabulary, making the translation more aligned with the aesthetic expectations of the target culture.

2.2 Discourse Practice Level Analysis

At the discourse practice level, Fairclough emphasizes that discourse does not exist in isolation but is constantly shaped and reshaped through the dynamic processes of production, distribution, and consumption. In the cross-cultural dissemination of *The Legend of Fuyao*, the translator, publishing platform, and readers collectively participate in this chain, thereby influencing the presentation and reception of the heroine's power and subjectivity.

2.2.1 Production: Translator's Interpretation and Treatment

The production process of translation first involves the translator's understanding and interpretation of the source text. Overall, when handling the heroine's linguistic features (such as self-references, reprimanding language, and imperative sentences), the translator shows a tendency combining "literal translation" and "mitigation." Beyond the leveling of differentiated self-references mentioned earlier, the tone of imperative sentences also shows attenuation in translation.

For example, the translation of imperative sentences demonstrates a trend of weakening force. The source text contains a line: "没死的都给我过来！有路了！" (All who aren't dead, come over here! There's a path!). The consecutive use of short, sharp imperatives carries a clear commanding and urgent tone, reflecting the heroine's strength and decisiveness in a critical situation. However, in the English translation, this is rendered as "Come over here if you're alive! There's a way out!". While the basic semantics correspond, the force of the tone is noticeably reduced. The phrase "没死的" (all who aren't dead) in the source text carries a rough, even ruthless, connotation, while the translation weakens this aggressiveness into a neutral statement through the conditional clause "if you're alive." The coercive sense in "都给我过来" (come over here, all of you) in the source text becomes closer to a routine summons in the translation.

Therefore, at the production stage, the translator's strategies generally tend to mitigate the aggressiveness and distinctive features of the source text, aiming for basic semantic fidelity and natural fluency in the target language. While this strategy enhances the acceptability of the translation, it inadvertently dilutes the subjectivity embedded in Meng Fuyao's language.

2.2.2 Distribution: Influence of Platform and Publishing

In the distribution stage, publishing platforms are not merely passive disseminators but "re-producers" shaping the text. *The Legend of Fuyao* is primarily distributed to English-speaking readers through

platforms like Webnovel. The editorial norms, market positioning, and commercial logic of such platforms significantly impact the discursive style of the translation.

Firstly, platforms often prioritize “fluency” and “update speed,” which directly impacts the translation’s completeness and linguistic quality. As one reader explicitly noted, “Each sentence doesn’t fit with the next one so the readers will feel confused at the end,” a comment indicating that the platform’s translation suffers from fragmentation and omissions, thereby weakening the original text’s linguistic tension and contextual coherence. Another reader further criticized, “The translation leaves much to be desired as it seems to skip portions entirely... with nothing to separate the two,” suggesting that, for the sake of pacing control or acceptability, the translation has omitted transitional scenes and contextual details. Consequently, the sense of urgency and coercive force inherent in Meng Fuyao’s language is significantly diluted.

Furthermore, platforms, considering reader acceptability and market adaptability, tend to simplify or omit expressions that are culturally loaded or stylistically too intense. For instance, parodic expressions deeply embedded in traditional Chinese cultural contexts like “犬寿无疆,” due to the lack of equivalent imagery in English and potential comprehension difficulties, are completely omitted in the translation. While this practice lowers the threshold for cross-cultural reading, it also leads to the dilution of the rebellious intent and satirical effect constructed by Meng Fuyao through parodying traditional authoritative discourse.

Therefore, in the distribution stage, through editorial strategies and discursive regulation mechanisms, the platform filters out expressions that are too intense or culturally specific, and reshapes the overall style of the text to fit market expectations. While this approach enhances the dissemination efficiency and acceptability of the translation, it inevitably dilutes the rebelliousness, aggressiveness, and subjective consciousness in Meng Fuyao’s language, leading to the reconstruction of her female image in cross-cultural communication.

2.2.3 Consumption: Reader Reception and Reinterpretation

In the consumption stage, readers’ understanding and feedback provide final evidence for the flow of discourse in the translated text. Overseas readers are not passive recipients; they actively participate in the “reproduction” of the text through comments, ratings, and secondary interpretations.

Despite the noticeable stylistic softening and cultural omissions in the translation process, some readers still affirm the effectiveness of the translation in conveying emotions and character portrayal, e.g., “Such wonderful characters and interesting world building... it is able to convey so much emotion, even in its translated form.” This suggests that Meng Fuyao’s subjectivity is still partially perceived, but its presentation has been recoded from the “dominant”/“sharp-tongued” image in the Chinese context into a “resilient” or “independent” image that better meets international readers’ expectations. However, almost no readers mention Meng Fuyao’s sarcastic language or “sharp-tongued” traits in their comments. This absence indicates that in the cross-cultural communication process, the aggressiveness of the heroine’s discourse has been systematically weakened, ultimately disappearing in the

reinterpretation by target language readers. It is replaced by a milder model that aligns with Western gender discourse expectations.

Therefore, the consumption stage is not merely a process of understanding but also a process of discursive reconstruction. While Chinese readers perceive “rebellion and dominance,” English readers, based on their familiarity with Western popular culture narratives, reinterpret Meng Fuyao as a ‘independent’ and ‘resilient’ female character. As Tasker and Negra (2007) pointed out, the ‘strong female character’ trope commonly found in Western media is often simplified, stripped of its sharpness and challenging aspects, becoming a more easily accepted trope.

2.3 Social Practice Level

In Fairclough’s CDA framework, the social practice level primarily examines discourse within a broader social context, analyzing its connections with social structures, power relations, and cultural norms.

In the source text, Meng Fuyao’s language challenges traditional gender and power orders through self-references, sarcasm, etc., demonstrating the awakening of female subjective consciousness. However, during the English translation process, these impactful expressions are weakened; while preserving her core agency, the translation also limits its critical force against existing power structures. This transformation reflects ideological differences in the cross-cultural context. Traits like “sharp-tongued” and “rebellious” in the source text are reconstructed into the “independent” and “resilient” image that better fits the Western “strong female lead” narrative model. Translation here performs a kind of cultural filtering, resulting in the softening of confrontation in favor of acceptability. Consequently, overseas readers’ feedback often centers on evaluations like “independent” and “determined,” rarely mentioning her aggressiveness or sarcastic language, indicating that the character image has been repositioned within the gender discourse of the target culture.

From a socio-historical perspective, this translational adjustment is not accidental. The source text originated from the context of Chinese online literature emphasizing “cathartic pleasure” and “rebellion,” while the translation needs to adapt to the dissemination logic and reader preferences of global markets and commercial platforms. Therefore, the transformation of the heroine’s language is actually an inevitable outcome of negotiation in cross-cultural communication – preserving the core traits of the character while enabling its acceptance and understanding in new cultural soil.

3. Conclusion

Employing The Legend of Fuyao and its English translation as the research subject and anchored in Fairclough’s framework of Critical Discourse Analysis, this study has examined the transformation of the heroine Meng Fuyao’s discourse style across three interconnected dimensions: textual, discourse practice, and social practice. The analysis demonstrates that linguistic features central to the construction of female power and subjectivity in the source text—such as persona-laden self-references, sarcastic or reprimanding expressions, and imperative structures—are systematically neutralized or

attenuated in the English translation. As a result, the heroine's discourse shifts from a mode characterized by linguistic confrontation and dominance to a more moderated and individualized style. This shift is not reducible to isolated linguistic choices but is jointly shaped by the translator's strategic mediation, platform norms, and the gender expectations embedded in the target culture.

At a broader theoretical level, this study argues that the English translation of Chinese online literature functions not merely as linguistic transfer but as a form of ideological mediation. Through processes of tonal mitigation and discursive reconfiguration, female subjectivity in the source text is selectively rearticulated to align with culturally sanctioned models of femininity in the target context. In this sense, translation operates as a site where female discourse is not simply reproduced but actively reconstituted, revealing the interplay between language, gender ideology, and market-driven cultural negotiation in cross-cultural communication.

Building on these findings, this study posits that the translation of Chinese online literature need not be confined to a binary choice between "fidelity" and "acceptability." Future translation practices could, while ensuring the naturalness of the target language, employ strategies such as tonal intensification, syntactic modulation, or pragmatic compensation to preserve, to a reasonable degree, the rebelliousness and discursive power inherent in female characters' speech. Furthermore, utilizing translator's notes or prefaces to contextualize a character's linguistic style could serve as a crucial measure to prevent its excessive neutralization during cross-cultural dissemination.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. Primarily constrained by scope and research conditions, the corpus analysis predominantly focused on the first volume of *The Legend of Fuyao*, resulting in a relatively limited sample size and a methodology leaning towards qualitative analysis. Future research could expand the corpus to include multiple volumes or diverse web novel works, and incorporate more systematic corpus-based methods to further examine the patterns and variations in the reconstruction of female discourse.

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