

Dimming the Grey: The Socio-cultural Recasting of Ageing Women in Chinese Translations of *Jane Eyre*

Minlin Yu

Abstract:

*The early twentieth to the twenty-first century marked fundamental changes in gender roles and identities in China. As young Chinese women have become more empowered, transitioning from the rigours of Confucian orthodoxy to personal sovereignty, the authority and respect traditionally reserved for older women have been subtly eroded. During this time, translators act as key participants in this cultural transformation by introducing and adapting Western gender discourses to the Chinese landscape. This research analyses how women of advanced age in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* were represented in three translations spanning a century, focusing on the variations of the descriptors embodying societal status and respect. Drawing from the cultural turns in translation studies, this study contextualises each translation within its cultural history, illuminating how translators face an array of conflicting forces: from imported Western gender discourses and internal cultural reassessments to collectivist and individualist ideologies, as well as patriarchal norms and feminist values. The study employs Mona Baker's word-meaning model to analyse and contrast the cultural terms designating older women in translations. It reveals how the translations engage in "dimming the grey," a process of adapting language to reflect contemporary cultural norms and societal biases that increasingly marginalise ageing women. This study offers a localised perspective that both confirms and problematises the transformative power of translation, recognising its role in cultural transmission, while also highlighting its potential to perpetuate gender biases and marginalisation.*

Keywords: Translation as cultural transformation, Chinese gender discourse, representation of older women

At the close of the nineteenth century, China, under the rule of the Qing dynasty, faced an existential crisis following a series of military defeats by perceived Western powers. This spurred a period of national introspection and importation of Western literature, deemed vital for "enriching impoverished souls and remedying flawed human nature," according to Mao Dun.¹ In this receptive cultural climate, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* was introduced. The novel has thrived in its Chinese translations and retranslations, conveying the beauty and power of gender ideologies across time and borders.

One of the earliest translations of *Jane Eyre* was carried out by Wu Guangjian (1867-1943), a prominent translator dedicated to modernising the nation.² Prefaced in 1927 and published in 1935, his translation was crafted in the new vernacular language "*baihua*," which facilitated the spread of literacy. In his preface, Wu elevates the heroine to a moral stature traditionally reserved for men, "being uncorrupted by wealth and honour, unswayed by poverty and obscurity, and unbent by power and authority".³ His comments echo progressive discourses and debates on gender equality during the May Fourth New Culture movement (1915-1924). Additionally, Wu's approach to translation prioritises naturalness of expression over strict adherence to the source text. His translation procedure, including comprehension, mastery, and rearrangement, endorses a rewriting process, wherein imitation and creation are mutually complementary.⁴ This authorial approach is further illustrated by his interpretative cultural additions, vividly exemplified in his rendition of *Jane Eyre*.

Among all Chinese translations of *Jane Eyre*, Song Zhaolin's 1996 edition stands out as the most frequently reprinted, with at least sixty-nine reprints by over thirty-eight publishers up to 2022.⁵ As a celebrated literary translator and professor at Zhejiang University, Song

¹ Shouhua Qi, *Western literature in China and the translation of a nation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

² Sin-wai Chan and David E. Pollard, *An encyclopaedia of translation: Chinese-English, English-Chinese* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2001).

³ Guangjian Wu, *Gunü piaoling ji 孤女飄零記 [Narrative of a female orphan adrift]* (Shanghai: Shanghai Sanlian Shudian, 2018).

⁴ Xu Zhang, *Wu Guangjian yizuo xuan 伍光建译作选 [Selected translations by Wu Guangjian]* (Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2019); Lifu Wu, *Wu Guangjian fanyi yigao 伍光建翻译遗稿 [Wu Guangjian's translation manuscripts]* (Beijing: Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe, 1980).

⁵ Minlin Yu, "The male lens on Jane Eyre: Translating/Constructing femininity across a century of Chinese cultural history" (PhD diss., University of Glasgow, 2024), <https://theses.gla.ac.uk/84987/>.

(1929-2011) translated over fifty literary works, amounting to a cumulative word count exceeding two hundred million.⁶ His translations to the "World Literature Classics Library" reflect his commitment to delivering a range of culturally and historically resonant texts. In the preface, Song highlights Jane as a symbol of resistance and empowerment, "displaying a rebellious spirit towards society, life, love, marriage, and religion, especially in championing women's independence, autonomy in marriage, and gender equality."⁷ This commentary reflects the translator's acknowledgement of and engagement with the feminist underpinnings of the novel.

Further aligning *Jane Eyre* with feminist values, Li Jihong characterises the literature in his preface "not as a Cinderella-style love story, but as a parable of financial independence, equality of character, and freedom in marriage and romance."⁸ Born in 1980, Li has established himself as a prolific literary translator. His translations exhibit both tendencies to provide extensive notes for culture-specific terms and to adapt them to the Chinese language and culture, maintaining "exotic flavour should not compromise readability".⁹ In public lectures, Li sharply criticised prior translations of Western literature, particularly those from the 1990s, as error-ridden and outdated, failing to meet contemporary needs. This criticism backlash over perceived disrespect for renowned predecessors. Furthermore, the "young genius" marketing associated with his translations has drawn criticism for self-promotion fervour.¹⁰ Despite these controversies, his literary translation series of Western literary works has achieved substantial success in sales.

The analysis of three translators reveals their engagement with feminist ideologies in the prefaces to *Jane Eyre*, coupled with a sensitivity to the Chinese language and cultural context. Far from simply bridging Western women's literature, these translators actively participate in its interpretation and cultural integration. This role invites a re-evaluation of gender narratives within China's changing socio-historical and cultural landscape. While much

⁶ Chun Zhao and Hongbo Gao, *Zhongguo zuojia da cidian 中国作家大辞典 [Encyclopedia of Chinese Writers]* (Beijing: Zhongguo Wenlian Chubanshe, 1999).

⁷ Zhaolin Song, *Jian' ai 简爱 [Jane Eyre]* (Beijing: Zuoja Chubanshe, 2015).

⁸ Jihong Li, *Jian' ai 简爱 [Jane Eyre]* (Tianjin: Tianjin Renmin Chubanshe, 2019).

⁹ Bruce Humes, "Transparent translator series: Q & A with Li Jihong, "Kite Runner" Chinese translator," *Wordpress*, January 23, 2009, <https://bruce-humes.com/2009/01/23/interview-kite-runner-translator/>.

¹⁰ "Mingzhu wuyi de wenti, Daodi you duo yanzhong? 名著误译的问题, 到底有多严重? [How serious are the problems with mistranslations in classic literature?]," Pengpai, January 10, 2020, https://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_5481511.

scholarly attention on gender translation in *Jane Eyre*, including recent works by Huang Yunte and Zhang Lei, has focused on the protagonist and other younger and middle-aged characters, this paper focuses on the representation of the often-overlooked women of advanced age. Drawing on the cultural turns in translation studies, this study contextualises each translation and employs Mona Baker's word-meaning model to analyse and compare the cultural terms used to describe older women across three translations. Particularly, it examines how these variations reflect translators' perceptions and negotiations of gender and ageing, illustrating the role of translation as a cultural practice.

Theoretical Foundation: Cultural Turn in Translation Studies

Emerging in the late twentieth century, the cultural turn in translation studies challenges traditional views of translation as a linguistic transfer. Heavily influenced by poststructuralist and postcolonial thought, it conceptualises translation within the target polysystem, as an interplay among various cultural, social, and political systems, each vying for influence and recognition.¹¹ This perspective, derived from polysystem theory, moves the analytical focus from a source-oriented to a target-oriented approach. While scholars were gradually shifting to the cultural turn, it was Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere who firmly anchored its prominence.¹² As showcased in their collection *Translation, History and Culture*, the term "culture" was enriched, adopting a broader and more concrete meaning beyond its anthropological origins. Within this reconceptualised framework, Bassnett and Lefevere contend that translations are not fashioned within an insulated lexical chamber, untainted by power structures, historical context, or cultural idiosyncrasies.¹³ Instead, they are crafted in response to the cultural exigencies and the needs of diverse groups within that cultural framework. The disciplinary landscape has consequently expanded, moving beyond mere linguistic comparisons between the source and target texts to embrace "cultural contextualisation," which situates translations with wider socio-historical contexts to explore cultural meanings and nuances, albeit at the risk of crystallising culture as monolithic or static.

¹¹ Theo Hermans, *Translation in systems: Descriptive and system-oriented approaches explained*. (Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing, 1999).

¹² Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere, *Translation, history and culture* (London: Cassell, 1990).

¹³ Bassnett and Lefevere, *Translation, history and culture*.

In the cultural dialogue, translation emerges both as a means of empowerment and as an entity bound by established power structures. Translation is not the happy marriage of cultures one might imagine; rather, it often represents a fraught terrain of cultural asymmetries and conflicting ideologies. Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere argue that translation takes place on a vertical axis, denoting an implicit hierarchy between the source and the target.¹⁴ Such a hierarchical arrangement reveals an asymmetry: one language, text, or culture often assumes a dominant role, relegating the other to a subordinate or even marginalised status. The power imbalance at play in translation not only dictates the nature of the works selected for translation but also sets the course for global currents of linguistic and cultural transmission. This inherent power imbalance is juxtaposed against the empowering narrative translation brings into play. The potency of cultural translation resides in its capacity to operate at the intersections of power, knowledge, and identity. Building upon Foucault's conceptualisation of power and knowledge, Román Álvarez and M. Carmen-África Vidal contend that translation serves as an arena for negotiating cultural self-images and subtleties.¹⁵ Translators' agency is encapsulated in "discursive" elements—namely, the actual words, phrases, and sentences used in translation—and "non-discursive" elements, including tone, emphasis, and deliberate choices of omission or inclusion. Therefore, every decision the translator makes—what to include or omit, and how to arrange them—constitutes a voluntary act, revealing their personal experiences and the cultural knowledge or specific stages of sociological development that translators seek to communicate. In the intricate negotiation of meaning, power, and identity, translation unfolds as an essential form of cultural transformation, defining and redefining existing symbolic systems.

Methodology: Bridging Lexical Elements and Cultural Contexts

Building on the theoretical foundation of the cultural turn in translation studies, this research adopts Maria Tymoczko's micro- and macro-level analyses that bridge small-scale textual elements with broader ideological positioning.¹⁶ This bifocal analysis begins with a socio-cultural scaffold that informs the textual elements. The microscopic lens evaluates how

¹⁴ Bassnett and Lefevere, *Translation, history and culture*.

¹⁵ Román Álvarez and M. Carmen Africa Vidal, *Translation, power, subversion* (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 1999).

¹⁶ Maria Tymoczko, "Connecting the two infinite orders research methods in Translation Studies," in *Crosscultural transgressions: Research models in translation: Historical and ideological issues*, ed. Theo Hermans (Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing, 2002).

these linguistic subtleties reflect, reinforce, or even contest broader undercurrents of cultural norms and values. The dual approach affirms the integral relationship between micro and macro dimensions of translation studies, emphasising how language and cultural dynamics are intimately linked and mutually informative.

Translations are like mosaics, pieced together by foundational or "lower-level" linguistic elements like words, phrases, and syntax. These components are not merely a collection of letters or strokes, but the threads that weave the meaning of the text, enabling resonance across cultural landscapes and historical epochs. The importance of lexical items in translated texts, as stated by Gideon Toury, tends to be overlooked, particularly in the theoretical, methodological and practical implications.¹⁷ With attention to these finer details, this study focuses on the linguistic choices and their significance in shaping the texture, tone and tenor of translated narratives and cultural representation. To this end, I am employing the linguistic analytical model synthesised by Mona Baker presented in *In other words: A coursebook on translation*, which draws upon the works of linguists such as D.A. Cruse and Michael Halliday.¹⁸

The propositional meaning is the foundational layer, establishing the basic connection between the word and its referent in the natural or imaginary world (Baker, 1992, p.13-14).¹⁹ For instance, for locals in Xiamen, a city on China's southeast coast, the mention of the popular local dish "*shacha mian*" 沙茶面 (satay noodles) brings to mind soup noodles with rich broth and a customised range of accompaniments such as shrimp, tofu products, and blanched leafy greens. This direct relationship between word and object not only forms the baseline of understanding but also provides the basis for judging a word as true or false. Beyond this objective layer lies the expressive meaning — the emotional, subjective undertones a word might carry. In the context of food choices, for lovers of "*shacha mian*", merely uttering the word might evoke emotions of enthusiasm, yearning and nostalgia. In contrast, those who dislike it might use a more disdainful tone. Notably, in the same language system, synonyms or near-synonyms, despite sharing a core denotative meaning, can exhibit different expressive meanings, imbued with the imprints of historical usages, societal changes, and cultural shifts.

¹⁷ Gideon Toury, *Descriptive translation studies and beyond (Revised edition)* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing, 2012).

¹⁸ Mona Baker, *In other words: A coursebook on translation* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

¹⁹ Baker, *In other words: A coursebook on translation*, 13-14.

Words often carry multiple layers of propositional meaning. Dictionaries provide a structured, researched foundation of established linguistic practices. These references provide basic definitions and concrete examples that elucidate the cultural and emotional subtleties of language, particularly in how words describe different individuals across varied contexts. Recognising the importance of the comprehensiveness of dictionary entries, I have primarily used the second edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* online edition for the English language and, for the Chinese language, the twelve volumes of *Hanyu Da Cidian* 汉语大词典 (Comprehensive Chinese Word Dictionary) in its first edition reprint version, accompanied by a correction volume.²⁰ To deepen the understanding gained from these dictionaries, I include consideration of the literary context, along with broader cultural and historical analyses in both source and target texts.

Gendered Ageing: The Shifting Cultural Landscape for Older Women in China

Gender history, as Maud Anne Bracke, Penelope Morris, and Emily Ryder contend, "represents an ideal setting for the re-thinking of histories of translation practices and the very nature of translation."²¹ The cultural and historical narratives of older women, in particular, provide essential backgrounds for understanding translators' perceptions of gender and ageing. In turn, translators' descriptive references to older female characters variously reflect the changing cultural perceptions and treatments of older women in China from the twentieth to the twenty-first century. These processes involve multiple degrees of negotiation by translators, who balance the imported Western gender discourses and domestic customs and values, the rise of neoliberal and individualist ethics and the enduring influence of Confucian family values. Additionally, translators address the tensions between national interests, such as preserving traditional cultural norms and addressing contemporary demographic crises. The following section contextualises each translator's work, charting the dynamics of older women's roles and perceptions across a century of societal change.

Imperial Tradition and Early Republican China

²⁰ Chen Qi, *Hanyu Da Cidian Dingbu* 漢語大詞典訂補 [Revised supplement to the Comprehensive Chinese word dictionary] (Shanghai: Shanghai Cishu Chubanshe, 2010).

²¹ Maud Anne Bracke, Penelope Morris, and Emily Ryder, "Introduction. translating feminism: Transfer, transgression, transformation (1950s–1980s)," *Gender & History* 30, no. 1 (2018).

Traditionally, older women, like older people in general, have benefited from the Confucian tradition of respecting age, experience, and accumulated wisdom. Central to this tradition is filial piety, a core value of Confucianism that mandates children to respect, obey, support, and care for their older parents.²² In this sociological framework, a woman's life trajectory typically progresses upward, starting as a young wife and mother, subordinate to her mother-in-law, and, with time and age, transitions into the role of a respected grandmother or matriarch, albeit within the limits of a patriarchal structure.²³

Following Chinese military defeats, the May Fourth New Culture Movements in the 1910s and 1920s saw Chinese intellectuals challenge Confucian patriarchal institutions and traditional family ethics, emphasising individual freedom over familial obligations. Women's roles and identities, in particular, were extensively debated and discussed. Reformers like Cai Yuanpei and Hu Shi championed women's transformation from merely "virtuous wives and good mothers" to "autonomous individuals," pushing for their educational and equal rights.²⁴ While this movement centred on the potential of young girls and women to drive social change, it often overlooked older women, despite their continued roles in household management and childcare. They were often portrayed either as enforcers of patriarchal norms in the form of domineering mothers-in-laws, or as victims oppressed by these very structures. Following the 1930s and 1940s, new civil and criminal codes were introduced to recognise each member as autonomous, reforming laws that differentiated between family members based on status. Despite these ideological and legal shifts, the social perception of familial relations evolved much more slowly. As noted by Du Yue, many older generation members continued to uphold traditional filial piety, while both young men and women increasingly asserted their autonomy, often in opposition to their parent's wishes or interests.²⁵ As these young Chinese women

²² Michael Nylan, "Confucian piety and individualism in Han China," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 116, no. 1 (1996).

²³ Diana Lary, *China's grandmothers: Gender, family and ageing from late Qing to twenty-first century* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge, 2002).

²⁴ Yuanpei Cai, "Yangcheng youmei gaoshang sixiang: Zai Shanghai chengdong nüxue yan shuo ci 養成優美高尚思想：在上海城東女學演說詞 [Cultivate noble and elegant thoughts: Speech at the Shanghai Eastern Girls' School]," in *Cai Yuanpei quanji 蔡元培全集 (1910-1916) [The complete works of Cai Yuanpei (1910-1916)]*, ed. Pingshu Gao (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1913); Shi Hu, "Nüzi wenti 女子問題 [The women's question]," *Funü Zazhi*, no. 5 (1921).

²⁵ Yue Du, *State and family in China: Filial piety and its modern reform* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

became more empowered, transitioning from the rigours of Confucian orthodoxy to the realm of personal sovereignty and enlightenment, the hierarchy and authority traditionally reserved for older women was gradually eroded.

Post-reform China

This trend of diminishing traditional values persisted through the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Under Mao Zedong, the nation's leader, the subsequent social and cultural reforms targeted old ideologies and practices deemed incompatible with the socialist ethos. Following Mao's death and his controversial legacies, China initiated economic reforms to decentralise, modernise and industrialise the economy. This shift aligned the country with broader global neoliberal trends emphasising market efficiency, deregulation, and individual autonomy. Concurrently, notable shifts in demographics and family structures unfolded, marked by the implementation of the one-child policy in the 1980s to control population growth, the two-child policy in 2016 and the three-child policy in 2021, aimed at addressing demographic imbalances and the ageing population. The rapid changes in demographics, socio-economics, technology and contemporary culture have undermined Margaret Mead's concept of "postfigurative culture," where knowledge predominately flows from older to younger generations.²⁶ Instead, there is arguably a shift towards a "cofigurative" or even "prefigurative" model, where peers and younger generations increasingly influence learning and cultural norms.

As these traditional frameworks become less applicable or relevant, the customary reverence for the wisdom of elders—traditionally sought and heeded—is now more often honoured in principle than in practice. For older women, parental authority and control over household decisions have become a nostalgic recollection. The generation of older women, who may have once envisioned being served by younger generations as they themselves had served their mothers-in-law, now find the tables turned. Many are expected to support their working daughters and daughters-in-law with childcare and household duties. Childcare roles have evolved from tending infants and young children within family homes to providing extended sole care, lasting weeks, months or even years.²⁷ The shifting treatment of older

²⁶ Margaret Mead, *Culture and commitment: A study of the generation gap* (New York: Natural History Press, 1970).

²⁷ Lary, *China's grandmothers: Gender, family and ageing from late Qing to twenty-first century*.

women in the domestic sphere is further complicated by the physical realities of ageing. As these women grow older, their caregiving capacities naturally diminish, and their level of dependence increases both emotionally and economically. This change occurs, paralleling the fading of the youthfulness and sexual attractiveness that society values in women. This transition from providers to dependents, and from "desirables" to "undesirables", often heightens their marginalisation—a reflection of both familial dynamics and broader societal attitudes that increasingly devalue the roles and experiences of older women.

Indeed, this societal shift is corroborated by research studies documenting a decline in traditional notions of filial piety following economic reforms, a trend increasingly observed from the early twenty-first century onwards.²⁸ While this decline does not signify an abandonment of traditional values, it extends beyond reduced obedience to older family members, also invariably impacting the respect, support, and care afforded to the seniors. This trend is particularly concerning as China, among the first developing countries in the world to have become ageing, grapples with inadequate social welfare and eldercare services. Recognising these challenges, the Chinese government has promoted the revival of traditional family virtues such as respect, support, and care for older women, casting young women in the roles of caregiving wives and daughters-in-law.²⁹ From required elderly care in their youth to expected childcare in old age, women of advanced age find themselves trapped in a caregiving cycle, shaped by changing societal norms and family dynamics. Their substantial contributions, however, have not garnered the deserved respect and recognition, overshadowed by the very structures they help sustain.

Cultural Shades of the Grey: The Ageing Woman in Chinese Translations

The older women in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, often overshadowed in analysis, are integral to the unfolding of the narrative. Among them, three figures assume the most narrative significance in the source text: Alice Fairfax, the housekeeper at Thornfield Hall; the unnamed gypsy fortune-teller; and Hannah, the maid at the Rivers' home. Specifically, the characters'

²⁸ Loreta POŠKAITĖ, "Filial Piety (xiao 孝) for the Contemporary and Global World," *Asian Studies* 2, no. 1 (2014): 99-114; Longtao He, *Care work, migrant peasant families and discourse of filial piety in China* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

²⁹ Neena L. Chappell, "The cultural context of social cohesion and social capital: Exploring filial caregiving," in *Global ageing in the twenty-first century: Challenges, opportunities and implications*, ed. Zachary Zimmer and Susan A. McDaniel (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2013).

societal roles and perceptions are evident through the descriptors and appellations used in the novel. A thorough search shows that the primary descriptors for Alice Fairfax are "older/old lady", contrasting with those for Hannah, who is referred to as either "old woman/person". The consistent use of "lady" in reference to Mrs Fairfax suggests a recognition of respectability in her role, hinting at a higher social standing and perception than Hannah. Nevertheless, both characters embody a sense of loyalty, duty, and service, while also displaying a nurturing, maternal warmth, representing the societal norms and expectations that define their existence. In contrast to the consistent descriptions of the other characters, the gypsy is depicted with a wide array of terms, including "mother," "old creature," "old woman," "beldame," "old crone," and "eld." This variation in descriptors reflects a range of Victorian stereotypes of gypsies, from mystery and deception to cunning and even danger. Historically, gypsies have resided continuously in England since the early sixteenth century, often portrayed in gothic novels as "impoverished vagrants" and "criminal underclass".³⁰ Despite living on the fringes of society, they were considered free and enigmatic individuals who were simultaneously admired and feared for their purported supernatural powers.

In each of the three selected Chinese translations, Mrs. Fairfax is uniformly referred to as "lao taitai" 老太太 (old lady), a term that connotes respect for older women, as evidenced in the *Hanyu Da Cidian: Volume Eight*.³¹ In contrast, Hannah's descriptors are translated into more neutral terms, such as "lao fu(ren)" 老妇(人) (old woman), across all of the translations, mirroring their social distinctions as depicted in the source text.³² Significantly, the character of the gypsy fortune-teller, marked by her narrative ambiguity, commands a broader spectrum of translations. Paradoxically, this ambiguity allows translators to engage in their own interpretation and characterisation of older women against the backdrop of the changing Chinese socio-political environment and gender history.

In Chapter Eighteen of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, an enigmatic gypsy presents herself as a fortune-teller from a nearby encampment. Hidden beneath the gypsy cape, Mr. Rochester sheds his identity as a man of wealth and prominence. Arriving uninvited at

³⁰ David Mayall, *Gypsy identities 1500-2000: From Egipcians and Moon-men to the ethnic Romany* (London: Routledge, 2004).

³¹ Zhufeng Luo, *Hanyu Da Cidian 漢語大詞典 [Comprehensive Chinese word dictionary]*, vol. Eight (Shanghai: Hanyu Da Cidian Chubanshe, 1991).

³² Luo, *Hanyu Da Cidian 漢語大詞典 [Comprehensive Chinese word dictionary]*, Eight.

Thornfield Hall, she requests to read the fortunes of only the young, unmarried women present at a social gathering. The footman initially notes the gypsy's arrival, describing her on two separate occasions as a troublesome "old woman" and "a shockingly ugly old creature." Applying Mona Baker's linguistic analytical model, these terms establish the propositional content, identifying her as an elderly and unsightly woman, and convey an expressive response of repulsion and dismissiveness toward her presence.³³ Blanche Ingram, Jane Eyre's romantic rival, demands the entrance of the gypsy she calls "beldame," a term with depreciative connotations and historical links to witchcraft.

As the narrative progresses, the gypsy, having attended to the other ladies, turns her attention to Jane. In the library setting, Jane encounters the fortune-teller, described by Brontë as "seated snugly" with a "bold and direct gaze".³⁴ Despite the gypsy's attempts to engage her, Jane's reserved and discreet responses reflect her "moral equilibrium"—a balanced, ethical sensibility she has developed in adulthood.³⁵ Jane addresses the gypsy as "mother", a term blending the Yorkshire dialect and archaic language, which refers to an older woman of lower social standing, limited means, or education, and indicates either respect or mock respect. This word choice reflects Jane's attitude towards an elder of lower status, influenced by Jane's own nuanced position as an "upper" servant and her acute awareness of societal marginalisation. Despite her cultivated sensibility, Jane neither fits into the working class nor is fully integrated into the upper social echelons. Continuing with the main storyline, Jane's discerning observations gradually lead her to suspect the disguise. Her use of the terms "old woman" and "eld" signifies women of advanced age, while the former is more general, the latter is particularly archaic, with both terms used neutrally or descriptively. Additionally, Jane describes the character as an "old crone," a depreciative term traditionally associated with women believed to possess magical powers, as noted in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Collectively, these descriptors blend realistic attributes of age with mythical and cultural elements. To explore how these nuanced descriptions are interpreted within different historical contexts in China, the translations provided by three translators are presented in the table below.

Table 1-1 Translating descriptors for gypsy

³³ Baker, *In other words: A coursebook on translation*.

³⁴ Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, ed. Margaret Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

³⁵ Harold Bloom, *The Brontës* (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2008).

	Reference and Source Text	Wu Guangjian 1935	Song Zhaolin 1996	Li Jihong 2019
1	House staff: ' <u>old woman</u> ,' quite troublesome.	lao pozi 老婆子 old woman/servant	lao taipo 老太婆 old hag	lao taipo 老太婆 old hag
2	Blanche Ingram: I have a curiosity to hear my fortune told: therefore, Sam, order the <u>beldame</u> forward.	lao pozi 老婆子 old woman/servant	lao pozi 老婆子 old bidy	lao taipo 老太婆 old hag

3	Jane: I don't care about it, <u>mother</u> ; you may please yourself: but I ought to warn you, I have no faith.	lao taipo 老太婆 old woman	dama 大妈 auntie	dama 大妈 dama
4	Jane: But, <u>mother</u> , I did not come to hear Mr Rochester's fortune: I came to hear my own; and you have told me nothing of it.	lao taipo 老太婆 old woman	dama 大妈 auntie	dama 大妈 dama

5	Jane's observation: She muttered the words to herself, as most <u>old women</u> do.	/	lao furen 老妇人 old women	lao taipo 老太婆 old hags
6	Jane's observation: The <u>old crone</u> 'nichered' a laugh under her bonnet and bandage.	lao pozi 老婆子 old woman/servant	lao taipo 老太婆 old hag	lao taipo 老太婆 old hag
7	Jane's observation: The <u>old woman</u> 's voice had changed:	lao pozi 老婆子 old woman/servant	furen 妇人 woman	lao taipo 老太婆 old hag
8	Jane's observation: It was no more the withered limb of <u>eld</u> than my own	lao pozi 老婆子 old woman/servant	lao nianren 老年人 older person	lao taipo 老太婆 old hag
9	Jane's reflection: I knew gypsies and fortune-tellers did not express themselves as this seeming <u>old woman</u> had expressed herself;	lao pozi 老婆子 old woman/servant	lao furen 老妇人 old woman	hen lao de nüren 很老的女人 very old woman

In the cases provided, translators most commonly use three terms to refer to the gypsy: "lao pozi" 老婆子, "lao taipo" 老太婆, and "dama" 大妈. All three terms contain semantic components of "old" and "woman," yet their expressive meanings have evolved, reflecting changes in social status and level of respect.

The term "lao pozi" 老婆子 could historically denote: (a) an older woman generally; (b) an older female servant; or (c) one's wife or women, as outlined in *Hanyu Da Cidian: Volume Eight*.³⁶ In classical Chinese literature, "lao pozi" is frequently employed in a neutral manner to refer to older women or female servants, emphasising their functional roles and responsibilities within the narrative household. Despite its historically neutral connotations, the *Modern Chinese Dictionary*, initiated by the State Council in 1956 to promote Mandarin and standardise the Chinese language, has marked a change in the perception of the term. According to this edition, "lao pozi" is defined as (a) an old woman, carrying a connotation of disdain or dislike, or (b) a colloquial term used by a husband for his wife.³⁷ Subsequent editions of the dictionary have maintained this definition. While the servant-related meaning of "lao pozi" has faded, its denotation of older women continues, albeit taking on a more negative nuance.

In his 1935 translation, Wu Guangjian consistently employs "lao pozi" (old woman) across various narrative voices—Jane Eyre, house staff, and Blanche Ingram—and in different scenarios when referring to the gypsy, as demonstrated in examples one to two and six to nine. Wu also uses it to describe an incidental elderly maid of lower social standing. This broad and consistent application suggests Wu was leveraging the term as a generic descriptor for women in servile positions rather than as a marker of respect or disdain, without necessarily implying derogatory qualities. Turning to Song Zhaolin's 1996 translation, there is a connotative shift in his use of "lao pozi" (old biddy). In example two, it is used exclusively to translate Blanche Ingram's pejorative reference "beldame," aligning with the negativity attached to this expression in his time. The juxtaposition of these two translations illustrates a broader linguistic and cultural transition that I refer to as the "dimming of the grey". This expression illustrates how a traditionally neutral term for older women subtly shifts toward more negative connotations to the extent that it can no longer be used in a neutral sense.

The term "lao taipo" 老太婆 offers further insight into this linguistic transformation. Employed by all three translators to describe the gypsy, its connotation and frequency of use vary across each version. Historically, it functioned as a relatively neutral descriptor for an

³⁶ Luo, *Hanyu Da Cidan* 漢語大詞典 [*Comprehensive Chinese word dictionary*], Eight.

³⁷ Shuxiang Lü and Shengshu Ding, *Xiandai Hanyu Cidian* 現代漢語詞典 [*Modern Chinese Dictionary*] (Beijing: The Commercial Press, 1978).

older woman in Chinese. In this cultural setting, Wu's application of the term to address the gypsy in examples three and four likely maintains a neutral connotation, reflective of Jane's refined sensibility as a governess. Over time, however, the connotation of "lao taipo" has shifted toward contempt and derogation, casting ageing women broadly as nuisances, as elaborated in *Hanyu Da Cidian: Volume Eight*.³⁸ With the expression acquiring an increasingly pejorative overlay, Song's 1996 use in two specific scenarios: one articulated by house staff and another by Jane, intensifies the negative portrayal of the gypsy in the narrative. Li Jihong's 2019 application of "lao taipo" across scenarios in examples one to two, and five to eight increases its frequency, amplifying the negative portrayal.

This changing interpretation is similarly reflected in "dama" 大妈. As elucidated in *Hanyu Da Cidan: Volume Two*, "dama" carried two primary meanings: (a) the wife of one's father's elder brother, essentially an aunt in a familial context; and (b) a respectful form of address for an older woman.³⁹ Traditionally, "dama" was a term of endearment and respect, emphasising the Chinese cultural norm of reverence for older people and recognition of their roles in familial and social contexts. In Song's 1996 and Li's 2019 translations, "dama" is used to translate "mother," specifically when Jane addresses the gypsy, as demonstrated in examples three and four. In Song's cultural context, this term lends familial warmth and respect to the interactions, suggesting a more personable and respectful attitude than might be inferred from Jane's mockingly respectful demeanour. Over the subsequent decades, the semantic drift of "dama" coloured Li's portrayal of the gypsy with contemporary stereotypes and social biases.

Since the Wall Street Journal highlighted their frenzied gold buying in 2013, "dama", the pinyin transliteration of the Chinese term "大妈", has emerged as an internet buzzword describing their irrational investments. Over time, the word was adopted by popular media outlets and used pejoratively to denote women, typically those late middle-aged or older.⁴⁰ These media sources often portray "dama" as troublemakers, infringing on personal privacy, monopolising public spaces, and scrambling for bargains on items as trivial as eggs or

³⁸ Luo, *Hanyu Da Cidan 漢語大詞典 [Comprehensive Chinese word dictionary]*, Eight.

³⁹ Zhufeng Luo, *Hanyu Da Cidan 漢語大詞典 [Comprehensive Chinese word dictionary]*, vol. Two (Shanghai: Hanyu Da Cidian Chubanshe, 1988).

⁴⁰ Claudia Huang, "Becoming Dama: The new old age in urban China," *Journal of Aging Studies* 57 (2021).

cabbage.⁴¹ They are also targeted for their energy and enthusiasm in public square dancing – performing to music in urban squares or parks. However, the media often overlooks how their shared lifestyle and philosophy reflect on society's value systems, particularly the "dying breath of collectivism and the ongoing creep of capitalism into families, social lives and living environments" Teng.⁴² Instead, the sensationalist portrayals associate dama with unculturedness, irrationality, and domination without acknowledging their contributions to and challenges within the fast-changing society. The portrayal of older women through the "dama" stereotype highlights the prevalent sexism and ageism in contemporary Chinese society.

Altogether, the evolving connotations of terms like "lao pozi," "lao taipo," and "dama" illustrate a "dimming" process where descriptors traditionally denoted respect associated with older women gradually take on negative, gendered connotations. This linguistic dimming parallels the translational dimming of the grey, portraying older female figures from neutral to negative across translations, as evidenced by the eight instances listed above. These translational changes occur with the socio-cultural changes that have diminished the stature of older women. Historically, older women were revered within the Confucian traditions, which emphasised filial piety and respected the wisdom of age. From the early twentieth century onwards, a series of cultural tides—including the May Fourth New Culture Movements, social and political reforms under Mao Zedong, and post-Mao economic policies—gradually moved society away from these traditional family ethics. Accompanying transformations in family structures, socioeconomics, and technology have further devalued older women's roles and societal perceptions. Notably, an extensive analysis across all twenty-seven instances throughout the three translations corroborates a broader, systemic pattern of the "dimming" of older women over a century.

Wu's 1935 depiction of the ageing woman emerges as the most neutral. These thirteen instances include the use of "lao pozi" 老婆子 (old woman/female servant) and "lao taipo" 老太婆 (old woman) to depict the gypsy, and "nianji shao da de nüren" 年紀稍大的女人 (a woman of slightly advanced age) to describe the elderly maid Hannah at Moorhouse.

⁴¹ Ho Hon Leung, "Lifestyle sport identity and national identity: Thoughts on the Chinese government's (re)creation of the dama image," in *Lifestyle sports and identities: Subcultural careers through the life course*, ed. Tyler Dupont and Becky Beal (New York: Routledge, 2022).

⁴² Teng Wei, "Rise of the red retirees? China's 'dama' are no red guards," *Sixth Tone*, January 22, 2019, <https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1003462>.

Contrastingly, Song's 1996 translation uses three neutral descriptors, including "lao furen" 老妇人 (old woman), "lao nian ren" 老年人 (old person), and "fu ren" 妇人 (woman), applying them not just to the gypsy, but also to other older servants like Hannah, in a total of seven instances, suggesting a reduction in descriptor neutrality. The trend toward less neutral language becomes more evident in Li's 2019 translation, which includes only three instances of the more neutral "lao fu" 老妇 (old woman) to describe the household female staff.

As neutral descriptors for ageing women decrease over time, there is a corresponding increase in the use of negative terms. Wu's 1935 translation appears the least negative, with two instances of disparaging terms: "lao dongxi" 老东西 (old thing) to describe the gypsy and a former governess. In contrast, Song's 1996 translation employs more overtly negative terms such as "lao jiahuo" 老家伙 (old fellow), "lao taipo" 老太婆 (old hag) and "lao pozi" 老婆子 (old biddy) for the gypsy, and "lao mutou" 老木头 (old blockhead) for a former governess, totalling five instances. Li's 2019 translation marks a notable increase in the use of pejorative descriptors, with two instances of "dama" 大妈 (dama) referring to the gypsy, and eleven instances of "lao taipo" 老太婆 (old hag) applied not only to the gypsy but also to older women from various social classes. These women include the upper-class Mrs Reed, Hannah, the housemaid, and the post office caretaker across different contexts, amplifying negative sentiments on the senior female characters.

Once revered as respected matriarchs, older women are increasingly cast in contemporary narratives as dependents or caregivers, or depicted as burdensome relics of a bygone era. The portrayal of older women in translations, from Wu Guangjian to Song Zhaolin and Li Jihong, mirrors changing cultural narratives and sensibilities from the early twentieth century to the early twenty-first century. Translators, consciously or unconsciously, align with rising neoliberal and individualist trends that clash with hierarchical family structures and generational authority. At the same time, their translation choices also echo patriarchal norms that perpetuate gender discrimination, standing at odds with feminist empowerment trends over the century. By introducing stereotypes and stigmas around ageing and gender into their renditions of *Jane Eyre*, and leaving them unchallenged, translators subtly endorse, solidify, and reinforce these perceptions within the target culture. Far from being passive nor neutral,

translators participate in shaping target cultural discourse and public perceptions through their interpretative choices. This study affirms the translators' role in cultural transmission and transformation while also problematising such power and influence. It highlights the potential of translations to perpetuate existing gender biases and marginalisation if not approached with cultural sensitivity and gender awareness. Advocating for translation practices that promote respect and fairness across all demographics, the study calls for more inclusive and equitable methods in contemporary translation practices.

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