Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific
Issue 53, May 2026
doi: 10.25911/QSMX-1K89

Untranslatability in Chinese Women's Trauma Narrative: Reading Yan Geling's *Thirteen Hairpins of Jinling* and Its English Translation

Ranran Zhang (Donghua University, Shanghai, China),
email: ranrzhang@dhu.edu.cn

Abstract

This article interrogates the reconfiguration of postcolonial trauma through a comparative narratological analysis of Yan Geling's *Thirteen Hairpins of Jinling* and its translation by Nicky Harman of *The Flowers of War*. Mediated by diverse institutional agents, the English rendition employs omission, addition, and domestication that erode the source's dual narrative, Qinhuai specificity, and philosophy of silence. Textual evidence reveals that excising the intergenerational narrator dismantles the postmemory mechanism, reducing ethical witnessing to a linear wartime spectacle. Furthermore, domesticating the courtesans' identities while aggrandising the western priest's heroism reinforces white saviour tropes and re-Orientalises the subaltern. Transmuting the survivors' strategic silence into forced testimony further commodifies trauma for the western gaze. This study contends that such translation constitutes epistemic violence, flattening cultural heterogeneity into neo-Orientalist templates. Ultimately, it frames translation as a site of political negotiation, advocating for ethical strategies that preserve the opacity and complexity of non-western trauma narratives.

Keywords: Yan Geling, *Thirteen Hairpins of Jinling,* untranslatability, postcolonial Asian literature, Chinese women's trauma narrative, translation ethics

Introduction

As a prominent Chinese American woman writer, Yan Geling has consistently focused on the destinies of women in her literary works. She is particularly renowned for her nuanced and historically embedded portrayals of Chinese women's traumatic experiences within colonial and postcolonial contexts. Her writing not only carries profound cultural memory and gender consciousness but also demonstrates a strong reflective awareness of postcoloniality and an intent to construct female subjectivity. *Thirteen Hairpins of Jinling* is one of her representative novels.[1] It is set against the backdrop of the Nanjing Massacre and depicts the survival and moral resistance of Asian women under conditions of colonial violence and gendered oppression. Through the perspective of a descendant of a church school student, *Thirteen Hairpins of Jinling* recreates the shifting relationship between a group of prostitutes and schoolgirls during the Nanjing Massacre, revealing the complex humanity and ethical choices of women confronting extreme violence.

[1] Yan Geling's novel *Thirteen Hairpins of Jinling* evolves from a short story into a full-length novel. In 2005, the short story version was first published in the literary magazine *Fiction Monthly: Original Edition*. In 2011, Yan Geling herself reworked the original short story, expanding it into a much longer novel of the same title. This full-length novel was eventually published by Shaanxi Normal University Press in 2011.

Thirteen Hairpins of Jinling can be regarded as a profound work of postcolonial literature because it transcends a mere narrative of historical tragedy to offer a critical examination of the intricate dynamics of power, representation, and identity politics within a context of colonial violence. By setting its core drama within a western Christian church—a 'enclave' symbolising western cultural presence—the story constructs a nuanced tripartite power structure involving the Japanese colonial aggressors, a westerner with privileged illusion, and the Chinese populace at the bottom of the power hierarchy. The novel forcefully deconstructs the classic 'white saviour' narrative. The initial cowardice and self-interest of the priest, Father Engelmann, reveal the myth of the western saviour figure. The ultimate and genuine sacrifice comes from the group of socially stigmatised Chinese prostitutes. The plotting of Chinese prostitutes as those sacrificed not only restores the agency and power of salvation from the external (the West) to the colonised themselves but also sharply critiques how colonial power unevenly assigns value to life—suggesting that the pure schoolgirls are deemed worthier of saving than the 'impure' prostitutes. Through the pivotal plot of the prostitutes cutting their hair, changing clothes, and substituting themselves for the students, the work vividly demonstrates the performativity of identity and allows the most marginalised individuals to reclaim the right to define their own dignity and fate. Consequently, *Thirteen Hairpins of Jinling* is not just a story about the horrors of war; it is a powerful allegory about who has the right to speak, represent, and sacrifice themselves amidst the ruins of a colonial encounter.

As postcolonial literature, the novel employs particular narrative techniques to deliver the culturally specific experiences of Chinese women during the Japanese War of Aggression Against China.[2] One characteristics of postcolonial literature, as Gayatri C. Spivak argues, is that it adopts narrative techniques different from western traditions to articulate the third-world experiences and to interrogate western discourse of colonialisation and marginalisation.[3] In Yan's *Thirteen Hairpins of Jinling*, she employs first-person intergenerational narratives, culture-specific articulations, and strategic silences, to represent Chinese women's traumatic experiences under colonialism, racism and sexism. These techniques are deployed to deconstruct western discourse's stereotypical depictions of Chinese women and highlights their unique philosophies of survival and resistance.

Existing scholarship on *The Flowers of War* has approached the work from diverse angles. Graham J. Matthews and Xianhai Luo compare narrative modes across the novella,

[2] The Japanese War of Aggression against China (1931–45) was a brutal military campaign that merged into World War II. It began with the Mukden Incident in 1931, leading to the occupation of Manchuria. Full-scale war broke out after the Marco Polo Bridge Incident in July 1937. Japanese forces committed horrific atrocities, including the Nanjing Massacre, where hundreds of thousands of civilians were killed. The conflict caused immense suffering, with millions of Chinese casualties. It ended after Japan's surrender in 1945, following the atomic bombings and the Soviet entry into the war. For detailed information, please refer to the following book: Yang, Bojiang. *The Japanese War of Aggression Against China and its Postwar legacies and Impacts*. Chinese Social Science Publication, 2025.

[3] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (University of Illinois Press, 1988), 286.

novel, and film.[4] Jincai Yang examines ethical negotiations through the body.[5] Jing Yang critiques the film's reinforcement of the white saviour narrative.[6] Katherina Li analyses fragmented sisterhood among women survivors.[7] From translation studies perspectives, Zhenwu Zhu and Wenjie Liu discuss translator Nicky Harman's creative treason,[8] while Mengying Jiang offers a feminist critique of how the English translation alters female subjectivity.[9] While these studies have enriched our understanding of Yan's work from literary, ethical, and translational perspectives, the specific question of how the English translation reconfigures the narrative techniques through which the novel articulates Chinese women's postcolonial trauma remains underexplored. Existing translation studies on the work have focused primarily on the style of the translator or feminist representation but have not systematically examined how three interconnected narrative dimensions—the dual structure of postmemory, culturally specific articulations of Qinhuai identity, and the philosophy of strategic silence—are transformed in cross-cultural transmission. This article addresses this gap by investigating how then narrative elements are negotiated in Harman's translation. Doing so, however, requires first grappling with a conceptual challenge: what makes these narrative dimensions (postmemory, Qinhuai and silence) so difficult to carry across linguistic and cultural borders? This study proposes that they can be productively understood as sites of 'untranslatability'—moments where the source text's culturally embedded strategies resist seamless transfer, thereby illuminating the political and ethical stakes of translation.

In this article, 'untranslatability' is treated as a critical heuristic—an analytical lens that foregrounds points of tension where the source text's narrative strategies resist easy assimilation into target-language norms, thereby revealing underlying power asymmetries and cultural assumptions. It refers specifically to the three interrelated dimensions identified above: its dual narrative structure of postmemory (which resists linear storytelling), its culturally embedded representations of Qinhuai prostitute identity (which carry intertextual resonances unfamiliar to western readers), and its philosophical treatment of silence as a mode of survival (which challenges western feminist imperatives of testimony). These elements are untranslatable not in an absolute linguistic sense, but insofar as the untranslatable contents are laden with the culturally specific experiences of marginalised

[4] Graham J. Matthews, 'Chinese Historical Fiction in the Wake of Postmodernism: Two Versions of Yan Geling's *The Flowers of War*,' in *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 62, no. 4 (2016): 659–77. https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.2016.0058; Xianhai Luo, 'The Reciprocal Symbiosis between Literature and Film: A New Study of the Film Adaptation and Version Variations of *The Flowers of War*,' *Journal of Guizhou Normal University (Social Sciences)* 2 (2025), https://doi.org/10.16614/j.gznuj.skb.2025.02.013.

[5] Jincai Yang, 'Reading ethics and the body in Geling Yan's *The Flowers of War*,' *Neohelicon* 42, no. 2 (2015), https://doi.org/10.1007/s11059-015-0312-y.

[6] Jing Yang, 'The reinvention of Hollywood's classic white saviour tale in contemporary Chinese cinema: *Pavilion of Women* and *The Flowers of War*,' *Critical Arts* 28, no. 2 (2014), https://doi.org/10.1080/02560046.2014.906343.

[7] Katherina Li, 'Fragmented sisterhood in the Nanking Massacre: *The Flowers of War*,' *Feminist Media Studies* 23, no. 6 (2023), https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2022.2084632.

[8] Zhenwu Zhu and Wenjie Liu, 'Sinologist Nicky Harman's "Creative Treason": A Case Study of the English Translation of *The Flowers of War*,' *Foreign Language Studies* 5, no. 2 (2017).

[9] Mengying Jiang, 'From "hairpins" to "flowers": feminist translation criticism of *The Flowers of War*,' *Journal of Gender Studies* 33, no. 7 (2024), https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2024.2315034.

people and places, and translation is prone to be influenced by the political and ethical stakes of cross-cultural representation.

How the untranslatable is dealt with in translation determines how these culturally specific experiences and their disruptive potential against cultural colonialism are transmitted globally. The act of translating the untranslatable is thereby, as Emily Apter argues, a political act given that it relates to how the oneworldedness, 'the one-size, supranational entity that recognizes the dominance of super-states' is contested by 'hidden relationalism.'[10] In this case, translation ceases to be merely a linguistic act and becomes a practice laden with political and ethical implications. As Maria Tymoczko argues, 'translation' could be seen as 'an ethical, political, and ideological activity, not simply as a mechanical linguistic transposition or literary art.'[11] In the process of translating and disseminating Asian women's gendered trauma narratives globally, a crucial challenge arises: how to effectively handle these untranslatable elements so that unique experiences and voices are conveyed authentically and completely, without being subsumed into a homogenised western feminist discourse. It involves preserving the cultural specificity, resistant consciousness, and constructive power inherent in postcolonial women's narratives, preventing their appropriation or dilution by western mainstream discourse.

Within this context, this article employs a comparative narratological analysis of one representative English translation of Yan Geling's novels—Harman's translation from *Thirteen Hairpins of Jinling* into *The Flowers of War*—as a case study. I systematically analyse the various agents involved in the English translation, the strategies employed in dealing with untranslatable elements, and most importantly the political and ethical effects caused by translation practices. By focusing on how the translation reconfigures the three untranslatable dimensions identified above, this study moves beyond moral critique to offer a grounded analysis of how specific translation choices produce ideological effects. I argue that attending to untranslatability as a critical heuristic reveals translation to be not merely a linguistic operation but a site where postcolonial trauma narratives are negotiated, commodified, and potentially re-silenced. It is hoped that this research will provide insights for the future translation and dissemination of Asian women's trauma narratives, helping to avoid the trap of 'neo-Orientalism,' challenge essentialist western narrative templates of womanhood, and highlight the locality and diversity of female trauma.

Agents of translation and commodification of trauma narrative

The translation trajectory of *Thirteen Hairpins of Jinlin* from Chinese into English serves as a paradigmatic illustration of how various agents of translation collectively shape the translation process. Through a layered process involving cinematic adaptation, authorial rewriting, and interlingual translation, power asymmetries within global publishing networks can reconfigure a critical postcolonial narrative into a commodified artifact of entertainment. 'Agents of translation,' as defined by Abdel Wahab Khalifa, denote the 'social actors who are heavily involved in the dynamics of translation production and the power interplay arising at every stage throughout the translation process.'[12] In the specific case of *Thirteen Hairpins of*

[10] Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: The Politics of Untranslatability* (Verso, 2013), 56.

[11] Maria M. Tymoczko, *Translation, Resistance, Activism* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2010), 3.

[12] Abdel Wahab Khalifa, 'Rethinking Agents and Agency in Translation Studies,' in *Translators Have Their Say? Translation and Power of Agency*, ed. Abdel Wahab Khalifa (LIT Verlag 2014), 11.

Jinling, these agents—comprising the author, the translator, the publisher, and the projected expectations of the target market—collectively redirect the novel's discursive orientation.

Originally published as a Chinese novella in 2007, the work garnered significant international visibility only after Zhang Yimou adapted it into a film titled *The Flowers of War.*[13] This cinematic adaptation—an initial layer of rewriting—fundamentally altered the narrative focus, shifting it from a postcolonial exploration of Chinese women's traumatic experiences to a spectacle centred on nationalism and male heroism. As Luo has noted, 'Although the film retains the protagonist Shujuan's peeping perspective, it immediately plunges into a battlefield of smoke and gunfire, deliberately emphasizing nationalism and secular heroism while stripping away the novella's most vital gendered narrative threads.'[14] Furthermore, the film employed eroticised representations of Chinese prostitutes to maximise audience appeal. Leo Ou-fan remarks that 'while the film is technically masterful, it feels uncomfortable because it appears entirely produced for a foreign gaze, presenting China as a site of exoticism.'[15] This cinematic gaze does more than just alter the visual aesthetics; it creates a pre-emptive interpretive framework that haunts the subsequent English translation. By centring the narrative on a western saviour figure and a sensationalised aesthetic, the adaptation establishes a commercial logic that the literary text was later pressured to mirror. Consequently, the film acts as a powerful agent of mediation, effectively re-authoring the story's cultural identity for global consumption before the expanded novel even reached the hands of international readers.

The second transformation occurred through Yan's intralingual rewriting—the expansion of the novella into a full-length novel. Learning of the film adaptation, western publishers, notably Harvill Secker, sought to capitalise on the film's momentum. According to Jiang, the publisher requested Yan to 'align the English novella with the film adaptation.'[16] Nevertheless, textual evidence suggests that Yan maintained significant authorial autonomy. Yan asserted that 'from novella to novel, the work grew into a great tree, but the core remained unchanged.'[17] The novel remains a work focused on women's wartime experiences; what were enriched in the expanded novel were the historical narrative and the authenticity of key plots. Such improvements, as Luo suggests, are partly influenced by Yan's role as a secondary editor for the film, allowing her to incorporate certain cinematic strengths—such as the detailed portrayal of war and the refined motivations of the prostitutes—without sacrificing her literary intent.[18]

In translating the expanded novel, Harman exercised an interpretive role that tried to balance fidelity to the source with the linguistic and cultural demands of the target audience. As Zhu and Liu note, Harman's translation makes 'a creative treason' of the source text.[19] Harman's strategies of translation include omission, domestication, addition and, specifically,

[13] Yimou Zhang, *Flowers of War*, https://v.qq.com/x/cover/hu9th0blgco6c89/h0034diznzc.html?ptag=11973.

[14] Luo, 'The Reciprocal Symbiosis between Literature and Film,' 135.

[15] Ou-fan Leo, 'Interview on Leo Ou-fan,' in *Appreciation of Masterpieces and Film Adaptations,* written and ed. Xiaohong Zhang, Man Xu, and Dongmei Meng (Jilin People's Publishing House, 2017), 368–69.

[16] Jiang, 'From "Hairpins" to "Flowers",' 870.

[17] Zhen Cai interviews Geling Yan, 'Geling Yan Reveals Three Major Revisions of *Thirteen Hairpins*: Zhang Yimou Treasures the Script as a Masterpiece,' *Yangtse Evening Post*, 16 May 2011, 16.

[18] Luo, 'The Reciprocal Symbiosis between Literature and Film,' 138.

[19] Zhu and Liu, 'Sinologist Nicky Harman's "Creative Treason",' 50.

reframes the original dual narrative structure into a singular third-person account. This translational intervention eliminates the intrusive commentary of the intergenerational narrator 'I,' which might otherwise interrupt the fast pacing expected of wartime stories. Furthermore, the translation domesticates culturally specific female experiences to facilitate engagement for western readers. Lastly, the translation transforms the Chinese women's philosophy of strategic silence into a western feminist mode of 'speaking up.' This translation tends to accommodate western readers' expectations of Asian wartime stories, which often anticipate rapid plot progression, exoticised depictions, and redemptive western agency. While this translation makes the novel an attractive story for foreigners, it risks undermining the subversive potential of Asian women's trauma narrative towards Orientalism.

Figure 1. Poster of Zhang Yimou's film *The Flowers of War,* 2011. https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1410063/.

Figure 2. Cover of Gelling Van's book, *The Flowers of War,* Other Press, 2012. Source. The cover was download from the Other Press official website: https://otherpress.com/product/the-flowers-of-war-movie-tie-in-edition-9781590515570/.

The external pressure of commodification is most evident in the work's paratextual framing, where the visual and promotional apparatuses prioritise cinematic glamour over historical trauma. Harvill Secker's cover highlights the book as the source material for Zhang Yimou's film, and the Other Press edition[20] directly uses the film poster (Figure 1)—featuring a romanticized, vibrant aesthetic—as its cover art (Figure 2). As Jiang argues, the translation of *Thirteen Hairpins of Jinling* is shaped extensively 'by the agency of a commercially motivated network.'[21] This synergy functions as a paratextual filter that pre-conditions the

[20] Geling Yan, *The Flowers of War,* translated by Nicky Harman (Other Press, 2012).

[21] Jiang, 'From "Hairpins" to "Flowers",' 870.

reader's expectations. By tethering the literary work so closely to a blockbuster film known for its spectacularisation of history and women, the publishers effectively shift the work's genre identity from a postcolonial recovery of memory to a sensationalist wartime romance. This visual rebranding does not merely reflect a marketing choice; it actively marginalises the novel's grittier, gender-focused critique in favour of a more consumable image of Chinese history. Consequently, the paratext serves as a site where the narrative's critical edge is blunted by the commercial necessity of brand identification, demonstrating how market-driven agents can overshadow the nuanced literary agency of both the author and the translator before a single page is even turned.

The translation of *Thirteen Hairpins of Jinling* is a multi-vocal process shaped by the interaction of diverse agents. It illustrates a transition from a localised trauma narrative to a global commodity, mediated by the distinct processes of cinematic adaptation, authorial expansion, and translational domestication. While market forces exerted significant pressure, the final English text remains a site of negotiation where the author's persistence and the translator's interpretive choices intersect with commercial interests. In subsequent sections of this article, I will investigate the specific effects caused by such translation, addressing the political and ethical dimensions inherent in the global circulation of Chinese women's postcolonial trauma narratives.

Dismantling a dual narrative structure and the ethic of witnessing

The translation of trauma narratives transcends mere linguistic substitution; it constitutes a profound ethical negotiation that mediates the source culture's articulation of trauma through the ideological and interpretive frameworks of the target culture. In my analysis of Yan's *Thirteen Hairpins of Jinling*, the transition into English is marked by a fundamental restructuring of the text's narrative architecture, a shift from a combination of first person and third person narrative to a merely third person narrative. Such shift profoundly compromises the novel's capacity to engage ethically with gendered trauma. It is important to note that third-person narration is not inherently ethically inferior to a dual narrative structure, nor does postmemory strictly require first-person metafiction to be effective. Trauma and its inherent belatedness can certainly be represented through various narrative modes without overt metafiction. However, the critique here concerns this specific translator's choices rather than third-person narration per se. In the English translation, the systematic excision of the first-person intergenerational narrative framework—the voice of the narrator 'I'—fundamentally dissolves the novel's core mechanism for the intergenerational processing of historical violence. This structural alteration goes beyond mere aesthetic simplification; it constitutes a profound ethical loss**,** moving the text away from a nuanced exploration of postmemory and toward a flattened historical chronicle.

In the Chinese original, the narrator is the niece of the protagonist Meng Shujuan. Her narrative function is not merely to tell a story but to engage in a conscious practice of postmemory. As Marianne Hirsch articulates, postmemory describes 'the relationship that the generation after bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before—to experiences they remember only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up.'[22] By removing this intergenerational lens, the English translation

[22] Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (Columbia University Press, 2012), 5.

collapses the critical distance required to witness trauma ethically, reducing a complex exploration of subaltern silence into a linear wartime spectacle.

In the source text, the narrator 'I' serves as a bridge between the past and the present, attempting to reconstruct the traumatic experiences of Shujuan and the other women during the Nanjing Massacre. This process of intergenerational representation is a laborious fusion of interpersonal communication, archival excavation, and creative imagination. Through her interactions with her aunt, the 'I' gradually uncovers that Shujuan has spent her entire life searching for a specific group of women—the prostitutes who sacrificed themselves. The text notes: 'My aunt Shujuan has been looking for a person. To be precise, looking for a woman. In the process of looking, she gradually grew old, and even forgot about the major event of marriage.'[23] Shujuan is driven by a conviction that 'no matter how much Zhao Yumo has changed ... she will definitely find the whereabouts of her and her twelve sisters.'[24] This lifelong search is described as a mosaic of fragmented evidence: 'Some she found in the records of Japanese journalists, some she chatted out of Japanese veterans, but the largest part was found through her decades of folk searching in Jiangsu, Anhui, and Zhejiang.'[25] This description highlights the aunt not merely as a survivor but as an active witness whose search bears profound ethical significance: the necessity and urgency of speaking for the silent victims.

This narrative trajectory responds directly to the central provocation posed by postcolonial theorist Spivak. In 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' Spivak argues that within the inequalities of power structures, the voice of the subaltern is often systematically obscured or appropriated, rendering them unable to be truly heard.[26] In *Thirteen Hairpins of Jinling*, the prostitutes represent the ultimate subalterns—socially marginalised by their profession and politically erased by the colonial violence of the occupation. The arduous process undertaken by the narrator and her aunt to collect and piece together these historical fragments demonstrates a crucial point: without such conscious, intergenerational excavation and narrative effort, the traumatic memories of these marginalised female 'victims' are destined to be obliterated from the grand historical narrative. Therefore, the act of speaking in the novel is essentially an ethical practice of resisting historical amnesia and challenging structural aphasia. However, in the English translation, the entire perspective and voice of the narrator 'I' are completely deleted. This excision does not merely simplify the story's layers; it fundamentally erases the text's most critical dimension—the postcolonial striving to construct a channel for the subaltern to speak and to speak with them.

A specific pathway for giving voice to the subaltern in the source text is the narrator's repeated emphasis on the intervention of 'imagination.' This is not a flight of fancy but a methodological necessity for constructing the emotional truth and historical depth of postcolonial trauma memory. As Hirsch notes, 'postmemory's connection to the past is not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation.'[27] In *Thirteen Hairpins of Jinling*, the narrator 'I' frequently employs meta-narrative techniques to highlight this creative process. For instance, she explicitly admits the limits of archival

[23] Geling Yan, *Thirteen Hairpins of Jinling* (Press of Shanxi Normal University, 2010), 1.

[24] Yan, *Thirteen Hairpins of Jinling*, 3.

[25] Yan, *Thirteen Hairpins of Jinling*, 3.

[26] Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' 287.

[27] Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory,* 5.

knowledge: 'Since my aunt Shujuan could not know the conversation between Yumo and Major Dai Tao, I had to fill in this blank with imagination.'[28] This reliance on imagination is not a betrayal of history, but a response to the 'unspeakable' nature of the traumatic experience. In another instance, the narrator states that based on her aunt's accounts and archival photos, she 'imagined the ins and outs of Doukou leaving the church.'[29] Through fictionalised details, the narrator approaches the emotional reality of the historical scene.

Furthermore, when reading the historical accounts rewritten by her aunt in her mature years, the narrator confesses: 'Reading such records, I could not control using the thinking of a novel to imagine it. Now, based on my imagination, I use the text of the novel to restore the event.'[30] This confession reveals that the act of narration is an ethical behaviour of arriving at historical truth through imagination. This echoes Hirsch's theory of postmemory while highlighting the complexity and necessity of representing female trauma through meta-narrative. By accessing the perspective of 'I,' the reader enters a space of trauma narrative that is based on history yet transcends pure historical fact, where imagination becomes the bridge connecting the past and the present, individual and collective memory.

The English translation, however, completely removes this first-person intergenerational narrative framework, rewriting the novel into a linear narrative with Shujuan's as the sole perspective. This move reduces the text's narrative layers and dissolves its core poetics and ethical dimensions. The dynamic, intergenerational transmission of postmemory is ossified into a closed plot description; the conscious effort to speak for the subaltern is simplified into a passive presentation of events; and crucially, the legitimacy of imagination as a necessary means of trauma narration is completely denied. This deletion creates a severe loss of the deep ethical dimension in cross-cultural transmission, transforming female trauma from a lived experience continuously understood and signified through narration into a silent, passive historical object.

The deletion of the first-person intergenerational narrator simplifies the narrative structure into a single third-person limited perspective centred on the student Shujuan. This revision strategy eliminates two key narrative layers found in the original: the meta-narrative intervention of the intergenerational narrator 'I' and the reflective, retrospective narrative of the adult Shujuan. According to trauma theorist Cathy Caruth, trauma is characterised by 'belatedness.' The victim's cognition at the moment of the event is often in a 'blind spot' of shock and incomprehension; the full meaning of the trauma can only be partially grasped through narrative reconstruction after the fact. As Caruth notes, 'Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely not known in the first instance.'[31] While theoretical debates around trauma narration acknowledge that belatedness is not structurally fixed and can be encoded without overt metafiction, in the context of this specific novel, relying purely on the immediate perspective of the witness, Shujuan, creates inherent cognitive limitations that the original text actively sought to transcend. In the English novel, this limitation is exacerbated because the witness is a young girl with immature cognition.

[28] Yan, *Thirteen Hairpins of Jinling*, 104.

[29] Yan, *Thirteen Hairpins of Jinling*, 153.

[30] Yan, *Thirteen Hairpins of Jinling*, 196.

[31] Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 4.

Her limited perspective is akin to being trapped in Plato's cave, perceiving only the blurry projection of historical truth, unable to connect personal sensory experiences with the grand historical violence.

A potent example of this is the depiction of Shujuan's menarche. In the English translation, the narrative is fixed on her private moment of the 'experiencing self':

> In the washroom, she stood by the toilet and examined her nightdress. She was torn between curiosity and disgust at the dark liquid issuing from deep within her belly. She had the sense that this blood had turned her flesh into fertile soil, a place where any demon could implant a seed which would put forth shoots and bear fruit.[32]

This third-person on-site narrative vividly presents the girl's physiological fear and sense of bodily alienation but strictly limits it to a closed private space. The historical dimensions—the panoramic massacre outside the city walls and the fall of the nation—are entirely obscured, severing the dialogue between personal trauma and historical trauma.

In contrast, the Chinese original successfully breaks this cognitive barrier through the intervention of the intergenerational narrator 'I.' After describing Shujuan's private experience, the 'I' immediately points out the limitation of her cognition: 'She had absolutely no idea what a crazy, gloomy doomsday morning it was outside the high walls of the Wilson Church.'[33] The narrator then constructs a grand historical coordinate, anchoring Shujuan's menarche to the specific moment of the Nanjing Massacre: 'Hundreds of thousands of tanks flying the Rising Sun flag are entering Nanjing.... Flesh and blood bodies were printed on the road of chaos in the blink of an eye, fixed on the asphalt negative.'[34]

Through this juxtaposition of personal experience and historical violence, the text reveals the multiple internal connections between the private body and collective destiny. Shujuan's menarche symbolises the start of female physiological maturity, yet it is placed against the backdrop of the Japanese invasion; the reproductive potential implied by her menstrual blood forms a sharp contrast with the war's trampling of life. Only by placing such 'private' trauma within the historical context of the massacre can we recognise that the fear triggered by that 'dark liquid' stems not only from an awakening of gender identity but is an unconscious response to the invasion of the bodily territory by historical violence. This understanding allows us to transcend the limitations of individual narrative and truly grasp the deep meaning of trauma in a broader historical dimension—it is both the growth ring of individual fate and the mark carved on the body by the times.

Similarly, when the young Shujuan witnesses the chaotic scene of prostitutes climbing over the wall into the church, the Chinese narrative does not stop at her immediate feelings. The intergenerational narrator 'I' intervenes with historical insight: 'My aunt Shujuan did not know at this time that what she saw and heard was a detail in what historians would later call the ugliest and cruelest massacre.... She would have to wait a long time to know ... how much bloody scenery and sound the priest and the high walls of the church had omitted for her.'[35] This intervention is a typical manifestation of postmemory practice. The narrator anchors the individual's micro-experience within the macro-historical tragedy. The 'detail' Shujuan sees is clearly placed against the background of 'the ugliest and cruelest massacre.' The translation's

[32] Geling Yan, *The Flowers of War*, trans. Nicky Harman (Harvill Secker, 2012), 5.

[33] Yan, *Thirteen Hairpins of Jinling*, 7.

[34] Yan, *Thirteen Hairpins of Jinling*, 7.

[35] Yan, *Thirteen Hairpins of Jinling*, 13.

deletion of this commentary flattens a complex postmemory narrative into a simple wartime adventure story. The reader, like the young Shujuan, is confined within the walls, deprived of the bridge to understanding the critical connection between personal experience and grand history.

Another key feature of trauma's belatedness is that its impact transcends the event itself, continuously intruding upon and haunting the individual's present and future existence. As Caruth observes, trauma 'returns to haunt the survivor later on.'[36] In the Chinese original, this 'haunted' state is not presented as a direct pathological symptom but is internalised in the adult Shujuan's reflective evaluations across time and space. For example, the narrator reveals: 'In the decades that followed, my aunt Meng Shujuan recalled again and again with horror: How fast the Chinese capital Nanjing fell in December 1937!'[37] Similarly, there is the historically ironic sigh: 'It was a fine day. Many years later, my aunt always thought resentfully: The doomsday of Nanjing was actually a fine day!'[38]

These narratives are far from simple recollections; they are literary manifestations of the 'afterwardsness' of trauma. They clearly indicate that the traumatic experience did not stop in the past of 1937, but, through 'recalling again and again with horror' and persistent 'resentment,' continues to intrude forcibly into Shujuan's later life consciousness. This psychological burden stems from the nature of trauma's delayed action. Shujuan's survival within the sanctuary of the church spared her the most direct violence, but this apparent luck became a source of deeper, more lasting trauma—a survivor's guilt and psychological weight born of the belated realisation of the holocaust's true horror.

However, the English translation systematically deletes these crucial internal monologues and evaluative retrospectives. The direct consequence is the simplification of Shujuan as a trauma survivor. Her war experience is presented as a past event with a clear endpoint, rather than a living source of trauma that shapes her lifelong emotions and cognition. English readers miss the 'haunting' quality of trauma—how it transcends temporal boundaries like a ghost. This weakens the depth and authenticity of the character's psychology and blurs the critical distinction between traumatic memory and ordinary memory. As a result, the translation enacts both an aesthetic simplification and an ethical reduction, reducing a profound literary exploration of trauma's long-term psychological consequences to a wartime adventure narrative focused only on immediate danger.

The English translation's exclusive focus on the student Shujuan's third-person limited perspective also introduces a significant narrative limitation: the depiction of Yumo and the other prostitutes is inevitably stamped with the social prejudices and cognitive limitations of a young girl, constituting an unreliable narrative. In the Chinese original, this limitation is broken by the polyphonic dialogue between the intervening 'I' and the retrospective narrative of the adult Shujuan. These voices constantly question, correct, and deepen the young Shujuan's initial impressions. For instance, the narrator 'I' explicitly points out the root of the prejudice: 'The Japanese soldiers ... are enemies, but for a thirteen-year-old girl, they are still abstract enemies ... while these colourful prostitutes ... are concrete, living villains.'[39] This analysis reveals that young Shujuan wrongly projects moral outrage onto the 'internal other'

[36] Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 4.

[37] Yan, *Thirteen Hairpins of Jinling*, 6.

[38] Yan, *Thirteen Hairpins of Jinling*, 115.

[39] Yan, *Thirteen Hairpins of Jinling*, 115.

(the prostitutes) rather than the abstract aggressors, a cognition deeply influenced by social stigmatisation. The narrator further notes that cognitive transformation requires time: 'It will take some time, a large section of growth, for them to thoroughly see clearly ... this group of women they regard as low-class.'[40] This foreshadows the 'belatedness' of trauma understanding—truth does not appear instantly but awaits future maturity and reflection.

The adult Shujuan's retrospective narrative confirms that this cognitive shift occurred, completing the process of trauma awakening from prejudice to understanding. She reflects: 'Years later Shujuan realised that Yumo scolded people so well. To make the girls pure and clean, the world must guarantee the lowliness of Yumo and others.'[41] This epiphany is a profound critique of the patriarchal binary of 'purity/corruption,' revealing how moral superiority is built on the systemic oppression of another group of women. Ultimately, this awakening leads to a positive ethical result. As the narrator recounts: 'My aunt smiled when talking with me about this. "Fabi would not know, that was a great liberation for us. We learned to liberate ourselves from these low-class women who were sold as slaves".'[42] This indicates that the traumatic experience did not imprison Shujuan in past hatred but awakened a new cognition of female solidarity and self-liberation. As Caruth suggests, trauma involves not just forgetting a past but an awakening to an unforeseen future.[43]

The systematic deletion of these evaluative contents in the English translation has severe consequences. The narrative remains solidified in the young Shujuan's prejudice-filled initial perspective. Characters like Yumo are simplified into flat 'villains' or symbols of sacrifice, their complex humanity and subjectivity obscured. The reader is deprived of witnessing the character's cognitive growth and trauma awakening, unable to experience the profound transformation from opposition to understanding. This not only weakens the character arc and the story's ethical depth but fundamentally dissolves the original text's exploration of the nature of trauma—that it is not an end point but may contain the power of awakening pointing toward the future.

The English translation of *Thirteen Hairpins of Jinling*, through the deletion of the dual narrative structure and the multiple narrative voices, fundamentally alters the text's engagement with gendered trauma. By removing the 'I' narrator, the translation dismantles the mechanism of postmemory, erasing the ethical struggle of the later generation to witness and reconstruct the silenced voices of the subaltern. By confining the narrative to the immediate, limited perspective of a child, the translation fails to capture the belated and haunting nature of trauma, flattening a diachronic psychological exploration into a synchronic spectacle of war. In doing so, the translation risks complicity in the very erasure of history that the original novel sought to combat, presenting a textually simplified and ethically compromised narrative that obscures the complex, painful realities of Asian women's historical experience.

Domesticating Qinhuai culture and re-orientalising the subaltern

Following my analysis of the structural violence exerted on the text's narrative voice, in this part I turn to the translation's engagement with the characters' cultural and social identities.

[40] Yan, *Thirteen Hairpins of Jinling*, 217.

[41] Yan, *Thirteen Hairpins of Jinling*, 29.

[42] Yan, *Thirteen Hairpins of Jinling*, 29.

[43] Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 105.

In the landscape of postcolonial literature, translation serves as a site of contestation where cultural hierarchies are either challenged or reinforced. Yan's novel, through its focus on the prostitutes of the Qinhuai River—a unique and historically marginalised group—engages directly with the politics of the subaltern. These women are the quintessential 'other' within Chinese patriarchy, doubly marginalised by their gender and profession. Yan employs rich, culturally specific expressions to powerfully challenge and deconstruct these stereotypes, endowing these women with agency, historical dignity, and a complex interiority. When this narrative crosses linguistic borders into English, however, it encounters the hegemonic forces of the global publishing industry. The English translation by Harman, influenced by commercial imperatives and the 'white saviour' narrative of the film adaptation, adopts a strategy of domestication. Through the alteration of the title, the displacement of cultural markers, the simplification of female subjectivity, and the rewriting of key character dynamics, the translation erases the cultural subjectivity of the Chinese subaltern. By smoothing over the 'untranslatable' resistance of the source text, the translation effectively 're-Orientalises' the narrative, transforming a story of subaltern agency into a commodified spectacle of western humanitarianism and Oriental fragility.

The original Chinese title, *Thirteen Hairpins of Jinling,* is saturated with cultural significance, immediately locating the narrative within an elevated lineage of Chinese literature. The title creates a deliberate intertextual link with the Twelve Hairpins of Jinling from the classical masterpiece, *Dream of the Red Chamber.* The term 'hairpin' is an ancient ornament that symbolises women of virtuous or beautiful quality, while 'Jinling' is the historical name for the city of Nanjing. Specifically, the 'Twelve Hairpins' in the classical novel refer to twelve women of high moral integrity. By echoing this canonical reference, Yan suggests that the thirteen prostitutes of her story, despite their profession, possess a comparable high moral character, a refined spiritual depth, and a tragic destiny that demands respect.

However, the translator adopted a domesticating strategy, rendering the title as *The Flowers of War*. This shift reflects a translation decision to treat culture-specific terms related to Chinese courtesan culture as 'untranslatable' elements. The translator likely assumed that a literal translation involving 'hairpins' might burden the western reader or affect the work's market reception. The renaming and the text's subsequent packaging align closely with the conventions of transnational genre marketing, prioritising the commercial appeal of a historical thriller over cultural fidelity. However, while these choices may be driven by market logic rather than conscious ideological bias, their structural effect aligns with Edward Said's conceptualisation of Orientalism as a systemic, institutionalised discourse.[44] The imagery of 'Flowers of War' aligns more closely with the western imagination of Asian women and the Orient: fragile, passive, decorative, and ephemeral. Where the 'hairpin' suggests something hard, enduring, and potentially sharp, the 'flower' suggests something that is meant to be plucked, consumed, or trampled. The English title 'The Flowers of War' implies that these women are merely the decorative collateral damage of conflict, waiting to be saved or destroyed. As Jiang points out: 'The translation of the title erases all the cultural allusion of the original.'[45] Consequently, the title becomes the first step in rendering the specific Chinese cultural context easier for the target reader to digest, but at the cost of stripping the text of its subversive cultural specificity.

[44] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Pantheon Books, 1978), 3–12.

[45] Jiang, 'From "Hairpins" to "Flowers",' 868.

The domestication of the narrative extends beyond the title to the structural organisation of cultural descriptions. The Chinese original opens with a meticulous and dignified depiction of the prostitute culture of the Qinhuai River, establishing the characters' social and historical context immediately. This is not a description of degradation, but of a complex social hierarchy with its own codes of honour:

> The prostitutes on the Qinhuai River in Nanjing have strict ranks, like doctors, masters, and bachelors, with levels of identity, standards, and offerings. And these grades are judged by the public ... generations of scholars have sung the praises of courtesans, from the Eight Beauties of Qinhuai to Sai Jinhua, who are all positive characters in their articles ... Zhao Yumo's badge has five stars.[46]

This passage is critical for several reasons. First, it connects the protagonist Yumo and her companions to historical figures like the 'Eight Beauties of Qinhuai' and Sai Jinhua—courtesans renowned in Chinese history for their patriotism, intellect, and role in saving the nation during times of crisis. By emphasising their talent, cultural cultivation, and national integrity, the source text establishes a foundation for the reader to look beyond superficial prejudice.

In the Chinese original, this paragraph is located at the end of the first chapter. Its placement is strategic; it sets the narrative tone and highlights the cultural identity of the characters before the plot fully unfolds. It allows the reader to transcend surface-level moral judgment and understand the women's later decision to substitute themselves for the schoolgirls as a deep-seated motivation. Their sacrifice is not merely a spontaneous act of female solidarity but is rooted in national patriotism and righteousness inherent to the Qinhuai tradition. In the English translation, however, this vital passage is displaced. It is moved to Chapter Eighteen, positioned after the plotline where Yumo seduces Major Dai. This displacement is an act of narrative reframing that weakens the political and cultural significance of the text. By the time the English reader encounters this cultural context, the characters have already been established primarily through the lens of their sexuality and their interactions with men.

In the English version, the description no longer serves to ground the women's historical agency; instead, it serves to portray Yumo's personal charm and justify her high price. The historical heaviness and cultural rectification of the original text are significantly diluted. This demonstrates that re-Orientalisation operates structurally within the translation, rather than being solely a product of altered imagery. By deferring the foundational cultural context to the latter part of the novel, the narrative architecture itself is reconfigured to prioritise the spectacle of the courtesans' physical bodies over their historical and political agency. From a postcolonial perspective, this translation strategy weakens the subjectivity of the source culture. The self-expression of the marginalised group—their claim to a lineage of patriotic history—is co-opted and rearranged to fit a narrative pace that prioritises romance and seduction over cultural dignity.

The process of re-Orientalisation is perhaps most visible in the translation's handling of character description, particularly regarding Yumo. The Chinese novel employs delicate psychological description and multiple perspectives to endow the prostitutes with a three-dimensional humanity, preventing them from becoming simple moral symbols or sexual objects. For example, in the scene where Yumo dances with Major Dai, the narrator 'I' uses retrospective imagination to reconstruct Yumo's complex identity, balancing her professional performativity with her internal dignity:

[46] Yan, *Thirteen Hairpins of Jinling*, 18.

> What did Zhao Yumo look like then? She should be wearing a black velvet, or dark purple velvet qipao, her skin white emitting a cold tone of light due to lack of sunlight. She did not rise to the rank of a five-star prostitute without reason; she always looked like a lady, reserved and generous and knowing the book of rites, only in such a moment did she release a dazzling light, letting men feel the coquettishness [saoqing] of a lady from a noble family.[47]

This description reveals the tension in Yumo's identity: she is a paradox. She possesses the demeanour of a 'lady'—educated, reserved, and refined—yet she can deploy 'coquettishness' as a professional tool. The text highlights her agency in navigating these roles. Simultaneously, the narrative voice critiques the social prejudice of the time through the eyes of the young aunt, Shujuan: 'My thirteen-year-old aunt was full of jealousy and hatred: look at this slut, her body is itching, twisting like that.'[48] Through this interweaving of dual perspectives, the text displays the multifaceted nature of Yumo as an individual while simultaneously exposing how the 'external gaze' (Shujuan's prejudice) simplifies and distorts her image. This narrative strategy breaks the thin stereotype of the prostitute, endowing her with human thickness and contradiction.

The English translation, however, drastically reduces this complexity. The critical descriptions of Yumo's 'ladylike' qualities and the narrator's nuanced reconstruction are largely excised. Instead, the translation retains and amplifies the elements of seduction, focusing on the physical and the erotic. The translation renders the scene as: 'Yumo's neat, rounded buttocks undulated in a rumba.... But Yumo, the seductress, kept enticing him back to her.... It was only these flashing looks that gave men a taste of the coquette under the surface.'[49] This adaptation compresses Yumo from a complex individual with subjectivity and emotional depth into a flat symbol of the temptress. The focus shifts from her 'cold light' and 'reserved' nature to her 'rounded buttocks' and 'enticing' movements. Yumo's amplified sexual assertiveness might be read as a reclamation of bodily agency or a subversive survival tactic within a patriarchal warzone. However, structurally, the translation undermines this potential agency. By excising the original narrator's critical reflections on the external gaze, the English text leaves the voyeuristic gaze unchecked. The empathy and historical reflection constructed in the original text through the narrator's intervention are dismantled. In their place, the translation establishes an exotic narrative that conforms to the western Orientalist imagination.

The most profound ideological shift in the translation is the simultaneous weakening of Chinese female agency and the strengthening of the western male saviour figure. This restructuring is particularly evident in the transformation of Father Engelmann. In the source text, the dynamics of salvation are complex; the West, represented by the church, is shown to be impotent, and the Chinese women must save themselves and the students. The English translation, however, engages in a systematic narrative reconstruction that highlights Father Engelmann's humanitarian care. This is achieved through plot additions and sequence adjustments. For instance, the translation adds a scene in Chapter Ten where the priest holds a funeral for the servant Ah Gu and moves a scene where he counsels the Chinese soldier Dai Tao. These changes enhance the priest's moral halo and make him a coherent emotional focal point, at the same time displacing the women from the centre of the ethical narrative.

---

[47] Yan, *Thirteen Hairpins of Jinling*, 107.

[48] Yan, *Thirteen Hairpins of Jinling*, 107.

[49] Yan, *The Flowers of War*, trans. Harman, 127.

Even more subversive is the rewriting of key critical scenes. In the Chinese original, Yan deconstructs the myth of the western saviour by revealing Engelmann's internal cowardice. When he watches Yumo and the other women board the Japanese trucks to be taken to their likely deaths, the narrator observes with cutting realism: 'I think Father Engelmann's mind was empty at that moment, only hoping that this play would go smoothly and nothing unexpected would happen. He could not afford any accidents.'[50] This psychological description profoundly reveals the priest's timidity and self-preservation instinct. He is a bystander who is relieved that the 'problem' is resolving itself, even at the cost of the women's lives. He is human, flawed, and ultimately powerless.

The English translation, however, completely deletes this critical commentary. Instead, it interpolates a scene that depicts him as a heroic figure attempting to intervene. The translation adds dialogue where he insists, '"I'll go with my students ... I'll go and make sure they sing properly…." Father Engelmann insisted, trying to climb into the truck.'[51] The rewriting goes further, employing concrete body narrative to reinforce his image as a sacrificer: 'With a hand clutching the wooden rail of the truck bed and a foot on the rear wheel, the priest was left suspended, his long, black cassock entangling his limbs.'[52] This adaptation transforms Engelmann from the calculating bystander of the original into a 'martyr' who disregards his own safety. The imagery of the black cassock and the suspended body evoke classic Christian iconography of saintly suffering. By engaging in this fleshy performance, the text sanctifies the western male's desire for redemption and compassion. The failure to save the women is reframed not because of cowardice or colonial impotence, but as a tragic, heroic failure of a saviour who tried his best.

Through the deletion of the Qinhuai cultural context and the romantisation of the western priest, the English translation of *Thirteen Hairpins of Jinling* completes a deep narrative colonisation. It structurally reproduces the classic Orientalist binary identified by Said: an active, redemptive West juxtaposed against a passive, imperilled East. It converts Chinese women from historical subjects acting out of cultural loyalty into objects to be saved (or failed to be saved) by western intervention. It transforms a narrative of resistance against colonial violence into a celebration of western humanitarianism. This translation strategy dissolves the critical edge of the original text regarding power structures. It reproduces the colonial discourse logic of White Saviour / Oriental Saved, ensuring that the text, in its cross-cultural circulation, unconsciously reinforces the very power relations it originally sought to deconstruct. The 'untranslatable' cultural identity of the subaltern—their specific history, their paradoxical dignity, their unique motivations—is not merely lost; it is actively overwritten by the dominant codes of the target culture. In the transition from the thirteen hairpins to the flowers of war, the sharp, resistant instrument of the hairpin is replaced by the passive, decorative flower, and the voice of the subaltern is once again silenced by the roar of the white saviour's machine.

Transforming strategic silence into trauma spectacle

If in the previous sections I detailed the structural and cultural violence enacted upon the text, in this final analysis I address the most profound ethical transgression: the treatment of

[50] Yan, *Thirteen Hairpins of Jinling*, 216.

[51] Yan, *The Flowers of War*, trans. Harman, 239.

[52] Yan, *The Flowers of War*, trans. Harman, 239.

silence. Within the historical and political contexts of western feminism, the imperative to speak out has functioned as a powerful, justice-seeking tool to challenge patriarchal silencing and demand accountability. However, in postcolonial contexts characterised by extreme power asymmetries, demanding such testimony can inadvertently become coercive. What is defended here is the subaltern's fundamental use of silence as a mechanism of self-preservation. Silence, as Homi Bhabha posits, is not an absence of speech but a strategic mode of resistance—a refusal by the subaltern to be fully known or consumed by the colonial gaze.[53] Silence, therefore, creates a locus of untranslatability that protects the subject from being essentialised into a mere victim. However, when *The Thirteen Hairpins of Jinling* travels into the Anglophone world as *The Flowers of War*, this strategic silence is systematically dismantled. The English translation's systematic removal of strategic silence and its replacement with forced testimony constitutes a narrative violation that re-subjects the survivors to the consuming gaze of the dominant culture.

In the Chinese source text, Yan establishes the silence of the protagonist, Yumo, as a fundamental narrative principle. From the outset, the novel emphasises Yumo's refusal to be found by history or society. She refuses to narrate her experience in the Japanese military camps to Shujuan or in public. Crucially, in the Chinese original, even when Yumo appears in a legal setting, her opacity remains intact. The text notes: 'Although she sat in the witness stand and identified a premeditated, large-scale rape by senior Japanese officers,' Yumo chooses to use a pseudonym and refuses to acknowledge her past identity or her connection to Shujuan.[54] The Chinese novel conspicuously avoids showing Yumo describing the rape scenes. Her testimony is an act of legal necessity, not a confessional purge. She remains a cipher, protecting the core of her trauma from public consumption. Yumo's refusal aligns with what Bhabha might describe as the sly civility of the colonised—a resistance that operates within the structures of power (the court) while withholding the truth of the self.[55] By retaining her silence and altering her identity, Yumo denies the public the satisfaction of consuming her pain.

The history of the thirteen women in the Chinese text is navigated not through their direct testimony, but through the laborious, decades-long investigation of Shujuan, mediated by the narrator 'I.' This structure is vital: it places the burden of witnessing on the observer, not the victim. At the end of the Chinese novel, the fate of the women is revealed through the narrator I's summary of Shujuan's findings:

> Zhao Yumo was the only one of the thirteen women to survive, and it was she who confirmed how the middle and high-ranking Japanese officers shared her and the other twelve 'female students'. Two of them attempted to resist with steak knives (taken from the Wilson Church dining room) but failed and were killed on the spot. The remaining eleven women, after the Japanese officers had enjoyed enough of them, were distributed to the newly established comfort stations. Within two or three years, they died one after another; some were shot while trying to escape, some died of disease, and a few committed suicide.[56]

This passage is clinically distant yet deeply mournful. It is a historical reconstruction, not a re-enactment. The narrator continues to describe Yumo's survival:

[53] Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' 286.

[54] Yan, *Thirteen Hairpins of Jinling*, 1.

[55] Homi K Bhabha, 'Sly Civility,' *October*, no. 34 (1985), https://doi.org/10.2307/778489.

[56] Yan, *Thirteen Hairpins of Jinling*, 220.

> Zhao Yumo's survival should probably be attributed to her outstanding appearance and style. Those who enjoyed her were middle and lower-level officers, so the guard on her was gradually relaxed, finally allowing her to escape.... She probably escaped after being a comfort woman for four years. As for why she underwent plastic surgery, my aunt has never been able to find the answer, and I cannot find the answer either.[57]

The detail regarding plastic surgery is profound. It physicalises Yumo's desire for erasure. The fact that 'I cannot find the answer' signifies the limits of the narrator's power. The trauma remains Yumo's private possession, inaccessible to the historian or the novelist. This unanswerable question respects the victim's right to silence, preventing the narrative from claiming total knowledge over the subaltern body.

The English translation, however, radically alters this dynamic. To highlight the subjectivity of western-style feminist resistance, the translation polishes away this texture of silence. Yumo is transformed from an elusive survivor into a vocal spokesperson for the victims. The distancing mechanism of the narrator 'I' is removed, and Yumo is made to perform her trauma directly for the reader.

The English novel provides a detailed, direct depiction of Yumo's speech in court: 'When Zhao Yumo had given her testimony to the War Crimes Tribunal, she had talked about how, when they were first taken.'[58] In this version, the investigative labour of Shujuan and the mediating ethics of 'I' are erased. Yumo becomes a native informant, delivering the raw data of her suffering to the western tribunal. The mystery of her plastic surgery and her refusal to be identified are flattened into a straightforward narrative of survival and testimony. This shift caters to a western literary market that equates speaking out with liberation, failing to recognise that while testimony is essential for seeking justice in democratic legal frameworks, for the postcolonial subject navigating the aftermath of complete colonial violation, silence is often the only remaining territory of sovereignty. By forcing Yumo to speak, the translation paradoxically silences her agency to refuse speech, collapsing the necessary and complex tension between the political drive for public justice-seeking and the psychological need for private self-preservation.

The consequences of this narrative shift are most disturbing in the depiction of sexual violence. In the Chinese original, the rape of the young prostitute Doukou is narrated with a distinct ethical buffer. The author describes the scene, but the focus is anchored in cultural dignity and resistance: Doukou risks her life to retrieve a pipa (traditional lute) so she can play for the soldiers, only to be tortured to death. The narrative emphasises the brutality of the Japanese military and the tragic loss of cultural beauty. Crucially, this scene is constructed through the imaginative reconstruction of the narrator 'I,' acknowledging that no one truly witnessed it. This meta-fictional distance acts as a veil, preventing the scene from becoming purely voyeuristic. Ethical witnessing in literary trauma narratives relies on narrative mediation that maintains a critical distance, exposing the mechanisms of violence to demand historical accountability while protecting the victim's core trauma from unmediated public consumption.

The English translation, however, reconfigures this scene through the eyes of the young Shujuan, who discovers the aftermath. By filtering the rape through the sensory experience of a character within the scene, the translation lends the violence an 'erotic atmosphere' (as noted in the source prompt). The focus shifts from the destruction of the

[57] Yan, *Thirteen Hairpins of Jinling*, 221.

[58] Yan, *The Flowers of War*, trans. Harman, 247.

pipa—a symbol of high culture and selfhood—to the destruction of the female body as a spectacle. Here, a clear theoretical distinction must be drawn between necessary representation and exploitative depiction. Necessary representation contextualises violence to critique the oppressor. Exploitative depiction relies on unmediated, sensory-heavy, and voyeuristic portrayals that prioritise the reader's visceral shock or titillation over the victim's dignity. Labelling this a spectacle of trauma is justified because the text crosses the line from mediated historical critique into exploitative depiction. The translation caters to the western Orientalist imagination, which has historically fetishised the suffering of Asian women. While the Chinese text uses the 'I' narrator to critique the cruelty of the aggressors through ethically mediated reflection, the English text uses the immediacy of Shujuan's perspective to facilitate a spectacularised consumption of the victim's pain.

Overall, the English translation of *The Thirteen Hairpins of Jinling* enacts an inversion of the source text's philosophy of silence. In the Chinese original, silence functions as a shield against re-traumatisation and a refusal of the pornographic gaze. The intergenerational narrator 'I' breaks the silence only to critique the historical erasure, while respecting the victims' refusal to re-live the details. The translation, however, deletes this ethical framework. It removes the intergenerational witness who speaks for the history and instead forces the trauma victims to speak as spectacle. By erasing the philosophy of silence-as-survival and replacing it with the western imperative of testimony, the translation subjects the characters to a secondary violence. It is a form of re-colonisation that strips the subaltern of their right to opacity, serving up their trauma for global consumption under the guise of giving them a voice.

Conclusion

In this study I have demonstrated that the English translation of Yan's The *Thirteen Hairpins of Jinling* is not a transparent linguistic transfer but a site of intense cultural and ideological negotiation. Through a systematic analysis of Harman's translation strategies, I have shown how the commercially driven translation network, aligned with the film adaptation's Orientalist and 'white saviour' narrative, systematically reconfigured the source text's postcolonial and feminist critique. The untranslatability inherent in Yan's gendered trauma narrative—embedded in its unique narrative structure, culture-specific lexicon, and philosophy of strategic silence—was not merely lost in translation but was actively domesticated, simplified, or erased.

The investigation revealed four key mechanisms of this transformation. First, the commercial imperative set the stage, subordinating the text's ethical concerns to marketability and cross-promotion with the film. Second, the dismantling of the dual narrative structure erased the intergenerational, postmemorial lens, flattening a complex ethical witnessing into a linear, third-person limited narrative. This deletion fundamentally undermined the novel's core project of giving voice to the subaltern and representing the belated and haunting nature of trauma. Third, a pervasive strategy of domestication and re-Orientalisation stripped the narrative of its cultural specificity. By altering the title, displacing cultural context, simplifying character subjectivity, and amplifying erotic elements, the translation transformed resilient, complex women into fragile, consumable flowers and recentred the western male as a heroic figure. Finally, the violation of strategic silence forced the subaltern to speak, turning a narrative that respected the unspeakable nature of trauma into a spectacle that caters to a western gaze eager for testimony and voyeuristic detail.

The journey from *Thirteen Hairpins of Jinling* to *The Flowers of War* exemplifies how translation can become an instrument of epistemic violence, reinforcing the very colonial power dynamics the original text sought to deconstruct. The hairpin, a symbol of dignity, agency, and potential resistance, was replaced by the flower, a symbol of passive beauty and ephemerality. This case study underscores the critical role of translation ethics in the global circulation of postcolonial literature. It warns against the trap of a homogenising, neo-Orientalist discourse that smooths over cultural heterogeneity and neutralises resistant potential. On a broader scale, these findings urge translation studies to critically re-evaluate the systemic power imbalances within global publishing networks, highlighting how market-driven domestication often overrides ethical engagement with marginalised voices. For the future translation and dissemination of Asian women's trauma narratives, it is imperative to develop strategies that prioritise cultural fidelity, respect narrative complexity, and protect the right to opacity. Only then can translation truly serve as a bridge for cross-cultural understanding rather than a renewed site of silencing and appropriation.

While this study provides an in-depth analysis of the dynamics of translation, its scope is inherently limited by its reliance on a single case study of one novel and its specific translation trajectory. Future research might explore comparative cases of Chinese trauma literature translated into English to determine whether these domesticating patterns are systemic across the industry. Furthermore, incorporating empirical studies on target reader reception and examining translator commentaries or editorial correspondence could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the decision-making processes behind such ideological shifts.

Acknowledgement

I am grateful to The Youth Fund Project of the Ministry of Education of China for Humanities and Social Sciences Research (25YJC752016) and the Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities (2232025E-18) for supporting this article.

References

Apter, Emily. *Against World Literature: The Politics of Untranslatability.* Verso, 2013.

Bhabha, Homi K. 'Sly Civility,' *October* 34 (1985): 71–80. https://doi.org/10.2307/778489.

Cai, Zhen. 'Geling Yan Reveals Three Major Revisions of Thirteen Hairpins: Zhang Yimou Treasures the Script as a Masterpiece.' *Yangtse Evening Post,* 16 May 2011.

Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History.* Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.

Hirsch, Marianne. T*he Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust.* Columbia University Press, 2012.

Jiang, Mengying. 'From "Hairpins" to "Flowers": Feminist Translation Criticism of The Flowers of War.' *Journal of Gender Studies* 33, no. 7 (2024): 867–78, https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2024.2315034.

Khalifa, Abdel Wahab. 'Rethinking Agents and Agency in Translation Studies.' *Translators Have Their Say? Translation and Power of Agency,* edited by Abdel Wahab Khalifa. LIT Verlag, 2014.

Leo, Ou-fan. 'Interview with Leo Ou-fan' in *Appreciation of Masterpieces and Film Adaptations,* written and edited by Xiaohong Zhang, Man Xu, and Dongmei Meng. Jilin People's Publishing House, 2017.

Li, Katherina. 'Fragmented Sisterhood in the Nanking Massacre: The Flowers of War.' *Feminist Media Studies* 23, no. 6 (2023): 2745–760. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2022.2084632.

Luo, Xianhai. 'The Reciprocal Symbiosis between Literature and Film: A New Study of the Film Adaptation and Version Variations of The Flowers of War.' *Journal of Guizhou Normal University (Social Sciences)* 2 (2025): 132–40. https://doi.org/10.16614/j.gznuj.skb.2025.02.013.

Matthews, Graham J. 'Chinese Historical Fiction in the Wake of Postmodernism: Two Versions of Yan Geling's *The Flowers of War*.' *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 62, no. 4 (2016): 659–77. https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.2016.0058.

Said, Edward. *Orientalism.* Pantheon Books, 1978.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture,* edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. University of Illinois Press, 1988.

Tymoczko, Maria. *Translation, Resistance, Activism.* University of Massachusetts Press, 2010.

Yan, Geling. *The Flowers of War,* translated by Nicky Harman. Harvill Secker, 2012.

Yan, Geling. *The Flowers of War*, translated by Nicky Harman. Other Press, 2012.

Yan, Geling. *Thirteen Hairpins of Jinling.* Press of Shanxi Normal University, 2011.

Yan, Geling and Zhen Cai. 'Geling Yan Reveals Three Major Revisions of Thirteen Hairpins: Zhang Yimou Treasures the Script as a Masterpiece.' *Yangtse Evening Post,* 16 May 2011.

Yang, Bojiang. *The Japanese War of Aggression Against China and its Postwar Legacies and Impacts.* Chinese Social Science Publication, 2025.

Yang, Jincai. 'Reading Ethics and the Body in Geling Yan's The Flowers of War.' *Neohelicon* 42, no. 2 (2015): 571–84. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11059-015-0312-y.

Yang, Jing. 'The Reinvention of Hollywood's Classic White Saviour Tale in Contemporary Chinese Cinema: Pavilion of Women and The Flowers of War.' *Critical Arts* 28, no. 2 (2014): 247–63. https://doi.org/10.1080/02560046.2014.906343.

Zhang, Yimou. *Flowers of War.* https://v.qq.com/x/cover/hu9th0blgco6c89/h0034diznzc.html?ptag=11973 .

Zhu, Zhenwu, and Wenjie Liu. 'Sinologist Nicky Harman's "Creative Treason": A Case Study of the English Translation of The Flowers of War.' *Foreign Language Studies* 5, no. 2 (2017): 50–57, 107.