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Review of Tales of Translation: Composing the New Woman in China, 1899-1918

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

Reviewed by Felicia Ho, University of California, Los Angeles

Hu Ying's *Tales of Translation: Composing the New Woman in China, 1898-1918* explores the emergence in literary texts of the new woman in late Qing China, a period marked by China's intensified confrontation with what has now often come to be designated as the "West." Hu Ying's literary/historical study investigates the transformations that take place in the meeting of Chinese women with the translations of three Western figures and how such Western figures simultaneously may have catalyzed the formation of the "new Chinese woman," as the figures themselves were transformed through their "migration." Most innovative of her contributions is perhaps the refreshing way in which Hu Ying re-envisions and re-reads the vital process of translation that often remains overlooked or underplayed when discussing cultural exchange. Through the model of translation, Hu Ying takes a closer look at the complicated process of narrating "others" amidst the negotiations of re-imagining the self. Hu Ying extends the literal metaphor of translation as a procedure of cultural exchange to a figurative one that helps shape our understanding of the constitution of the new Chinese woman during the turn of the twentieth century.

The book is divided into six sections: an introduction, epilogue, and four chapters. In the first, Hu Ying analyzes a prefigure for the modern Chinese woman and her confrontation with the "West"; in the following chapters, she traces the transformations of Alexander Dumas' female protagonist, Marguerite Gautier, in *La dame aux camélias*; the historical figures Sophia Perovskaia, a Russian anarchist infamous for her assassination of Tsar Alexander II, and the French revolution's political activist, Madame Roland de la Platiere, as they enter the Chinese imagination. Hu Ying's introduction situates her work among various contending discourses of Chinese Nationalism and traditional Chinese chauvinism, feminism and Orientalism. By contextualizing the emerging new Chinese female figures' confrontation with Western women within the specific historicity of Western imperialism, Chinese intellectual reform, the legacy of Chinese literature and traditional heritage, and the unpredictable power of creativity, Hu Ying's work ambitiously embarks on transcending the current limits of cultural comparativism, Western feminism and East Asian studies. Her task is challenging, for she must clear new space for imagining the new Chinese woman from a long history of totalizing narratives. As promised, Hu Ying delivers almost beyond one's expectation. Meticulously researched and documented, *Tales of Translation* reads like an enjoyable page-turner, filled with interesting anecdotes, deep insights, and playful humor when one least expects it. In addition, the generous historical contextualizations make *Tales of Translation* accessible not only to non-East Asian scholars, but to anyone with a budding interest in East Asian Studies, feminism, or comparative studies.

Illustrating the importance of contextualizing in cross-cultural work, Hu Ying explicates the critical historical events that brought about the crisis of constituting the new Chinese woman. Hu Ying explains how the determined imperialistic aggressions against China that sparked the fear of national genocide and the need for massive multi-fronted reforms (national, cultural, philosophical, etc.) were ultimately framed purely as a gender problem. Perhaps this was in part

because, traditionally, the position of Chinese women represented the norm of both Chinese tradition and the proper cosmic order. In addition, at the time, attempts to forge a universal measuring stick often tended to focus on incongruities of gender differences and probably only further exacerbated such interpretations. For example, prominent missionary Young J. Allen's (1836-1907) equation of a country's civilization to its treatment of women and Chinese diplomat Liu Xihong's description of nations through their different treatment of women, likely influenced Chinese intellectuals like Liang Qichao to equate national salvation with a need specifically for women's reform. The crisis of constituting the new woman thus embodied the crisis of nation, race, national and racial identity as women's reform became a metonymy for the reform of the nation and the potential site for a new China. The woman's place therefore functioned as a site for the construction of differences between China and the West, as well as China's atrophied past versus its potential modern future. Thus, the main premise of Hu Ying's book posits that the new Chinese woman was constituted through her opposition to her "significant others" (6): her domestic "other"—the Confucian educated *cainu*, women writers from elite backgrounds in the High Qing—and her foreign "other," the Western woman.

Hu Ying provocatively opposes to the new woman the *cainu* rather than the more conventional ignorant female victim, such as Lu Xun's Xiangling Shao in "Benediction," a short story in which a traditional woman is used and abused and ultimately starves to death, a beggar under the male-dominated Confucian system. By using the figure of the *cainu* instead of the traditional female victim, Hu Ying adroitly avoids various land mines as she traverses multiple fields. Arguing against a totalized nationalist narrative, Hu Ying contends that the *cainu* were intentionally erased from national memory by Nationalism in an attempt to subvert their authority to write and participate in the making of history, and in order to hegemonize the trope of traditional women. Grounding her argument in the context of a new field of scholarship where literary historical critics like Susan Mann and Dorothy Ko document the highly visible and active *cainu* who participated in flourishing female poetry societies and had female anthologies published, Hu Ying illustrates how the presence of the *cainu* did not support the monolithic image of Chinese women as "ignorant, apathetic and sequestered" (7). By re-inscribing the *cainu*'s education as useless, atrophied, indulgent, and frivolous and by equating it with the sentimentalized and feminized cultural heritage that led to the nation's emasculation, Liang Qichao disempowers the *cainu*'s cultural capital and recuperates for nationalism the ultimate authority. Again invoking Mann's scholarship of the *cainu* to critique "feminist Orientalism" (6), Hu Ying illustrates how the *cainu* challenges the "monochromatic picture frozen in time" (6) of the uniformly oppressed victim, the missing and silenced "others," who need the assistance of Western women to speak. Through the motif of the *cainu*, Hu Ying successfully rejects both a Nationalist or a Western feminist totalized reading and opens space for the possibility of new interpretation.

To complete the second half of her argument, Hu Ying maintains that while intellectuals re-constituted traditional women as polar opposites to new Chinese women, they looked to the modernity embodied by Western women, the *xifu*, for Chinese women to emulate. Indeed, as Hu Ying suggests, the figure of the Western woman may have acted as a catalyst for expanding the possibilities for women. In chapter one, Hu Ying's reading of *Flower in a Sea of Retribution*'s female protagonist, Fu Caiyun—a courtesan/concubine who travels to Europe with her diplomat husband—is perhaps most notable for underscoring Caiyun's ability to use Western female

figures—such as the Lady of the Camelias and the fictional version of Sophia Perovskaia—to reinvent herself and to cross borders in her culture. Furthermore, in each subsequent chapter, a continuous thread emerges of Western women sparking (in part) the development of modern Chinese women. Hu Ying reads the Lady of the Camelias as a symbol of transformative power that lends those women clothed in her image the instant appearance of modernity; she takes the figure of Sophia Perovskaia as opening new possibilities of public life, autonomy, and new historical agency for women, and she interprets Madame Roland as symbolizing the new global position of women. Hu Ying argues that these various transplantations—from shocking iconoclastic public spectacle, powerful political activist to global citizen—encourage experimentation of radically different female behaviors by virtue of trying out new identities and habits. For her, such transplantations act as potential progenitors for a wide range of different configurations for modern women.

At first, such a precarious stance may appear to make her argument vulnerable to Orientalist appropriations. Yet, while her work celebrates the diversity of the modern Chinese woman and Western figures' positive roles within it, perhaps more importantly her work repeatedly and emphatically grounds itself in a rebuttal of the totalizing narratives of Orientalism. By framing the confrontation of Chinese and Western women through the incommensurability of languages and compromises of translations, and among the myriad of competing forces both local and global, Hu Ying's work challenges the subsuming discourse of universalism. Through an innovative turn to translation, Hu Ying escapes her final lure. Extending this literal metaphor of translation as a means of understanding the complicated process of cultural exchange to a figurative one that encompasses the constitution of the new Chinese woman, Hu Ying utilizes the flexibility, negotiation and dissolving of boundaries inevitable in translations as ways to complicate our understanding of the constitution of the new Chinese woman. Hu Ying achieves this through the repeated and re-emphasized themes in her four chapters: 1) because omissions and negotiations are inevitable in translation, translations are not copies but innovations; 2) Western feminists are not necessarily more evolved than Chinese woman, but just stripped of their historical context as a result of the nature of translation into different cultures and a result of Chinese translators' attempts to appropriate them for political ends; 3) Chinese modern women are often divided between Western feminism and Chinese nationalism; 4) because figures are neither completely the same nor different, the nature of all identities and cultures remains porous and multiple.

1) Focusing on the powerful role that translators and translations played in deciding and understanding how the construction of the “West” and the Chinese tradition may have been imagined and constituted, Hu Ying emphasizes the importance of the language that embodies the figures and the choices that translators make which ultimately determine any figure's reception. By illustrating Chinese translators' struggles to decide which form of language to use—archaic prose, *guwen*, which bestowed a moral value to literary work; *pianwen* (parallel prose), which bestowed a more poetic/ornate resonance; or even *xinwen*, a new invented style combining colloquial speech with Japanese compounds—Hu Ying illustrates that each choice came with its own specific cultural and historical implications, as well as personal and emotional investments. For example, in *La dame aux camélias*, Hu Ying focuses on the difficulties Lin Shu encounters as he attempts to translate the Parisian world and negotiates the tension between foreign images and his chosen language of its embodiment—classical Chinese prose. By studying Lin Shu's

“infidelity” (79) to the original text—the “omissions and embellishments” (79) of Lin Shu’s translation—Hu Ying highlights the conflict between cultures—between French romantic sensibility and Confucian *lifa*, the rules of propriety that demand separate spheres for the genders. While his highly refined and articulate descriptions made the text popular for the literati, its ties to Confucian morality abutted on the fluid sexual spirit of French romanticism. In addition, by explaining how Lin Shu translated through the practice of *duiyi*, where the task of translation was divided between an oral translator and one who transcribes, Hu Ying challenges the assumptions of sole intellectual ownership, originality, and authorship. By emphasizing the constant negotiations, omissions and admissions inevitable in translation, Hu Ying illustrates the non-transparency of languages as well as cultural exchanges. Her re-investigation of the complicated process of translation illuminates the invention present in all translation and in any cultural exchange. Moreover, her documentation of the various packaging of Western figures illustrates how changes in genre and medium predispose the figures to different receptivity in terms of class, education and gender. While the first expensive hardback publication of *La dame aux camélias*’ translation exposed the figure only to a privileged few, the tale’s later serialization in newspapers expanded coverage to a broader audience. Furthermore, while Liang Qichao’s biography of Madame Roland suggests mimicking her supportive role as a revolutionary nationalist, her portrayal in *tanci* scripts, primarily exchanged between women, depicts Madame Roland as the center of a conventional traditional romance. The different translator’s choice of parallels between Western figures and native Chinese legends constitutes different models for understanding the foreign “other.” Thus, Hu Ying persuasively argues, the consumption as well as acceptance of characters ultimately depends upon the translator’s choice of medium, the words used, and the packaging, as well as the cultural legacies alluded to. In short, the act of translation is inventive.

Similarly, like lingual translations, the translations of female figures, Hu Ying asserts, are never copies of originals but always inherently innovative. This image of translation Hu Ying most poignantly depicts in the fourth chapter in her reading of Yi Suo’s novel *Huang Xiuqiu*, the story of a traditional woman, Xiuqiu, who turns modern and in turn modernizes China. Using the borrowing of embroidery patterns as a metaphor for cultural borrowing, Xiuqiu must borrow a pattern from Madame Roland to fight for Chinese women’s equality. Hu Ying notes that Xiuqiu’s borrowed pattern is neither an exact copy nor an inferior derivative of the original and thus diverges from translation models that demand total fidelity and unquestioning reverence for the original. Rather than a betrayal, in Xiuqiu’s model of translation, the result of productive differences possesses “its own pattern” (195) and the process of translation empowers her by opening creative space. Hu Ying states, “The gift of universal feminism is . . . accepted just as the call of nationalism [is] . . . exploited, by the understanding that the creative transformation is what matters” (195). Ultimately, the original or the original intent of Madame Roland’s pattern and Nationalism become irrelevant, for it is the translation’s impact on the cultural scene, the effect of the differences that engender the new Chinese woman, that is of importance.

2) By showing that lingual and character translations are inherently inventive, Hu Ying further illustrates that Western feminists are not necessarily more evolved than Chinese women, but stripped of their historical context. Hu Ying argues that it is a combined effect of the nature of translation that removes historical context and the translator’s intent to strip figures of their historical limitations in order for them to be used for specific political ends. For example, in her

reading of *Huang Xiuqiu*, Hu Ying banishes the possibility of a feminist Orientalizing perspective by exploring the differences between the historically recorded images of Madame Roland and the discrepancy between the images presented in the story. In eighteenth-century France, the “real” Madame Roland experienced real historical constraints. Contrary to her portrayal in *Xiuqiu*, the real Madame Roland’s stance on many issues contradicted the aims of women’s liberation for gender equality. Indeed, she had considerable political influence, but she never saw herself as a public figure; her lifetime publications were anonymous, her self-effacing words were unfeminist, and crucial letters were always penned in the name of her husband. In spite of her self-stifling, she was still often attacked for her “abuses of male power . . . and . . . was seen . . . as a corruption of the body politic by the female body” (189), and even compared to such notoriously despised women as Marie-Antoinette. The inaccuracy of representation, Hu Ying argues, can be understood as a political as well as narrative necessity, for only by stripping Madame Roland of her historical specificity can she serve as a feminist model for the imagination of *Xiuqiu*.

Furthermore, through the narrative of *Xiuqiu*, Hu Ying introduces a fierce regionalism that does not defer to the center that proclaims itself equally effective as an organizing principle and pays little respect to borders. As *Xiuqiu*’s local pattern of embroidery is implemented nationwide, the Nationalist and universalizing discourses become rewritten by the local village into a local pattern for global embroidery, and as *Xiuqiu* defies her centers, so too does Hu Ying. Finally, by emphasizing shared gender limitations, Hu Ying illustrates the non-existence of a more significantly evolved Western feminist. For example, Hu Ying illustrates the similarities between Sophia Perovskaia and the Chinese traditional *xianu* (Chinese martial heroine marked with extraordinary virtues as well as remarkable martial skills) and ultimately shows how both figures never transcend their gender but become appropriated by other discourses and must inevitably pay for their transgressions outside female propriety with their violent death. Thus, by utilizing themes of translation as invention, by unearthing the historical context of Madame Roland’s political struggles, and by illustrating the similar gender constraints placed upon Western and Chinese women, Hu Ying decenters the image of the West as central and omniscient benevolent educator.

3) There is tension between Western feminism and nationalism and although both are at times antithetical to the new Chinese woman’s quest for equality, ultimately they are useful in inspiring her emergence. In chapter 4, Hu Ying shows how *Xiuqiu*’s search for gender equality must negotiate between her nationalist husband’s ambivalence toward her awakening and the racially competitive Madame Roland’s pattern of feminism. While her husband takes on the problematic arguments of nationalism’s reform for women—namely, women’s educational reform as a disguised return to the Confucian role of “good wives and wise mothers” (191) and nationalism’s demand for conformity and ultimate authority to determine legitimacy—, the transfiguration of Madame Roland, on the other hand, most powerfully reveals the problematic relationship between the configuration of modern Chinese women and Western feminism. Thus both Nationalism and Western feminism legitimate as they simultaneously subsume. Triangulated in this predicament of nationalist rhetoric, European enlightenment’s universalism and the need for gender equality, *Xiuqiu* painstakingly attempts to find a solution. While both her husband and Madame Roland at times are antithetical to her cause, *Xiuqiu* requires the presence of both. *Xiuqiu* needs her husband’s assistance to bail her out of prison and to serve as a

source of authority in mediating her revolutionary new ways to the surrounding people. In other words, he is the necessary authority who lends her authority. Similarly, Madame Roland's racialized gift of female equality, which ends up embodying the threat of the "West" to universalize itself, is also a spark that engenders the indigenous feminist.

4) By reading translated texts through a strategy of the similar and the different, Hu Ying's book solves the question of the "the thematic and the problematic" (36) that Partha Chatterjee raises in his book, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*. Neither in exact opposition (nativist) nor acceding to the totalizing lure of universalism, her literary interpretations answer his call for literary analysis that is no longer centered in Western literature and theory. A deeply analytical and powerful literary analysis which not only interprets from landmark pieces of Western theory, but also draws upon canonical Chinese literary tradition and history, Hu Ying's readings of heightened historical consciousness deepen the complexity of the literary text and our understanding of cultural exchange. For example, Hu Ying reads Caiyun as a partial descendent of traditional historical figures and canonical Chinese texts. Her reading, however, suggests that the Chinese female protagonists are neither Western copies, nor a return to nativism. While Hu Ying agrees Caiyun bears similarities to Daiyu of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, Pan Jinlian of *Golden Vase Plum*, and the fictionalized historical figure from whom Caiyun was modeled—Sai Jinhua and its *Mingji* tradition, unlike any of the other female protagonists, Caiyun ultimately transcends, for Hu Ying, the limit imposed by tradition and culture and its moral codes and thoughts. Unlike any of her traditional counterparts, Caiyun never suffers any retributions for her transgressions; she simply escapes unscathed to the outside. Ironically, however, Hu Ying discovers, in this narrative of the different and the familiar, that Fu Caiyun often acts more unconventionally than the fictional rendition of Sophia Perovskaia, who ends up acting more like a traditional Confucian heroine. Thus Hu Ying illustrates her point of seeing others in the self and the self in others.

Furthermore, in her daring analysis of the *La dame aux camélias*, Hu Ying calls the "stripped" transplanted Camelia but a retelling of a familiar Chinese beauty/scholar classic. The variety of transplanted camelias, Hu Ying concludes, is an amalgamation of the old and the new—the old of Chinese romances, and the new exotic Parisian world that includes the spectacle of the Western woman whose package is distinctly modern. Although the Lady of the Camelias is exotic and foreign, the translation renders her familiar by having her act in traditional Confucian ways. Again in chapter three of Hu Ying's text, balancing between the authentically foreign and the domestically familiar, Sophia Perovskaia is markedly foreign as she is also familiar to the *xianu*. Both cross-dress but are exaggeratedly feminine, are independent, have minimal family ties to allow dedication to the public, and possess a spirit of self-denial and self-sacrifice that is reminiscent of traditional Chinese female virtues lauded in the Confucian canonical texts *Lie Nuzhuan (Biographies of Women)*. Thus again in the search of the foreign, the literary texts find not the absolute "other," but more of its multiple selves. By re-interpreting the Western woman through a recognition of sameness and difference, then, Hu Ying not only escapes Western centrism, but also illustrates the ultimate porosity of identity and cultures.

But aside from refuting nationalist and Western feminist strains of thought, Hu Ying's book clearly also desires to illustrate China's distance from debates over Third World women and nationalism. In agreement that nationalism's troping of Chinese women as symbols of past and

future subsumed the discourse of gender—not unlike Gail Hershatter’s revolutionary look at the courtesan culture of Shanghai in *Dangerous Pleasures*—Hu Ying illustrates how over time the interpretation of events and characters is repeatedly reconstituted to serve the ruling party’s agenda, and how women repeatedly become displaced as they invariably become troped. However, to the current debate about women serving as national boundary guards, Hu Ying adds a unique element. While Partha Chatterjee’s *The Nation and Its Fragments* describes the colonizing experience as creating inner and outer spheres, where men took on change, and women were made to police the boundaries of the nation, to serve as the unchanging essence of its culture that made it distinct from the “West,” Hu Ying finds that traditional Chinese women held multiple and often contradictory roles. Not only did they police the cultural essence that distinguished it from others, but they also had to symbolize China’s atrophied past and its future. Furthermore, her reading of the relationship between nationalism and women’s issues is a much less intentionally antagonistic one. Cautioning against overinterpreting all nationalist actions as conscious decisions to subsume the female voice, her reading allows the possibility of other factors—both economic and historical—that may have accounted for the eroded cultural value of the *cainu* in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Secondly, her reading recognizes that there were also female and not just male nationalists. Finally, although women served as figures of speech, and self-representations of women writers easily became submerged in the nationalist discourse, men frequently borrowed female pen names to express their dissatisfaction with the traditional system. Hu Ying complicates the prevailing tendency to immediately label and personify it as “nationalism’s” desire to obliterate the female voice. In interpreting the male penning of female names, Hu Ying wishes to leave space for the possibility that male penning was also a sign of a man’s desire to obscure his gender. Arguing that since the seventh century, women writers’ works were being collected and published, and that by the late Qing, they were only increasingly more established and visible, Hu Ying suggests “it thus became more difficult to turn ‘the woman’s voice’ into a symbolic blank, to be filled with male writerly presence” (147). Rather, female writers of the time conferred authority, and the image of writing women came with “considerable cultural and political capital” (147). Hu Ying thus leaves space for a positive reading, where a momentary potential blurring of gender in writing was occurring, as penning permitted men to “inhabit” (144) a new self, and as writing became a group process (both male and female) of envisioning the creation of a new community. If indeed, as Hu Ying suggests, there may have been “a conscious effort to erase her [the *cainu*] from historical memory” (7) so that she “apparently vanished barely half a century later” (6), the potentially positive reading does become somewhat dampened if we consider the possible effects of such actions. Nevertheless, Hu Ying’s reading does not negate the possibility of a more optimistic reading of nationalist intention or disavow the persistent agency of female writers of the period.

Although the book begins with the search for the modern Chinese woman’s “others,” Hu Ying argues that the modern Chinese woman transcends both the *cainu* and the Western *xifu*, along with any other structures that attempt to subsume her, by questioning the assumption of fixed boundaries. Initially sparked and legitimized by the nationalist agenda and Western female figures, the modern Chinese woman is neither a Western imported copy nor an anti-traditionalist. Neither is she original or coherent, but rather flourishes due to a wide variety of sources and inspirations—native, traditional and foreign. While traversing the spaces of cultural studies, feminism, and translation, *Tales of Translation* problematizes the very concepts of boundaries that are assumed in identity, originality, and even history. By reading translation as a mode of

production, circulation, creation, and transformation, Hu Ying interprets these changes in the figure of the new woman as a form of historical documentation that attests to the non-transparency of cultural exchange—a process that blurs the boundaries of cultures and the lines that distinguish between history and narrative. Her book is perhaps most intriguing in its suggestion that identities and cultures are never completely similar, nor irretrievably different, but essentially porous.

While her unproblematized and undesignated usage of the term “the West” throughout her book tends to foster a monolithic conception of England, America, France and Spain, as well as other less martial, non-participating Western nations, and may detract from her deconstructive argument, I assume that Hu Ying uses the term “The West” as it was used in an undifferentiated way by Chinese intellectuals of the time. Before I conclude, I leave with several provocative questions for further exploring the text. My colleague, Tawei Ji, reminded me of the most self-conscious dialectic of Gail Hershatter’s text which continually deconstructed others and her own work as she was writing, and queried if Hu Ying was equally self-conscious of deconstructing herself or not. Since all discourses subsume and totalize, do deconstructivist texts that attempt to break down boundaries also subsume to some extent? Although Hu Ying clearly intends for the *cainu* to share the space of traditional Chinese women, to what extent might the space and detail of the *cainu*’s discussion potentially subsume the space of other traditional Chinese women, like farmers or peasants who had no access to literature or literacy? Yet, is there also not something problematic about assuming that the Third World critic must always be overly self-conscious? Insofar as the past must also be narrated/constructed, to what extent can the margins between fiction and history be erased? And to the extent that there is always an illiterate population, how are the lines between fiction and reality reified? Hu Ying’s book richly evokes intriguing age-old problems in a truly brilliant and refreshing way.

Overall, her entire book is devoted to exposing, exploding and exceeding the limits of our mental constructs of identity, culture, originality and history. Although her readings do not specifically mention Judith Butler, her interpretation of translations, cultures and identities can almost be read as a sophisticated macro-reading of Butler’s fluid identity politics that incorporates one’s competing ties to the ideological constructs of the national, the global and the local that continue, to borrow Althusser’s word, to “hail” us. Hu Ying’s *Tales of Translation*, thus, like many of the female modern Chinese women of her literary texts, transgresses ideological structures that attempt to contain it—East Asian Studies, Western feminism and cultural comparison. For East Asian studies she offers a new perspective for understanding the formation of the Chinese new identity, and a new tool to understand the construction of the national crisis. And to current debates on the field of modern Chinese literature as to whether May Fourth ever successfully cleft a complete rupture with the past, Hu Ying’s examples of the repeatedly re-surfacing past act as determined specters that refuse to be erased. And rather than asserting ultimate difference or similarity in cultural comparison, Hu Ying’s book is a fascinating reminder of the importance of the role of translation and creativity, and of the process of cultural exchange in which the different within the similar and the reverse continue to captivate our interests. Her work is powerfully anti-Orientalist, anti-linear and anti-evolutionary, and even anti-universalizing feminist. By repeatedly invoking the specter of the highly cultured and educated *cainu*, Hu Ying demonstrates that the progressions of any narrative, whether feminist, nationalist, or historical, are not necessarily evolving into greater transcendence. Rather than attributing them to one

supreme authority, Hu Ying suggests that real and imagined modern women came from a multitude of sources. Initially legitimized by the nationalist agenda, and sparked by images of modern Western women, the women figures in Hu Ying's study—like Xiuqiu who surpasses both her husband and Madame Roland—ultimately go beyond political agendas, as the transformative power of writing and translation opens up a new space, limited and constraining in its ways, but fertile in its potentials for the new woman and man.