

# The Narrative Construction of Wang Xifeng's Character in the English Translation of "A Dream of Red Mansions"

Wen Li<sup>1</sup>, Hua Nan<sup>1,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Guangxi University of Science and Technology, China

\* Corresponding author: LiWen(1365846789@qq.com)

**Abstract:** The English translations of "A Dream of Red Mansions" by Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang, as well as by David Hawkes, almost completely replicate the original work, holding significant positions both domestically and internationally. Both versions vividly portray the characters, but there are deficiencies in the depiction of the classic character Wang Xifeng. Based on Mona Baker's narrative construction theory, this paper studies the portrayal of Wang Xifeng in these two translations, revealing that in some translations, the depiction of Wang Xifeng's beauty, brashness, dignified elegance, and cunning charm is somewhat diminished.

**Keywords:** A Dream of Red Mansions; Narrative Construction; Wang Xifeng.

## 1. Introduction

Wang Xifeng is one of the main female characters in the classic "A Dream of Red Mansions". She is portrayed as a beautiful, fiery, and scheming housewife. As the person in charge of the Jia household, she holds real power and is the leader in the family, often appearing in luxurious attire, embodying wealth and nobility. Her external beauty and warm demeanor mask her cunning, power tactics, and numerous schemes. Cao Xueqin, in creating the image of this iconic character, not only objectively describes her appearance and behavior but also brings her to life through distinctive and personalized language, making her an immortal artistic classic. "A Dream of Red Mansions" allows readers to vividly feel the characters through the text alone, with Wang Xifeng being a prime example. However, due to differences in cultural background and environment of the translators, variations arise in the translations, making it difficult for target language readers to experience the same enjoyment as the source language readers. This paper studies her image through narrative construction strategies, finding that the translations fall short in recreating her dynamic and fascinating character.

## 2. Mona Baker's Narrative Construction Theory

Mona Baker's narrative construction theory, grounded in sociology and communication theory, breaks from the traditional focus on internal elements of narrative and views narrative as "the public and personal 'stories' we identify with and that guide our behavior." Baker details the workings and constructions of narrative, exploring the role of translation across time and texts. She identifies four main strategies of narrative construction in translation: (1) temporal and spatial framing, which places the chosen text in a different time and space, highlighting the narrative in a new context and connecting it to real-life stories; (2) selective appropriation of textual material, a process of extracting through deletion and addition, which can suppress, emphasize, or elaborate the implicit narratives or meta-narratives in the original text; (3) framing by labeling, a discursive process using vocabulary,

terms, or phrases to identify key elements like characters, places, groups, and events in the narrative; (4) repositioning of participants, changing the relationship between the participants in the translation activity and the reader or audience through time, space, deixis, and language domain. Baker also outlines several key features of narrative: causal emplotment and narrative accrual, among others. As Baker suggested that narrative features can also be used as narrative strategies, this paper collectively refers to them as narrative strategies, allowing translators to participate in narrative construction and clarify their narrative stance.

Baker notes, "Translation is essentially a form of re-narration, a reconstruction of events and characters in another language." Her theory provides a new direction for translation studies and a viable approach for researching the reshaping of character images in translation. She advocates analyzing translation from a narrative perspective, considering translation itself as a form of narrative. Applying Baker's narrative construction theory to the study of Wang Xifeng's character in "Dream of the Red Chamber" offers deep insights into how these translators from the East and West reshape the protagonist's image.

## 3. Narrative Construction of Wang Xifeng's Image in the Translations by Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang, and David Hawkes

### 3.1. Temporal and Spatial Construction of Wang Xifeng's Image

Baker's first strategy in narrative construction is temporal and spatial framing. This means that translators should bring the source text into the context of the target language, establishing a connection between the two, even if the temporal and spatial context of the source text differs from that of the target language. If successfully integrated and connected, this approach allows readers of the target language to closely relate the text to their own reality. This not only highlights the content of the original text but also makes it easier for readers to understand its meaning.

In the translation of "A Dream of Red Mansions"

translators from both Eastern and Western backgrounds translated the work into English, bringing the original time and setting into the temporal and spatial context of the target language. By translating the book into English, they each constructed a new temporal and spatial framework. In their re-narration, they placed the translated text in a different time and space, creating connections between the narrative of the translation and other narratives, making the characters in the translation relate to characters in a new time and space. The English version by Yang Xianyi and his wife has significant influence in China, while the Hawkes version remains a unique classic in the Western world to this day. As Chinese, Yang Xianyi and his wife had a deeper understanding of Chinese culture. Hawkes, being a native English speaker, had a rare insight during the translation process, understanding the needs of native English readers. Coming from different cultural standpoints and contexts, their versions naturally vary. However, both guided readers to connect the story with real-life narratives, albeit with some shortcomings in reshaping the character of Wang Xifeng. Overall, they successfully constructed the temporal and spatial framework in their translations, re-narrating the story, and enabling target language readers to better understand the image of Wang Xifeng.

## 3.2. Selective Appropriation of Textual Material

Baker believes that selective appropriation involves omission and addition to emphasize or suppress certain aspects of the narrative. Translators have the autonomy to make macro-level decisions about authors, texts, and cultures, and micro-level decisions about deletions, omissions, or additions in the translation. This selective appropriation is also seen in the rewriting and rephrasing of the original content to construct a personal narrative. In the translations of Wang Xifeng's image, this strategy can be analyzed for comparative study.

### 3.2.1. Wang Xifeng's Appearance – Beautiful yet Brash

In Cao Xueqin's writing, Wang Xifeng, although beautiful and seemingly kind, is actually brash and scheming. The book describes her as having willow leaf eyebrows and triangular eyes. Though her eyebrows are like willow leaves, they are actually drooping at the ends. "Triangular eyes" and "drooping eyebrows" are often used to describe someone who is not only unattractive but also malicious and deceitful. In Yang Hsien-yi's translation of Wang Xifeng's "eyes" and "eyebrows," he uses the phrase "almond-shaped" and "as long and drooping as" to vividly recreate the description of "triangular phoenix eyes" and "willow leaf drooping eyebrows." However, in Hawkes' translation, the use of similes like "like" retains the original rhetorical style but loses its original flavor and fails to convey the ironic meaning. Wang Xifeng, with her attractive appearance, is also described as "having a vivacious figure." In translating this, Yang uses the word "vivacious," emphasizing Wang Xifeng's attractive and energetic figure, while Hawkes uses "seductive," highlighting her sexy and tempting figure. The original term "literary excellence" refers to a graceful and slender beauty, not the current meaning of "flirtatious behavior." Therefore, "having a vivacious figure" refers to Wang Xifeng's elegant and attractive posture. In this regard, Yang's translation is semantically closer to the original meaning of "elegant physique," while Hawkes, due to a lack of understanding of Chinese culture, distorts its original

meaning. In translating Wang Xifeng's overall demeanor "lit. the face covered in pink does not show her might," Yang adopts a literal translation method, translating it as "The spring time charm of her powdered face gave no hint of her latent formidability," hiding Wang Xifeng's "formidability" beneath a spring-like smile, faithfully reproducing the original meaning. In contrast, Hawkes uses a free translation approach, rendering it as "the ever-smiling summer face of hidden thunders showed no trace," likening Wang Xifeng's smile to the brightness of summer, and her inner authority to hidden thunder. Compared to Yang's version, Hawkes' portrayal of Wang Xifeng expresses her unpredictable nature, akin to the changing summer weather. In this translation, Yang allows target language readers to clearly perceive the image of Wang Xifeng's cunning hidden behind her smile.

### 3.2.2. Wang Xifeng's Attire – Dignified Elegance

In the book, Cao Xueqin provides a detailed description of Wang Xifeng's clothing, reflecting her status as a leader of a feudal aristocratic family, with her attire being magnificent. The colors of her garments are striking, intended to provide a strong sensory impact. She wears a "bright red" jacket, over which is a "teal" robe, and underneath, a "kingfisher blue" skirt. Such a rich palette further accentuates Wang Xifeng's dignified and luxurious appearance. In Yang's translation, the colors are vividly rendered as "red," "turquoise," and "kingfisher-blue." However, Hawkes chooses somewhat muted shades like "dark red," "slate-blue," and "turquoise-colored," which may not convey as strong a sensory impact to the reader. These bright colors also serve to indirectly reflect the wealth and power of the Jia family, as well as Wang Xifeng's high status within it. Due to the different cultural backgrounds of the two translators, their interpretations of the color combinations vary, leading to different representations of these colors in their translations.

### 3.2.3. Wang Xifeng's Language – Cunning and Charming

Wang Xifeng said, "No wonder our Old Ancestress can't stop talking and thinking about the grandchildren every day." This statement is a double entendre, not only praising her grandmother for her kindness to the grandchildren but also winning over Daiyu's heart. In Yang's translation, using "Old Ancestress" as the subject and the phrase "no wonder" to lead the sentence, it shows Wang Xifeng's understanding of the grandmother's affection for the grandchildren, while Hawkes' translation "don't blame you for" makes it seem as if Wang Xifeng is proudly and arrogantly reliant on the grandmother's favor. In an attempt to show off in front of her elders, Wang Xifeng continually offers warm and caring words to Daiyu, but her tone betrays a sense of superiority as the host. Yang's translation uses terms like "cousin," "don't hesitate to tell me," and "just let me know," giving a sense of command and effectively capturing the original's portrayal of elder superiority. In contrast, Hawkes' translation uses "dear," "just come and tell me," and "you must tell me," which convey more of Wang Xifeng's care for Daiyu but fail to depict her elder superiority and her duplicitous nature. In this regard, Yang's translation is closer to the original, portraying a hypocritical elder figure and faithfully recreating Wang Xifeng's cunning, duplicitous, and vainglorious character. To assert her status in the mansion, Wang Xifeng's language towards the servants is harsher. Yang's translation uses the imperative "Hurry up and clear out," which better reflects Wang Xifeng's brash character, whereas Hawkes' "You'd better" appears kinder in tone, not reflecting Wang Xifeng's

desire to assert her status and power in front of Lin Daiyu. Language is one of the carriers of culture. Due to the differences in cultural backgrounds, language habits differ. In these translations, Yang's version more accurately portrays Wang Xifeng's character. The choice of language in the English translations by both translators paints two different images: Yang's Wang Xifeng is cunning, showy, and tactful, while Hawkes' Wang Xifeng appears more approachable and caring towards the younger generation. Comparatively, Yang's translation more accurately represents Wang Xifeng's cunning and hypocritical character, as well as her brash and extravagant nature.

### 3.3. Framing by Labeling

Labeling refers to the use of vocabulary, terms, or phrases to identify characters, places, groups, events, and other key elements in a narrative. All such linguistic processes are considered labeling. In terms of labeling in narrative construction, this paper mainly discusses the translation of the Jinling verdict poems related to Wang Xifeng. The translation of these verdict poems is crucial in representing the characters' images in the book, as they are the "eyes" through which we understand the characters. Ancient Chinese poetry is characterized by its conciseness, rich implications, and deep connotations, often employing rhetorical devices and allusions. In Wang Xifeng's verdict poems, author Cao Xueqin frequently uses the method of word splitting. Take the first line, "Birds of prey come from the last days.," as an example. In the Jinling Twelve Hairpins album, the image accompanying Wang Xifeng's verdict poem depicts a female phoenix standing atop an iceberg. The term "ordinary bird" is derived from splitting the traditional Chinese character phoenix, implying that Wang Xifeng is not an ordinary person but a smart and intellectual individual. The true meaning intended by the author is the "phoenix," suggesting that such a smart person is born during the decline of the Jia family. Yang and his wife translated "ordinary bird" as "this bird," which, although straightforward and easy to understand, does not accurately convey the original meaning. Hawkes translated "ordinary bird" directly as "this phoenix," with "phoenix" meaning "phoenix." This translation subtly indicates the hidden meaning of "ordinary bird" referring to Wang Xifeng, suggesting her nobility but failing to convey the ironic undertone. For target language readers unfamiliar with this cultural context, such translations can seem obscure and difficult to understand, leading to a loss of pragmatic effectiveness in narrative translation. In this aspect, if both translators could adopt Baker's narrative strategies and effectively use labeling, the target readers would gain a clearer understanding of Wang Xifeng's character.

## 4. Conclusion

Both translators have, to a certain extent, successfully recreated the original text, with over 975 major and minor characters in "A Dream of Red Mansions" vividly and accurately portrayed in the translations. A comparative study using Mona Baker's three narrative construction strategies on the poetry in the Yang and Hawkes translations of "A Dream of Red Mansions" reveals that some words and sentences lost their pragmatic effectiveness due to a lack of narrative construction. This particularly affected the reshaping of the character Wang Xifeng, whose distinctive personality traits of being brash, vulgar, and straightforward were somewhat diluted in the translations. However, in some parts, both translators effectively re-narrated the text, achieving pragmatic equivalence, which facilitates the target language readers' understanding and appreciation of the character Wang Xifeng.

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