

Discipline, Desire and Gender: A Feminist Study of Pearl's Chinese Subtitles

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Abstract: This study investigates the translation of gendered power dynamics in Ti West's film *Pearl* through four key English-Chinese subtitle pairs, adopting a dual framework of Foucault's theory of bodily discipline and feminist translation theory. It aims to explore how Chinese subtitles convey disciplinary oppression, bodily resistance, suppressed feminine desire, and gendered transgression. Findings reveal that translations retain the core of Foucauldian disciplinary micro-powers (e.g., psychological surveillance) and feminist insights (e.g., patriarchal role alienation), while making subtle cultural compromises to align with Chinese norms. Translators balance technical conciseness and ideological fidelity, avoiding the silencing of Pearl's resistance. This research enriches interdisciplinary dialogue across translation, film, and gender studies, offering pragmatic strategies for translating sensitive gendered narratives in cross-cultural contexts.

Keywords: *Pearl*, Subtitle Translation, Foucault's Bodily Discipline, Feminist Translation Theory, Gender and Power.

INTRODUCTION

Set against the 1918 influenza pandemic in rural America, Ti West's 2022 horror film *Pearl* dissects oppression and feminine resistance through its eponymous protagonist, Pearl, who is trapped on a desolate farm caring for her bedridden, paralyzed father while enduring her mother's tyrannical, dream-crushing control. Cut off from the outside world by pandemic isolation, Pearl harbors an all-consuming longing to escape her stifling rural life and pursue a glittering screen career, her desperation mounting as her confined existence fuels a violent rebellion against her fate. Waska (2025) argues that the main character, Pearl, is trapped in dual bondage: familial discipline demands she endure her mother's strict control and care for her paralyzed father, while 1918 influenza-induced social isolation robs her of emotional recognition and autonomy. Her longing for stardom clashes with suffocating family constraints, turning unspoken frustrations into violent rebellion that frames madness as a response to systemic suppression of desire and agency—dynamics requiring nuanced theoretical lenses in translation.

Translating these themes into Chinese subtitles faces cultural and technical barriers. Yu (2015, 2020) notes Western feminist discourse and bodily resistance narratives often clash with Chinese cultural norms, forcing translators to balance radical ideas and cultural acceptability. Meanwhile, audiovisual translation's demands of conciseness and synchronization, as Liang (2017) highlights, complicate preserving the film's ideological weight, requiring word choices that align with dialogue rhythm while carrying layered meanings.

This study uses a dual framework integrating Foucault's theory of bodily discipline and feminist translation theory. Deacon (2002) argues understanding human development requires an analytics of how power and knowledge technologies have intertwined historically. Foucault's theory can illuminate how disciplinary power, shape Pearl's docile body through familial and societal constraints. Feminist translation theory, however, addresses Foucault's neglect of women's unique power experiences centers gendered perspectives by making the feminine visible (Deveaux, 1994; Massardier-Kenney, 1997) and adapting strategies to challenge patriarchal norms (Castro & Ergun, 2017).

Existing scholarship rarely bridges these theories to analyze horror film subtitles, especially in Chinese contexts (Miquel-Baldellou, 2024). Leveridge (2023) notes audiovisual translation research often overlooks power dynamics in linguistic choices, critical for genre films dependent on precise narrative transmission. This study addresses these issues by enriching dialogue across translation, film and gender studies as Williams (1991) underscores, offering pragmatic insights for translating sensitive gendered narratives without losing critical edge. It also provides a framework for evaluating cultural and ideological transfer in cross-linguistic contexts, addressing translators' needs in navigating power and desire-themed terrain.

Taming the Body: Translating Discipline and Madness

This analysis centers on Foucault's theory of disciplinary power. Deacon (2002) extends this

framework by emphasizing how subtle control technologies in familial contexts shape docile subjects through norm internalization. Sullivan (1996) notes that such power operates not through overt coercion but via the infiltration of psychonormative standards. This dynamic is particularly evident in Pearl's familial interactions. Waska (2021) details how Pearl's mother wields this power to suppress her daughter's aspirations forcing her to accept a confined life. Translating this nuanced power dynamic requires conveying both surface dialogue and the underlying disciplinary weight. This task is complicated by the fact that familial authority in Chinese contexts is often expressed through indirect yet firm discourse (Yu, 2020) and the demand for conciseness in audiovisual translation (Liang, 2017).

ST (by Pearl's mother): "If you want to leave, go. But if you fail, and you will fail, I want you to remember what it feels like, because that's how I feel every time I look at you."

TT: "如果你想离开, 那就走吧。但如果你失败了, 你一定会失败, 我要你记住那种感觉, 因为每当我看着你时, 我就是这种感觉。"

This line embodies normative judgment and psychological surveillance. The mother ties Pearl's inevitable failure to her own contempt forcing Pearl to internalize the belief that her aspirations are futile. The translation faithfully preserves the core of the disciplinary structure. "你一定会失败" retains the unyielding certainty of the original while "我就是这种感觉" maintains the psychological pressure of surveillance. The translation does not soften the confrontational tone which aligns with Rhodes-Phillips (2022) who argues that family-centric discipline often operates through gendered double standards devaluing women's individual desires. This contrasts with Yu's (2015) observation that Chinese translations often moderate direct authority suggesting translators prioritized preserving the disciplinary power of the scene over cultural softening.

However, this fidelity obscures gendered violence the mother's policing of unfeminine aspirations and misogynistic logic. Feminist translation can expose this dimension through subtle adjustments. Translating the source text's unaddressed "you" as "丫头" a dismissive gendered term for young girls can intensify contempt. Alternatively adding "娘" a maternal address can deepen intimate control. At the lexical level "fail" which is neutral in English

can be rendered as "一败涂地" a phrase that metaphorizes the consequences of women overstepping traditional gender roles or "天生就成不了事" which carries gendered fatalism. Syntactically rephrasing "and you will fail" as "但你注定会失败, 你一定会失败" uses repetition to simulate the internalization of disciplinary discourse. Each strategy involves trade-offs it may lead to regionalized expressions overinterpretation or deviation from colloquial speech. However feminist translation prioritizes estranged critique over fluent violence translations that read smoothly but obscure oppression to expose misogyny.

ST: "It's not about what I want anymore, Mitz. It's about making the best of what I have."

TT: "这不再是关于我想要什么了, 米兹。重要的是利用好我有的一切。"

Here Pearl's resigned docility reflects the effects of disciplinary conditioning but the translation reduces her struggle to a universal renunciation erasing gender specificity. Her "making the best of" her circumstances stem not from universal hardship but from the patriarchal policing of unfeminine dreams. Lexical feminization can correct this. Revising "利用好我有的一切" to "将就用手头这点东西了" captures the resigned adaptability forced on women in patriarchal structures through "将就着" while "这点东西" highlights the compressed space of female agency. Syntactic fragmentation rephrasing the line as "我已经不敢再想自己想要什么了, 米兹。还能怎么办呢? 只能将就着过了吧" uses fragmented expression to simulate the rupture of self-perception framing docility as a tearful female-specific compromise rather than abstract resignation. For space-constrained subtitles italicizing "我想要" when technically feasible can visually embody the silencing of female desire.

These translations successfully convey the core connotations of Foucault's disciplinary power but they also reveal the theory's limitations in interpreting specific texts. Foucault's analysis focuses on general power mechanisms and does not adequately address gender dimensions. Williams (1991) emphasizes that the bodily narratives of horror cinema inherently possess distinct gender attributes a dimension that the pure Foucauldian framework struggles to cover. Strategies such as gendered address lexical feminization and syntactic manipulation demonstrate that making gender visible is not an

abstract ideological choice but a series of concrete and trade-off-laden decisions. Prioritizing gender visibility over linguistic fluency allows Pearl's tragedy to be recognized as a product of misogynistic discipline rather than fate. This tension lies at the heart of translation's political nature. Feminist translation theory argues that translation's significance extends beyond communication to promoting social justice (Simon, 1996) making gendered violence visible rather than normalizing it.

Silencing Desire: Translating Transgression and Violence

Guided by feminist translation theory's core imperative which centers on women's lived experiences makes gendered oppression visible and resists the dilution of feminine voices (Massardier-Kenney, 1997) this section examines how Chinese subtitles negotiate the layered gender dynamics in Pearl particularly the transmission of patriarchal role coercion and its impact on suppressing Pearl's desire. Castro & Ergun (2017) stress that feminist translation must preserve the complexity of systemic gender oppression including how marginalized women may inadvertently perpetuate control over other women. This task is complicated by Chinese cultural norms that prioritize restraint in gendered conflict (Yu, 2015) and audiovisual translation's demand for conciseness (Liang, 2017). For Pearl the selected lines encapsulate a critical dynamic. Pearl's mother trapped in her own patriarchal role transfers her oppression to Pearl tightening the confinement that silences her daughter's desires.

ST (by Pearl's mother): "I should have been his wife, not his mother."

TT: "我本应该是他的妻子，而不是他的母亲"

Uttered by Pearl's mother this line is not just a personal grievance but a manifestation of patriarchal role alienation and a tool to justify her coercion of Pearl into shared caregiving labor. The mother herself is trapped. Robbed of the intimate equal partnership of a wife she is reduced to the self-sacrificing lifelong caregiver of a paralyzed husband a form of gendered exploitation that feminist translation seeks to make visible (Wallmach, 2006). Yet her accusation does not challenge the patriarchal system. Instead it rationalizes forcing Pearl to take on the same burdensome role reinforcing Pearl's confinement to the farm and caregiving duties. The Chinese translation retains this layered dynamic with striking fidelity. "本应该" mirrors the mother's

resentment and sense of injustice in "should have been" preserving her own suffering as a victim of role-based oppression. The sharp contrast between "妻子" (wife) and "母亲" (mother) lays bare the patriarchal violence of reducing women to instrumental caregiving roles. This aligns with Massardier-Kenney' (1997) call to amplify marginalized women' experiences even when those experiences involve perpetuating harm. Notably the translation resists softening the mother' directness. "不是他的母亲" retains the unapologetic clarity of her frustration which directly fuels her demand that Pearl share her fate. This choice departs slightly from Yu's (2020) observation of Chinese translations moderating gendered conflict ensuring the translation conveys the critical feminist insight. Patriarchal oppression can create cycles of coercion as marginalized women pass on their imposed roles to the next generation further silencing young women's desires for autonomy.

ST: "You guys get everything you want. You're younger and more blonde."

TT: "你总是能得到你想要的，你更年轻，一头金发闪亮亮"

Here Pearl's anger erupts into a critique of patriarchal desire. She links the other woman's apparent fulfillment to conforming to male-centric beauty standards youth and blonde hair exposing how women's access to freedom and desire fulfillment is contingent on satisfying patriarchal ideals (Cowie, 2019). The Chinese translation captures the core of this grievance while making subtle adjustments for cultural adaptability. "是能得到你想要的" retains the bitterness of "You guys get everything you want" though the shift from plural "you guys" a broad swipe at women who fit patriarchal norms to singular "你" narrows the critique to a personal rivalry. This simplification risks diluting the feminist critique of structural inequality as Wallmach (2006) warns that reducing collective oppression to individual conflict weakens the critique of systemic injustice. Meanwhile "more blonde" translated as "金发闪亮亮" softens the original's stark contrast of beauty standards into a descriptive almost whimsical phrase toning down the anger at how patriarchal aesthetics gatekeep women's desires. Yet the translation preserves the causal link between "younger" or "blonde" and "get everything" ensuring the core feminist insight remains intact. Pearl's own desires are denied because she does not fit the patriarchal mold that

grants other women leeway. This balance aligns with Yu's (2017) emphasis on navigating cultural acceptability without abandoning ideological fidelity.

Taken together these translations reflect the nuanced challenge of feminist translation in cross-cultural contexts. The first preserves the layered cycle of patriarchal oppression mother as victim and enforcer while the second softens systemic critique but retains the core of Pearl's marginalization. Both avoid silencing the gendered dynamics that suppress Pearl's desire yet the subtle adjustments highlight the tension between preserving radicality and adapting to cultural norms (Yu, 2015). These findings paired with the Foucauldian analysis of bodily discipline demonstrate that translating gendered narratives requires honoring the complexity of oppression including how it is perpetuated and resisted and balancing the specificity of women's experiences with the practicalities of cross-cultural communication. Such insights inform the final chapter's conclusions on translating gendered power dynamics in genre films.

CONCLUSION

This study adopts a dual theoretical framework of Foucault's theory of bodily discipline and feminist translation theory. It explores the translation of gendered power dynamics by analyzing four key English lines and their Chinese target texts from Ti West's **Pearl**. The core aim of this research is to investigate how Chinese subtitles convey disciplinary oppression bodily resistance suppressed feminine desire and gendered transgression. This addresses a gap in interdisciplinary scholarship where these theories are rarely combined to analyze horror film subtitles in Chinese contexts.

The Foucauldian analysis in Chapter 2 shows that the translation of disciplinary discourse successfully captures the subtlety of power operation. The mother's line “如果你想离开，那就走吧。但如果你失败了，你一定会失败，我要你记住那种感觉，因为每当我看着你时，我就是这种感觉” accurately preserves the core of Foucault's “disciplinary power” namely psychological surveillance and normative judgment (Deacon, 2002). The unyielding certainty of the original “you will fail” is retained in the target text as “你一定会失败” forcing Pearl to internalize the belief that her desire for autonomy is futile and reinforcing her subjugation.

Meanwhile Pearl's line “这不再是我想要什么了” effectively conveys the internalization of discipline into a “docile body” (Sullivan, 1996) as she abandons personal desire to comply with imposed roles. Minor cultural adjustments in these translations reflect the tension between ideological fidelity and Chinese norms of familial discourse (Yu, 2020) yet the core of Foucauldian power dynamics remains intact.

The feminist translation analysis in Chapter 3 complements this by foregrounding gendered experiences. The mother's line “我本应该是他的妻子，而不是他的母亲” highlights how marginalized women inadvertently perpetuate oppression which is a core emphasis of feminist theory (Massardier-Kenney, 1997). The target text preserves the mother's grief over role alienation and this grief rationalizes her coercion of Pearl into caregiving labor. Meanwhile Pearl's complaint “你总是能得到你想要的，你更年轻，一头金发闪亮亮” retains the link between patriarchal beauty standards and desire fulfillment despite narrowing systemic critique to personal grievance. This balance aligns with Yu's (2017) “adaptation and selection” framework demonstrating how translators navigate cultural constraints without silencing Pearl's feminist resistance.

The dual framework proves indispensable. Foucault's theory illuminates how bodily discipline shapes Pearl's subjugation while feminist translation theory addresses the gendered specificity of this oppression filling the gap in Foucault's work noted by Deveau (1994). Together they reveal a consistent pattern translations preserve the core of power dynamics in key lines but make subtle compromises such as softening systemic critique to fit Chinese cultural and technical demands.

This study enriches interdisciplinary dialogue across translation studies film studies and gender studies by providing a nuanced model for analyzing cross-cultural gendered narratives. Its limitation lies in focusing on only four key lines. Future research could expand to more scenes to deepen understanding of how translation strategies evolve across a film's narrative arc. Ultimately this study offers pragmatic insights for translators. They must balance conciseness and cultural adaptability with the imperative to make visible both the mechanisms of gendered oppression and the radical potential of women's resistance.

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