

# Gender Reconstruction in Chinese Ci When Translated into English

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## Abstract

This paper aims to study how gender in ci (Song lyrics) written by Li Qingzhao in the Song Dynasty is reconstructed in the process of translation. By analyzing the discourse practice of gender construction in traditional Chinese culture and its reconstruction in translation, it is hoped that different powers and values will be revealed through Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). It is found that the reconstruction of gender in Chinese ci—a high-context original text—is an attempt to connect genders with social practices and also a gender doing performance negotiated between different power, and value systems.

**Keywords:** gender, construction, ci, translation

## 1. Introduction

In Song Dynasty—a highly hierarchical society featuring gender inequality, the occurrence of a very talented and creative woman poet Li Qingzhao (1084–1155) is a miracle. Her open-minded father, who was a high-ranking official in the Northern Song Dynasty, allowed her to receive education, and her husband, who was a son of a high-ranking official, read her poems to his friends so as to spread them to the public. All these contributed to her fame as a great woman ci poet.

Ci (Song lyrics) is very special form of traditional Chinese poem (Fong, 2004), reaching the peak of its development in Song Dynasty (Zhang et al., 2001). The translated English version chosen is *The Works of Li Qingzhao*, edited by Anna M. Shields, translated by Ronald Egan, published in 2019. There are altogether 66 ci in it.

When Chinese is translated into English, besides the semiotic transfer (Jakobson, 2013) between two distinctly different language systems, the transfer of ideology, such as identity construction and object construction (Foucault, 1980) also takes place. In the translation process, even if the translator wants to be faithful to the original work, the cultural and value clash between two semiotic systems, between the translator and the writer, may result in deviation. From the perspective of critical discourse analysis, this kind of transfer and deviation demonstrates power manipulation (Van Dijk, 1993), consciously or unconsciously. This power manipulation can also be seen in the reconstruction of gender in the translation process.

As a woman writer, some of Li Qingzhao's lyrics construct different gender roles, revealing how a woman looked at this world within traditional Chinese cultural model (Gee, 1996). When they are translated into English, in the process of reconstruction of gender, the author's interpretation, with his internalized ideology (Kress, 1993), is involved. To expose this power manipulation, this research will focus on gender construction in the original work and the reconstruction of it in translation to see the difference and analyze reasons for the difference.

## 2. Literature Review

Gender is believed to be displayed (Goffman, 1976). Whether “it is morally right or wrong” (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 35) it is normalized on daily basis. Everyone “does gender” without thinking about it (Lorber, 1994). Even children know how to perform their gender in their own social/moral domain (Guo, 2007). Gender attribution is both a physical and a social issue: women are physically and psychologically more passive, preferring connection with a more powerful party to avoid taking responsibility, and this natural tendency is encouraged socially (Fischer, 2018). With the involvement of different people there might be different attributions (Kessler & McKenna, 2000). Gender construction with different attributions may be at the root of gender inequality. For

example, gender asymmetry can be realized through various means, such as illustrations accompanying linguistic texts (Damayanti, 2014), or a dominant ideology produced by the southern ideologues, contributing to the exploitation of enslaved Black women (Simms, 2001).

In traditional China, gender construction was constrained within a hierarchical frame. It was interwoven with class division and women were at the bottom of the social class. Although Chinese worshiped Nywa, a Goddess, as the Creator of the world, this primitive religion-based gender equality was abandoned with the popularity of Confucianism, which advocated strict hierarchy structure both in society and in family, that is, a monarch rules as a monarch and officials serve as officials; fathers do their duties as fathers and sons do their duties as sons (君君臣臣父父子子) (Confucius, *Analects*, 12.11). There are written principles for different groups of people to follow. Even colors are hierarchically related, marking different social status (Wang, 2013). Under the influence of Confucianism, children must follow the principle of filial piety, otherwise they are regarded as immoral, condemned or even imprisoned. For women, who were at the bottom of the social hierarchy, the most important principle they had to follow was Three Obediences (woman was required to obey her father before marriage, her husband during married life and her sons in widowhood) and the Four Virtues (womanly virtue, womanly words, womanly bearing, and womanly work). Under the guidance of such principle, virtues were regarded as far more important than talent for women. It was widely accepted that ‘mediocrity is the virtue of women’ (女子无才便是德) (Molon, Theiss, & Choi, 2018).

### 3. Theory and Methodology

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) are used to analyze the reconstruction of gender in the translation process. According to Gumperz (1982, p. 6), language creates and maintains ‘the subtle boundaries of power, status, role and occupational specialization’. Discourse can be used by politicians for power manipulation (Change & Mehan, 2006). There is a dialectical relationship between discourse and power, which is cultural specific. For example, different cultures may foreground either social and institutional power or the power of individual speakers and writers in news discourse (Scollon, 1997). So it is necessary to analyze discourse from critical perspective to discover the power manipulation at work.

For specific analysis of discourse, Systemic Functional Linguistics provides us with the pattern of how lexical and syntax selections are systematically made in a given text. Halliday believes that grammar has “meaning potential” (Halliday, 1985). The vocabulary and grammar in the text can tell us a lot of implicit things. Besides transitivity, the allocation of participants with social practices also has implications according to van Leeuwen (2008). Different representation of the participant in the discourse perform different functions. Sociological participants are defined as “social actors” by van Leeuwen to categorize their social practices through a system network ranging over a variety of linguistic and rhetorical phenomena (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 23).

According to van Leeuwen (2008), there is a Social Actor Network.

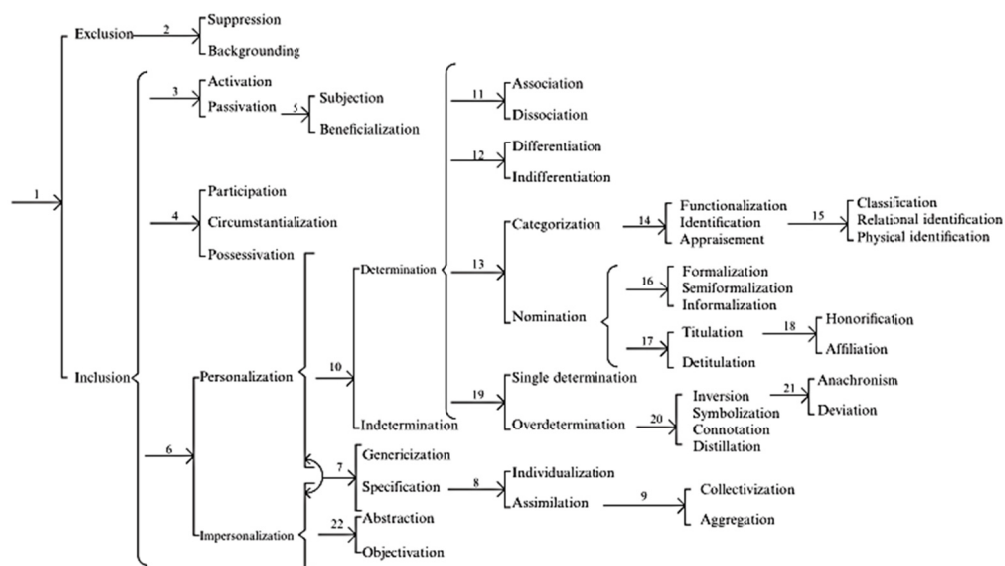


Figure 1. Social actor network (Leeuwen, 2008, p. 52)

In this social actor network (Leeuween, 2008, p. 52), exclusion takes place when there is no trace of the representation of the social actor in one sentence, including suppression (no reference to the social actor in the sentence) and backgrounding (the social actor is mentioned elsewhere). Suppression can be realized through passive agent deletion, nonfinite clauses, deletion of beneficiaries, nominalizations and process nouns, and adjectives. The following are examples of suppression.

#### Examples:

##### 1) Suppression through passive agent deletion

In Japan similar **concerns** (whose concerns these are is not mentioned) are being expressed about a mere trickle of Third World immigrants.

##### 2) Suppression through nonfinite clauses

**To maintain** (who is to maintain the policy is not mentioned) this policy is hard.

##### 3) Suppression through beneficiaries

Japan's National Police Agency had to **apologise** (to whom the apology is made is not given) recently for circulating an in-ternal memo to police stations claiming that Pakistanis working in Japan "have a unique body odour," carry infectious skin diseases and tell lies "under the name of Allah."

##### 4) Suppression through nominalizations and process nouns

The level of **support** (who supports?) for **stopping** (who stops it?) **immigration** (who immigrates?) together was at a post-war high.

##### 5) Suppression through adjectives

Australians feel they cannot voice **legitimate** (who legitimates?) fears about immigration.

All these examples come from Social Practice (Leeuween, 2008, pp. 29–30). The mark of the bold word, which indicates the trace of exclusion, and the explanation in brackets, are given by the author.

According to van Leeuwan (2008, p. 30), the probable reasons for suppression could be:

—readers are assumed to know it already, so that more detailed reference would be overcommunicative;

—to block access to knowledge of a practice.

Another exclusion, backgrounding can be realized through ellipses in nonfinite clauses with -ing and -ed participles; in infinitival clauses with to; and in paratactic clauses; or through the same way as suppression, when the social actor can be found elsewhere in the text (Leeuween, 2008, p. 30).

Besides exclusion, various social actors are defined within the range of inclusion. Activation occurs when the social actor plays an active role in the activity. If s/he is undergoing it, s/he is represented in passivation through subjection and beneficialization. The realization of activation and passivation can be done in various ways such as participation, circumstantialization, premodification or postmodification, and possessivation. When the social actor is referred to generally as a class, genericization occurs while specification occurs when the social actor is referred to in a specific way as identifiable individual. When the social actor is referred to as a group, assimilation, such as aggregation and collectivization, occurs. When the social actor is referred to as individual, individualization occurs. When the social actors are presented as an associated group, association occurs while when the association is unformed dissociation occurs. When the social actor is represented as an unspecified individual, indetermination occurs. When the difference is created between social actors, differentiation occurs. Nomination is about the unique identity of the social actor which can be realized through a proper name via honorification and affiliation. Categorization is about the identities and functions the social actor share with others. Functionalization occurs when the social actor is referred to in terms of what they do. Identification occurs when the social actor is referred to in terms of what they are, such as classification, relational identification and physical identification. When the social actor is represented as human beings, personalization occurs. Impersonalization can be realized through abstraction and objectivation. The typical ways of objectivation are spatialization, utterance autonomization, instrumentalization and somatization.

#### 4. Analysis

By reading and observing the original version written by Li Qingzhao and the translated version translated by Egan, it is found that there are great differences in terms of exclusion and inclusion of the social actor. The focus of the analysis is thus on this difference.

#### 4.1 An Exclusion-Inclusion Difference

There is huge difference between classical Chinese and modern Chinese. The change is “the result of language fulfilling its discourse and communicative functions” (Peyraube, 1999). In this change, there is “meaning potential” in the choice of lexical items and grammatical structures. Compared with modern Chinese, it is found that there is a lot of more suppression and backgrounding of social actor in the original lyrics.

##### Examples:

1)新 來 瘦

Lately grow thin (word for word translation)

She's grown thin of late (translation by Egan)

2)倚 門 回 首。

Lean on door turn head. (word for word translation)

At the door she pauses, turning to look back. (translation by Egan)

In the above two lines of poetry, the agents of the action are not given in the sentence, nor are they mentioned in the lyrics. This kind of discourse practice shows that the absence of the agents, as one feature of classical Chinese, will not hinder the reader's understanding of the lyrics. In fact, there is a dialectical relationship between this kind of discourse practice and the Chinese thought/cognitive model (Lakoff, 2008). In traditional Chinese logic, things were mutually related in a system featuring interdependence, which distinguished itself from the principles of dichotomies as is the basis in Western logic. With this different epistemological system cultivated in unique Chinese culture, classical Chinese uses word order and sentence structure, not grammatical forms such as morphological changes, to make differences of the meaning expressed (Rošker, 2015, p. 5). It is a result of a high-context system (Hall, 1976), relying heavily on the surrounding and internal context rather than the codes, thus featuring implicitness and indirectness. For readers in the traditional Chinese cultural model, with a lot of concrete given context, meaning can be inferred even without the help of structural principles. Therefore, classical Chinese tends to be less formal.

“In ancient China, this attention to contents led to fundamental peculiarities in the development of inferences...In order to grasp the meaning and the semantic construction of a Chinese sentence, it is necessary to analyze it within its context. This rather flexible understanding of Chinese determined the mode of informal thought” (Rošker, 2015, pp. 4–5).

In this highly-contextualized classical Chinese, even if the agent is the subject of the sentence, it can still be excluded when inference can be done in the given context.

“The Chinese language also does not generally use sentential subjects, as opposed to Indo-European languages, which omit sentential subjects only in exceptional cases. Thus, the Chinese quite often omits the subject entirely, which implies that, for the Chinese speaker, the subject is not necessary” (Zhang Dongsun, 363, cited by Rošker, 2015, p. 5).

On the one hand, this kind of highly-contextualized discourse practice gives readers more room for interpretation. On the other hand, the context exerts a great power in the inference process, so the reading has to be constrained within the traditional Chinese model, even for translators.

#### 4.2 Reconstruction of Gender in the Translated Version

When translated into English, a more formal language, the excluded subject is usually added, which is actually a reconstruction of the social actor of the sentence. For the translation of the excluded social actor in Li Qingzhao's ci, there are different ways to deal with it.

1) The social actor excluded in ci is translated as ‘she’

In 15 ci, excluded participants of social practice are translated as ‘she’ among all 66 ci. In the original work, the gender of the social actor is not directly given in the sentence while in translation the social actor is explicitly represented as female. So there is an exclusion-inclusion contrast between the original work and the translated one. The following are examples.

##### Examples:

(1)倚 樓 無 語 理 瑤 琴。

Leans on the balcony no word play a pearled zither. (word for word translation)

She leans on the balcony, saying nothing, plucking a pearled zither. (translation by Egan)

(2) 起來 慵 自 梳 頭。

Arises languidly self comb hair. (word for word translation)

She arises, too languid to comb her hair. (translation by Egan)

(3) 輕 解 羅 裳

Lightly unties gauze robe (word for word translation)

Lightly she unties her gauze robe (translation by Egan)

(4) 歌 巧 動 朱 唇

Sing skillfully move crimson lip (word for word translation)

Her crimson lips move as she sings skillfully (translation by Egan)

(5) 寂寞 幽 閨 坐 對 小 園 嫩 綠。

Lonely secluded women's quarters sits facing small garden tender green. (word for word translation)

Lonely now in the women's quarters, she sits facing the small garden's tender green. (translation by Egan)

The social practice described in these lyrics are: plucking a pearled zither, combing hair, untying a gauze robe, singing skillfully and facing the small garden's tender greens in the women's quarters. Judging from the translation, they are social practices mainly done by women from the translator's perspective. In all these practices, a hint for specified gender practice is obvious in example 5, where the expression "women's quarters" indicates there were "men's quarters": so there was a separation of women and men. In the Song Dynasty, under the influence of New-Confucianism advocated by Zhuxi, strict gender differentiation and hierarchy were popularized. Various ways were used to distinguish women from men, including foot-binding, chastity, and seclusion of women from the outside world. In many families, especially wealthy ones, there was a special place in a building complex for women to live, where they were kept away from the outside world. Under this kind of circumstance, even if the social actor is absent in the original work, for readers familiar with the cultural background of the Song Dynasty, it is easy to distinguish the gender of the excluded social actor. However, in a different cultural model different inferences of the gender of the social actor might be made: for Western readers in a Western cultural model, practices like plucking a pearled zither, combing hair, untying a gauze robe, and singing skillfully can be gender-neutral activities. Since the social actors in these practices are excluded, the job of filling the gap is up to the translator. Here in the translated version by Egan, he chose to reconstruct the gender from the perspective of a Chinese model. The translation is an admittance of gender differentiation in the Song Dynasty and the reinforcement of gender division in traditional Chinese culture for Western readers. In a word, gender division in traditional Chinese cultural model is the principle followed by the translator in the process of translation.

Even within the constraints of the traditional Chinese cultural model, different principles may be followed in the translation process from different inferences. For example, in an English version translated by a Chinese translator Xu Yuanhong (2006, p. 27), the social actor in example 1 is translated as 'I': "Silent, I lean on rails and play on zither cold", referring to the poet herself. The Chinese translator reconstructs an identifiable individual as the social actor through specification, which is different from the gender reconstruction in Egan's version where the social actor is represented as an unspecified individual through indetermination.

Though in both versions the social actor is reconstructed as a female, the Chinese translator focuses on one specified person while the English translator attributes the corresponding social practice to an indeterminate female. It could be inferred that from Chinese translator's perspective, these social practices, such as plucking a pearled zither, are more specifically individual-related, only being engaged by talented and educated upper-class women, such as Li Qingzhao, who is rare in a women suppressing society. The confusion in the reconstruction of gender in ci thus is caused by the interwovenness of gender division and class divisions in a traditional Chinese cultural model.

2) The social actor excluded in ci is translated as 'he'

In all 66 ci, there are 3 excluded participants of the social practice who are translated into 'he' in the translated version. The following are examples.

Examples:

## (1)這 回 去 也

This time leave (word for word translation)

When he left this time (translation by Egan)

千萬遍 陽關 也則 難 留。

Thousands of Yang Pass still hardly detain. (word for word translation)

A thousand verses of “Yang Pass” would not have detained him. (translation by Egan)

(“Yang Pass” was a famous parting song, often sung repeatedly at a farewell scene or banquet in an attempt to delay the inevitable departure.)

## (2)今 歲 不 歸 來

This year not return, (word for word translation)

This year he still does not return, (translation by Egan)

怕 見 江南 信。

Fear see Southland message.(word for word translation)

She fears to see the Southland’s messenger of spring. (translation by Egan)

## (3)歸 來 也

Returned (word for word translation)

Now that he has returned again, (translation by Egan)

著 意 過 今 春。

Determine mind enjoy this spring. (word for word translation)

Let me set my mind on enjoying this spring. (translation by Egan)

In examples 1 and 2, the related social practices are ‘leave’ and ‘return’. It seems that the ‘he’ participant is on the move. They are separated from other female participants like ‘I’ (excluded in 1) or ‘she’ (excluded in 2). Compared with ‘I’ or ‘she’, whose social practice are to ‘detain him’ and ‘fear to see the message’, longing for a connection with ‘him’, ‘he’ has more freedom to be able to move ‘in’ or ‘out’ of the world belonging to ‘I’ or ‘she’. The former is searching for and dependent on a relationship while the latter is in control of the relationship. In the original work, all the participants in 1 and 2 are excluded. So the translator is neutral in gender choice. Still he chooses to construct the social actor who stays in a secluded world as ‘she’ while the social actor who is from the outside world is designated as ‘he’, which is consistent with the gender division and corresponding seclusion of women in traditional Chinese society: an inside-world-versus-outside-world separation.

In 3 ‘he’ doesn’t refer to a person. The lines before 3 are “Blossom shadows press upon double doors. Spaced blinds are covered with pallid moonlight, what a fine evening it is! Three times in two years I’ve betrayed the Lord of the East” (The Lord of the East is the god of spring). So here ‘he’ refers to the Lord of the East, a personification of spring, the active power who brings energy and vitality. Still the translation is in accordance with the gender division and works and corresponds with an inside-world-versus-outside-world separation pattern in a traditional Chinese cultural model.

## 3) Social actor excluded in ci translated as ‘I’

For some other social practices, the translator chose ‘I’ as the social actor. In 26 ci, excluded participants of social practice are translated as ‘I’ among all 66 ci. The following is an example.

菩薩蠻

To the tune “Bodhisattva Barbarian” (Title)

風 柔 日 薄 春 猶 早。

Wind delicate the sun pale spring still early.(word for word translation)

The wind delicate, the sun pale—it’s still early spring. (translation by Egan)

夾 衫 乍 著 心 情 好。

Lined jacket suddenly wore mood good.(word for word translation)

I wore a lined jacket, my heart at ease. (translation by Egan)

睡 起 覺 微 寒。

Sleep arise feel slight chill. (word for word translation)

Now arising from sleep, I feel a chill in the air. (translation by Egan)

梅花 鬢 上 殘。

The plum hair on wither. (word for word translation)

The plum blossom in my hair has withered. (translation by Egan)

故鄉 何處 是。

Homeland where is. (word for word translation)

My homeland, where is it? (translation by Egan)

忘了 除非 醉。

Forget unless drunk. (word for word translation)

I can't forget unless I've been drinking. (translation by Egan)

沉水 臥 時 燒。

Aloeswood lie when smolder. (word for word translation)

Aloeswood incense smoldered as I lay down. (translation by Egan)

香 消 酒 未 消。

The fragrance disappeared the wine hasn't disappeared. (word for word translation)

The fragrance has dissipated, the wine has not. (translation by Egan)

The person described in this ci gets up after being drunk the night before in the early spring, with plum flower in the hair, remembering his/her homeland, which s/he could only forget when being drunk. At that moment, the fragrance of incense burning during his/her sleep disappears while his/her drunk state remains. Through the series of social practices of the participant and the description of the environment, a sharp contrast is drawn between the ease brought by the beautiful season and new clothes, and his/her sad lingering longing for his/her homeland.

The reason why the translator chose 'I' instead of 'she' or 'he' is probably because the social practice described in this ci is more personally related. When Li Qingzhao was 44 in 1127, the Jin people invaded the Northern Song Dynasty on a large scale, captured the father and son of Emperor Huizong and Emperor Qinzong of the Northern Song Dynasty and went north, which is known as the "Jingkang Change" in history, and the Northern Song Dynasty collapsed. After the establishment of the Southern Song Dynasty in south China, Li Qingzhao left her hometown and migrated to south China.

The sad lingering longing for his/her homeland described in this ci is in accordance with Li Qingzhao's personal suffering faced with the defeat of Northern Song Dynasty and the corresponding loss of huge territory. In translating the excluded social actor as 'I', the translator reconstructs an active female individual through activation and individualization, who connects her ci not only with her personal emotions, but also the fate of a country. The gender construction here is more constrained by individual experience rather than gender division in traditional Chinese cultural model.

4) The social actor excluded in lyric is translated as 'we'

In all 66 Ci, there are 11 excluded participants of the social practice are translated into 'we' in the translated version. The following is one example.

當年 曾 勝 賞

Former years had won appreciation (word for word translation)

In former years, we had the grandest pleasures. (translation by Egan)

生 香 熏 袖

Burn incense perfumed sleeves (word for word translation)

Honey-bush incense perfumed our sleeves, (translation by Egan)

活 火 分 茶。

Ignite fire distribute tea (word for word translation)

cakes of tea were broken over live coals. (translation by Egan)

This example is chosen from a ci which makes a contrast between the happy and rich life before the defeat of the Northern Song Dynasty and the miserable life later on in south China. After her resettlement in southern China in 1127, Li Qingzhao has been living together with her beloved husband until his death in 1129. So here in the translated version, Egan reconstructs the excluded social actor who was entertaining guests in the past as the couple—'we'. By reconstructing the social actor as 'we', the light is not shed on Li Qingzhao, but a collective group, thus dimming the charm of an outstanding woman poet, which is in accordance with traditional Chinese values asserting that 'mediocrity is the virtue of women. The translation is also in accordance with the preference of collectivism in a highly-contextualized culture.

However, one Chinese reading of the example different from Egan's version is from a Chinese website, in which activation and individualization is foregrounded. The lines are interpreted as "In those days, I was also a celebrity of the Fair. I often smoked my sleeves with incense, boiled tea on the fire and poured it into everyone's cups" (Ancient Poetry Web, 2022). The social practice of entertaining guests as a celebrity is attributed to Li Qingzhao, not a collective 'we'. The greatness of Li Qingzhao as an individual is emphasized in this Chinese interpretation. She is the focus of social practice, not the one being backgrounded into a collective concept. With the preference of individualism, the light is on Li Qingzhao, not the couple. As a rare female poet, Li Qingzhao was born into a rich family and enjoyed the privilege of a comprehensive education with the support of her rich and powerful father. Her privilege of not being absolutely isolated from the outside world continued after her marriage with the support of her rich and powerful husband. With these privileges, she could relate herself to social practice typified by males such as being publicly admired as celebrity. In the modern Chinese interpretation version, Li Qingzhao's personal charm is admired as that of a member of social elite who has achieved upper-class social status through activation and individualization, and in this sense, through the process of reconstructing gender in Chinese interpretation, class division surpassed gender division as far as social practice was concerned. The different interpretation and construction of social actors indicates different understandings of class and gender divisions in interpretation process.

## 5. Conclusion

In translating ci written in a highly-contextualized Chinese cultural model, inferences must be made in the reconstruction of gender. Faced with this highly-contextualized and flexible inferences of the traditional Chinese culture model on the one hand, and the conflict between a Chinese cultural model and Western cultural model in terms of gender division on the other hand, the translator seems to adopt the gender division of the traditional Chinese cultural model as principle to infer the social actor of social practices in gender reconstructions of the translated version. However, it is noticeable that in the highly hierarchical and structured society of traditional China, other social factors, such as class divisions, also play a key role in determining the social actor, thus making the reconstruction of gender a more complex and complicated inference process. Factors other than gender division also need to be taken into consideration in this process.

The reconstruction of gender in Chinese ci, a highly-contextualized original text, connects genders with social practices, and also a negotiates between different powers: gender-division related values, class-division related values, traditional Chinese values, and Western values. As translators, it is necessary to deconstruct these powers before the reconstruction.

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