

Strangers in Their Hometown: Linguistic Alienation and Cultural Translation in Chinese Diasporic Women's Writing

Xihan Lei

Sichuan University of Media and Communications, Chengdu, 611745, China.

Abstract

In the wave of globalization, scattered writing has become an important way for cross-cultural dissemination of Chinese literature. Chinese female scattered authors with dual gender and cultural identities often face unique language and cultural challenges in their creations. This article takes the works of writers such as Yan Geling, Tang Tingting, and Celeste Ng as case studies, based on Homi Bhabha's "Third Space" theory and combined with Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's core discourse on colonial language oppression, to clarify the dual problem of "language alienation" as the weakening of meaning in the mother tongue and the lack of cultural foundation in the second language. It clarifies that "cultural translation" is a creative practice of symbol reconstruction and narrative adjustment, and then focuses on the interactive relationship between the two to explore the process of Chinese female refugees coping with language fragmentation and cultural dislocation in cross contexts, completing cultural meaning transformation and identity dynamic reconstruction through writing. Research has found that language estrangement is not only reflected in the "lack of meaning in words" at the expression level, but also leads to uncertainty in identity cognition. Cultural translation can build a dialogue bridge between different cultures through the concretization of cultural symbols and the adjustment of narrative methods. This type of writing can not only alleviate the anxiety caused by language estrangement, provide fresh text samples for Chinese culture to go global, but also provide a new perspective for understanding the reconstruction of dispersed female identity.

Keywords

Diasporic Writing, Linguistic Alienation, Cultural Translation, Identity Construction.

1. Introduction

Since the latter half of the twentieth century, against the backdrop of war, economic transformation, and accelerated globalization, transnational migration has become increasingly prevalent. Within this context, Chinese women in the diaspora have developed a distinctive form of writing. Unlike Western diasporic literature, which often emphasizes issues of race and class, or traditional Chinese literature rooted in regional narratives, diasporic Chinese women's writing is characterized by a persistent tension between "homeland" and "hostland." Unable to sever ties with Chinese cultural traditions yet compelled to articulate themselves within Western discursive frameworks, these writers inevitably inscribe their work with traces of linguistic alienation.

Linguistic alienation, however, is not merely a matter of proficiency but a fundamental cultural dilemma. Drawing on Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's discussion of linguistic oppression under colonialism, it may be defined as a dual predicament: on the one hand, the estrangement and gradual defamiliarization of the mother tongue in contexts of displacement; on the other, the second language's lack of cultural grounding to adequately convey lived experience. This dual tension produces both expressive anxiety and a precarious suspension of identity.

In this regard, cultural translation emerges as a primary strategy of negotiation. As Homi Bhabha's concept of the "third space" suggests, identity is not reconstructed through assimilation into a single cultural paradigm but through the creative generation of meaning in the interstices between cultures. Chinese women writers in the diaspora engage in recontextualizing cultural symbols and adjusting narrative strategies, thereby transforming untranslatable cultural experiences into forms that foster cross-cultural dialogue and understanding.

This article, therefore, explores the dynamic interplay between linguistic alienation and cultural translation, arguing that their interaction forms a cyclical logic of "dilemma–response–reconstruction" that drives the identity formation of diasporic Chinese women writers. As Edward Said observed, the diaspora exists "in an in-between zone, neither fully integrated into the new environment nor completely detached from the old." It is precisely within this in-between condition that a unique critical perspective and cultural creativity emerge, positioning diasporic Chinese women's writing as a vital site for cultural dialogue and identity renewal in the global literary landscape.

2. The Context and Characteristics of Chinese Diasporic Women's Writing

Chinese diasporic women's writing emerges from the historical, linguistic, and cultural conditions shaped by global migration since the late twentieth century. As Robin Cohen and James Clifford have argued, diaspora is marked by a persistent tension between displacement and cultural memory, where communities live "elsewhere" while continuing to imagine, remember, and negotiate "home." [1] For women, this tension is further inflected by gendered responsibilities, caregiving roles, and intergenerational expectations, which complicate their negotiation of belonging in both the country of origin and the host society. Within this broader framework, Chinese diasporic women writers develop a literary space rooted in the lived realities of bilingualism, cultural in-betweenness, and transnational identity formation.

A central body of research has focused on the bilingual and bicultural circumstances of migrant authors, emphasizing how linguistic environments shape expressive capacity, self-perception, and literary aesthetics. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's theorization of language as both a carrier of culture and a "collective memory bank" of a people's historical experience highlights how the choice of language is inseparable from questions of identity and power. [2] Aneta Pavlenko's work on emotions and multilingualism further shows that second languages often lack the same affective depth as the mother tongue, and that bilinguals may feel "different selves" emerging with each language. [3] For Chinese diasporic women, prolonged immersion in English-speaking environments frequently leads to the gradual attenuation of native-language intuition, while English, as an adopted literary medium, may not fully accommodate the cultural textures of Chinese familial and social life. This situation produces a characteristic form of linguistic alienation: a simultaneous weakening of the mother tongue and a sense of cultural insufficiency in the adopted language. In literary practice, this alienation becomes visible in narrative hesitation, lexical gaps, code-switching, and various hybrid linguistic forms that oscillate between Chinese and English.

At the thematic and structural level, scholars have identified several recurring features in diasporic women's writing, including intergenerational memory, mother–daughter relationships, and the reconstruction of cultural lineage through storytelling. Marianne Hirsch's concept of "postmemory" has been particularly influential in explaining how daughters "inherit" their mothers' traumatic or suppressed histories through mediated forms such as stories, photographs, and objects rather than direct experience. [4] In Chinese American and broader Chinese diasporic fiction, these ideas have been applied to works by authors like Tang Tingting, Amy Tan, and Celeste Ng, whose narratives foreground the ways in which daughters piece

together fragmentary family histories to make sense of both their ethnic origins and their contemporary lives.[5] The “home” that emerges in these texts is not a stable geographical location but a contested symbolic space in which cultural values, gender norms, and racialized experiences are continuously renegotiated.

Cultural translation has thus become a key concept for understanding Chinese diasporic women’s writing. Homi Bhabha’s notion of the “third space” emphasizes that cultural identity is not simply preserved or assimilated, but is re-articulated through negotiation in the interstices between cultures.[6] For Chinese diasporic women writers, this third space is often constructed through strategies that render culturally embedded experiences legible to non-Chinese readers without entirely flattening their specificity. Concrete objects, embodied gestures, and hybrid narrative structures become crucial means of conveying concepts—filial piety, collective shame, ancestral obligation—that resist straightforward translation. These techniques allow writers to mediate between different cultural frameworks while preserving a degree of opacity that signals the limits of full translation.

Within this context, Chinese diasporic women’s writing can be understood as a field where language, gender, and diaspora intersect. The texts do not merely “represent” migrant experience; they actively experiment with form and language in order to register the fractures and continuities of living between worlds. Thematically, they return to motifs of silence and speech, secrecy and confession, remembering and forgetting; formally, they employ fragmented structures, shifting perspectives, and interwoven temporalities that mirror the disjointed nature of diasporic memory. These contextual and stylistic features form the foundation for the present study. They provide the theoretical basis for examining how linguistic alienation manifests in specific texts and how, through various forms of cultural translation, Chinese diasporic women’s writing not only articulates but also reshapes the dynamics of identity formation in transnational settings.

3. Multiple Manifestations of Linguistic Alienation: From Expressive Dilemma to Identity Suspension

Linguistic alienation in Chinese diasporic women’s writing often takes shape in subtle but pervasive ways, affecting how narratives move, how emotions are expressed, and how identities are negotiated. Rather than appearing as isolated linguistic “problems,” these forms of alienation weave through the texture of the writing, shaping the atmosphere of entire works. One recurring pattern arises when writers sense a gradual weakening of their intuitive connection to the mother tongue. Yan Geling has spoken of this with striking clarity. After years of writing mainly in English, she noticed that certain nuances of Chinese—especially those tied to dialect, everyday speech rhythms, or culturally embedded idioms—no longer came to her with the same immediacy. Linguists such as Aneta Pavlenko argue that long-term immersion in a second language reshapes emotional resonance and lexical accessibility, and that bilinguals often find themselves inhabiting slightly different emotional identities from one language to another.[7] When Yan returned to writing in Chinese, traces of hesitation, minor shifts in meaning, and a need to “search” for the right expression became visible in her narrative voice. Expressions that Chinese readers grasp intuitively often require explanation for Anglophone readers, revealing the challenge of converting culturally saturated language into a form understandable across linguistic borders.

Another mode of alienation appears in the difficulty of carrying culturally dense concepts from one symbolic system into another. Tang Tingting’s *The Woman Warrior* offers a well-known example. Her use of the English “ghost” to represent the Chinese “鬼魂” produces an unavoidable gap in meaning: the Western term leans toward haunting and malevolence, while the Chinese concept can carry connotations of longing, moral warning, or unresolved affection.

Tang does not attempt to eliminate this gap. Instead, she shapes a hybrid symbolic figure that inhabits what Homi Bhabha calls the "third space," a zone where cultural meanings mix, collide, and generate new forms. The oscillation in the narrative—moving between mythic inheritance, maternal storytelling, and American childhood—mirrors the instability of identity experienced by those who move between epistemological worlds.

A different form of alienation emerges in second-generation narratives, where the challenge lies less in bilingual attrition and more in the emotional "misalignment" between cultural systems. Celeste Ng's *Everything I Never Told You* is emblematic in this regard. The mother's aspirations for her daughter—rooted in Chinese ideas about achievement, diligence, and familial responsibility—are repeatedly interpreted by others as unwarranted pressure or overbearing control. Although Ng writes entirely in English, her characters' failure to understand one another demonstrates that linguistic alienation also operates at the level of cultural transmission: meaning falters not because the words are wrong, but because the cultural logic beneath them remains untranslatable.

4. Cultural Translation Paths in Chinese Diasporic Women's Writing

Faced with the dilemma of language alienation, Chinese diasporic women writers do not choose the easy way of simply changing languages, but rely on text creation to make cultural translation a bridge connecting heterogeneous cultures. This is more than just a matter of changing languages; it is also, as Homi Bhabha calls it, a "third space," creating new meanings in the gaps between two cultures, building a mutually understandable space of meaning. The most effective approach is to concretize cultural symbols. Abstract concepts in Chinese culture can be confusing when directly translated, but by attaching them to concrete actions or objects, readers can grasp them through their senses. Yan Geling's portrayal of chastity in "The Flowers of War" lacks any moralizing, simply depicting the details of a prostitute's final moments: wiping off her lipstick with a burnt match, and deliberately straightening her back after changing into her school uniform. Western readers, without understanding Chinese notions of chastity, can discern the character's transformation through the act of applying lipstick, and grasp the dignity of a desperate situation through the act of straightening her back. In *The Joy Luck Club*, Amy Tan similarly uses figurative symbols to explore intergenerational cultural transmission. Rather than directly expounding on the "mother-daughter bond," she focuses on the mahjong table as a cultural medium: the positions of the four mothers gathered around the table are implicitly defined, with the "East Wind Position" always reserved for the founder, Su Yuan. The crisp clatter of tiles shuffling recounts Chinese history, while the rhythmic tactile clatter of fingertips as they draw cards conveys unspoken family secrets. Through the subtleties of the game of "Chi, Peng, Gang, Hu" (cooking, slapping, ganging, and hu) during the rounds, the novel transforms the implicit emotions and survival wisdom of Chinese families into visually tangible action sequences. Even Western readers, even if they don't understand the rules of mahjong, can still grasp the tension of cultural inheritance through the silence and joyful smiles of the mothers as they push their cards. Adapting narrative structure is another key approach. Traditional Chinese literature favors linear narratives and implicit expression, while Western readers are accustomed to conflict and explicit emotion. Diasporic writers must strike a balance [8]. Yan Geling's English novel "The Banquet Bug" employs dark humor: laid-off worker Dong Dan disguises himself as a journalist to get into a dinner party. This satirical tone appeals to Western readers while also capturing the absurdity of China's transitional society. The book depicts a lavish banquet, with the line "a thousand crab claws piled up like a mountain" piques the reader's curiosity while simultaneously offering a critique of extravagance, effectively achieving two goals at once. Tang Tingting's "The Female Warrior" is even more direct, blending the Chinese tradition of storytelling with the Western coming-of-age novel. The opening, "The

Mother's Narration," conveys the flavor of Chinese culture passed down through generations, while the main plot centers on the character's growth, aligning with Western reading habits. Stories like "Learning Taoism at White Tiger Mountain" combine elements of Chinese martial arts with the awakening of female consciousness, making them relatable to readers of both Chinese and Western cultures.

5. The Interaction between Linguistic Alienation and Cultural Translation: Dual Drivers of Identity Reconstruction

In Chinese diasporic women's writing, linguistic alienation and cultural translation form a closed loop of "dilemma-coping-reconstruction," a core driving force for writers to reconstruct their identities: the anxiety of linguistic alienation drives the exploration of cultural translation, while the practice of cultural translation can alleviate feelings of alienation and help them establish a transcultural identity. Linguistic alienation forces cultural translation to shift from passive adaptation to active choice. Yan Geling discusses the challenges of bilingual writing, exploring the method of "using English to build the narrative framework and Chinese to refine cultural details" to suit Western readers. In 2006, her English novel "The Banquet Bug," using the absurd plot of Dong Dan's dinner party experience to convey observations on China's social transformation through familiar Western black humor, won the Chinese American Library Association's "Gold Medal for Fiction." Faced with the dilemma of translating the Chinese concept of "ghosts" into English, Tang Tingting employs a "half-real" strategy in "The Woman Warrior": "ghosts" are both supernatural beings and metaphors for the "invisibility" of Chinese women in the West. This approach stems from her dual experience of Chinese and American culture, and has been widely confirmed by the academic community, allowing her to transform from a "cultural translator" to a "cross-cultural intermediary." The book won the National Book Critics Circle Award and became a classic of Asian American literature. Cultural translation allows writers to transform from "marginal people" to "middlemen." In 2001, Chinese-American writer Amy Tan published "The Bonesetter's Daughter," which used "Chinese manuscripts" and "jade" to write about identity reconstruction: daughter Ruth had difficulty understanding the family secrets recorded by her mother due to language barriers, and only after translating the manuscripts and interpreting the jade bracelets did she understand her mother's love. This echoes her proposition in her creative talk of "writing about the love and struggles shared by all cultures." Her novel "The Joy Luck Club," through the game of mahjong, connects the implicit depth of Chinese maternal love with the directness and openness of Western self-expression, resonating with readers from diverse cultural backgrounds. Yan Geling frankly admits, "I don't cater to either audience, but rather stand in the middle ground, allowing the two cultures to communicate." It is this attitude that gives her work both a cross-cultural appeal and profound depth[9].

6. The Value and Limitations of Chinese Diasporic Women's Writing: Implications for Cross-Cultural Communication

Chinese diasporic women's writing is a unique form of cross-cultural writing. It has paved a concrete path for Chinese culture to spread abroad, but it has also exposed common flaws in cross-cultural communication. Both its value and limitations deserve careful consideration. Its value lies, first and foremost, in filling a gap in the study of diasporic literature. Previously, this field focused solely on Western minorities, with Chinese women in the diaspora largely overlooked. However, this type of writing, by virtue of its role as a "cultural middleman," has broken this limitation—it demonstrates that diaspora is not merely a passive exile but can also be an active cultural creation: linguistic and cultural challenges can become creative inspiration. Examples include Yan Geling's developed "bilingual aesthetics" and Tang Tingting's "virtual and

real writing," unique styles forged through difficult circumstances. Furthermore, it promotes the "real dissemination" of Chinese culture. Unlike official output that relies solely on dry, abstract concepts, diasporic writing draws on personal experiences to convey culture, making it both grounded and deeply moving. Yan Geling's works, for example, have been translated into over 30 languages, demonstrating their undeniable reach. Western readers can sense the resilience of Chinese women through the details of foot binding in "The Lost Daughter of Happiness" and the transformations of identity in *The Flowers of War*. These examples demonstrate that "small, concrete" cultural symbols can resonate more deeply with people from different cultures than vague theories. However, their limitations are also obvious. First, cultural symbols can easily become "stagnant." To reach Western readers, writers often focus on recognizable traditional symbols. Over time, this can lead Western readers to perceive Chinese culture as old-fashioned and conservative. Yan Geling herself recognized this, and later she reduced the use of cheongsams in her works, instead focusing on the suit-wearing, English-speaking casino owner in "A City Called Macau"—a character who still exudes the resilience of Chinese women and, in turn, defies Western readers' stereotypes. Second, it can easily "appeal to the market." To gain recognition from Western publishers, some Chinese-American writers deliberately exaggerate negative aspects of Chinese culture, for example, endlessly dwelling on the "oppression of feudal ethics" to satisfy Western readers' curiosity about the "wonders of the East." While this approach can help books reach wider audiences, it defeats the original purpose of cultural translation—simplifying Chinese culture into a "curiosity seen by others," stripping it of its authenticity and exacerbating cross-cultural misunderstandings. Amy Tan's writing offers an alternative approach. Rather than deliberately amplifying Eastern symbols, in "The Bonesetter's Daughter," she weaves cultural memory into the universal emotion of mother-daughter reconciliation through the plots of "Chinese manuscripts" and "the inheritance of a jade bracelet." The book embodies the subtle warmth of a Chinese family while poking at the universal bonds of kinship. This writing, while not emphasizing cultural differences, resonates with readers from all backgrounds. This demonstrates that cultural communication doesn't necessarily emphasize differences; it truly works by capturing shared emotions[10].

7. Conclusion

The interaction between language alienation and cultural translation in the writing of Chinese diasporic women constitutes a micro sample of cross-cultural communication and identity construction in the context of globalization. Combining Homi Bhabha's "Third Space" theory with the language alienation theory centered on Ng ũ g ĩ wa Thiong'o's discourse on colonial language oppression, it can be seen that language alienation is not only a creative obstacle, but also a driving force for cultural translation, forcing diasporic writers to confront cross-cultural differences and build dialogue bridges between heterogeneous cultures through symbolic concretization and narrative adjustment. This type of cultural translation does not deviate from the cultural origin nor compromise with the target culture, which is actually a "creative reconstruction" that constructs a meaningful space that preserves the characteristics of Chinese culture and can resonate with heterogeneous cultural groups in the midst of the dual culture gap. At the level of identity construction, such interactions enable Chinese female exiles to break through the binary opposition between "hometown people" and "foreigners" and obtain a new identity as "cross-cultural intermediaries". This identity combines the "marginalization" of diaspora with the "centrality" of cultural translation. Even if writers establish a sense of belonging in their creations, it also provides important inspiration for cross-cultural communication of Chinese culture. That is, cultural communication should not be a one-way output or a compromise of "passive catering", but a joint construction of "two-way dialogue". Only by recognizing differences, respecting diversity, and transmitting cultural core

through specific individual experiences can true cross-cultural understanding be achieved. This study has limitations in selecting cases that focus on Chinese American writers' insufficient attention to the scattered writing of Chinese American women in Europe, Southeast Asia, and other regions. The analysis of cultural translation focuses on the internal aspects of the text and does not involve empirical research on reader acceptance. Future research can expand the scope of case studies to include the creation of dispersed Chinese female writers from different regions in the analysis. At the same time, empirical methods such as reader interviews and translated communication data can be used to explore the actual effects of dispersed Chinese female writing in cross-cultural communication, providing more practical references for cultural dialogue in the era of globalization.

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