



Little Women and Transformative Girl Narrative in China: Translation, Adaptation and Reception

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Abstract

This study explores the textual transformations of *Little Women* (1868–69) by Louisa May Alcott in China, focusing on its translations, adaptations, and reception across different historical periods. Despite its initial perception as an educational novel shaping girls' values and behaviors, *Little Women* has evolved into a text that empowers women, reflecting tensions between patriarchal norms and feminist ideals, as well as between children's and adult discourse. Drawing on André Lefevere's manipulation theory and a feminist perspective, this research examines key Chinese translations and adaptations, including Zheng Xiaocang's 1933 translation, the 1957 Cantonese film adaptation, and Liu Chunying and Chen Yuli's 2020 translation influenced by Greta Gerwig's film. The findings reveal that these transformations not only reshape gender narratives but also mirror China's modernization process and the evolution of Chinese feminism. By analyzing how gender issues in the original text are conveyed and negotiated in different socio-historical contexts, this study highlights the dynamic interaction between literature, translation, and cultural shifts. It further underscores the role of literary adaptation in shaping feminist discourse in China. Future research should explore how translated and adapted literary works contribute to cross-cultural exchanges and evolving gender perceptions.

Keywords: *China context, Little Women, Louisa May Alcott, Textual transformation.*

A. Introduction

Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868) is often hailed as a quintessentially American classic novel featuring the iconic female characters of the March sisters. The study of this novel is particularly significant for its exploration of Jo's pursuit of independence through writing, set against the backdrop of the American Civil War. *Little Women* has maintained its popularity over the years through various adaptations and translations and is frequently lauded for its portrayal of family and love in America. The study of its emphasis on the growth of young girls and its promotion of self-reliance and independence—ideals advocated by Ralph Waldo Emerson—contributes to its enduring appeal.

Jo's boyish, independent, and rebellious characterization, based on Alcott's prototype and her sisters in *Little Women*, highlights feminine independence, children's independent consciousness, and national independent spirit. In the novel, the March sisters begin working at about eleven or twelve years old to "cultivate energy, industry, and independence" (Alcott, 39). However, feminist studies argue that the image of womanhood embodied by Jo (Josephine March) is controversial, as Jo ultimately succumbs to marriage. The critic Anne B. Rioux describes *Little Women* as a "divided house book" (105) because it is both conservative and progressive, subversive and submissive. Judith Fetterley's 1979 study, *Alcott's Civil War*, opens

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new avenues of debate, suggesting that “the figure who most resists the pressure to become a little woman is the most attractive, and the figure who most succumbs to it dies” (379). These ambivalent feminist perspectives persist in *Little Women*'s historical translations and adaptations, raising questions about how translators and adaptors negotiate, integrate, and transform gender-related themes for diverse readers.

Since *Little Women* “has been translated into more than fifty languages worldwide” (Clark 142), scholarly studies from various disciplines have contributed valuable insights into its themes and cultural impact. Although research has examined how 19th-century womanhood is translated across cultures, few studies have analyzed its influence on child readers or different readerships. Abbatelli Valentina’s study of the 1938 Italian translation under Fascist rule reveals that Jo’s “gender-neutrality” was considered too avant-garde and modern, leading to the deletion of the scene where Jo cuts her hair (215). Similarly, Giugliano and Socas (2019) compare two Spanish translations from 1948 and 2004, finding that the 1948 version altered the portrayal of Mrs. March and Jo to appear more feminine due to censorship. In Chinese studies, scholars have explored translators’ manipulation from a gender perspective (Ding, 2015; Yu, 2019). Although some research focuses on children’s versions of *Little Women* (Chen, 2012; Tang, 2019), few studies investigate its different readerships. Moreover, most Chinese studies overlook the early 1930s translation by Zheng Xiaocang, leaving a gap in the historical trajectory of *Little Women*'s translation and reception in China. This study addresses that gap by providing a comprehensive historical overview of its Chinese translations and adaptations.

This study defines *Little Women* as a classic in children’s literature with strong crossover appeal, following a historical tradition in works like Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (Zhang, ‘Crossover Fiction,’ 100). Like Defoe’s novel, *Little Women* has significantly influenced children’s and adult literature. Alcott incorporated elements of sentimental fiction, such as sisterly bonds and the significance of motherhood, blending them with the domestic fiction typical of children’s literature. Early child readers benefited from its engaging narrative style, as *Little Women* broke away from purely didactic materials and introduced a new genre for children (Clark 10). As a follower of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s transcendental philosophy, Alcott emphasized self-reliance and independence, particularly for women, resonating with the 19th-century American national imagination. Given that it was “perhaps the first American book explicitly directed to girls as an audience, offering four models of girlhood” (Clark 11), *Little Women* also presents a compelling study of personal transformation as the March sisters progress from girlhood to womanhood. The domestic narrative ensures that young female readers can identify with the characters worldwide. For contemporary Chinese audiences, *Little Women* attracts children, adolescents, and adults, as diverse Chinese translations and adaptations provide various reading materials, with film adaptations serving as a key medium to introduce new audiences to the original classic.

This study also supports the argument that textual transformation in children’s literature is “the norm rather than the exception” (Lefebvre 2). Since its publication, *Little Women* has undergone numerous adaptations worldwide and is widely regarded as a classic of world literature. However, there remains a significant gap in scholarly studies on its textual transformation in China despite its vast readership and publishing industry. In *Afterlife of Little Women* (2014), Beverly Lyon Clark comprehensively studies *Little Women*'s reception in America and globally, detailing its popularity and various versions in England, France, the Netherlands, and Japan. However, Clark does not explore the translation and reception of *Little Women* in China, which is likely one of its largest markets.

The introduction of *Little Women* into China dates back over a hundred years. Since its first full Chinese translation in 1925, it has been adapted into plays, films, TV series, and children’s books. In 1957, the first Chinese film adaptation, *Si Qian Jin* (*Our Sister Hedy*), directed by Tao

Qin, won the 5th Asian Film Festival's "Best Film" award (Mai 69). 1977 a Cantonese TV adaptation, *Xiao Fu Ren*, was released. In 1982, the first English-Chinese bilingual audiobook of *Little Women* was published by the English Walkman Studio, Chengdu Audio-Visual Publishing House. In 1995, the first phonetic version targeting primary school children was produced. Since 2010, the play *Xiao Fu Ren*, adapted from *Little Women*, has been regularly performed by university students in China, providing valuable material for students in drama and directing programs. Thanks to the efforts of Chinese translators and publishers, young and adult readers have access to various versions of *Little Women*, as demonstrated by its popularity on Douban, the Chinese equivalent of Goodreads, where the 2004 translated edition has garnered over 19,000 reviews.

B. Methods

This study employs a qualitative and computational research design within the Digital Humanities (DH) framework to construct a comprehensive and fine-grained cultural resource database for the Lanjiefu culture of Wenzhou. The research follows a knowledge engineering paradigm, integrating data mining, natural language processing (NLP), and semantic web technologies to extract, structure, and analyze cultural information (Liu et al., 2020; Wang & Zhang, 2021). A mixed-method approach combines computational text analysis with user experience evaluation to ensure technical efficiency and cultural relevance in the developed knowledge graph system (Doerr et al., 2018). This methodological approach facilitates the preservation and inheritance of Lanjiefu culture. It enhances its accessibility through structured knowledge representation, aligning with previous efforts in intangible cultural heritage (ICH) digitalization (Islami et al., 2019).

The research procedure is divided into four key stages. First, data collection and preprocessing are conducted by gathering text, image, and video materials from historical archives, academic sources, museums, and online repositories, followed by data cleaning and standardization to ensure consistency and accuracy (Zhang et al., 2022). Second, knowledge extraction and graph construction are performed using data mining and NLP techniques to identify key entities, relationships, and attributes (Wu et al., 2017). This stage includes entity recognition, relationship extraction, and knowledge fusion, essential for structuring cultural knowledge into a meaningful graph representation (Hogan et al., 2021). Third, a user-friendly system interface and visualization tools are developed to enable specialists and non-specialists to access and explore the knowledge graph effectively (Shen et al., 2020). Finally, evaluation and validation are conducted through expert assessments, computational precision-recall analysis, and user testing to ensure the knowledge graph's accuracy, usability, and completeness (Bordes et al., 2013).

Multiple data collection techniques are employed to ensure comprehensive data coverage. Archival research gathers textual and multimedia data from historical records, museums, and libraries (Bearman & Trant, 2007). Web scraping and data mining extract cultural knowledge from online sources using automated text analysis methods (Guo et al., 2021). Additionally, expert interviews are conducted with cultural scholars and historians to validate the extracted information (Fan et al., 2019). Lastly, crowdsourcing and community engagement allow for collecting oral histories and folk narratives, enriching the knowledge graph with lived experiences and local perspectives (Su et al., 2022). This combination of structured and unstructured data sources ensures a robust and holistic representation of Lanjiefu culture.

The data analysis phase utilizes advanced computational and qualitative techniques to enhance the knowledge graph's accuracy, reliability, and usability. Natural Language Processing

(NLP) and Machine Learning techniques such as entity recognition, relationship extraction, and sentiment analysis are applied to structure the collected data (Mikolov et al., 2013). The knowledge graph is refined and validated through semantic consistency checks, precision-recall evaluation, and expert validation, ensuring logical coherence between entities (Nickerson et al., 2013). Additionally, user experience and usability testing are conducted to evaluate how effectively non-specialists can interact with and comprehend the knowledge graph system (Shneiderman, 1996). By integrating these methodologies, this study establishes a solid foundation for digital preservation, intelligent query systems, personalized recommendations, and cultural education, demonstrating the transformative potential of computer science applications in the cultural heritage domain (Eide, 2019).

C. Findings and Discussion

1. 1957 Hongkong Film Adaptation of *Little Women*

Little Women can be regarded as an exemplary “literature-to-film” adaptation, accounting for its enduring popularity worldwide (Clark, 2014). In 1957, the first Chinese adapted film, *Xiao Furen* (*Little Women*), a black-and-white film directed by Cheng Gang, was produced at Huayuan Film Studio in Hong Kong, a hub for transcultural adaptations of world literature, including *Sister Carrie*, *Jane Eyre*, and *Great Expectations* (Mai, 2019). As the film poster illustrates, *Little Women*, a world classic, was adapted into a “family ethics tragicomedy” in which Jo (Shen Mengxiang) is portrayed waving her arms. This adaptation significantly amplifies the romantic entanglements between Jo (Shen Mengxiang), Amy (Shen Menglian), and Laurie (Shang Guanwu), transforming *Little Women* into a family ethics story (Yi, 2020). In this version, the shadow of war is obscured, and Mr. March (Mr. Shen) is reimagined as a philanthropic doctor working far from home. Furthermore, the characterization of the four sisters is altered: Menglian (Amy) becomes the eldest and ultimately marries Laurie (Guanwu), while Beth (Meng Qin) is the youngest (Zhou, 2022).

The Hollywood adaptations in 1933 and 1949, by contrast, emphasize Jo and Laurie's romance rather than Jo's pursuit of a career (Clark, 2014). Conversely, Wu Hui's adaptation prioritizes Mengxiang (Jo)'s passion for her writing career at the end of the film, omitting the unrealistic inheritance subplot from the original novel (Zhou, 2022). Ultimately, the heroine Mengxiang takes her newly published book, asks a young factory worker whether he will support her literary career as much as he loves her, and receives a warm, affirmative response. As Yi Lianyuan (2020) states, “The whole film is full of the Chinese New Culture Movement's positive pursuit of gender equality and revolution, which is also an aspect of the post-war Hong Kong Cantonese film circle under the influence of the progressive trend.”

The conclusion of Mengxiang (Jo) with an ordinary factory worker highlights the film's depiction of a non-hierarchical marriage. However, Cheng Gang's adaptation foregrounds morality and virtue above personal happiness, as Mengxiang sacrifices her love for her family (Mai, 2019). Mengxiang had reciprocated Guanwu's love with a warm embrace before discovering that her sister also harbored feelings for him. In Alcott's original text, Jo's rejection of Laurie and subsequent marriage to the eccentric German professor, Mr. Bhaer, has long been a point of contention among readers, with some feminist scholars arguing that Jo's marriage represents a failure of feminist ideals (Alberghene & Clark, 2014). As feminist critics Estes and Lant (1989) have asserted, Alcott was “forced to wage war upon her protagonist,” ultimately compelling “Jo to assume a kind of death in life, to impersonate the dead Beth.” Given Alcott's publishing constraints in 19th-century America, Jo's marriage may have been a necessary condition for *Little Women*'s publication, especially considering that Alcott herself remained unmarried throughout her life (Clark, 2014). Phillips (2022) argues that Alcott's final choices

reflect ambivalence about marriage and maturation, while simultaneously “suggest[ing] how she was rethinking what it means to become a wife and mother and offering a new way of talking about those roles.”

In Cheng’s adaptation, however, marriage is depicted as essential for all four sisters. Mrs. Shen frequently reinforces this expectation, stating, “A woman has to get married all the time” (Zhou, 2022). Compared to Mrs. March in the original novel, Mrs. Shen is a less charismatic and authoritative figure, as she consoles Mengxiang’s sacrifice with the words, “Your father will be content.” In Cheng’s adaptation, the role of the mother is diminished, and Mr. Shen emerges as the family’s absolute moral authority. Both Mr. Shen and Mengxiang view self-sacrifice as a path to moral superiority, an act that earns the father’s praise (Zhou, 2022). This patriarchal shift displaces the original text’s Christian themes of divine love and instead demands that women conform to patriarchal moral standards through self-sacrifice.

As a result, Mengxiang (Jo)’s rejection of Guanwu (Laurie) is framed not as an assertion of personal independence but as a moral act of self-sacrifice. This transformation challenges the notion of “self-sustaining communities of women” that Auerbach (1978) identified in *Little Women*, instead reinforcing patriarchal ideology within the context of Asian film adaptations. For example, the 1957 Hong Kong film *Si Qian Jin* (*Our Sister Hedy*), directed by Tao Qin, mirrors *Little Women* in its depiction of sisterly bonds but replaces the strong maternal figure with a dominant father (Yi, 2020). Many Asian cinematographers struggled to envision a mother who was frequently absent due to work, leading them to portray her as deceased (Yi, 2020). This single-father family structure became a common trope in adaptations of *Little Women* across Asia, as seen in the 1975 Hong Kong TV series *Little Women* directed by Wang Tianlin, the 1980 Japanese film *Little Women* by Serikawa Yogo, the 1997 Taiwanese TV series *Si Qianjin* by Huang Yigong, and the 2004 Korean TV series *Little Women* by Kung Sik/Kim Hyung Sik (Yi, 2020).

2. Chinese Translations of *Little Women* (1933-2020)

However, unlike a few stage adaptations, the numerous translated versions of *Little Women* released by nearly thirty Chinese publishers over the past decade stand out as exceptionally captivating and deserving of exploration. According to cataloging data from the National Archives of Publications and Culture of China, 244 versions of *Little Women* have been published in China. From 1992 to 2010, the number of versions launched by Chinese publishers generally increased, albeit with slight fluctuations. The number of translated and adapted versions of *Little Women* peaked in 2010, with twenty-one different editions appearing in the Chinese market that year (Clark, 2014). After 2010, the number of different versions remained around ten per year. However, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019 caused the number to drop by half (National Archives of Publications and Culture of China). Due to the release of Greta Gerwig’s film adaptation in China, the number rebounded to ten in 2020 (National Archives of Publications and Culture of China).

Chinese translations of *Little Women* before 1949, the founding of New China, were significantly influenced by ideological and social norms. As Stephens (1992) argues, “a narrative without an ideology is unthinkable; ideology is formulated in and by language, meanings within a language are socially determined, and narratives are constructed out of language.” *Little Women* has consistently drawn readers’ attention to its religious themes through intertextual references to Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (Alberghene & Clark, 2014). However, early Chinese translations erased or altered the religious references permeating the source text. The first Chinese version of *Little Women* was published in 1925 by The Christian Literature Society for China and was translated by Bei Houde (Martha E.

Pyle) with her assistant. This version, retitled *Four Sisters*, amplified Christian references and was criticized as a tool for religious proselytization. As Zhao (2019) notes, Bei's translation was derided as a "propagandizing Christian text" due to her missionary background and her intent to convert Chinese elite girls.

Conversely, other translations, such as Zheng Xiaocang's widely circulated 1933 version and Wang Hongsheng's 1936 edition, stripped the text of Christian allusions or replaced them with references to Chinese Buddhism and Daoism. In the preface to his translation, Zheng (1933) explicitly stated, "Our people mostly understand the plots in the book. The passages containing religious implications will be deleted. Whether to worship it or not, each one has its judgment, because literature and textbooks are inherently different." Both Zheng and Wang adopted a domestication strategy, using traditional Chinese idiomatic and poetic expressions to convey the emotions and thoughts of the four sisters. As O'Sullivan (2005) highlights, intercultural transference cannot occur without textual operations designed to "defuse" cultural elements that might be unfamiliar to the target audience. This approach was particularly effective for young Chinese readers, who had little exposure to Western Christmas traditions and Christianity. However, the domestication strategy was also politically motivated. As Zhao (2019) observes, Wang Hongsheng, a student at Guanghai University—an institution with strong nationalist and anti-imperialist leanings—translated Christian allusions selectively, reflecting the political climate of the time.

Zheng's translation also faced criticism due to its use of classical literary styles, which conflicted with the vernacular literature movement promoted by the New Culture Movement (1915–1923). For instance, Zheng formatted *Little Women* as a chapter novel with two-character titles and included personal commentary before and after each chapter (Alcott, 1933). Additionally, Zheng uniquely translated Jo's name as "Shu," an allusion to historical Chinese heroines associated with Sichuan Province, such as Wang Zhaojun, Yang Guifei, and Wu Zetian. This naming strategy created a metaphorical link between Jo March and legendary Chinese female figures, reinforcing her role as an extraordinary woman (Zhao, 2019).

After decades of political turmoil from the 1940s to the 1970s, *Little Women* saw a sharp decline in publication and circulation in China. It was not until the 1980s, following economic reforms, that official translations and academic discussions of the novel resurfaced (Clark, 2014). During this period, children's versions of *Little Women* gained popularity, coinciding with the rise of Chinese children's literature and the introduction of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series in 1997. Notably, Rowling has cited Jo March as a major inspiration for her own writing (Shealy, 2022). While this facilitated greater accessibility to *Little Women* for younger audiences, commercialization and gender stereotyping became prevalent issues in many adaptations (Li, 2019).

Currently, Wang Zhiguang's translation is the most widely published Chinese version. According to the Chinese National Library Reference Alliance, eighteen editions of Wang's translation have been published between 2001 and 2023, primarily targeting young readers. Wang employs a foreignizing translation strategy, incorporating a lively and modern linguistic style that resonates with contemporary teenagers. However, scholars have criticized his translation for reinforcing masculine ideologies and adopting an adult-controlling discourse over child readers (Li, 2019). Oittinen (2000) argues that children's literature is shaped by adult perceptions and power structures, stating that "children's literature as a whole is based on adult decisions, adult points of view, adult likes and dislikes." In Wang's *Little Women* (2005), words such as "good," "dutiful," and "dear" are

frequently used to reinforce moral values, aligning with the Chinese concept of *guai*—a term used to describe obedient and well-behaved children (Chen & Lau, 2020). As Chen and Lau (2020) explain, *guai* children are expected to be obedient and excel academically, conforming to societal expectations rather than embracing individuality. Wang's translation reinforces this discourse, subtly shaping young female readers' perceptions of obedience and virtue.

Among contemporary Chinese translations, the most critically acclaimed version is by Liu Chunying and Chen Yuli. Liu's translation is noted for its academic rigor and foreignization strategy, making it a preferred choice for university students and scholars (Alcott, 2020). On Douban, China's equivalent of Goodreads, Liu and Chen's translation has amassed over 15,000 reader reviews and maintains an 8.4 rating for its 2004 edition (Douban). Liu, an English professor, has also contributed significantly to academic research on *Little Women*, publishing the first scholarly article on the novel in 1997 (He, 1997). Her work emphasizes the novel's transcendentalist themes, particularly its connection to Ralph Waldo Emerson's philosophy of self-reliance (Liu, 2001).

Additionally, Liu's translation subtly modifies Jo's characterization, reducing her masculinity by translating "comical" as "pretty" when describing Jo's nose, and emphasizing her beauty rather than her boyishness (Alcott, 2020). This alteration reflects Liu's feminist interpretation of Jo as an emblem of independent womanhood. Notably, Liu translates Jo's "independence" (Alcott, 1868/1989) as "Zi Shi Qi Li" (self-sufficiency), a phrase that connotes economic autonomy rather than mere self-reliance. Similarly, Meg's assertion of independence in defending her relationship with Mr. Brooke is reinforced through this translation choice (Alcott, 1868/1989). Liu's version also enhances the role of female figures in the novel, including Hannah, the March family's servant, whose dialectal speech is standardized in the Chinese translation to reflect linguistic equality (Alcott, 2020).

With the rise of feminist discourse in China, the academic study of *Little Women* has expanded significantly. In the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database, there are 234 scholarly papers on *Little Women*, with 169 focusing on feminist interpretations, accounting for nearly 70% of the total research output (CNKI). Liu's 2020 translation has been widely regarded as a definitive version, aligning closely with Greta Gerwig's 2019 film adaptation.

3. Chinese Research on *Little Women*

Scholars in China, since the publication of the first Chinese translation of *Little Women*, have contributed remarkable insights into the subjects and themes covered in this book. CNKI data showed that 234 academic publications delve into various aspects of *Little Women*. These scholarly works specifically explore the book's English translation, Chinese translation, and adaptations in American and Chinese contexts. Most of the publications are journal articles, and there are also 28 academic dissertations completed by MA and PhD students. This indicates that both established and emerging scholars have paid attention to this world classic of children's literature (Clark, 2014).

Chinese scholars analyze *Little Women* from three perspectives: feminist studies, comparative literature, translation studies, and adaptation studies (Fetterley, 1979; O'Sullivan, 2005; Zhang, 2022). Feminist concerns have always been prioritized regardless of the methodologies applied, despite *Little Women* initially being regarded as an educational novel in early 20th-century China (Jin, 2004). However, contemporary Chinese

research on *Little Women* tends to overwhelmingly emphasize feminine concerns and independence. Few studies critically examine the domesticity and sentimentality that permeate the second part of the novel (Rioux, 2018). This lack of balance in publications may result in some researchers neglecting a thorough reading of the novel's second half. Furthermore, early translations and scholarly introductions have reinforced feminist interpretations (Zhao, 2019). Jin (2004), a leading critic of 19th-century American literature, praises Jo as "freed from the social constraints of being a woman through writing" and asserts that *Little Women* "envisages varieties and new possibilities in women's development in the family and the public sphere." In searching for *Little Women* in CNKI, the terms "feminism," "feminist consciousness," and "feminist growth" frequently appear as prominent keywords (Xu, 2004).

Chinese scholars also recognize the comparative value of *Little Women* in the context of American literary history (Nel et al., 2021). Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) and Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868), published 55 years apart in England and the United States, respectively, share many similarities as classic 19th-century novels (Auerbach, 1978). Auerbach (1978) compares the mother-dominated female communities in these two novels. Chinese scholars have also explored this relationship. Xu (2004), in a discussion on "personality and family education," points out that *Little Women* emphasizes personality independence and self-restraint, highlighting the importance of personal growth, whereas *Pride and Prejudice* exposes the economic realities of bourgeois marriage. In Austen's novel, financial security is crucial for women without inheritance rights, while in *Little Women*, virtue and character take precedence (Phillip, 2022).

Moreover, Chinese scholars such as Han and Huang (cited in Xiao, 2011) argue that both novels present not only the predicaments of women's limited gender roles in the 19th century but also explore the possibilities for female progress and agency. Given the plot similarities, Xiao (2011) compares *Little Women* with *A Dream in Red Mansions* (1754), one of China's four great classical novels, noting that both feature a similar characterization of Laurie—a male intruder in a predominantly female world. Laurie closely resembles Jia Baoyu, the noble young gentleman in *A Dream in Red Mansions*, as both boys develop deep friendships with the March sisters and the girls of Yong Mansion. Xiao (2011) highlights how both Laurie and Jia Baoyu serve as close caregivers and companions to their respective female communities, which are confronted with restrictions under patriarchal systems in 19th-century America and 18th-century China.

Beyond themes and characters, Chinese researchers also examine significant motifs such as "death" when comparing *Little Women* with *Narcissus and Goldmund* (1930) and explore the symbolic function of the attic as a space of freedom for Jo March but a site of captivity for Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* (Liu, 2001). Additionally, scholars analyze the depiction of women's personal adornment and dress when comparing *Little Women* with Anton Chekhov's *Three Sisters* (1901) (Oittinen, 2000).

Various adaptations of *Little Women* account for its long-lasting popularity and influence. The four Hollywood film adaptations, in particular, have attracted significant attention from Chinese scholars. Zhou (2022) argues that each of these adaptations reflects different cultural and historical contexts. For instance, Zhou (2022) notes that George Cukor's 1933 film adaptation was imbued with a sense of gloom, reflecting the Great Depression era in the United States. This is evident in the opening scene, where troops march through snowy Christmas streets, setting the stage for the film's depiction of the American Civil War and financial hardship. Furthermore, this version significantly minimizes Amy

and Laurie's relationship, focusing instead on Jo as the central character. Cukor's adaptation was a global success and was introduced to Chinese audiences in Shanghai in 1934 by the Lei Dian Hua Film Corporation. In 1933, Zheng Xiao Cang's translation of *Little Women* gained widespread popularity in China, reinforcing the novel's association with themes of "pure love" among the four sisters.

Zhou (2022) further contends that Cukor's 1933 adaptation had a lasting impact on subsequent Chinese adaptations, including Wu Gang's 1957 canonical film. While the 1949 adaptation incorporated improved stage design due to advancements in color film technology, it closely followed the 1933 film's script, omitting key scenes such as Amy burning Jo's manuscript and falling through the ice. The 1994 adaptation, widely regarded as one of the best, finally reintegrated Amy and Laurie's storyline and restored missing plot elements, making it a more faithful and comprehensive adaptation than previous versions.

Greta Gerwig's *Little Women* (2019) has been hailed as the most successful adaptation of the novel, sparking renewed scholarly interest in both the film and Alcott's work. Lin (2022) argues that Gerwig's film employs a non-linear narrative structure, creating a Bakhtinian-style "polyphonic dialogue" that not only emphasizes Jo's identity as a writer but also reflects the meta-narrative function of filmmaking itself. Qi (2021) applies Susan S. Lanser's feminist narratology to analyze the diverse feminist voices embedded in Gerwig's adaptation, including Alcott's original voice, Jo's voice, and Gerwig's own reinterpretation. Zhang (2022) suggests that Gerwig's film aligns with contemporary feminist values, emphasizing themes of self-authorship and identity formation. Gerwig's adaptation, Zhang (2022) asserts, "explores how individuals construct their lives, narrate their journeys, and ultimately define their true selves."

Compared with Western scholars, Chinese scholars have contributed unique perspectives on *Little Women* through comparative, translation, adaptation, and cross-cultural research approaches (Shealy, 2022). Despite extensive research, there remain several unexplored areas, including transnational and cross-cultural studies of *Little Women*, its various adaptations across media, its relationship to adolescent pop culture, the influence of Alcott's family's educational philosophy on her works, and the pedagogical applications of *Little Women* in classroom settings (Zhou, 2022). These avenues present promising directions for future research by Chinese scholars.

4. The Reasons Behind the Reception of *Little Women* in China

Three factors contribute to the acceptance and popularity of *Little Women* in China. The first reason is closely connected with translation and academic research, as discussed in the previous two sections. Furthermore, such translating and literary criticism activities transform *Little Women* from a part of American literature into a masterpiece of world literature, enjoying popularity among Chinese readers, both old and young (Clark, 2014). Gideon Toury views translations as cultural factors and argues that cultures resort to translating precisely to "fill in gaps" (Lefevere, 2016). Regarding the translation of *Little Women*, translators who base their work on the English versions produce a well-written and highly readable text, helping to bridge the knowledge gap for Chinese readers, most of whom have little knowledge about the daily lives of young women in 19th-century America (Li, 2019).

Little Women, as a world classic, portrays distinct female emotions and life experiences, allowing each female reader to identify with the March sisters on their journey to womanhood (Rioux, 2018). The novel imparts values such as kindness, loyalty, generosity, respect, tolerance, resilience, and courage, as demonstrated by the struggles of the March sisters (Alberghene & Clark, 2014). In particular, the most lovable, determined, tomboyish, and headstrong character, Jo March, has become an inspiring icon for young women across the globe (Phillip, 2022). Not only have prominent English-speaking figures such as Simone de Beauvoir, Patti Smith, Gloria Steinem, J. K. Rowling, Cynthia Ozick, and Caitlin Moran expressed admiration for Jo March (Rioux, 2018), but influential Chinese writers, including Yang Jiang (1911–2016) and Lin Haiyin (1918–2001), have also declared their fondness for *Little Women*. According to Lin Haiyin's biography, the March sisters served as exemplary figures for her. "Yingzi likes American writer Louisa May Alcott. She takes 'Amy' as her English name, but she admires the character Jo most for her honesty and determination. The happy family atmosphere in *Little Women* is very similar to that of Yingzi's family, so when she was a teenager, she did not have so many youthful fantasies but wanted to be a real 'little woman'" (Fu, 2019, as cited in Liu, 2001).

Little Women not only reveals the hardships of early feminism in 19th-century America to Chinese readers, reflecting Alcott's concerns about women's liberation, but also presents diverse life possibilities for Chinese female readers, fostering a strong sense of identification among Chinese women (Chen & Song, 2023). The transmission of *Little Women* into China testifies to the evolution of Chinese feminism and provides ideological support for the growth and awakening of Chinese women (Xu, 2004). The novel promotes the idea that everyone has the right to choose their own way of life and strive for it. Additionally, Chinese translators like Liu Chunying actively engage with other translators and scholars who share an interest in exploring *Little Women*, the lives of the March sisters, and the values of sisterhood, family, and love (Liu, 2001).

Similarly, Chinese scholars of *Little Women* interact with their international counterparts, who share a common concern about the idealized portrayal of home life (Nel et al., 2021). As Anne Boyd Rioux states, "The family bonds the Marches share—strong enough to survive the war, marriage, overseas travel, and even death—make us nostalgic for a time before fragmented families became the norm" (Rioux, 2018, Prologue). The image of the March family gathered around the fireplace evokes a longing for quiet, candlelit homes, while the playful interactions and fierce quarrels among the March sisters remind readers of their own siblings and families. Family values have traditionally held great importance in Chinese culture (Yi, 2020), making Alcott's vision of a familial utopia particularly resonant with Chinese readers seeking love and warmth within their families (Zhou, 2022).

Various media have played a significant role in shaping the reception of *Little Women* in China. The novel has been adapted into multiple films and television series, significantly increasing its exposure and introducing more readers to the original text (Mai, 2019). In addition to the four major Hollywood film adaptations, several other adaptations have gained popularity among Chinese audiences. For instance, in 1987, Japan released a 48-episode animated adaptation titled *Ruo Cao Wu Yu*, which was later introduced to Chinese audiences in the 1990s, making it the version most familiar to many Chinese children (He, 1997). Furthermore, South Korea produced two TV adaptations—*Da Xiao Jie Men* in 2004 and *Xiao Xiao Jie Men* in 2022—both based on *Little Women*, attracting a large number of older viewers who enjoy Korean romantic dramas (Qi, 2021).

In modern times, celebrity influence and fan culture have played a significant role in the promotion and popularity of literary works and their adaptations (Zhang, 2022). For instance, in the 2019 film adaptation of *Little Women*, the character of Laurie was portrayed by actor Timothée Chalamet, who has a substantial fan base in China. As a result, the 2019 adaptation performed well at the Chinese box office, driven in part by Chalamet's popularity (Shealy, 2022). For young readers, any adaptation or cultural product related to *Little Women* serves as an entry point to the original novel, fostering early engagement with this literary classic (O'Sullivan, 2005).

D. Conclusion

In the Chinese context, Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, initially an educational novel, transformed into a novel empowering women, representing the confrontation between patriarchal consciousness and feminism, the confrontation between children's discourse and adult discourse. The translations and adaptations of *Little Women* have witnessed the process of Chinese modernization and the emancipation and development of Chinese feminism. This article reveals how the nineteenth-century American girlhood narrative in *Little Women* has been presented as a canonical text for young Chinese readers in its translation adaptation and reception. In the initial part, Jo's strong sense of independence is not well-received due to the prevailing educational goals for the younger generation and the societal expectation for women to fulfill traditional roles as mothers and wives. In the second, Jo and her sisters are transformed into obedient and well-mannered children through patriarchal discourse, which succumbs to the traditional Chinese values of filial piety and children's virtue in the Millennium. In the third, Jo and her sisters are translated as modern, independent women who strive for economic and personal independence in a new era of China. Ultimately, the power dynamics between men and women and between children and adults shape the portrayal and manipulation of Jo and her sisters' independence in the different translations.

With the development of Chinese feminism and children's rights, the reception of *Little Women* also changed. Their attempt to reshape March's sister's independence aligns with the didactic purpose of children's literature and Chinese mainstream ideology about children's identity and the child-adult relationship. *Little Women* builds an ideal family utopia for the Chinese. The metamorphosis of feminine independence from domesticity to well-behave and submissiveness, and finally, the new independent individuals show implicit concerns and subtle resistance towards the preaching of such complicated ideas as the American spirit to children in modern Chinese society, which lays special emphasis on filial piety, patriarchy, and collectivism. To conclude, the question lies in whether Chinese adults are willing to take risks and allow their children to experience Jo's independence with all their ambiguity, complexity, and subversiveness and think for themselves about the meaning of her independence, or will choose the safer way by reframing the story towards mainstream ideology so they can be taught the designated morals of the story and how to adapt to the grown-ups' world.

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