

# Empowering Mrs. Ramsay: Chinese Feminist Translations of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*

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## Abstract

Given her experimental, innovative and distinctive writing techniques — particularly the strength of her stream of consciousness technique and her ideas for women's liberation from traditional family roles — poet and translator Xu Zhimo first introduced Woolf into China in December 1928 when he delivered a speech to students at Suzhou Female High School. In the following years, *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927) also came to the attention of Chinese readers, inaugurating a new era for foreign culture as well as ideas for women's liberation. *To the Lighthouse* was first translated by translator Xie Qingyao, but was eventually retranslated many times as interest in Woolf heightened. While constant interest in Virginia Woolf's modernist techniques have been a universal topic in the critic circle, Woolf's feminist proposal in her fictions have also been a ever heated theme explored not only in critics but also the translated texts when the social and political atmosphere took a feminist turn. By comparing retranslations of *To the Lighthouse* by male translator Qu Shijing and female translator Ma Ainong, this study explores the different socio-political contexts under which the two translations were created and two different perspectives in approaching this novel. This juxtaposition demonstrates a fundamental shift in the translation strategies under the influence of feminism and the evolving reader reception of the female character, Mrs. Ramsay, from submissive to strong and self-aware.

**Key Words:** *To the Lighthouse*, Qu Shijing, Ma Ainong, Socio-political Contexts, Feminist Translation, Reader Receptions

## Introduction

In 1928, Xu Zhimo was invited to deliver a speech at Su-Chou Girls' High School (苏州女中) and the speech was later turned into an essay entitled “关于女子” (About Women; 1929) In this speech, Xu hailed Virginia Woolf as the inspiration that made his article possible, claiming that his topic was the result of her famous essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929). Virginia Woolf and her idea of women's liberation was hence introduced for the first time to Chinese readers. Given the limited exposure to foreign thoughts at the time, it was not until

more than two decades later in 1949 that Xie Qingyao eventually published his translation of Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927), solidifying Woolf's Chinese reputation as a renowned Western modernist writer.

A subsequent craze in Virginia Woolf was promoted by the women's liberation movement and the desire to break away from the old social restrictions and embrace new literature. Consequently, more of Woolf's works such as *The Voyage Out* (1915), *Night and Day* (1919), *Jacob's Room* (1922) *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), *The Waves* (1931), and *Orlando* (1928) were translated into Chinese. Over the next three decades, due to the socio-political circumstances, works of foreign writers like T. S. Eliot, Wordsworth, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf had been banned for their so-called bourgeois ideologies and works from capitalist countries were regarded as tools used to mislead Chinese people. By the end of the 1970s, however, influence from foreign authors resurged and Woolf re-emerged in China. Woolf's novels were re-translated into China, with *To the Lighthouse* (1927) the most frequently re-translated work, proving its popularity among Chinese scholars and readers.

Among all the retranslated works, Qu Shijing's has been the most influential one. The first leading Chinese scholar to study the works of Virginia Woolf, Qu undertook his translation in the 1980s. An expert on Woolf and particularly the stream of consciousness technique, Qu published two monographs: *Woolf, a Novelist of Stream of Consciousness* (《意识流小说家伍尔夫》) and *Music, Art and Literature: a Comparative Study of Stream of Consciousness Novels* (《音乐、艺术与文学：意识流小说比较研究》).

When Qu retranslated *To the Lighthouse*, China had just implemented its reform and opening-up policy. The idea of women's liberation had spread over the whole country, but the long dominant patriarchal culture still had deeply-rooted impacts on nearly every aspect of people's lives. Traces of patriarchal influence can be spotted in Qu's choice of wording for the corresponding translation.

In the traditional patriarchal Chinese society, it had long been a predominantly accepted fact that women were inferior to men. Women had always been regarded as men's subordinated goods. They couldn't go out to work, and their scope of activities were limited at home. For a long time, people even women themselves think that women are "incompetent", while men are indispensable. There were many invisible shackles and cages for women in the old society, such as "three obediences" (at home from the father, married from the husband, husband died from the son), "four virtues" (women's appearance, women's face, women's morality, women's merit) and "men as the heaven" feudal ethics were the "highest principle" to restrict and control women. It was socially accepted that "Women in families are second-class citizens and they have no right to speak their minds. Women's only rights in the family are to bow to work and have children"<sup>1</sup> (Junhua 113). These similarities between the role of women in Qu's time of the contemporary China and in the Victorian England of Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* provide

<sup>1</sup>The original text is: 家庭地位上, 是家里的"二等公民", 没有话语权。妇女在家庭中仅有的权利就是俯首干活和生儿育女。

an important context for Qu's very traditional representation of Mrs. Ramsay as an ideal woman from a patriarchal perspective:

She is a real, living person; a gentle, kind, intuitive and graceful lady; She is adroit at keeping her home neat and socializing; She is eager to help relatives and friends and maintain harmonious relationships; She takes delight in paying visits to the poor and helps them. (Qu 4-5)<sup>2</sup>

In Qu's view, Mrs. Ramsay is a traditional, kind and graceful lady, representative of a real woman of her social hierarchy at her time. Following this understanding of Mrs. Ramsay, Qu depicts her as a conventional Victorian wife through his choice of words and languages.

Ma Ainong (1974- ) produced her translation of *To the Lighthouse* in 2003, in the midst of a different social and political atmosphere. In the 1980s, feminism had arrived in China with a translation of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), but it was not until the 1990s that scholars and critics began to approach Woolf's works from a feminist perspective. Acclaimed feminist theorist of translation, Sherry Simon, proposed that "women's liberation must first be a liberation of language." (Simon 8) Language is taken as a weapon for feminist intervention in translation, which stresses the role of female translators and advocates that women's voices should be available to the public. Feminist translation theory was introduced to China in the 1980s. When the 1995 World Conference on women in Beijing was held, women's rights took the center stage, resulting in even more works on women's rights. Following these Western feminist theories, language became a priority for Chinese feminists in the construction of gender differences.

It was in this historical context that Ma published her translation of *To the Lighthouse* under the same title as Qu (《到灯塔去》). Ma was inevitably influenced by the social circumstances of her time, portraying Mrs. Ramsay as a more self-aware woman, empowered with an awareness of gender consciousness. Ma imbues *To the Lighthouse* with feminist ideas when selecting the corresponding words and expressions for Mrs. Ramsay's internal monologues, thus giving a voice for Mrs. Ramsay to express herself explicitly.

To comprehend the disparity in the depictions of Mrs. Ramsay by these two translators, this article investigates the translation divergences in rendering Mrs. Ramsay on marriage, domestic duties and individual ambitions separately, so as to offer readers a glimpse of how Qu, a male translator, and Ma, a female translator, portray Woolf's Mrs. Ramsay with lexical and syntactic differences, and thus rendering a fundamental shift in the presentation and reception of this key character, Mrs. Ramsay, from submissive to self-aware which can be attributed to different socio-political scenarios and the burgeoning Chinese feminist movement of the 1990s.

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<sup>2</sup> This and all English-language translations of Chinese are my own. Original text: 她是一个真实的、活生生的人。她是一位温柔善良、富于直觉、风姿绰约的夫人。她善于持家和社交，喜欢为亲友排忧解难，促使他们和睦相处，并且经常访贫问苦，助人为乐。

**I. Mrs. Ramsay on Marriage**

When Virginia Woolf conceived *To the Lighthouse*, she meant it to be an elegy to her mother Julia Prinsep Duckworth (1846-1895), who lived in the Victorian period. During which Era, an ideal woman was seen as an ‘angel in the house’, a phrase derived from the famous poem *The Angel in the House* by English poet and critic, Coventry Kersey Dighton Patmore (1823-1896). Following its publication, the term was used in reference to women who embodied the Victorian feminine ideal:

*Man must be pleased; but him to please  
Is woman's pleasure; down the gulf  
Of his condoled necessities  
She casts her best, she flings herself.  
How often flings for nought! And yokes  
Her heart to icicle or whim,  
Whose each impatient word provokes  
Another, not from her, but him;  
While she, too gentle even to force  
His penitence by kind replies,  
Waits by, expecting his remorse,  
With pardon in her pitying eyes;* (Patmore 45)

For Patmore, this Victorian feminine ideal was a wife and mother selflessly devoted to her children and compliant to her husband, with no desires but to please her family even if she is met with provocation. When surveying Mrs. Ramsay's role in her family, it could be concluded that Mrs. Ramsay is, by all objective measures, a paradigm of the angel in the house: she tries to please her husband in marriage.

Typical of Victorian women, Mrs. Ramsay accepts that her husband is superior. When Mr. Ramsay needs her assurance of his importance in the family and even in his career, Mrs. Ramsay obliges with poise and competence, just “as a nurse carrying a light across a dark room assures a fractious child”. (43) Despite this seemingly inherent need to please, readers often experience her exhaustion with the status quo:

*She knew precisely what [this exhaustion] came from; nor did she let herself put into words her dissatisfaction when she realized, at the turn of the page when she stopped and heard dully, ominously, a wave fall, how it came from this: she did not like, even for a second, to feel finer than her husband; and further, could not bear not being entirely sure, when she spoke to him, of the truth of what she said, Universities and people wanting him, lectures and books and their being of the highest importance—all that she did not doubt for a moment (44-5).*

Mrs. Ramsay has the feeling that she could arrange all the tough stuff. She is even powerful enough to provide Mr. Ramsay with spiritual solace he longs for and it seems that she is much more competent and is a vital pillar in her family, which contradicts with the realistic fact that Mr. Ramsay is socially accepted as the support of the whole family, causing her unnameable dissatisfaction. While on one hand, Mrs. Ramsay feels her discontent about her being lower in social condition, on the other hand, she has to convince herself of Mr. Ramsay's importance in

the family, in his career, and in his social status. As a result, Mrs. Ramsay "... did not like, even for a second, to feel finer than her husband."

Qu renders the word group "she did not like, even for a second, to feel finer than her husband" as "她不喜欢感到她自己比她的丈夫优越，即使是在一刹那间也不行" (she would not *let* herself have such feelings, not even for a moment). This subtle change suggests Mrs. Ramsay's rigid obedience to the social constraints on women. Ma renders it as "她不愿意感到自己比丈夫优秀，哪怕是一秒钟也不行" (she is not willing to *admit*, not even for a second), implying that Mrs. Ramsay knows quite well that she is superior to her husband, but she does not want to face this thought which goes against conventional social rules. Compared with Qu's depiction of Mrs. Ramsay's repressed gesture, Ma's translation reveals that Mrs. Ramsay is aware of her superiority which she hides from others.

Mrs. Ramsay's self-awareness can also be traced in the respective translations of: "...could not bear not being entirely sure, when she spoke to him, of the truth of what she said." While Ma interprets this word group as "不能完全肯定自己的话符合事实，这一点令她无法忍受" (she is not completely sure whether what she said complies with the fact that Mr. Ramsay is actually not superior to her, which is such an unbearable thing and she cannot stand it *at all*), Qu paraphrases it as "她不能完全肯定她所说的都是事实，这可叫她受不了" (she is not completely sure whether what she said complies to the fact that Mr. Ramsay is actually not superior to her, and she cannot stand it). By stressing the extreme extent of Mrs. Ramsay's unbearable situation, Ma describes a more conscious woman who cannot stand her half-hearted recognition of Mr. Ramsay's superiority in marriage. Through her addition of "at all," Ma empowers Mrs. Ramsay with strong awareness of her realization of her own capability in family management and her superiority to Mr. Ramsay.

While Mrs. Ramsay in Qu's translation may be aware that she is superior to Mr. Ramsay in certain aspects, as an idealized patriarchal woman, she does not let such thoughts dominate. On the other hand, Mrs. Ramsay in Ma's translation has much stronger feelings about her superiority to Mr. Ramsay, she harbors such feelings and tries hard to suppress her strong awareness of her capability.

## II. Mrs. Ramsay on Domestic Duties

Women in the Victorian Era were supposed to perform their familial duties and thus belonged to the home. Likewise, in *To the Lighthouse*, Mrs. Ramsay is busily engaged in familial duties: she puts her children to bed, cares for her children and her husband; does daily chores; and cares for everyone around her. Throughout the first part of the novel, Woolf affords readers a glimpse into Mrs. Ramsay's seemingly endless domestic tasks. More importantly, the stream of consciousness technique offers readers a precious window into this character's thoughts and demonstrates just how much of a mental toll these tasks take on this stereotypical mother.

In the following quote, we feel Mrs. Ramsay's reticent endeavors to raise spirits, start conversation topics and bring people together at her party. Woolf's depiction of Mrs. Ramsay's

heavy mental task as hostess not only suggests her reluctant acceptance of this familial role but reveals Mrs. Ramsay's dissatisfaction with men's incompetence in sharing familial duties:

Nothing seemed to have merged. They all sat separate. And the whole of the effort of merging and flowing and creating rested on her. Again she felt, as a fact without hostility, the sterility of men, for if she did not do it nobody would do it and so, giving herself the little shake that one gives a watch that has stopped, the old familiar pulse began beating, as the watch begins ticking—one, two, three, one, two, three. And so on and so on, she repeated, listening to it, sheltering and fostering the still feeble pulse as one might guard a weak flame with a newspaper. (95)

The phrase 'a fact without hostility, the sterility of men' — a derogative judgement on men's incompetence in hosting party and social bonding matters — is translated differently. Qu relegates it to a parenthetical aside: “仅仅作作为一种事实而毫无恶意” (just a fact, without any hostility). While in English, such a statement's inclusion in parentheses might be interpreted as reducing its importance, for a Chinese reader, Qu's parentheses stress the underlying objective attitude of Mrs. Ramsay regarding men's incapability of creating a harmonious atmosphere, which, according to Qu's wording, is simply a fact without any of Mrs. Ramsay's personal bias. Two fundamental categories of annotation are distinguished in translation: one the author's notes, which “...are an indispensable part of the original text, whose function is to fully clarify the writer's purpose in the source language” (Xiao 102); and the other, the translator's notes, which are “the notes added by the translator according to the needs of the target language and its readers” (102). Qu's addition of the parentheses can be understood as his own annotations, a tactic he uses several times throughout his translation<sup>3</sup> to help Chinese readers comprehend Woolf's underlying intention.

In comparison, Ma faithfully retains the original sentence structures, interpreting 'just a fact, without any hostility' as “这是事实而不是她的偏见” (this is a fact, not her prejudice). The word ‘偏见(prejudice)’ vividly conveys Mrs. Ramsay's awareness of her bias towards men. Similarly, the phrase ‘the sterility of men’ is translated by Qu as “男人们缺乏能力、需要帮助” (men are incapable and need help) implying that men are in a pathetic position; while Ma's translation ‘男人的贫瘠 (men are meager)’, paraphrasing ‘sterility’ into ‘meagerness’. Here the word ‘meagerness’ is utilized metaphorically by Ma to refer to men's pathetic capability in managing social life, a disdainful expression showing Mrs. Ramsay's awareness of men's incompetence, which she critiques as sterility. To a great extent, Ma justifies Mrs.

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<sup>3</sup> In addition to the aforementioned excerpt, Qu uses annotations to explain the juxtaposition of various images in some stream of consciousness passages. At times, he does not only add annotations but also footnotes to ease readers' access to Woolf's text, such as with the addition of “in the academic field” to this quote about Mr. Ramsay: “However deep he buried himself or climbed high” to “无论他（在学术领域中）钻得多么深 (however he buried himself or climbed high) (in the academic field)”. Besides the addition of annotation, Qu also adds a footnote, “What Woolf means is that, due to over exaggeration, she could scarcely see her true self (伍尔夫的意思是说，由于过分夸张，拉姆齐夫人几乎认不清自己的真面目了。)” to further explain the sentence.

Ramsay's prejudice, instilling her with a strong disdain for men's conventional superiority in domestic life, injecting her translated wording and expressions with feminist perspectives.

### III. Mrs. Ramsay on Individual Ambitions

Woolf was encouraged by her father, "to write, and insisted on her adherence to strict standards of womanly conduct" (Showalter 340) In compliance with his father's demanding request, Mrs. Ramsay is portrayed as a stereotypical idealized Victorian woman who performs all the family duties following the conventional restrictions on any woman of her time. After Woolf's father died, 'she[Woolf] felt that her imagination was liberated by his death, and also that she had managed to kill the Angel in the house' (340).

Woolf intends for Mrs. Ramsay to be a real person, who, on one hand, endeavors to comply with social norms, and on the other hand, has her own mind and feelings. Through Woolf's stream of consciousness technique, readers can feel Mrs. Ramsay's unwillingness and reluctance when she forces herself to attend to the chores and provide support for her husband and see her discontentment with domestic life:

Strife, divisions, difference of opinion, prejudices twisted into the very fibre of being, oh, that they should begin so early, Mrs. Ramsay deplored. They were so critical, her children. They talked such nonsense. It seemed to her such nonsense—inventing differences, when people, heaven knows, were different enough without that. The real differences, she thought, standing by the drawing-room window, are enough, quite enough (10-11).

After sending her children to bed and hearing their discussions, Mrs. Ramsay feels impatient about their differences and arguments. While most mothers have to stop their children from fighting, here readers see Mrs. Ramsay's annoyance with her children's squabbles. Mrs. Ramsay wishes that her children could escape this vicious cycle. Indeed, she recognizes that greater differences exist between people in society at large:

She had in mind at the moment, rich and poor, high and low, but more profoundly, she ruminated the other problem, of rich and poor, and the things she saw with her own eyes, weekly, daily, here or in London, when she visited this widow, or that struggling wife in person with a bag on her arm, and a notebook and pencil with which she wrote down in columns carefully ruled for the purpose wages and spendings, employment and unemployment, in the hope that thus she would cease to be a private woman whose charity was half a sop to her own indignation, half a relief to her own curiosity, and become what with her untrained mind she greatly admired, an investigator, elucidating the social problem. (10-11)

Through a series of dichotomies—rich/poor, high/low, wages/spendings, employment/unemployment, readers are afforded yet another glimpse into Mrs. Ramsay's understanding of the world in which she lives. While typically confined to her home taking care of her children, Mrs. Ramsay nevertheless understands domestic squabbles to be less

important than the real systemic issues facing her society and therefore engages in charitable actions as a way to help rectify the problems she sees. However, as Woolf notes through this stream of consciousness passage, Mrs. Ramsay's charity work does not entirely quell her dissatisfaction with society, but additionally satisfies her own curiosity about the world beyond her walls. With this in mind, the readers see that Mrs. Ramsay, while forever doomed to be a Victorian housewife, has greater ambitions and would have liked to be able to solve such social problems.

It is thought-provoking to notice that the phrase 'a private woman' is transposed dissimilarly. In the context of Woolf's original, "private woman" seems to be a euphemism for housewife. Qu interprets it literally as "私人身份" (private) "的妇女" (woman), which is a very uncommon phrasing for a Chinese speaker that simply indicates Mrs. Ramsay's gender without necessarily conveying her lack of a profession. Ma, on the other hand, renders it bluntly as "家庭主妇" (a housewife). When a woman's occupation is "家庭主妇" (housewife), it indicates that she has no status in her family as she has no financial role in supporting the family. By translating "private woman" as housewife, Ma empowers Mrs. Ramsay with a recognition of her status, further solidifying her aspiration to "cease to be a private woman (housewife)" and become "an investigator, elucidating the social problem" and she admires such social obligations.

Besides ambition for involvement in social problems, Mrs. Ramsay ruminates on philosophical questions and spiritual experiences and contemplates her own self-worth:

...and it was a relief when they went to bed. For now she need not think about anybody. She could be herself, by herself. And that was what now she often felt the need of—to think; well not even to think. To be silent; to be alone. All the being and the doing, expansive, glittering, vocal, evaporated; and one shrunk, with a sense of solemnity, to being oneself, a wedge-shaped core of darkness, something invisible to others. Although she continued to knit, and sat upright, it was thus that she felt herself; and this self having shed its attachments was free for the strangest adventures. When life sank down for a moment, the range of experience seemed limitless. (70)

Being alone allows Mrs. Ramsay to recognize that she longs for freedom, relief, and spiritual pursuits outside of her domestic life. She has at this moment transcended life and been spiritually elevated, enjoying the peace and eternity. We perceive, in Mrs. Ramsay, the budding awareness of self-consciousness and her identity. The following table is drawn to gain a clearer contrast between Qu's and Ma's translated text about this excerpt.

Woolf's word groups	Qu's translations	Ma's translations
she could be herself, by herself	她能恢复她的自我, 不为他人所左右了。  (Her self is regained, and she is not controlled by anyone.)	她可以自己呆着, 表现真实的自我。  (She could be herself, and find her real self)
to be alone	是孤独  (to be solitary)	独自呆着  (to stay alone)
to being oneself	返回她的自我  (Her self retrieves.)	缩成真的自我  (shrunk into her real self)
this self	她的自我  (her self)	真的自我  (real self)

Qu and Ma depict Mrs. Ramsay disparately by their translations for 'by herself', 'to be alone', 'to being oneself', and 'this self'. Qu uses 'herself' repeatedly to convey Mrs. Ramsay's awareness of being alone. When Mrs. Ramsay is by herself, she seems to feel 'solitary' and inadaptable as she has been used to always put her kids, her husband, and the whole family chores before her. Qu's interpretation portrays a pathetic woman who is relieved from family responsibilities but cannot properly adapt to such solitude. The time she is alone, she feels at a loss. On the other hand, Ma represents Mrs. Ramsay as a more introspective woman, pondering her real self and appreciating the state of being on her own. Ma's repetitive use of 'real self' repeatedly emphasizes that Mrs. Ramsay could not only find her inner feelings and she is now possible to ponder on the question of who she really is.

In general, Qu maintains a neutral and accurate wording, while Ma empowers Mrs. Ramsay with more feminist contemplation through her choices of words on her married life, domestic duties and individual ambitions, thus portraying Mrs. Ramsay as a more self-aware and independent woman who is no longer in perfect conformity with the Victorian image of an ideal woman as presented in Patmore's *Angel in the House*.

## Conclusion

Readers' reception varies with different socio-political backgrounds and gender consciousness encapsulating into the words and phrases. Following the mainstream patriarchal ideology on women's role in society, family and marriage, Qu presented Mrs. Ramsay as a perfectly idealized Victorian women, which resonated with the social hierarchical rules for Chinese women in the time. Ma, on the other hand, translated *To the Lighthouse* under a feminist socio-political scenario when the women's liberation movement was on the rise in

China and women's equality in social, political, economical and family spheres had become more generally accepted.

While patriarchal views were forced on real women represented by Mrs. Ramsay during the Victorian Era, feminist translation strategy provides readers with a new dimension to treat Mrs. Ramsay. Different from Western feminist scholars, “[Chinese female writers] are not radical enough to create new words to resist the patriarchal language. Like female translators, even those who have been deeply influenced by feminist thoughts, express their feminist faith and concepts implicitly between lines.”(Wei 133) Ma, as a female translator, is perceived to create her translated text influenced by gender consciousness, particularly the feminist translation theoretical proposals. She thus ingrained her feminist interpretation of a relatively radical Mrs. Ramsay empowered with strong womanly consciousness of her own opinions and feelings about the marriage, family duties, and even her unnamed personal values between her translated lines.

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