The visibility of Ida Pruitt as a woman translator: An archival approach to the English translation of Lao She's *Si Shi Tong Tang*

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Woman translator. Archives. Visibility. Ida Pruitt. Lao She. *The Yellow Storm*.

Drawing on Lawrence Venuti's concept of invisibility, this article focuses on the translator Ida Pruitt's visibility in the English translation of Lao She's *Si Shi Tong Tang* (literally, Four generations under one roof, 1949; shortened Eng. trans. *The Yellow Storm*, 1951) by combining textual and archival analyses. It demonstrates that Pruitt, in lieu of the author, negotiated her visibility with the publisher, editors, and literary agent in the editing process of her translation and in the design of its paratexts such as the title, cover, and map. She thus performed her visibility to English readers by retaining linguistic and cultural differences in her translation. This study expands research on translators' visibility by integrating process- and product-oriented perspectives, opening up a new avenue for reconsidering the conventional notion of the double invisibility of women translators.

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Translators are traditionally seen as invisible (Venuti 1995), but this is changing thanks to the call for research on translators in translation history (Pym 1998) and the development of translator studies in line with the sociological turn in translation studies (Chesterman 2009). Recently, many scholars have moved away from text-centered analyses of translations to investigate multifaceted dimensions of translators (Kaindl, Kolb and Schlager 2021; Freeth and Treviño 2024; Cercel and Leal 2025; Cercel 2026). However, despite the huge number of women translators and self-translators, there exists a tendency within scholarship that primarily focuses on male translators, due to the double shadow hovering over women translators cast by both the male authors and translators (Bryer 2016; Rajewska 2020, 107). Regarding the relationship between translation and gender, scholars such as Sherry Simon (1996) and Luise von Flotow (1997) examined the similar subordinated status of translated texts and women, and explored feminist translations. Since their pioneering contributions, scholars in translation and gender studies have drawn on diverse perspectives to explore an array of topics ranging from the translation of women writers and feminist texts to representations of gender identities in translation, calling for transnational dialogues (Castro and Ergun 2017; von Flotow and Farahzad 2017; Federici and Santaemilia 2022). Notably, some feminist translation scholars have also turned to delineate the history of women translators in diverse contexts (Misiou 2023; McAteer 2025), unearth the hidden contributions by women translators under the shadow of their husbands (Ordóñez-López 2021; Marinetti 2022), and examine women translators' agency and activism from gender and feminist perspectives (Vassallo 2023; Castellano-Ortolà 2024; Yu and Shen 2026). These existing studies have highlighted the gender issues in translation and restored the overlooked history of women translators, shedding some valuable light on women translators' visibility. Nevertheless, in Chinese literary scholarship, there is still a lack of in-depth investigations into the visibility of women translators in specific historical contexts.

In this context, based on archival materials, this article will draw on Lawrence Venuti's (1995) notion of invisibility to delve into the visibility of a specific woman translator, Ida Pruitt, during the Cold War in her English translation of Chinese writer Lao She's *Si Shi Tong Tang* (1949; literally, Four generations under one roof; shortened Eng. trans. *The Yellow Storm*, 1951).[1] By combining extratextual and textual analyses, it will examine Lao She and Pruitt's collaboration in the translation process before exploring Pruitt's visibility in the translated text via nuanced comparative analyses of the Chinese source text, the published English translation, and the translation manuscript. It will also probe into Pruitt's visibility at the extratextual level by concentrating on her negotiation and coordination in the translation editing process and its paratextual design. The archival materials examined in the present article include translation manuscripts and correspondence between translation agents such as Lao She, Pruitt, the literary agent, and the editors, which have been collected from the Papers of Ida Pruitt and Marjorie King, 1891–1994 (hereafter PIPMK) and the Papers of Ida Pruitt, 1850s–1992 in the Schlesinger Library, Harvard University in conjunction with the David Lloyd collection on Lao She, 1946–1957 in the Rare

Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University. By so doing, this article seeks to expand research on translators' visibility by moving beyond product-oriented analytical frameworks to integrate process- and product-oriented perspectives, opening up a new avenue for reconsidering the conventional notion of the double invisibility of women translators.

SI SHI TONG TANG AND ITS COLLABORATIVE ENGLISH TRANSLATION

Lao She (1899–1966), also known as Lau Shaw or Shu Qingchun, is a celebrated writer who has been honored as "People's Artist" in China. His achievements in the field of modern Chinese literature are also internationally recognized, with many of his works translated into English, including *Luo Tuo Xiang Zi* (1939; Eng. trans. *Rickshaw Boy*, 1945), *Si Shi Tong Tang* (1949; shortened Eng. trans. *The Yellow Storm*, 1951), and *Mao Cheng Ji* (1933; Eng. trans. *Cat Country*, 2015). His representative work *Si Shi Tong Tang* is a monumental realist novel that focuses on the four generations of the Chi family to depict the tragic fate of ordinary Beijing residents and the persistent resistance of the Chinese people in occupied Beijing during the Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945). It encompasses three parts, namely "Huanghuo" (Fear and confusion), "Tousheng" (Dragging out an ignoble existence) and "Jihuang" (Famine), with the last part completed during Lao She's sojourn in the US from 1946 to 1949. It is "acclaimed as a masterpiece in modern Chinese literature for its epic chronicle of the life and mentalities of those living in the fallen city", occupying an outstanding position in the history of modern Chinese literature (Lin 2022, 1144).

The historical context is important: on the eve of the Cold War, both China and the US leveraged cultural contacts and interactions as weapons to promote their respective ideologies. Invited by the American government for a cultural exchange, Lao She arrived in the US in 1946, when Evan King's English translation of his representative novel *Rickshaw Boy* (1945) had already been published. Due to King's extensive rewriting in the service of a pro-US democratic ideology, Lao She's novel was transformed "from a Dickensian exposé of the evils of capitalism to a celebration of individualism and personal freedom", achieving an unprecedented success in the American market (So 2016, 186). However, despite its success, Lao She strongly disapproved of King's manipulation, which prompted him to personally engage in the English translation of his other novels such as *Si Shi Tong Tang* and *Li Hun* (1933; Eng. trans. *Divorce*, 1948) by collaborating with his translators. In the case of the English translation of *Si Shi Tong Tang*, it can be subsumed under the category of "closelaboration", as it resulted from close collaboration between the author and the translator (Hersant 2017, 95). Although Pruitt was listed as the sole translator of the final published translation, the collaboration between Lao She and Pruitt was rare and intimate with a well-defined division of labor (Cordingley and Stenberg 2021, 93).

As the daughter of Southern Baptist missionaries, Ida Pruitt (1888–1985) had lived, studied and worked in China and the US. Proficient in English and spoken

Chinese, she fostered a deep understanding of their cultures. According to Marjorie King, she was considered "half Chinese" and "truly bicultural" (2006, xv). In this sense, to use Bourdieu's term, she cultivated a bicultural habitus with her extensive lived experiences in Chinese and American cultures (1990). Nevertheless, Pruitt was not capable of reading Chinese, which led to the unique nature of her collaboration with Lao She. In terms of their translation process, Pruitt recalled that Lao She "would read to me in Chinese and I would type in English".[2] With her profound knowledge of Chinese society and culture, she, as Lao She observed, could "visualize all what I read to her at once from my book".[3] Meanwhile, with his experience of living in London and the US, Lao She had a keen awareness of English readers' needs. Aiming to fulfill his ambition to promote China internationally via his novel after the end of World War II (So 2016, 178–180), he intentionally rewrote it for their translation through extensive deletions to appeal to English readers. As Pruitt reveals, Lao She "knew that Americans did not like novels to be too long so he cut severely as we worked together on the book. Unfortunately the publishers cut even more, cutting out one whole character – not a major character but one of whom I was fond – the farmer tending the grave plots".[4]

In summary, it is clear that *The Yellow Storm* (1951) is an abridged English translation of *Si Shi Tong Tang*, which is an outcome of the close collaboration between Lao She and Pruitt with editorial interventions from the publisher. In the translation process, Lao She was primarily responsible for producing a suitable source text to cater for English readers at the pre-translation stage and assisting Pruitt at the translation stage in which the translator rendered the rewritten source text into English. When their translation manuscripts were submitted to the publisher, editors acted as gatekeepers at the post-translation stage, revising them in tune with the aesthetic tastes of their English readers via deletions.

UNVEILING PRUITT'S VISIBILITY

To explore Pruitt's visibility, it is necessary to articulate Venuti's (1995) concept of the translator's invisibility and discuss the existing typology of visibility. Observing the dominance of fluent and transparent translation in the Anglophone world, Venuti (1) argues that translators are invisible, highlighting the ignorance of translators' interventions and their subordinated status. This provocative idea sparked debates on the role of translators and stirred up scholarly interest in its opposite, translators' visibility (Coldiron 2012; Li 2026).

Regarding translators' visibility, Kaisa Koskinen categorizes it into textual, paratextual, and extratextual forms (2000, 99) while Klaus Kaindl divides it into textual, media, social, and academic visibility (2024, 40). From a sociological perspective, Helle V. Dam and Minna Ruokonen propose an inclusive term "beyond-textual visibility" to encompass "physical, professional and more general societal visibility" of translators (2024, 78). Evidently, these classifications are context-dependent and partially overlapping rather than rigidly defined or mutually exclusive, pointing to translated texts as a core site for exploring translators' visibility and the necessity of further research into other forms of visibility in different situations. In this regard,

given the rare yet abundant archival resources related to the English translation of *Si Shi Tong Tang*, this section focuses on exploring Pruitt's visibility with a combination of textual and archival analyses to reveal her salient visibility in the translated text and hidden visibility behind the translation scene.

Pruitt's visibility in the translated text

According to Venuti, a domesticating practice is "an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to receiving cultural values", while a foreignizing practice exerts "ethnodeviant pressure on those values to register the linguistic and cultural differences of the foreign text" (1995, 20). Confronted with the prevailing phenomena of domesticating translation and invisible translators in the British and American contexts, Venuti calls for translators to resist them by developing a foreignizing translation practice that is "not just more self-conscious, but also more self-critical" (1995, 309). Venuti links translators' invisibility directly to domesticating strategies of translation and valorizes foreignizing strategies of translation as a valuable means of increasing translators' visibility. Following this critical line, this article aims to identify the way in which Pruitt exercised her translator ethics to create a more visible voice in her translation of *Si Shi Tong Tang*.

In opposition to the dominant practice of domestication in the American translation tradition, Pruitt's translation approach aligns with an ethics of foreignization, bringing her visibility in the English translation to the fore. This inclination was evident in a variety of examples in which she repeatedly preserved the original image, metaphor, and even the syntactic structure of the Chinese source text instead of replacing them with idiomatic renderings in English. The following three examples might suffice to indicate how the translator negotiated her visibility in the translated text by retaining what she understood as the distinguishing linguistic and cultural features in the source text. (The ST, TT, and M in the following examples refer to source text, target text, and translation manuscript, respectively.)

Example 1
ST: 老人斩钉截铁的说 (She 2018, 6)
TT: the old man to "cut a nail into two or to split iron" said (Shaw 1951, 7–8)
M: the old man to "cut a nail into two or to split iron" said[5]

Example 2
ST: 在祁老人呢，他，第一，需要个年老的朋友，好有个地方去播放他的陈谷子烂芝麻。(She 2018, 13)
TT: Old Man Chi needed an older friend before whom he could spread his "old grain and rotting sesame." (Shaw 1951, 15)
M: Old Man Chi needed an older friend before whom he could spread his "old grain and rotting sesame."

Example 3
ST: 他不愿拒人于千里之外 (She 2018, 562)

TT: he could not "push people off a thousand li." (Shaw 1951, 275)
M: he did not like to "push people a thousand li away."

In Example 1, the source text reflects Old Man Chi's firm opposition to the lovey-dovey behavior of his grandson and granddaughter-in-law. In the sentence, while the literal meaning of the Chinese idiom is "cut nails and sever iron", it is often used to describe people who speak or act in a firm and resolute manner. Pruitt rendered it literally as "cut a nail into two or to split iron", restoring the concrete images of "nail" and "iron" in her translation. With such a literal, image-preserving translation, the translator disrupted English syntactic norms and opened a space for English readers to experience the foreignness in the translation by forcing them to confront the Chinese syntactic structure and deduce the connotations from these images. In this sense, Pruitt's translation demonstrated the characteristics of abusive fidelity, pushing the boundaries of translation by resisting a fluent strategy in favor of flagging the linguistic and cultural features of the source text (Venuti 1995, 23; Lewis 1985).

In Example 2, the source text explains why Old Man Chi and his neighbor, Mr. Chien, became friends despite their different learning and interests. The reason lay in Old Man Chi's need for an older friend to listen to his trivial recollections or old stories. The phrase, literally, "old grain and rotten sesame", in the sentence figuratively refers to "trivial recollections" or "old stories". Pruitt translated it literally as "old grain and rotting sesame", retaining its concrete food images instead of replacing them with a familiar English equivalent like old chestnuts. In this way, she forcefully transplanted the Chinese idiom into her translation at the expense of its immediate intelligibility, which may leave English readers adrift in opaque foreignism and compel them to grapple with its metaphorical texture. However, such a stylistically awkward or insufficiently idiomatic translation exposed the translator's interventions in mediating the source text, contributing to her visibility before English readers.

In Example 3, the source text describes that Mr. Goodrich, as an orientalized Englishman, was reluctant to keep people at arm's length. Unlike Example 1 and Example 2, there are slight differences between the published translation and the translation manuscript in Example 3. To ensure that the translated text reflects the translator's voice without editorial intervention, the present analysis focuses on the version from the translation manuscript. The phrase in the sentence, literally, "reject people a thousand li away", is a Chinese idiom, which metaphorically means "to keep people at a distance or at arm's length" or describes someone unapproachable. This idiom is thus used to describe a social attitude rather than a physical action, with "a thousand li" functioning as an exaggerated spatial measure of emotional or social distance. When dealing with it, it is obvious that Pruitt again consciously chose to keep the Chinese cultural metaphor, as evidenced by flagging her literal translations with quotation marks, and to reproduce the image of rejection and distance in a literal way by translating it as "push people a thousand li away". Besides, it is noteworthy that li as a Chinese unit of distance is not converted

into the familiar English unit "mile". By leaving the traces of the source language, the translator interrupted the transparency of the translation and reminded readers of her mediation in the translation. As such, Pruitt preserved the vividness and cultural specificity of the source text, producing a foreignizing effect on the translation and highlighting her visibility.

Based on the above examples, it is clear that Pruitt favored an ethics of foreignization, providing a sort of crib for the Chinese idioms, metaphors and syntactic structures rather than writing fluent English. Such a predilection for literalism can be argued as a conscious strategy adopted by the translator to resist assimilation and foreground cultural otherness, as she displayed a keen awareness of the strangeness of her translation by flagging them with quotation marks in the above examples. As a whole, Pruitt's translation aligns with the "Sinocentric translation approach", advocating for "translations that emphasize accuracy, historical depth, and cultural authenticity" (Li 2026, 335). Her choices of preserving the cultural specificities and inviting English readers to engage with the cultural otherness foreground her mediation, which can be understood as enhancing her textual visibility.

Pruitt's hidden visibility in the publication process

The sociology of translation views translation as a complex social activity, which highlights the importance of studying the network of translation agents, translators in particular (Chesterman 2009; Milton and Bandia 2009; Yu and Shen 2024). Translators often not only invest their social, cultural and linguistic capital in crafting their translations, but also play multiple roles and engage in various activities beyond the translation process such as fostering cooperation between authors and publishers as well as promoting authors and their works in a different linguistic and cultural context (Yu and Zhang 2021; Gnot 2025). Accordingly, the translator's visibility "does not just happen in one particular way, it is multifaceted" (Kaindl 2024, 37). In the case of Pruitt, her efforts to display her visibility as a translator extended beyond the textual domain to the negotiation and coordination of the translation editing and its paratextual design, although her visibility was ultimately compromised in the published translation.

Pruitt, in lieu of Lao She, became a coordinator and gatekeeper in the publication process of her translation when the author returned to China at the end of 1949. As she observed, "I am not just a translator," and "Dr. Shu is counting on me to keep the quality of the book. It is no light responsibility".[6] Regarding the editing of her translation manuscript, although she accepted some editorial interventions, she resisted editors' cutting without consulting her, arguing that "the quality of the book is in its pattern which is woven like a great tapestry. Any thread cut or clipped will be a loss to that pattern".[7] When she was informed that her translation manuscript was assigned to new editors and its cutting was inevitable, she arranged a meeting with the publisher Eugene Reynal and the editors Denver Lindley and Glenn Gosling immediately, suggesting that two main themes of the book should remain intact: "the impact of the Japanese war on the Chi family and their friends and that of the entrance of the new ways from the west, and also of the futility and wickedness of war".[8] Even

on the eve of the translation's publication, she continued to offer specific suggestions to the editors, pointing out that "a little more is needed for characterization or motivation".[9] In response to her suggestions, the editor wrote: "Thanks once more for your careful work and helpful suggestions on behalf of Dr. Shu. The suggestions have all been acted upon, and the book will presently be on the press".[10] This letter demonstrates that Pruitt actively engaged in the editing process and her suggestions were fully appreciated and incorporated into the final version. Endowed with interpretive authority over her translation, Pruitt, acting as Lao She's proxy, secured a pivotal position in the network of translation agents and an advantage in her negotiations with the publisher and editors. She exercised her agency by supervising the editing process and providing suggestions, negotiating her visibility within the publishing network (Lefevere 1992; Milton and Bandia 2009).

Moreover, Pruitt's visibility found expression in her involvement in the preparation of translation paratexts. Paratext, which can be divided into peritext and epitext, acts as a threshold for interpretation and mediates between a text and its public, influencing the reception of the text (Genette 1997; Batchelor 2018; Qi 2018). As a crucial peritextual element, a title is the powerful vanguard of a book and wields substantial power in that it "attracts, inspires and triggers the readers' first schema" (Pellatt 2018, 168). Well aware of its significance, Pruitt opposed Lao She's proposed title *Yellow Storm*, deeming it both misleading and racially charged for its evocation of the "yellow peril" trope. She articulated the negative connotations of the word "yellow", arguing that *Yellow Storm* would not "carry to an American the grandeur of the book and they would expect it to be a book in which the main theme was treachery".[11] Instead, she preferred *Four Generations* over many other titles like *The Earth Shock*, as "publishers could, with the advertiseing [sic], so easily explain it that no one would think it a sociological treatise".[12] With her cross-cultural expertise, she was alert to the potential risk that the title *Yellow Storm* might lead English readers to misunderstand the main theme of the novel, and proposed alternative titles that struck a balance between an authoritative presentation of the novel and its marketability. By challenging the author's own proposed title and negotiating with the publisher and editors, she attempted to display her visibility as a cultural broker and expert before them.

Apart from the title, Pruitt also participated in the design of a map and a cover for the translation. She recommended her friend Chiao Ssutu, a renowned Chinese painter, to Lao She and the publisher, inviting him to be responsible for designing a map and a cover for her translation.[13] The map of Little Sheep Fold Lane was designed to guide readers into the spatial world of the novel, while the cover sought to attract an Anglophone readership. During the production process of the map and the cover, Pruitt offered much assistance to Ssutu, ranging from sending a galley of the translation to him to coordinating between him and the publisher. For instance, when the map and the cover were ready, she did more than simply forward them to the editor, Lindley. Rather, she evaluated them critically, praising the map as "very satisfactory", while expressing reservations about Ssutu's idea of designing the cover for "catering to what is supposed to be American taste".[14] This assessment

of the map and the cover reflected her intention to balance the competing demands of increasing the appeal of the novel in the American market and retaining a specifically Chinese aesthetic authority.

The detailed analysis of Pruitt's multiple roles in the translation editing process and its paratextual design manifests her active pursuit of visibility in the publication process of her translation. Her visibility lay in her roles as a coordinator, negotiator and cultural mediator who sought to balance cultural fidelity with commercial interests. However, despite her great efforts, her visibility should be seen as constrained and negotiated rather than absolute, as the publisher and editors enjoyed the power of veto. This is evident in their final decision to use the title *Yellow Storm* and reject Ssutu's design of the cover on commercial and practical grounds.[15] More notably, they refused to put the translator's name on the cover and only promised to present her name in their advertising of the book, despite her insistence on receiving credit on the cover.[16] In other words, although Pruitt assumed substantial responsibility for editing, coordination and cultural mediation, formal recognition of her contributions remained predominantly controlled by publishing authorities and her name was ultimately excluded from the cover of her translation. However, it should be noted that the publisher's decision, as the archival evidence indicated, was primarily justified in terms of marketability and practical considerations. In this regard, by juxtaposing her invisibility on the translation cover with her visibility in the translated text and publication process, the present case study complicates theories of gendered translator invisibility, challenging the traditional understanding of women translators as doubly invisible.

CONCLUSION

Based on Lawrence Venuti's concept of invisibility, this article has demonstrated that Pruitt tended to utilize the foreignizing strategy to produce deliberate oddness for English readers and highlight cultural alterity, thereby seeking to enhance her translator's visibility in the translation. The archival analyses have shed light on the translator's multiple roles in the translation editing and publication process, bringing to the surface her hidden visibility in the coordination and negotiation with the publisher, the editors, and the literary agent. By integrating process- and product-oriented perspectives, this article has challenged the conventional notion of the double invisibility of women translators, and answered the call for "archival research to explore women translators' agency beyond textual choices" (Reisinger 2025, 533). Moreover, by examining Pruitt's translation from interdisciplinary perspectives within its specific historical, political, and geographical contexts, it has also contributed to intersectional and transnational feminist translation studies (Castro and Ergun 2017; Federici and Santaemilia 2022).

Nevertheless, despite the visibility of Pruitt as a woman translator in her translated text and archives, it should be admitted that her interventions in the design of the paratexts were repeatedly filtered by the authority of the publisher and editors. In other words, her visibility was not on a par with her contributions to the publication process. Therefore, the present case study has complicated the dichotomy be-

tween translators' visibility and invisibility, pointing to the significance of considering translators' "visibility along a spectrum" (Huang 2021, 63). However, its findings cannot be generalized, which calls for more research on the multifaceted visibility of women translators in different cultural and historical contexts.

NOTES

[1] Pinyin is used for Chinese names and titles in this article. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Chinese are by the present author.
[2] Letter from Ida Pruitt to Gladys Yang, October 20, 1978, PIPMK.
[3] Letter from Lao She to David Lloyd, April 22, 1948, David Lloyd collection on Lao She, 1946–1957, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University.
[4] Letter from Ida Pruitt to Gladys Yang, October 20, 1978, PIPMK.
[5] The translation manuscript in the examples comes from the Early Draft of the *Yellow Storm*, Papers of Ida Pruitt, 1850s–1992 in Schlesinger Library, Harvard University.
[6] Letter from Ida Pruitt to David Lloyd, February 24, 1950, PIPMK.
[7] Letter from Ida Pruitt to David Lloyd, August 31, 1950, PIPMK.
[8] Letter from Ida Pruitt to Lao She, March 6, 1950, PIPMK.
[9] Letter from Ida Pruitt to Denver Lindley, September 20, 1950, PIPMK.
[10] Letter from Denver Lindley to Ida Pruitt, September 22, 1950, PIPMK.
[11] See Note 7.
[12] See Note 7.
[13] See Note 7.
[14] Letter from Ida Pruitt to Denver Lindley, May 29, 1950, PIPMK.
[15] Letter from David Lloyd to Ida Pruitt, August 9, 1950, and Letter from Denver Lindley to Ida Pruitt, June 5, 1950, PIPMK.
[16] Letter from Ida Pruitt to David Lloyd, January 3, 1951, and Letter from David Lloyd to Ida Pruitt, February 19, 1951, PIPMK.

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