Proceedings of the 5th International Conference on Literature, Language, and Culture Development
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.35032

Generative AI Empowerment and the Cross-Cultural Re-Canonization of Chinese Literary Essay Classics: A Comparative Study of Zhang Peiji's and DeepSeek's English Translations of Zhu Ziqing's The Sight of Father's Back and Transient Days

Yuquan Deng

Shipai Campus, South China Normal University, Guangzhou, China
744174805@qq.com

Abstract. This study adopts a descriptive research method, taking Zhang Peiji's and DeepSeek's English translations of the Chinese literary essay classics *The Sight of Father's Back* and *Transient Days* as research objects, to evaluate the feasibility of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) empowering the cross-cultural re-canonization of essay classics. The study finds that GenAI can be applied to the cross-cultural re-canonization of essay classics, with satisfactory performance at the semantic and grammatical levels. However, regarding GenAI's deficiencies in reproducing the author's style, emotional diction, and tonal rhythm, it is proposed to establish a human-machine collaboration matrix to reshape "canonicity" through three stages: pre-translation text analysis, in-translation instruction adjustment, and post-translation optimization and quality evaluation. This study can provide references for the translation of Chinese essays in cross-cultural re-canonization.

Keywords: generative artificial intelligence, re-canonization, essay classics, Zhang Peiji, DeepSeek

1. Introduction

With the continuous development of Deep Learning (DL) and Large Language Models (LLMs), generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) products such as DeepSeek and ChatGPT have emerged. GenAI is capable of performing translation tasks and is applicable to diverse scenarios, including literary, creative, and terminological translation. It also continues to drive traditional human translation toward "human-machine collaboration" under the background of the "AI+" initiative [1]. Against the cultural outreach context of telling Chinese stories well in the new era and deepening dialogue between Chinese and foreign civilizations, how to give full play to the functionality of artificial intelligence (AI) to facilitate translation enhance the communication power of Chinese civilization, and further build a credible and respectable image of China [2] has become a common issue for translators in the digital intelligence era.

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However, in the new context of AI, due to the incommensurability between languages and the dislocation of cultural presuppositions, GenAI still faces certain challenges in handling cross-cultural translation of specific literary texts, especially in the processing of literary essay texts. For instance, challenges include how to reproduce essay styles, capture the constituent elements of literariness in essays, and address cultural differences. These factors have also become three major obstacles that GenAI needs to overcome in the cross-cultural re-canonization of literary essay classics.

2. Research status and research objectives

At present, domestic and international research on AI-enabled literary translation can be roughly divided into three directions, presenting a research chain oriented toward practical problems, anchored in comparative analysis, and aimed at solving real-world issues.

First, in terms of research topics, existing studies mainly focus on the comparison of translation quality between human translation and AI translation. For example, Huang Yingqi and Andrew Cheung Kay Fan [3] explored the performance of AI in the translation of literary autobiographies, namely, the extent to which AI can reproduce the depth and subtlety of human translation. Yuan Xiaoyi and Luo Xi [4] took the famous work *Madame Bovary* as material, compared the translations generated by DeepL Translator and the large language model ChatGPT-4 with the versions translated by Li Jianwu, Zhou Kexi, and Xu Yuanchong, and discussed the essential differences between AI-generated translations and human-translated versions.

Second, from the perspective of technological development, existing studies mainly focus on the comparison of translation performance between different large language models or GenAI and traditional neural machine translation, so as to examine the literary translation performance of different models. For example, Safaa M. Abdelhalim et al. [5] discussed the impact of ChatGPT and Google Translate (GT) on literary translation, evaluated the translation quality of the two from three dimensions—accuracy, fluency, and cultural understanding—through questionnaire surveys, and found that ChatGPT can produce relatively satisfactory translation results. Zhang Shukang and Zhao Chaoyong [6] took the English translation of Shen Congwen's *Biancheng*(*Border Town*) as an example, compared the translation performance of different large language models on the basis of traditional neural machine translation, and found that the DeepSeek model outperforms traditional neural machine translation and other large language models in literary translation from Chinese to English.

Third, from a methodological perspective, existing studies mainly focus on how to improve the quality of AI literary translation through empirical case studies. For example, Wu Minghao et al. [7] creatively proposed the "Transagents" multi-agent framework and two evaluation strategies, finding that the translation quality of multi-agents is significantly better than that of other methods, surpassing traditional human reference texts and GPT-4 translations. Hou Guangxu [8], taking literary texts as samples, analyzed the specific deficiencies in the translation of literary discourses from English to Chinese in the era of AI translation and put forward corresponding avoidance strategies that give full play to the respective advantages of humans and machines on the basis of discussing the causes.

However, in terms of the genre types of research objects, most studies still focus on literary types such as classic novels, biographies, and poetry, with relatively little involvement in the translation of literary essays. Moreover, they fail to address the feasibility and strategies of AI-enabled cross-cultural re-canonization of literary essay texts. Therefore, this study aims to explore the feasibility of reshaping the classics of cross-cultural literary essay works and reconstructing their "canonicity" in

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.35032

the context of AI, and to investigate how to better conduct AI-enabled cross-cultural "re-canonization" of such texts in the new era and new context, so as to help GenAI overcome the three major obstacles mentioned above in this process: reproducing essay styles, capturing the constituent elements of literariness in essays, and handling cultural differences.

3. Linguistic material selection

The samples selected for this study include the classic literary essays *The Sight of Father's Back*(《背影》) and *Transient Days*（《匆匆》） by Zhu Ziqing, their classic human-translated English versions by Zhang Peiji, and the English versions generated by DeepSeek.

First, the selection of source texts in this study is based on the criteria of "canon" and "canonicity". According to Harold Bloom [9], a famous American literary critic and writer, in his work *The Western Canon*, a canon, in its original sense, refers to books selected by educational institutions, representing an "art of memory" formed by the relationship between readers and authors' works. *The Sight of Father's Back* and *Transient Days* by Zhu Ziqing selected in this study have long been classic reading materials in primary and secondary school textbooks. They possess aesthetic value, originality, and rereadability. In other words, they are literary essay classics in Chinese literature and feature outstanding "canonicity".

Second, the selection of target texts (human-translated materials) is based on the criterion of "translated literary canon". Xie Tianzhen [10] points out that the formation of a translated literary canon requires the "creative treason" of translators across different eras, meaning that translators of different periods will continuously produce new translations. Zha Mingjian [11] argues that there are three categories of translated literary canons, including foreign literary works regarded as classics in foreign cultures. Therefore, the human-translated version chosen as the control in this study is Zhang Peiji's English translation of *The Sight of Father's Back* and *Transient Days*. Zhang Peiji is a famous contemporary Chinese translator. His English translations of the two essays are of excellent quality in terms of diction, style, and the handling of cultural elements. For decades, they have influenced translation teaching, research, and criticism, and have become classic translated literary essays in the practice of English translation of Chinese literature.

Finally, the GenAI model selected in this study is DeepSeek. In the field of translation, DeepSeek can realize an automated translation process and fulfill customized translation instruction tasks. At present, the development of translation technology in China has entered a stage of in-depth application. The penetration rate of AI in the translation industry is increasing, and human-machine collaboration has become a consensus in the translation industry [12]. DeepSeek is an indispensable tool for "full AI translation" and "AI translation plus post-editing" under this domestic background. This study adopts the "full AI translation" mode to explore its own literary essay translation performance and the quality of translation results. Specifically, the Chinese texts of *The Sight of Father's Back* and *Transient Days* by Zhu Ziqing are input into DeepSeek separately, and the corresponding English versions are obtained with the instruction "Please translate the following Chinese into English".

4. Analysis on the reshaping of "canonicity" in translations

This section analyzes Zhang Peiji's translations and the translation versions generated by DeepSeek, examines how human translators reshape the canonicity of source texts to achieve cross-cultural re-canonization, and explores whether DeepSeek reshapes the "canonicity" of source texts in its automatic translation.

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4.1. Comparative analysis of translations of *The Sight of Father's Back*

Zhu Ziqing's *The Sight of Father's Back* is a classic literary essay characterized by "narrativity", "lyricism", and "ethical remorse". Its "canonicity" lies in its euphemistic, simple, and sincere emotions conveyed through plain and delicate language. However, the human translation and the DeepSeek translation differ drastically in presenting the "canonicity" of this type of essay.

First, DeepSeek lacks the "concretization" technique adopted by the human translator in the translation process. For example, in translating "那年冬天……打算跟着父亲奔丧回家" [13], Zhang Peiji adjusted the word order according to target language conventions and concretized "that winter" and "for the funeral" into "...the winter of...two years ago" and "...attend grandma's funeral" [14]. By contrast, DeepSeek translated it as "That winter… planning to join him and go home for the funeral". It only translated in accordance with the original word order and semantics, without adjusting the order to highlight logic or excavating the specific information in the original sentence. In comparison, the human translator grasped the specific logic and details of the original work and presented them through "concretization" in the translation to achieve complete narration. DeepSeek, however, pursues literal equivalence. As a result, its translation loses the "narrativity" of the original text.

Second, DeepSeek lacks the "elaboration" technique adopted by human translators in the translation process. For example, in translating "父亲……再三嘱咐茶房，甚是仔细。但他终于不放心……终于决定还是自己送我去。我两三回劝他不必去；他只说，'不要紧，他们去不好！" [13], Zhang Peiji focused on elaborating emotional descriptions into linguistic details to convey delicate feelings. For instance, he used "urge the waiter again and again" to express the father's anxiety in repeated instructions, "still did not quite trust him" to show his inner struggle, and "accompany me to the station" [14] to imply the father's wish to spend more time with him. DeepSeek, however, translated it as "Father… gave the waiter repeated, detailed instructions. But he was still worried… he finally decided to see me off himself. I tried several times to talk him out of it, but all he said was, 'Never mind. It's not good for them to go.'" Its word choices are relatively straightforward and stiff, failing to convey the emotional tension between the lines. Expressions such as "repeated, detailed instructions" for instructions, "see me off" for farewell, and "not good for them to go" for distrust in others all reflect this. This shows that the human translator can use "elaboration" to depict characters' psychology through linguistic information, thus reproducing the author's delicate emotional expression. DeepSeek, however, did not analyze the author's emotional appeals nor convey delicate emotional nuances through language. Consequently, its translation loses the "lyricism" of the original text.

In addition, DeepSeek lacks the "explicitation" technique adopted by the human translator in the translation process. For example, in translating "我那时真是聪明过分……唉，我现在想想，那时真是太聪明了！" [13], Zhang Peiji used "smart aleck" and "smarty" [14] to repeatedly emphasize his self-conceit at that time and his failure to understand his father's actions and situation, thus expliciting his self-reflection and later understanding of his father. DeepSeek translated it as "At the time, I was terribly conceited… Ah, when I think of it now, I was really too clever then." The words "conceited" and "clever" used by DeepSeek only indicate literal cleverness without conveying the shift in the original tone from irony to remorse. By comparison, the human translator used "explicitation" to express the hidden attitudes in the original work, while DeepSeek only grasped the surface meaning and failed to penetrate into the underlying emotions. Therefore, its translation loses the "ethical remorse" of the original work.

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Overall, for this literary essay with strong narrativity, lyricism, and ethical remorse, DeepSeek can efficiently accomplish the task of "semantic transmission", but it does not perceive complex human feelings and emotions, only performing language translation coldly, reflecting the "coldness" of AI. In contrast, the human translator Zhang Peiji takes conveying the author's psychology and emotions as his responsibility. Through "concretization", "elaboration", and "explicitation", he reproduces the unspoken implications between the lines. With moderate "creative treason" at the linguistic level, he clarifies the author's intention and replicates the "canonicity" of the original work extending from language to emotion, embodying the "warmth" of human translators.

4.2. Comparative analysis of translations of *Transient Days*

Zhu Ziqing's *Transient Days* is a classic essay marked by "rhythm", "reflection" and "processuality". Its "canonicity" lies in the philosophical reflections on life and time conveyed through dense rhetoric, gradually intensifying rhythm and progressive thinking. Nevertheless, the human translation and the DeepSeek translation also differ in presenting the "canonicity" of this type of essay.

First, compared with the human translator, DeepSeek focuses more on information transmission rather than reproducing or strengthening "rhythm". For example, in translating "……我们的日子为什么一去不复返呢？——是有人偷了他们罢：那是谁？又藏在何处呢？是他们自己逃走了罢：现在又到了那里呢？" [15], Zhang Peiji captured the parallel structure marked by "Perhaps…" and used two consecutive "Perhaps… But…" structures [14] to reproduce and strengthen the reading rhythm of the original text, achieving a rhetorical effect of repetition together with the preceding sentence. DeepSeek's translation reads: "why should our days be gone never to return? Is it that someone has stolen them away? But who could it be, and where would they hide them? Or have they simply fled on their own—and if so, where are they now?" It is clear that DeepSeek failed to recognize the parallel structure here and only translated the original text sentence by sentence, resulting in a broken rhythm. Consequently, its translation loses the "rhythm" of the original work.

Second, compared with the human translator, DeepSeek fails to grasp the "reflection" of the original text and falls into the trap of "short" and "hasty" diction. For instance, in translating "洗手的时候，日子从水盆里过去；吃饭的时候，日子从饭碗里过去；默默时，便从凝然的双眼前过去。我觉察他去的匆匆了，伸出手遮挽时，他又从遮挽着的手边过去……" [15], Zhang Peiji adopted a technique of "enrichment" in word selection and collocation, such as "vanish", "have my meal", "lost in reverie", "fleeting presence" [14], which balance linguistic richness and literary depth. The translation reads fluently, maintains a restrained tone and guides readers to follow the original text in reflecting on time. DeepSeek, however, translated it as "So it is that when I wash my hands, the moments drain away through the basin; when I eat, they slip past my rice bowl; when I sit in silence, they pass before my staring eyes. I feel how fast they flee, and reach out a hand to hold them back—but they race past even as I reach…". It tends to use short monosyllabic verbs such as "wash, drain, eat, slip, sit, feel, hold, flee", as if a series of actions take place continuously without leaving readers time to think as they read. Thus, its translation loses the "reflection" of the original text.

In addition, compared with the human translator, DeepSeek uses words with a strong tone and breaks rhetorical coherence. For example, in translating "只有徘徊罢了，只有匆匆罢了……我赤裸裸来到这世界，转眼间也将赤裸裸的回去罢？但不能平的，为什么偏要白白走这一遭啊？" [15], Zhang Peiji reproduced the processual nature of the original reflection through "dynamic" expressions such as "doing, wavering, wandering, taking", and applied rhetorical compensation such as alliteration with "no, nothing, not" [14], making the text highly dynamic,

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well-paced and clearly focused. DeepSeek translated it as "Nothing but wander—nothing but rush! ...Naked I came into this world, and in the blink of an eye, shall I return naked again? Yet I cannot be content—why must I make this journey for nothing at all?". The tone of DeepSeek's translation is short and intense; expressions such as "nothing… but…", "shall I…", "I cannot…" and "why must I…" are rather forceful, as if the thinking here is compulsory and instant. However, Zhu Ziqing's personal style in this essay lies in using restrained language to carry progressive thinking—a kind of reflection that is clearly processual. It is thus evident that DeepSeek's translation loses the "processuality" of the original work.

In general, for this literary essay with a strong rhythm, reflection, and processuality, DeepSeek can achieve grammatical adaptation and semantic transmission to ensure accurate meaning and basic conformity with target language grammatical rules and usage conventions. Yet it does not depict the process of human thinking but only rigidly simplifies expressions to fulfill precise grammatical functions, resulting in strong "stiffness" in the AI translation. In contrast, Zhang Peiji takes as his mission the reproduction of the author's linguistic style, control of reading rhythm, and evocation of emotion and reflection. By giving full play to translator subjectivity, he uses "strengthening", "enrichment" and "dynamization" to balance semantic faithfulness, emotional resonance and reader acceptability. With moderate "creative treason", he reconstructs the author's ideological system, creating the soft "flexibility" of human translation.

4.3. Feasibility and strategies of GenAI-enabled re-canonization

Admittedly, GenAI, supported by massive data, is capable of semantic conversion in line with target language grammar, which represents its greatest advantage and potential in literary translation. However, the "canonicity" of Chinese literary essay classics does not merely reside in superficial words and sentences. Words and sentences are the carriers through which essayists express emotions and ideas, forming the outer shell of canonicity. In translation, the translator's task is to reshape the inner core of "canonicity" in another language while accommodating the linguistic and cultural habits of target readers, so as to realize the cross-cultural canonization of the text. Nevertheless, to achieve GenAI-enabled cross-cultural re-canonization of Chinese literary essay classics, the "full AI translation" mode alone is insufficient, while the "AI translation plus post-editing" model omits the crucial step of pre-translation analysis. It is necessary to break through the dualistic paradigm and construct a human-machine collaboration matrix, namely "pre-translation text analysis – in-translation instruction adjustment – post-translation optimization and quality evaluation", giving full play to translator subjectivity.

From this perspective, GenAI-enabled cross-cultural re-canonization of Chinese literary essay classics is feasible. Furthermore, as AI continues to develop and iterate, its translation quality will improve further, and it will collaborate with translators to produce outstanding literary translations through continuous adjustment. This strongly responds to the view that AI should not be used in literary translation.

Specifically, to realize GenAI empowerment and cross-cultural re-canonization of classic Chinese literary essays, appropriate "creative treason" should be maintained at the theoretical level—that is, on the basis of faithfulness to the style, emotion, and ideas of the original work, the translation should conform to the linguistic and cultural habits of the target language. This requires giving full play to the translator's subjectivity and creativity: grasping the "canonicity" according to the distinctiveness of the literary essay while taking into account the specific context of the target language. In practice, translators should provide more accurate and detailed instructions before translation to facilitate GenAI's pre-translation analysis and thus produce high-quality first drafts.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.35032

Furthermore, translators should issue optimization instructions and conduct post-editing, using the warmth and softness of human translation to refine the coldness and stiffness of machine output, thereby improving the translation. Finally, translators should carry out translation calibration and quality evaluation, balancing faithfulness to the original and service to readers. This human-machine collaboration matrix can improve both translation efficiency and quality.

5. Conclusion

Taking the comparison between Zhang Peiji's and DeepSeek's English translations of Zhu Ziqing's *The Sight of Father's Back* and *Transient Days* as examples, this paper explores the feasibility of GenAI-enabled cross-cultural re-canonization of classic Chinese literary essays. The study finds that, given GenAI's translation performance at the grammatical and semantic levels, it is feasible to apply GenAI to empower the cross-cultural re-canonization of Chinese literary essay classics. However, "full AI translation" is still deficient in reproducing the author's style, conveying thoughts and emotions, and maintaining tone and rhythm. The "AI translation plus post-editing" model fails to conduct effective pre-translation analysis to control the quality of GenAI's initial draft. Therefore, it is necessary to construct a human-machine collaboration matrix, namely "pre-translation text analysis – in-translation instruction adjustment – post-translation optimization and quality evaluation", so as to give full play to the subjectivity and creativity of human translators and strictly control translation quality through the three stages of pre-translation, in-translation and post-translation.

This study can provide an empirical reference for future AI participation in literary translation activities and also help translation shape a respectable and three-dimensional image of Chinese literature and culture on the international stage. Further exploration is needed on how to deepen human-machine collaboration under the background of "AI+" so as to form an effective human-machine collaborative translation model and translation quality evaluation system.

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