



A Comparative Study of AI Translation and Human Translation from the Perspective of Creative Treason—A Case Study of Qian Zhongshu's *Fortress Besieged*

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Abstract

Amid the rapid advancement of scientific technology, artificial intelligence (AI) has profoundly penetrated into the translation area, exerting profound influences on traditional translation paradigms and even demonstrating a trend of replacing human translation in a large number of application scenarios. However, machine translation still exhibits systemic deficiencies when applied to specialized domains requiring cultural sensitivity and stylistic sophistication in accordance with Creative Treason, particularly in literary translation. Literary translation requires translators to mobilize their subjective initiative, entailing the deliberate application of cultural competence and creativity to mediate textual and contextual dimensions across linguistic boundaries. So far, no literary translations have been fully completed by artificial intelligence. Taking Qian Zhongshu's literary masterpiece *Fortress Besieged* as a case study, this paper compares the authoritative human translation by Jeanne Kelly and Nathan K. Mao with the AI translation by DeepSeek from the perspective of Creative Treason. Human translation demonstrates distinct advantages—namely, its subjectivity and flexibility—where AI translation falls short.

Keywords

AI translation; Human translation; Creative treason; Literary translation; *Fortress Besieged*

1. Introduction

Translation is a process of information processing, while machine translation is the utilization of machines to carry out this process (Weaver, 1955). Fundamentally, this paradigm aims to simulate human translation processes through data-driven approaches rather than relying on manually constructed linguistic rules. The rapid evolution of AI-powered translation systems in recent years has precipitated profound transformations within the translation market, simultaneously driving an efficiency revolution while stimulating critical discourse regarding the ontological nature of translation itself. According to the *Histoire de la Langue Universelle* (Couturat & Leau, 1903), artificial translation (La traduction artificielle) is the process in which humans, through rationality, decode and re-encode the symbols of two languages in both directions. AI translation systems have achieved remarkable success in mass-market text translation by virtue of their technical advantages, such as processing speed, cost-effectiveness, and accessibility (Way, 2020). However, different from technical and practical translation, literary translation fundamentally embodies human ideologies, ensuring that conscious agency plays a central role in the translation process.

Given the nuanced demands of literary expression, this study takes *Fortress Besieged* by Qian Zhongshu as a case to examine how AI translation (DeepSeek in this study) and human translation (Jeanne Kelly and Nathan K. Mao) approaches diverge in practice. Adopting Fang Hung-chien's life experiences as its primary narrative plot, *Fortress Besieged* profoundly explores the existential dilemma of modern humanity—a philosophical proposition embodied by the “fortress besieged” metaphor: those outside the fortress desperately pursue careers, relationships, and marriage, while those inside grow dissatisfied and weary of their own.

This novel serves as an ideal text for study as it exhibits distinctive linguistic and cultural features, epitomizing the intellectual style of scholarly fiction and reflecting the cultural dilemmas of Republican-era intellectuals. Its diverse linguistic techniques—integrating satirical rhetoric, academic humor, and subtextual dialogue artistry—establish the novel as a modern reincarnation of *The Scholars* (also called *Rulin Waishi*). The work embodies profound humanistic values, notably through its portrayal of modernity's triple entrapment in marriage, profession, and culture by making full use of unique Qian-style—irony, black humor, extended metaphors, and cross-cultural allusions. Yang Jiang (1977-2016), Qian's wife, suggested that Qian was adept at the method of subtle criticism, presenting a seemingly calm surface but hiding sharp criticism within. Mo Yan, China's Nobel Prize winner in literature, said the metaphors in the *Fortress Besieged* are like sugar calabash one after another, each one clear and crystal, but if you eat too much, your teeth will become sore.

2. Literature Review on Creative Treason

As an imperative theory under the Medio-translatology (Xie, 1999), Creative Treason has been widely used in reflecting subjective transformation and accommodation by translators. This concept demands that translators uncover the connotations within sentences and skillfully balance creation and treason on the basis of overcoming difficulties—a highly sought-after skill.

As the core concept of Medio-translatology, Creative Treason was first integrated into the translation field by Xie Tianzhen (1944-2020) so as to clearly illustrate the translator's subjective changing of the source language text (SLT) and its cultural values, which has broken the restriction of the traditional concept—“loyalty”. Creativity refers to the utilization of translation devices like adding or deleting images, adjusting rhetoric, and switching narrative perspective while transforming source language text (SLT) to target language text (TLT). As for Treason, under the influences of the “prismatic images” (Liu, 2019, p. 41) of cultural pluralism, there exist many discrepancies between the source language (SL) and the target language (TL). That demands translators to work hard to seek a middle ground between two languages. In a word, both Creative and Treason shall enhance literary translation during its process, upgrading translators from an invisible “servant” caught in the middle to a cultural disseminator.

On the basis of the Creative Treason (Lefevere, 1992), such humanistic depth requires human cognitive innovation for full interpretation—that is, subjective initiative. Essentially, translation is the process by which people overcome objective constraints (components cannot be translated between the two languages) through their own subjective initiative. While AI machine translation has surpassed human capabilities in certain fields, it remains unable to fully unleash the subjective initiative like humans only through an algorithm when processing texts with strong literary qualities, profound humanistic undertones, and rich cultural connotations like this masterpiece, *Fortress Besieged*. Furthermore, AI is just a kind of machine with a pre-designated and limited translating mechanism and lacking sensibility and subjective initiative (Long, 2023) compared with humans. Therefore, it is the reason that AI is just a kind of fixed machine. “The supremacy of technology and the uniqueness of human wisdom are irreconcilable” (Yuan & Luo, 2025, p. 3).

3. Advantages of Human Translation in Fortress Besieged from Creative Treason

3.1 Dynamic Processing of Pathology

Qian Zhongshu has only one purpose through the *Fortress Besieged*—that is, satire. Different kinds of satirical techniques were leveraged to express the critical view on society of the Republic of China (1912-1949), which has not been replaced by AI.

The academicization of the materialization metaphor is seen as one of Qian's ingenious devices in writing, which is so subtle and delicate that AI could find the seam-like channel to smoothly decode meanings of three hierarchies under the passage only through its algorithm—the first is concept decoding, the second is the author's intention decoding and the last one is cultural decoding, from simple to complex. If it breaks through the first tier, it still

something inaccurate in the second or the third ones.

Original Chinese: 过些时，他才像从昏厥里醒过来，开始不住的心痛，就像因蜷曲而麻木的四肢，到伸直了血脉流通，就觉得刺痛。(excerpted from the fourth chapter)

Version A: *After some time, he awoke as if from a swoon and began to feel incessant heartache—just like limbs that had gone numb from being curled up too long: when they were stretched out and blood started circulating again, the pain stabbed through.* (translated by DeepSeek)

Version B: *some time later, he finally awoke as though from a faint, feeling a continuous pain in his heart. It was like the prickly pain a person feels when his limbs, after having gone numb from being curled up, are stretched out and the blood is once again circulating.* (translated by Jeanne Kelly and Nathan K. Mao)

Qian concretized serious pains suffered by Fang Hung-chien for his emotional setback through combining these mental adversities with Physical Description. Although DeepSeek also uses many physical terms like “swoon”, “incessant heartache”, and the like in Version-A, Kelly and Mao, on the contrary, advanced this writing device by restoring the entire operating mechanism. For instance, “the blood is once again circulating”, emphasizing the ischemia-reperfusion, illustrated the whole process of pathology more clearly compared to the blood starting to circulate again in Version A. By doing so, Kelly and Mao vividly showed the gradual degeneration of Fang Hung-chien’s psychological defense. The degradation from Fung’s sympathy for Miss Su to simply a physical reaction hints that such sympathy has no connection with noble emotion, but is just linked to one’s physical reaction, unveiling the satirical end of Qian Zhongshu—people from the Republic of China era always deceiving themselves as well as others.

Due to its inability to fully comprehend the shared cultural knowledge and implicit meanings inherent in high-context languages like Chinese, DeepSeek struggles to effectively mediate between the two languages. Moreover, because of the absence of the default mode network (Simone, Emmanuelle & Roger, 2025), DeepSeek cannot understand Qian’s true intention of satire to people from the Republic of China and experience the dynamic process of human mental transformation. Ultimately, it merely gives a cursory description in plain text, merely translating the surface content rather than the deeply hidden “sub-text”, unable to grasp the actual connotations in high-context language. Thus, humans have the ability to translate the inner meaning in Chinese into surface information of English, while DeepSeek cannot do so.

3.2 Replacement of Cultural Symbols

Cultural attributes serve as the most fundamental nature of language; in other words, language is culturally bound (Liu, 2019). Under the influence of different cultural backgrounds, Chinese and English have developed their own “collective psychological trend” (including people’s common values, behavioral habits and ways of thinking) spontaneously forming in this region under the influence of a certain common factor, which result in differences in ways of expression between the two languages, contributing to “cultural estrangement”, the origin of misunderstanding.

Integrating cultural elements serves as an essential means to avoid mechanical translation and enhance the connotation and readability of the translation. Aiming to ensure the emotional expression and the needs of the readers, translators are required to approach “Domestication” or “Foreignization” (Venuti, 1995) so as to appropriately deal with the ST.

Original Chinese: 有人叫她“熟食铺子”(charcuterie), 因为只有熟食店会把那许多颜色暖热的肉公开陈列。(excerpted from the first chapter)

Version A: *Some called her a “deli.”—for only a delicatessen would publicly display such richly colored cuts of meat.* (translated by DeepSeek)

Version B: *Some called her a **charcuterie**—a shop selling cooked meats—because only such a shop would have so much warm-colored flesh on public display.* (translated by Jeanne Kelly and Nathan K. Mao)

DeepSeek directly translated the French word “charcuterie” in SL into “deli”, an English word, while Jeanne Kelly and Nathan K. Mao retained the French one. The way used in version A belongs to the literal translation, making the TT completely English, which involves nothing about Qian’s intention and cultural connotation on the basis of the theory of meaning decoding mentioned above. Kelly and Mao retained both its source language and its italic form, reflecting a kind of “Colonial Context” reflected by the French colony of Indochina in Vietnam, further reflecting woman’s distorted and materialized identity at that time.

Moreover, Kelly and Mao adopted Foreignization here to retain the colonial cultural symbol, conveying Qian’s satire towards western intellectuals by showing their local objectification and colonial worship, instead of using Domestication like DeepSeek, only making TT become easily understood but losing its real connotation. In a word, Kelly and Mao maintained the foreignness of their translations. By contrast, DeepSeek did not do so. The flow diagram explains the inner logical procedures of the Foreignization adaptation.

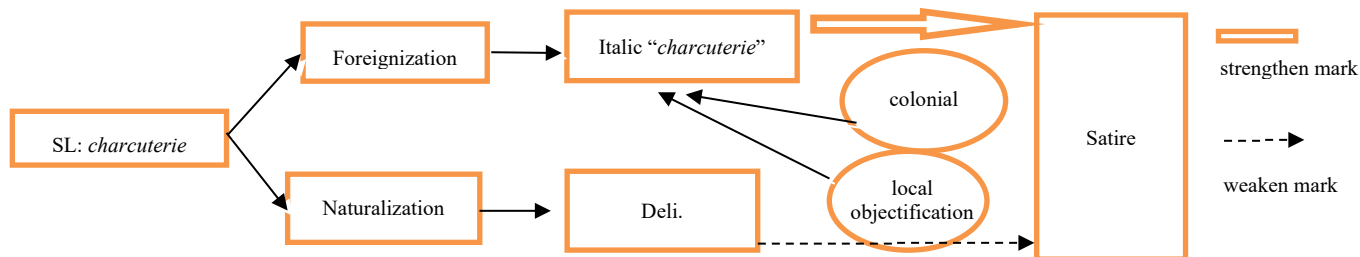


Figure 1. Inner Logical Procedures of The Foreignization Adaptation.

3.3 Sanctification of Terminology

Essentially, the sanctification of terminology adopted by Kelly and Mao is a kind of translation compensation (Li, 2023) of culture, while TL lacks a cultural expression system equivalent to that of SL through creative means. By introducing Western philosophy, culture, and literary forms, he highlighted his satire of the literati of the Republic of China through the collision of Chinese and Western cultures.

Original Chinese: 又有人叫她“真理”，因为据说“真理是赤裸裸的”。鲍小姐并未一丝不挂，所以他们修正为“局部的真理”。(excerpted from the first chapter)

Version A: Others nicknamed her “**truth**”, since “**truth is naked**”. As Miss Bao wasn’t entirely unclothed, they amended it to “**partial truth**”. (translated by DeepSeek)

Version B: Others called her “**Truth**,” since it is said that “**the Truth is Naked.**” But Miss Pao wasn’t exactly without a stitch on, so they revised her name to “**Partial Truth**”. (translated by Jeanne Kelly & Nathan K. Mao)

In version B, Kelly and Mao integrated Western philosophical elements into his translation by leveraging capital forms such as “Truth”, “Truth is Naked” and ‘Partial Truth’, which imitate the form of philosophical propositions like Kant’s “Pure Reason”. Through that, English readers will experience the same “ironic effect of presenting something vulgar in an academic manner” as in the ST, while DeepSeek translated these parts having strong cultural flavors into “truth”, “truth is naked” and “partial truth”. Except which, Kelly and Mao’s translation contains more cultural compensation phenomena. The following flow diagram showcases the compensation mechanism in details.

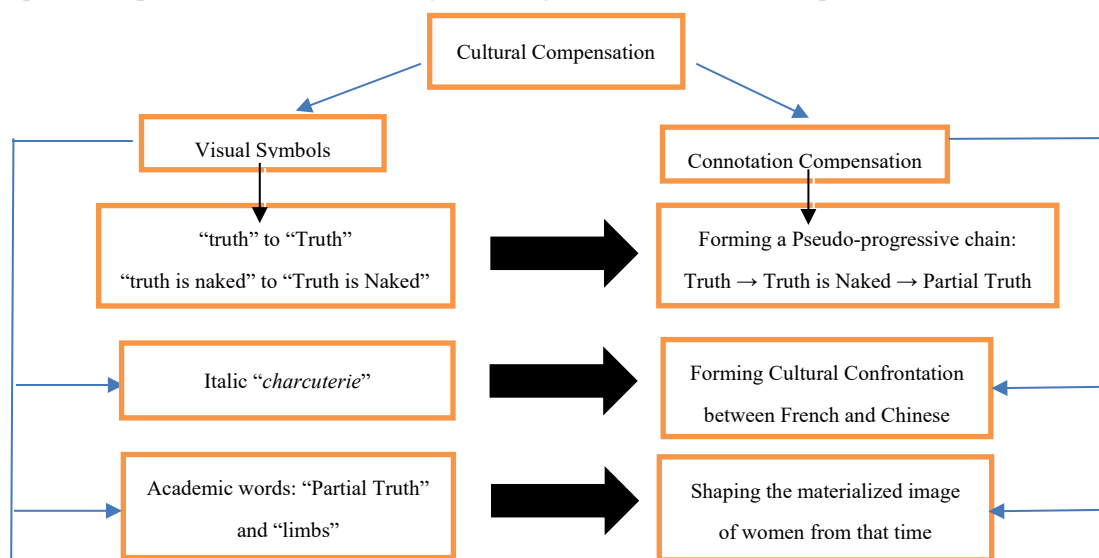


Figure 2. Compensation Mechanism.

The pseudo-progressive chain, cultural confrontation, and materialized image constitute the cultural connotations underlying three types of visual symbols, which tightly bind to humans' subjective initiative. The following flow chart is based on DeepSeek's translation procedures.

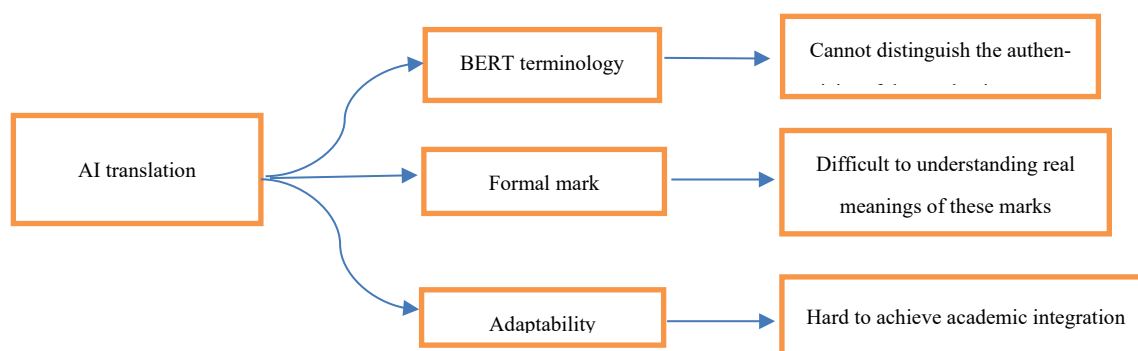


Figure 3. DeepSeek's Translating Procedures.

As of the Creative Treason, subjective initiative will be fully leveraged through human translation, appropriately and flexibly adopting a series of translating strategies to demonstrate various advantages of its Human Cognitive Process: inter-disciplinary integration, symbol processing, and intra-cultural balance (cultural compensation). By contrast, amounts of disadvantages are reflected by the DeepSeek version—vision symbol referring to the capital letter in “Truth”, “Truth is Naked”, and ‘Partial Truth’ and italic form in “charcuterie”, failure handling, decoding disability, and mechanical translating strategies.

4. Disadvantages of AI Translation in *Fortress Besieged* from Creative Treason

In accordance with the Creative Treason and the above three advantages of human translation, the DeepSeek version contains the following disadvantages:

4.1 Disconnection between Signifier and Signified

Solidification of the “Signifier” of the material form of language symbols, such as pronunciation, spelling, and vision forms, and Degeneracy of the “Signified”, the connotation underlying the language symbols, are two shortcomings of AI mechanical translation in accordance with the theory on “signifier” and “signified”. DeepSeek translated “心痛” mechanically into “feel incessant heartache”, but from Qian’s point of view, the word “心痛” implies a sense of suffocation, as in the pathological sense, such as neuropathic pain, but the two translators showed this through “prickly pain”. DeepSeek fails to capture this cross-disciplinary metaphor, which is cultural dimension compression. Thus, AI only processes chains of signifiers and cannot reconstruct the criticality of the referent through “cling to flesh” and italic “charcuterie”.

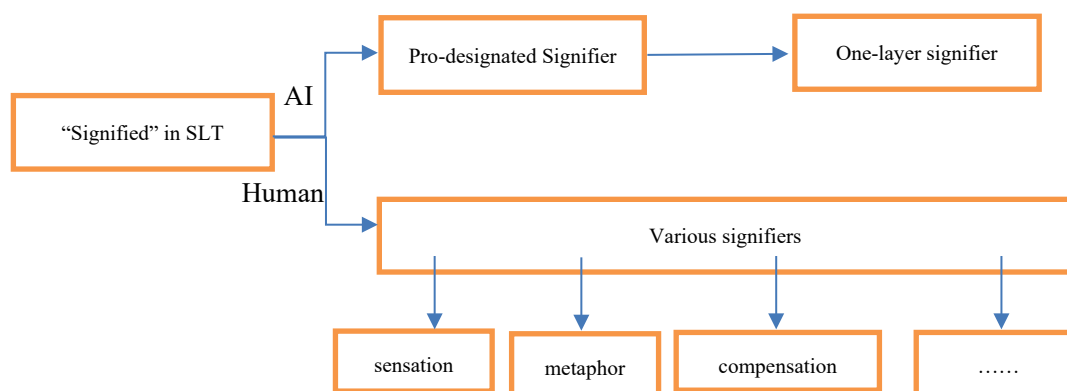


Figure 4. AI and Human “Signified” in SLT.

In a word, from the AI perspective, a specific topic is only relative to a specific topic—one-layer signifier, making it hard to break through its designated program.

4.2 Failure of Intertextuality

As mentioned above, AI translation is so stiff for its literal decoding that it cannot deal with the inner connections perfectly between sentences, even words. Thus, AI excels in isolated text processing, separating metaphorical chains under the literal context, rather than translating the author's fundamentally intricate thoughts and intentions. This disadvantage is clearly reflected in DeepSeek's translation: the broken pseudo-progressive chain—"truth", "truth is naked", and "partial truth".

Here are two flow charts, respectively clarifying the intertextualities (Basil Hatim and Ian Mason, 1990) of AI translation and human translation.

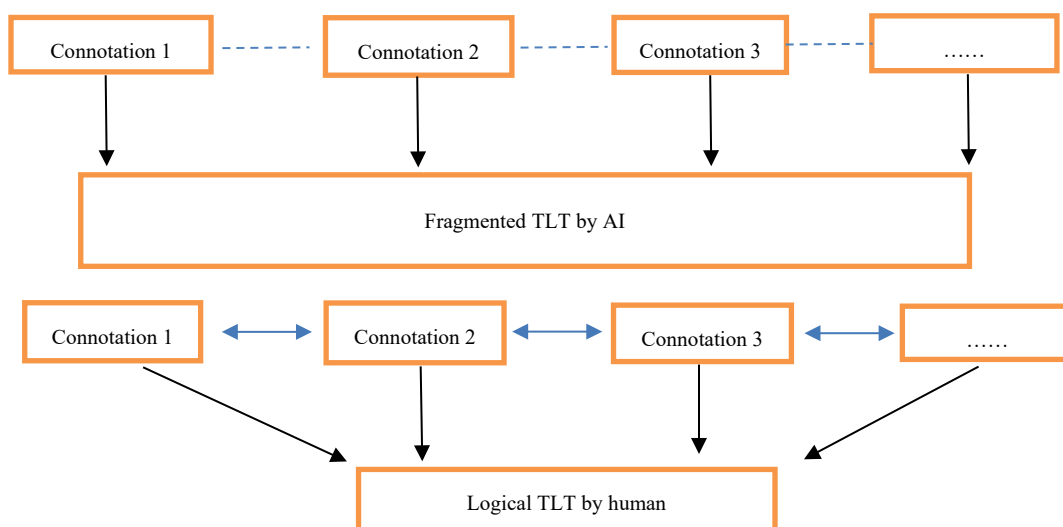


Figure 5. AI and Human Intertextual Processing Mechanism.

(- - - - - : disconnection between connotations; \longleftrightarrow : tight connection between connections)

From the AI angle, connotations expressed by the author are independent entities with subtle connections, so the resulting translation is fragmented and obscures the subtle connections with the author. Such fragmentation prevents readers from discerning the underlying meaning conveyed by authors, ultimately diminishing the value of the source text (SLT). For humans, with the assistance of their subjective initiative, they ensure cross-textuality (co-textual meaning expression) in translation, producing more readable works.

4.3 Lack of Translator's Subjectivity

Compared to human translation, AI demonstrates poor transformation strategies, specifically Domestication Dominance, Literal Bias, and Context-Free Processing. AI will convert the SL cultural elements into the "general expression" of the target language and even impose forced Domestication, for example, the "charcuterie" to "deli", cutting the defamiliarization of the SLT without any dialectical application of strategies.

AI's trustworthiness in evaluating SLT is lower than that of humans. This is primarily reflected in its failure to identify cultural values. In other words, AI often struggles to decode contextual meanings, as demonstrated when DeepSeek translated the French word "charcuterie" to "deli" instead of retaining the culturally specific original term. Moreover, the non-capitalized words "truth", "truth is naked" and "partial truth" also degraded the satire meaning in *Fortress Besieged*.

Stylistic differences also exist between the two translation versions, reflecting AI's convergence versus human uniqueness.

It also exists style differences between two versions of translations—that is the convergence of AI vs. the uniqueness of humans. "Compare with the translations completed by different human subjects, the translations produced by AI based on different principles show a high degree of similarity" (Yuan & Luo, 2025, p. 4). While AI often employs a one-size-fits-all strategy, style, and approach to cultural transformation for translating different SLTs—particularly those lack of emotional expression, rhythm, or rhyme—humans demonstrably excel in handling these specific elements.

5. Conclusion

This case study demonstrates that human translation retains irreplaceable value in literary contexts, particularly evident in *Fortress Besieged* when analyzed from the perspective of Creative Treason. Human translators (e.g., Kelly and Mao) excel in culturally nuanced domains—such as rendering physical descriptions, substituting cultural symbols, and preserving terminological sanctity—where AI systems like DeepSeek exhibit critical limitations: disrupted signifier-signified coherence, intertextual failures, and an absence of translator subjectivity. These systemic deficiencies confirm that AI cannot yet replicate the flexibility and intentionality essential to human translators concerning literary translation.

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