

Classic Translation and Humanistic Spirit in the Age of AI*

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This article hopes to explore a question: in the era of artificial intelligence, do we still need traditional translation of canonical texts, and how is such translation possible? Artificial intelligence has an all-round impact on the world's productivity, and translation is the first area to be challenged. With the increasing accuracy and optimization of big data computing, daily translation, business translation, simultaneous interpretation and even general academic translation are gradually being replaced by machine translation. In this context, whether the canon translation by scholars is still meaningful has become a question that must be asked. This article believes that translation of canonical texts will never be out of date, and it is precisely in this era that the canon translation with academic standards and humanistic spirit are more needed by academia and society. The contemporary task of canon translation is not only translation and introduction, but more importantly, the inheritance and construction of its own academic history and humanistic thoughts, as well as the understanding and cultivation of human history, civilization and humanistic spirit.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, translation, humanistic spirit, academic history, classics

Introduction: Challenges of Translation in the AI Era

Since John McCarthy first proposed the term “Artificial Intelligence” (AI) in 1955 in the *A Proposal for the Dartmouth Summer Research Project on Artificial Intelligence* and began research on machine translation, AI-driven translation practices have spanned over half a century.¹ Translation powered by artificial intelligence has evolved from the early dictionary-based and rule-based machine translation (DBMT/RBMT) of the 1950s to the statistical machine translation (SMT) using statistical models to learn mappings between source and target languages in the mid-1990s to the early 21st century. By 2014, neural machine translation (NMT), which utilizes neural networks for end-to-end learning of translation models, emerged, followed around 2020 by large language model-based machine translation that employs self-supervised learning methods on vast amounts of unannotated text, exemplified by OpenAI and ChatGPT (XU & YAO, 2023, pp. 13-14; FENG & ZHANG, 2024, pp. 3-7).

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¹ Shortly thereafter, in 1956, John McCarthy and ten others held a two-month academic workshop on artificial intelligence and machine learning at Dartmouth College in the United States. This conference is considered a landmark event that marked the beginning of the era of artificial intelligence. For relevant content regarding McCarthy's proposal on "studying the relationship between language and intelligence," see FENG Zhiwei and ZHANG Dengkai, "Large Language Models in Artificial Intelligence," published in *Foreign Language Research (Bimonthly)*, May 2024, vol. 4, no. 3, p. 2.

If prior to the rise of large language models machine translation was in an “auxiliary” stage, it has shown characteristics of human translations, and may even surpass or replace them in some fields. Scholars have noted that contemporary 4th generation AI translation, with its vast data coefficients and intense contextual learning, not only significantly outpaces manual human translation, but more importantly, also exhibits increasingly “natural” features showing understanding of literary features like metaphors, delivering relatively accurate meanings. This development indicates that machine translation is reaching a high level of proficiency, embodying certain “human” traits (YUAN & GAN, 2024, p. 10; XIAO, 2018, pp. 10-11). Given the rapid pace of AI development, machine translation’s enhancement and refinement are expected to grow exponentially. As YUAN Xiaoyi and GAN Lu assert in *The ‘Task’ of Digital-Intelligence, Translation, and Digital Humanities Research*, “Even though the error rate of advanced language models still exceeds industry standards for literary translation, both tech optimists and humanist pessimists agree that the increase of computational power is inevitable and will likely experience geometric growth in the future. Thus, with further training, machines may soon demonstrate greater autonomy and creativity in literary translation” (YUAN & GAN, 2024, pp. 10-11; WANG, 2024, p. 20).

As Big Data computation becomes increasingly precise and optimized, the advancement of machine translation in terms of “subjectivity” becomes an unavoidable challenge to traditional translation. Not only daily, business translations and simultaneous interpretations may gradually be supplanted by machine translation, but scholars also worry that even the final bastion of translators—literary and classical translation—may be in jeopardy. Some scholars have suggested that while translators are the creators and owners of translation memory resources, they increasingly lack obvious control in practice (XU & YAO, 2023, p.12; Bowker, 2020, p. 266). This concern was echoed in October 2023 when a group of French writers and artists collectively declared in *Liberation* boycotting the use of AI for translation and all forms of artistic works and texts, emphasizing that “translation is a human act requiring experience, thought, emotion, and style creation, not merely machine replication based on big data” (YUAN & GAN, 2024 p. 11). Thus, this has become a critical issue for translation practice, raising ethical questions about the existence and nature of translation’s subjectivity.

In light of the “strong AI” era, we must consider how to address the relationship between translation and artificial intelligence, understand the historical significance and contemporary relevance of translation practices, and contemplate the future prospects and possibilities of translation. Actually, scholars have begun to focus on human creativity, emotional capacity, and the ambiguity of understanding. In these discussions, we see the distinction between machine translation as a “mimetic” behavior driven by big data and human beings as “creative” agents (WANG, 2024, pp. 18-27; Stahl & Eke, 2024, pp. 1-14; Nousias, 2023, pp. 29-48). However, regarding classical translation—specifically, the translation of classic works from various civilizations—we can delve deeper. This field, characterized by high scientific rigor, humanistic artistry, and cultural heritage, transcends mere linguistic issues; it requires profound understanding and interpretation, the grasp of the humanity spirit embedded in the text, and an appreciation of the structural and holistic aspects of other civilizations by the translator. Therefore, while some less demanding translation tasks can be delegated to AI, serious classical translations which requires high literary quality, uniqueness, and cultural depth will always need the involvement of scholars and translators. This is why traditional classical translation remains timeless, even in an era of high AI prevalence. However, in the face of AI’s formidable challenges, classical translation must also reflect on its own

significance. If AI can preliminarily handle semantic work, then classical translation should play a role in even more important aspects.

This article posits that the requirements for classical translation today should extend beyond mere translation; it must serve as a vehicle for the transmission and construction of academic lineage and humanistic thought, as well as for the understanding and cultivation of human history and spirit. Thus, classical translation in the AI era can embody the essence of human civilization's spirit, revealing its intrinsic significance. How can classical translation fulfill this role in the age of AI? We must start by discussing the nature of translation.

Classical Translation and Human Spirit: Reexamining “Faithfulness, Clarity, Elegance”

There is perhaps a well-known classical expression among all Chinese translators: “The Three Difficulties of Translation: Faithfulness, Clarity, Elegance. To seek faithfulness is already most difficult. Yet if one be faithful but not clear, though it be translated, ‘tis as if it were not translated at all; therefore, clarity is yet required.” Since YAN Fu proposed the translation principles of “faithfulness, clarity, and elegance” in *Tianyan Lun*, Chinese translation practices have nearly all adhered to these three tenets. Despite subsequent phrases such as “loyalty, fluency, and beauty”, “no addition or reduction”, and “spiritual similarity”, “transformation”, the essence of translation still hinges on these three words. As Mr. GUO Hong’an stated in his postscript to *Les Fleurs du Mal*, “The three difficulties of translation: faithfulness, clarity, elegance. Faithfulness means truth; truth means non-falsity; clarity means preciseness; preciseness means neither excess nor deficiency; elegance means literary quality, which means it should be elegant when necessary and colloquial when appropriate. When faithfulness, clarity, and elegance are all achieved, one enters the ‘transformed realm’; however, ‘complete transformation is an unattainable ideal,’ leading to the pursuit of ‘spiritual similarity’. Therefore, I believe that for literary translation, faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance remain valid standards and constitute the ‘three difficulties of translation’” (GUO, 1992, p. 207).

From these “three difficulties,” we can understand why translation is seen as an endeavor requiring high human intelligence. It involves not merely a mechanical conversion between two languages but also a transcription of different linguistic thought patterns and a reconstruction of cultural signifying systems. “Faithfulness” is the first step, requiring the translation to convey the original work’s meaning. Selecting corresponding vocabulary and expressions in another language is no simple task. “Clarity” is even more challenging; it requires internalizing the essence of the text to merge the thinking of the translation with that of the original, thus maximizing the expression of the author’s perspective, spirit, and tone. “Elegance” represents an even higher realm—it fundamentally involves recreation. Only with a profound understanding of the original can the text be “transformed” into another language, breathing new life into the translation through its “naturally authentic” expression, thereby endowing it with a unique soul.

From “faithfulness” to “clarity” and finally to “elegance,” these three levels must be sequentially achieved for a serious translation practice to be considered complete. In traditional classical translation, this is a lengthy process involving meticulous revisions from initial word-for-word translations to careful considerations aimed at achieving “clarity” and “elegance,” often requiring the translator’s considerable effort and multiple revisions before finalizing. However, with the aid of artificial intelligence, machine translation can now assume much of this “human intelligence” work. As we have seen, on the level of “faithfulness,” large language models are

becoming increasingly sophisticated, demonstrating higher fidelity to the original text, leading many translators to use AI for initial translations. This is undoubtedly beneficial, as the improvement in efficiency and accuracy saves translators significant time and effort, making translation seem “easier.” However, as previously mentioned, if a work—especially a classic—is worthy of careful scrutiny, then “clarity” and “elegance” must not be overlooked as even more precious levels and realms. It is precisely at these two levels that machine translation struggles to achieve, making them the essence and uniqueness of traditional classical translation.

First, let us discuss “Clarity.” Even though current large language models can choose a more fluent translation by transcending established grammatical rules through contextual learning, achieving true literary clarity remains nearly impossible. As stated above, “clarity” is not merely about selecting “correct” vocabulary in specific sentences; it requires a seamless flow of language and an understanding of the original work’s spirit and thought, demanding a deep and thorough comprehension of the text and a grasp of its context from the local to the global. The complexity and richness of classic works are what make them classic. Generations of commentaries have shown that “classical” works are dense with meaning and merit careful examination. Without a theoretically profound understanding and judgment of these interpretations, translation risks becoming fragmented and superficial, failing to capture the core spirit of the text. Moreover, the complex meanings and rich spiritual connotations embedded in classical texts—along with their ambiguity and multiplicity—dictate the openness of meaning. This implies that based on different textual interpretations, both the commentaries and translations can vary widely. Consequently, translation becomes an act of conscious selection by the translator, incorporating their holistic understanding of the text, thus becoming a constructive process rich in humanistic thought and insight—something that “fixed” and “closed” machine translation cannot achieve. In this sense, we can argue that not only the classical text itself but also the diverse translations and vibrant interpretive traditions collectively constitute a part of the “classics,” contributing to the true “expression” within the overall “context” and opening up “expressiveness” to countless possibilities through re-creation.

Now, let us consider “elegance.” Whether it is YAN Fu’s notion of “literary quality” or the “transformation,” “spiritual similarity,” and “nature and authenticity” advocated by other translators, these indicate that the highest realm of translation is an expression infused with humanistic qualities. Here, language transcends mere rational computation and combination of “words” from a corpus; it embodies the translator’s individual understanding and expression. The charm of translation lies precisely here. While maintaining sufficient respect and reverence for the original text, it can achieve the translator’s own stylistic and ideological expression through choices, arrangements, and generation of different diction. This means that the translator, as the creative subject, is profoundly influenced by their own experiences, knowledge, thoughts, and historical context, all of which impact the translation. The translations of Shakespeare by ZHU Shenghao and LIANG Shiqiu are illustrative examples; their approaches to the same text differ significantly, sometimes in word choice, phrasing, and even meaning. These differences stem from their varied experiences and knowledge, as well as their distinct personalities and writing styles. Translations from different eras show even greater divergence, often bearing the marks of their time—be it rustic, simple, complex, or refined—thus, through various translations, we can glimpse not only the individual lives of different authors but also feel the spirit and historical atmosphere of different ages. Ultimately, classical translation—or more broadly, translation as a result of human effort—becomes a means of life expression. Precisely because it embodies the living “human” (rather than

machines) understanding of the text, it becomes vibrant, life-infused words. These words, in turn, constitute the inner soul of social culture and, over time, have settled into a part of historical civilization and humanistic spirit.

From “clarity” to “elegance,” we see that humans are not only deeply involved in classical translation but also irreplaceable. This practice, filled with human understanding and choice, is undoubtedly an open humanistic activity that uncovers infinite possibilities. Conversely, only human participation can endow classical translation with ontological significance. The reason classical works are considered classics lies in their endurance against the test of human civilization throughout history, thus, it becomes a spiritual wealth of enduring value for humanity. Only through continued human engagement, where individuals project and integrate their feelings, thoughts, and spirits into their understanding and translation of these classics, can we ensure that classical works retain a continuous reservoir of spiritual resources and intellectual vitality in contemporary times. This is precisely where the significance of “being human” lies and where the distinction between “humans” and “machines” becomes evident.

The Tasks and Significance of Translating Chinese Classics in the Contemporary Era

After an in-depth examination of the essence of translation, we can explore the tasks and significance of translating Chinese classics in the contemporary era. As the age of AI continually showcases the power of machines to humanity, it is crucial to emphasize the perpetual need for human involvement in classical translation. In the pursuit of “faithfulness, clarity, and elegance”, classical translation inevitably incorporates the translator’s insightful interpretation and personalized rendition of texts. This makes translation work extend beyond mere linguistic conversion to a relatively professional and academic discourse, functioning simultaneously as a carrier of contemporary humanistic spirit and thought. This is posited as the direction in which classical translation should develop today.

I have previously mentioned the importance of commentary in classical translation. If modern classical translation still necessitates deep human involvement, it should continue this tradition and even place greater emphasis on the academic community’s output of commentaries. From an standpoint of academic tradition, the method of commentary originated early in ancient Greece and Rome, while in China, it is seen in Canonical studies and commentaries. With the rise of modern disciplines, commentary has universally become a fundamental research approach to classical texts in the humanities. Western academia already possesses a substantial tradition in this respect. In recent years, Chinese disciplines such as classical studies and foreign literature have increasingly introduced Western academic commentaries as materials for studying foreign classics, thus deepening the understanding of these classic texts among translators. Commentary is vital because it represents the most detailed and solid close reading and study of a classic. Through such meticulous study, different interpretations open up varied explanatory paths. Many influential writings and translations result from detailed commentary analysis. This implies that high-level commentaries have become an indispensable cornerstone in constructing the scholarly framework of classical works. This phenomenon is particularly evident in classical studies focused on classical texts, such as Greek and Roman studies.

Regarding the topic of “the tasks of translating Chinese classics in the contemporary era,” we might compare it with the Western translation and research of Greek and Roman texts. In a sense, Greek and Roman texts are also “foreign-language” classics to modern Western readers. Except for a few experts, most scholars and

ordinary readers rely on translations to read them. Therefore, the Western academic community's translation of Greek and Roman texts can be considered a classical translation in the truest sense. From this angle, it is evident that the entire Western academic community, centered around Europe and America, has made impressive progress in translating Greek and Roman classics. Take the Greek classic *Iliad* as an example; there are over a hundred commentaries in English alone, with studies in Latin, Italian, German and French even more numerous. Centuries of accumulated commentary provide a firm foundation for understanding these classic works in the Western academic community, where different eras' interpretations inspire continuous commentary on the texts. Scholars can continually retranslate classic texts based on these updated commentaries, prompting more scholars to interpret and study the texts. From annotation to translation to interpretation, and then to re-annotation, re-translation, and re-interpretation, Western Greek and Roman studies form a vibrant closed loop, continually advancing Western scholarship and culture. This process establishes its rich academic system concerning Greek and Roman studies, which, in a way, has an "imperial" power under Western academia's strong construction. It not only incorporates Greek and Roman civilizations into the modern Western framework of knowledge and civilization but also profoundly influences the global understanding of Greek and Roman civilization. References and introductions to these academic and translation achievements in Chinese classical academia are good examples.

This suggests that the issues involved in translation, annotation, and related research cover more than merely introducing "foreign language texts" or "exotic cultures" or simply establishing an academic system. In the context of globalization, these issues even relate to establishing and contending for the discourse power of interpreting a certain civilization. There is notable confrontation among different countries, regions, and academic schools. Thus, based on translation and focusing on annotation and explanation, classical text research actively engages in cross-civilization dialogue and interaction. This means that if China intends to build its independent knowledge system (especially in Western studies), it must not only fully understand, recognize, and assess these existing research and discourse frameworks but also consciously and actively participate in translating and explaining classical texts of different civilizations across the globe. Translation requires a higher global historical perspective. Only with this perspective can we understand the urgent and critical tasks of translating Chinese classics today. It concerns not only the understanding of others and self-definition in this diverse civilization world system, but also China's power and position in global discourse.

So, how do we build an independent knowledge system with a global historical view based on translation? This requires returning to the fundamental purpose of translation. Translation is an essential cultural practice because it serves as a bridge connecting groups speaking different languages, cultural regions, and civilizational entities. It arises from natural necessity. Whether it's daily communication, business exchanges, or literary and academic translation and introduction, they all aim to "understand the other" and "make oneself understood." This objective naturally differentiates the order and sequence of understanding the "other," i.e., what to understand first, what to understand later, how much to understand, and how to understand. The principles of this differentiation are inevitably centered around the "self," being built according to the self's interests and needs. Therefore, from the beginning, translation is a selective and ordering activity, a conscious "list-making" activity, a process of reinterpreting and remolding the original form of the "other."

Let us use the example of Western translation and study of Greek and Roman texts again. Rigorously speaking, from their very existence, the translation and canonization of these texts began. The process started with the Library of Alexandria during the Hellenistic period, which organized, compiled, and translated Greek and other regional texts (Pfeiffer, 1968, pp. 203-208). Later, Rome used the term “classici” to refer to those Greek authors included in the “classical works list” (Citroni, 2006, p. 204). From such early times, texts have been selectively translated and studied under the scholarly interests of different eras. Whether a work is considered a classic is entirely based on the value and influence it can contribute to social and cultural thought at different times. Understandably, this classical list underwent significant changes from Ancient Greece and Rome to the Middle Ages, with notable contraction during the latter to exclude texts contrary to Christian spirit. During the Renaissance, many Greek and Roman texts were reintroduced into this list.² Similarly, Sinology provides another pertinent example. Since the 18th century, Western academia, especially in Europe and America, has embarked on translating and studying Chinese classics under the framework of “Oriental Studies.” Anyone with even a modest understanding of the academic history of Sinology would note how Western Sinology selectively approaches Chinese classics. Consequently, Sinology presents a highly distinct view of Chinese civilization compared to indigenous Chinese studies. This not only established Sinology as a highly autonomous Western discipline but also profoundly influenced Western understanding and imagination of Chinese civilization.

These examples illustrate how the translation and study of classic texts (and research literature) in the translation and academic fields themselves constitute a process of constructing one’s academic system through continuous selection. Decisions regarding what to translate first, what to prioritize, what to ignore, how to translate, and how to interpret have an imperceptible way of altering and reshaping the original cultural form and landscape. Through translation and study, original classical texts (and research literature) reappear before new readers and researchers in different chronological sequences, thus being incorporated into new academic frameworks and contexts. This process reshapes the overall historical context of previous civilizations into new scholarly disciplines, forming the groundwork of academic history and the creation of civilizational discourse systems.

In this context, we can see the tasks and significance that the translation of Chinese classics can assume in contemporary times. With ambitious intentions, translators and scholars should pursue the craft of translation, providing a profound understanding of human historical civilization and humanistic spirit, while consciously participating in the construction of China’s autonomous knowledge system both “internally” and “externally.” By grounding this effort in China’s contemporary issues and inquiries, these translators and scholars not only pose questions to China but also to the world. In doing so, the translation endeavor will not only bring the world closer to China but also bring China to the world, allowing Chinese civilization to fully exert its inherent function and value in the bidirectional relationship between China and the world.

² In fact, this change has been occurring throughout all eras, and to this day, there is still debate in Western scholarly and educational circles about which texts should be considered “classics” (canon) for study and teaching. For a history of the development of the Western canon and the controversies surrounding the canon in research and education, see George A. Kennedy, “The Origin of the Concept of a Canon and Its Application to the Greek and Latin Classics,” in Jan Groak (ed.), *Canon Vs. Culture*, Routledge, 2001, pp. 105-116.

Conclusion

This article aims to illustrate the intrinsic nature and uniqueness of classical translation, stressing its significant connection to humanistic spirit in the age of AI. It suggests that in our current era, the task and significance of translating classics lie precisely in nurturing and inheriting this humanistic spirit. Through translation efforts with human in-depth involvement, it seeks to fully develop its academic framework to construct an autonomous knowledge system with a Chinese subjectivity.

While continuously emphasizing the necessity of human involvement in classical translation, this does not imply an absolutely conservative stance against the various conveniences and benefits that artificial intelligence and digital humanities bring to human knowledge production. Whether conservative or optimistic, an AI-dominated technological era has already arrived. Thus, the issue we face is no longer simply about acceptance or rejection. Instead, after inevitably embracing all the changes brought by new technology, the challenge is how to allow humanistic spirit and intelligent technology to progress hand in hand in a way that remains positive and beneficial for humanity. Therefore, it is important to clarify the significance of translation in history and civilization and to redefine its position and historical tasks in the modern era. This has been the original intention behind writing this article.

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