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Human Agency in GenAI-ssisted Translation: Lessons from Translating Chinese Policy Reports

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ABSTRACT
The rapid development of Generative AI and large language models (LLMs) has significantly transformed the landscape of professional translation, especially for large-volume, high-stakes texts such as policy reports and research papers. While LLMs such as ChatGPT can produce fluent and contextually plausible drafts, their output often requires careful post-editing to ensure accuracy, appropriateness, and alignment with genre conventions. This paper explores the translator's agency in AI-assisted translation through a detailed examination of case studies drawn from a corpus of Chinese policy reports on sustainable agricultural supply chains. Each case demonstrates how the human translator identifies issues, evaluates alternatives, and makes contextually informed revisions, resulting in translations that are not only accurate but also rhetorically effective and suitable for policy discourse. The paper argues that human agency is not diminished but rather reconfigured in AI post-editing. Translators act as diagnosticians and evaluators, working with AI as co-creators to shape the text while ultimately serving as the final gatekeepers of meaning and quality. The study concludes by stressing the qualities translators must cultivate—critical reading, domain knowledge, genre awareness, stylistic sensibility, and editorial judgment—to fully harness AI as a productive partner while maintaining ultimate accountability for the final product.

KEYWORDS
AI-assisted translation; Post-editing (PE); Machine translation; Translator agency

1 Introduction

Machine translation (MT), especially Neural Machine Translation (NMT), has long played a central role in assisting translators to produce drafts of texts more quickly. Yet the rise of Generative AI (GenAI)—exemplified by Large Language Models (LLMs) such as GPT-4, GPT-5, Claude, and Gemini—has marked a qualitative leap rather than a mere incremental improvement. These models offer greater fluency, broader contextual understanding, and more flexible interaction and extend capabilities into longer context translation, more natural phrasing, and zero-shot/few-shot adaptation to new domains (Ataman, 2025; Pang et al., 2024).

This evolution raises new questions about translator agency—how much control, creativity, and responsibility human translators retain when working with highly capable AI systems. Some scholars caution that over-reliance on MT/AI might reduce translators to mere correctors of machine outputs, diminishing their role (Koponen, 2016). Others maintain that, especially in high-stakes genres like legal, medical, or policy translation, human oversight remains essential to ensure quality, accuracy, and rhetorical appropriateness (O'Brien, 2012; Ataman, 2025).

This paper contributes to that debate by examining case studies from the author's practice in translating Chinese policy reports related to sustainable agriculture using LLM-assisted workflows. The study shows that LLMs often generate fluent and useful baseline drafts, but real quality depends on active human intervention: diagnosing mismatches, selecting among alternatives, maintaining terminological consistency, and ensuring that tone, style, and policy discourse norms are preserved. Through these cases, this paper argues that in the age of LLMs, translator agency is not diminished but reconfigured: translators act as diagnosticians, evaluators, co-creators—and, crucially, as final gatekeepers of meaning, quality, and fidelity to policy intent.

2 Corpus Description and Style Calibration

2.1 Corpus Description

The data for this study are drawn from a series of Chinese-language policy and research reports focused on the development of sustainable agricultural supply chains, particularly the use of recyclable fruit and vegetable crates, the modernization of rural industries, and cold-chain logistics. The reports were produced by a leading Chinese agricultural research institution under the framework of an international cooperation project and required translation into English to serve as reference for international partners.

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These texts are characterized by formal, information-dense language, the frequent use of policy jargon, and a combination of descriptive analysis and prescriptive recommendations. For international dissemination, translations must conform to the policy report genre in English, which values clarity, conciseness, and a balanced tone that blends objectivity with persuasion. This makes the corpus particularly valuable for examining the distinctive challenges of AI-assisted post-editing, especially in areas such as terminological precision, coherence across extended texts, pragmatic appropriateness, and cultural adaptation—where human intervention plays a decisive role.

2.2 Selection of Large Language Models (LLMs)

Before post-editing began, deliberate consideration was given to the choice of LLM used to generate initial drafts. Among the currently available models, GPT-5 was selected primarily for pragmatic reasons. The author had extensive prior experience using GPT-based systems, which facilitated a smoother workflow and reduced the learning curve. GPT-5 was also chosen for its ability to maintain context across lengthy policy texts, a critical requirement for ensuring terminological and stylistic consistency throughout multi-section reports.

Compared with conventional NMT systems, GPT-5 produces fluent, polished drafts that reduce the need for low-level correction and allow post-editing to focus on meaning, tone, and domain-specific nuance. Another factor in the choice was GPT-5's interactive prompting capability: rather than producing a single static translation, it allows the author to query for alternatives, refine outputs iteratively, and select phrasing most consistent with international policy discourse.

Throughout the process, the author maintained a critical stance, mindful of risks such as hallucinations and overgeneralization. The model was treated not as a replacement for human judgment but as a collaborative partner, with the author serving as both co-creator and final arbiter of quality.

2.3 Style Calibration

Before beginning the translation task, a style calibration exercise was performed. The author worked with AI to establish guidelines for the target style, which included:

· Using formal but reader-friendly English, avoiding unnecessary literalism.

· Preserving all policy-relevant information with no omissions.

· Preferring noun-phrase section headings (e.g., "Strengthening Law Enforcement in Food Safety") for consistency.

· Using internationally recognized policy discourse markers ("encourage," "promote," "mainstream," "ensure") where appropriate.

· Avoiding overly colloquial or figurative expressions that might undermine the authoritative tone.

This calibration process ensured that subsequent post-editing would have a consistent stylistic benchmark and that the AI-generated drafts could be systematically evaluated against it.

3 Case Studies in Post-Editing with Human Agency

This section examines three representative examples drawn from the author's translation of Chinese policy reports on agricultural sustainability. In each case, the AI-generated draft served as a useful baseline but required substantial human intervention to resolve issues of meaning, tone, and rhetorical adequacy. The discussion follows Source text, AI draft translation, Analysis and post-editing, Final translation, and Commentary.

Case 1: Rendering "周转筐社会化运营"

Source text

同时鼓励和推动第三方物流对于果蔬周转筐的应用，尽早实现果蔬周转筐的社会化运营，解决长距离运输回框困难的问题。

AI draft translation

At the same time, third-party logistics providers should be encouraged to integrate crates into their operations, enabling socialized circulation and addressing the challenge of long-distance returns.

Analysis and post-editing

This recommendation is situated in a section addressing low adoption rates of reusable crates, identifying pain points such as management burdens, loss rates, long-distance return difficulties, and high costs. The phrase "社会化运营" is crucial: it signals a shift from localized experimentation to broad, system-wide, and standardized adoption. The AI's "socialized circulation" is problematic on several levels. First, the term "socialized" risks being misunderstood in English as referring to socialist ownership or state control, which is not implied in the Chinese text. Second, "circulation" foregrounds the physical movement of crates but neglects the managerial and institutional dimension of "运营" (operation).

The author identified this as a case where literal rendering obscured the policy objective: to institutionalize crate usage as a mainstream logistics practice. The author prompted the AI for alternatives, which produced several options—"industry-wide operation," "system-wide operation," "broad-based operation," and "mainstreamed operation." Each was assessed for semantic accuracy and discursive appropriateness. While "industry-wide" and "system-wide" captured the scale, they risked being too technical and did not evoke the idea of adoption becoming the norm.

"Mainstreamed operation" stood out because of its intertextual resonance with widely used policy expressions such as "gender mainstreaming," where the term connotes integration into core processes and normalization across institutions. The author then restructured the sentence syntactically, shifting from a nominal construction ("achieve mainstreamed operation") to an action-oriented clause ("help mainstream their use"), which better fits English policy discourse that favors prescriptive and dynamic phrasing.

Final translation

At the same time, third-party logistics providers should be encouraged to adopt fruit and vegetable crates and help mainstream their use, thereby addressing the challenges of returning empty crates over long distances.

Commentary

This case demonstrates how AI-assisted translation can open up a richer range of lexical choices that a human translator might not immediately generate. However, it also highlights that the final decision required nuanced genre awareness, knowledge of policy discourse, and a deliberate reframing of syntax to make the recommendation more forceful. The translator's agency was exercised in diagnosing the risk of misinterpretation, evaluating candidate solutions, and creating a rhetorically effective final product.

Case 2: Interpreting "辐射"

Source text

…生产基地1000余亩，辐射达万亩，实现蔬菜标准化、规模化种植600亩。

AI draft translation

… with a production base of more than 67 hectares, demonstration coverage of about 667 hectares, and standardized large-scale vegetable farming on 40 hectares.

Analysis and post-editing

This sentence appeared in the introduction to a farmers' cooperative. Here, the term 辐射 literally means "radiate" or "emit," but in rural development discourse it metaphorically describes the cooperative's ability to extend influence, practices, and benefits to other farmers and additional land. The AI's choice of "demonstration coverage" partially captured the idea of influence but was overly narrow and could be interpreted as experimental plots rather than genuine socio-economic impact, which risked distorting the original intent.

The author engaged the AI iteratively, explaining the meaning of "辐射" and asking it to generate alternatives emphasizing reach rather than demonstration. Options such as "coverage area," "impact area," and "influence extending to" were produced. After careful consideration, "influence extending to" was selected because it preserves the metaphorical sense of "辐射" as spreading outward like a field of impact and avoids implying that the areas were merely demonstration sites.

The post-editing also involved calibrating the tone: policy documents often use to "辐射" showcase the scaling up of successful initiatives, so the translation needed to maintain a positive, expansive connotation. By choosing "influence extending to," the translator retained this evaluative dimension and strengthened the narrative of outreach and capacity building.

Final translation

… with a production base of over 67 hectares and an influence extending to more than 667 hectares of surrounding farmland.

Commentary

This example illustrates how post-editing is an interpretive act. AI provided several viable lexical candidates, but the final selection relied on the translator's understanding of rural development rhetoric and knowledge of the importance of scale effects in Chinese policy writing. The translator's agency was not just corrective but constructive, ensuring that the translation supported the intended narrative of social and economic diffusion.

Case 3: Reframing "倒逼"

Source text

从消费端、零售企业倒逼农民专业合作社和农户按照高标准严要求进行种植，确保食品安全和产品品质能够满足自有品牌和消费者需求，也很好的避免产品鱼龙混杂，出现劣币驱逐良币的现象，帮扶农户实现订单闭环管理。

AI draft translation

This "reverse pressure" from consumers and retailers ensures that farmers and cooperatives meet high standards, safeguarding food safety and product quality while preventing inferior products from crowding out superior ones.

Analysis and post-editing

In this section, the report describes how retail enterprises influence farmers' cooperatives and individual farmers by signing production contracts and introducing more advanced, environmentally friendly farming practices. The term "倒逼" literally means "to force from the opposite direction," implying that change is being driven externally rather than initiated by farmers themselves. This phrase reflects a typically Chinese way of conceptualization. While the literal rendering "reverse pressure" is semantically correct, it is pragmatically awkward in English and risks sounding adversarial, suggesting coercion rather than constructive market influence. In the policy context, however, the term is intended to convey a positive dynamic: consumer demand and retailer standards act as catalysts that elevate production practices, creating a virtuous cycle of quality improvement.

The author first asked the AI to rephrase without the notion of coercion, receiving more neutral sentences focused on compliance but lacking dynamism. The final decision was to rewrite the clause using the verb "drive," which reframes the relationship between consumers and producers as one of motivation and alignment rather than force. This preserves the policy document's optimistic tone and underscores that quality improvements are demand-driven rather than externally imposed.

The sentence was also streamlined to foreground outcomes (safeguarding food safety and protecting high-quality products) rather than process mechanics. This aligns with the genre convention of emphasizing solutions and benefits over conflict.

Final translation

Higher expectations from consumers and retailers drive farmers and cooperatives to uphold high standards, which helps safeguard food safety and product quality and protects superior products from being displaced by lower-quality ones.

Commentary

This case underscores the translator's normative agency—actively shaping the evaluative stance of the text. Instead of reproducing a potentially negative frame, the translator reoriented the message toward a market-led, win–win narrative. This not only improved readability but also aligned the translation with international policy discourse, where terms like "market-driven" and "consumer-driven" are common.

4 Translator Agency in Post-Editing

The notion of translator agency has become central in contemporary translation studies, particularly in the era of AI-assisted translation. Agency here is understood not merely as the translator's ability to intervene but as their capacity to make deliberate, context-sensitive decisions that shape the final text in alignment with communicative purpose, ethical considerations, and target-culture expectations (Chesterman, 2001; Nord, 1997).

4.1 Cognitive Agency: Beyond Error Correction

Post-editing is often misunderstood as a linear task of correcting "mistakes." In reality, it involves a dynamic, recursive process of reading, interpreting, hypothesizing, and rewriting. Cognitive research (e. g., O'Brien, 2012) shows that professional post-editors engage in complex monitoring activities: they read machine output critically, compare it with the source text, and rapidly decide whether to accept, reject, or modify each segment.

In the three cases analyzed above, agency manifested as:

· Problem recognition: The author identified that *socialized circulation* was grammatically correct but pragmatically misleading, and that *reverse pressure* carried negative connotations absent from the Chinese source.

· Contextual reconstruction: The author supplied implicit background information, such as the purpose of mainstreaming fruit and vegetable crates (to address systemic logistics challenges), which the MT output did not capture.

· Lexical creativity: In place of literal calques, the author chose terms like *mainstream their use*, aligning with international development discourse and thereby reframing the policy recommendation in a globally intelligible manner.

This shows that translator agency is inherently interpretive and constructive: the translator does not simply transmit meaning but actively shapes it, drawing on domain knowledge, cognitive evaluation, and stylistic judgment to produce a text that meets communicative and functional goals.

4.2 Ethical and Functional Agency

Translator agency also has an ethical dimension. As Chesterman (2001) argues, translators act as "ethics brokers," deciding which meanings to privilege and which to downplay. In post-editing, this might involve choosing a rendering that avoids cultural misinterpretation (e. g., steering away from "socialized," which might be politically loaded in an international context) or making the implicit normative stance of a policy document more explicit for clarity.

Functionalist theories (Nord, 1997) remind us that translation should serve the *skopos*—the communicative purpose. In this corpus, the purpose is not merely to inform but to persuade policymakers and stakeholders to adopt sustainable practices. A literal but awkward translation could undermine the persuasive force of the original. Thus, the translator exercises agency to ensure that the target text achieves its intended illocutionary force.

4.3 Dialogic Agency: Negotiating with AI

Agency in the post-editing process is also dialogic. The human translator is constantly "negotiating" with the AI output —sometimes accepting the draft verbatim, sometimes making micro-adjustments, and sometimes rejecting entire segments and rewriting them from scratch. This negotiation is guided by three key considerations:

(1) Trust but verify—Translators must resist automation bias , which can lead to over-reliance on AI output.

(2) Efficiency vs. quality—post-editing decisions must strike a balance between preserving useful output for speed and making the refinements needed for a high-quality final text (Green et al., 2013; Vieira, 2019).

(3) Voice and consistency. Translators ensure terminological coherence and stylistic uniformity across sections, particularly when LLM outputs are inconsistent (Herbig et al., 2020).

In this sense, the translator acts as an orchestrator of human-AI collaboration, curating the AI's contributions and integrating them into a coherent narrative.

4.4 Emotional and Professional Agency

Recent research highlights that post-editing is not only a cognitive but also an affective process: translators may experience cognitive dissonance, frustration, or even alienation when confronted with suboptimal AI output, and satisfaction when they succeed in improving it (Ehrensberger-Dow & Massey, 2014). These emotional reactions are not incidental—they directly influence the depth and quality of intervention. In the case studies above, the process of refining "辐射" and "倒逼" was driven partly by affect: the author resisted accepting machine-suggested phrasing that felt unsatisfactory, persisting through multiple iterations until a solution aligned with professional standards was achieved. This illustrates not only emotional agency (the ability to recognize and regulate affective responses) but also professional agency, where the translator asserts ownership of the text and accepts full responsibility for its quality.

4.5 Required Competencies for Effective Agency in the AI Era

To exercise agency effectively in post-editing, translators must develop a multi-layered skill set:

· Linguistic competence: Not just bilingual proficiency but genre awareness and rhetorical sensitivity.

· Stylistic Sensitivity: Ability to match register and rhetorical style to the communicative context.

· Domain expertise: Familiarity with domain discourse, knowledge, and terminology.

· Critical thinking: Capacity to detect hidden assumptions, logical gaps, or misleading connotations in AI output.

· Technological literacy: Knowing how to prompt, iterate, and refine AI output effectively..

· Decision-making skills: Knowing when to leave AI output untouched, when to lightly edit, and when to fully rewrite.

These competencies turn the translator into an *augmented expert*—someone who harnesses AI for efficiency but asserts human judgment to ensure communicative adequacy. The case studies illustrate these competencies in action: identifying semantic gaps, aligning the translation with international policy discourse, and choosing formulations that resonate with stakeholders.

5 Conclusion

This study has explored the interplay between AI-assisted translation and human agency through a detailed post-editing process of policy reports in sustainable agricultural development. The use of a state-of-the-art LLM such as GPT-5 proved valuable, generating fluent, contextually coherent drafts that reduced the time needed for first-pass translation and allowed the author to focus on higher-order decisions. However, the case studies demonstrate that human agency remains indispensable. By analyzing examples such as translating "周转筐社会化运营" into "mainstream their use," refining "辐射" to emphasize its outreach and promotional function, and reframing "倒逼" into a natural, constructive rendering, the study shows that AI output—while efficient—still requires deliberate human intervention to ensure conceptual precision, rhetorical appropriateness, and alignment with policy discourse norms.

The notion of translator agency has proven central throughout this work. Rather than being relegated to a passive editor, the translator assumed the role of decision-maker, mediator, and quality controller. Agency was exercised at several levels: in identifying conceptual mismatches (e.g., rejecting "socialized circulation" as awkward), in steering the AI

toward more idiomatic or policy-appropriate alternatives (e. g., iteratively prompting for "mainstream" and "system-wide" variants), and in reshaping sentence structures to achieve conciseness and clarity (e. g., restructuring clauses for better readability). These actions reflect the translator's critical responsibility not only to correct errors but to elevate the translation to a publishable standard that meets the expectations of international policy stakeholders.

From a methodological perspective, this study suggests several strategies for effective post-editing in the AI era:

(1) Pre-translation calibration: Clearly define style requirements, domain terminology, and register expectations before initiating AI translation. This increases consistency and reduces editing overhead.

(2) Iterative prompting: Treat the LLM as a collaborative partner. Ask for alternatives, request rephrasings, and compare outputs to find the most suitable expression rather than accepting the first suggestion.

(3) Contextual and cultural checking: Pay attention to cultural nuances and target-language conventions, especially in politically or socially sensitive texts. This prevents literal translations from misrepresenting intent.

(4) Terminology validation: Verify key terms against official documents, glossaries, or domain-specific references to ensure alignment with established usage.

(5) Maintaining translator agency: Approach AI output critically, not deferentially. The translator must remain the ultimate authority in determining semantic accuracy and stylistic adequacy.

Looking ahead, the role of translators in the age of LLMs will increasingly shift toward curation, critical evaluation, and knowledge integration. As machine translation becomes more sophisticated, human effort will concentrate on the higher-order tasks of aligning translation with stakeholder goals, shaping discourse for target audiences, and safeguarding the ethical and political implications of language use. This evolution underscores the enduring value of human translators—not as competitors to AI, but as collaborative partners and arbiters of meaning.

Ultimately, AI-assisted translation, when combined with strong translator agency, can achieve a level of quality and efficiency that were once difficult to achieve. The challenge for the translation profession is not merely to keep pace with technological change but to actively shape its application, ensuring that human judgment, creativity, and ethical responsibility remain at the core of multilingual communication in an AI-enabled world.

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