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A Corpus-Based Study on the Translation Style of the Web Novel 'A Record of a Mortal's Journey to Immortality'

ZiXi Xu
Yangtze University, School of Foreign Studies, Jinzhou 43400, China

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of the large-scale international expansion of Chinese web fiction, the rapid adoption of AI translation alongside high-quality human translations has drawn attention to the linguistic features of translated works. Existing research predominantly focuses on macro-level industrial models or qualitative examinations of individual translation strategies, lacking systematic, linguistically grounded empirical analyses of classic translations that have undergone long-term market validation. This paper takes the English translation of 'A Record of a Mortal's Journey to Immortality' as its research subject and employs corpus linguistics methods to comparatively analyze the fan translation published on Wuxiaworld and the commercial translation published on Amazon, examining differences and similarities in lexical density, distribution of content words, handling of culture-loaded terms, and textual readability. The findings reveal that: (1) both translations exhibit higher lexical density than native English novels; (2) translation strategies for high-frequency key words reflect distinct orientation preferences; (3) regarding readability, both translations appropriately control average word length and sentence length, achieving standard reading proficiency, yet display stylistic differences; and (4) through word cloud and keyword analyses, the translations successfully construct a logically coherent Eastern xianxia (immortal cultivation) world. The study demonstrates that these linguistic features can serve as high-quality reference corpora for optimizing AI translation models and provide empirical support for future web fiction translation practice.

Keywords

Corpus-based Translation Studies; ARMJI; Overseas Expansion of Chinese Web Literature; English Translation Comparison; Readability Analysis

1. Introduction

Chinese online literature—one of the 'new three pillars' of Chinese cultural exports—is emerging as a vital vehicle for contemporary cultural dissemination, rapidly gaining global visibility. In 2024, the overseas market size of Chinese online

literature reached 5.07 billion RMB, representing a 16.5% year-on-year growth; the number of exported works totaled 808,440; and the overseas user base reached 352 million, spanning over 200 countries and regions worldwide. In 2024, the number of overseas publishing licensing agreements signed for Chinese online literature increased by 80% year-on-year, while the total value of overseas publishing licensing deals grew by over 200% year-on-year. Human-AI collaboration has been scaled up for overseas publishing, becoming the core engine driving the "one-click global expansion" of Chinese web novels: In most platforms' translated works, AI translation accounts for over 50%; translation efficiency has increased nearly one hundredfold, and costs have decreased by more than 90%. For example, Webnovel's AI-translated works number 7,200 titles, representing over 70% of its total Chinese-to-English translations. A Record of a Mortal's Journey to Immortality (Hereinafter referred to as ARMJI) is a web novel serialized and completed on Qidian Chinese Network starting from 2008. The work ranked second on the "Mopian Hurun Most Valuable Creative Works IP 2018" and was featured on the "China Web Literature Influence List (2020 Annual) – IP Adaptation Influence List." Its adapted series gained immense popularity overseas, topping the weekly chart on the international streaming platform Netflix, and achieving a rating of 8.1 on the popular website MyDramaList. Wang Yu, the author of 'ARMJI', whose real name is Ding Lingtao, is a Platinum Contract Author on Qidian Chinese Network and has been named one of China's Top Ten Web Novelists. His debut novel, 'A Record of a Mortal's Journey to Immortality', established the 'underdog triumph' narrative in the xianxia (cultivation-immortality) genre of Chinese web literature. Existing research primarily focuses on macro-level market studies and empirical discussions of Chinese web novels going global, the opportunities for Chinese online literature's international expansion, the effectiveness of such expansion, and translation challenges encountered during the process; There is limited research on the translation of web novels. Studies on 'ARMJI' primarily focus on its narrative structure, anime adaptations, cultural dissemination, and a small number of studies on subtitle translation for its animated adaptation, there is insufficient research on the overall stylistic features of new translation formats, such as that of 'A Record of a Mortal's Journey to Immortality'.

ARMJIThere are currently two main English translations: the first is the Wuxiaworld platform translation, collaboratively completed by in-house translators Johnchen and DoubleDD, with 330 reader reviews and 82% favorable rate ; the second is the Amazon platform translation, whose translator remains anonymous, and has received relatively few reviews—the version sold on this platform is updated only up to Chapter 99.

This study employs a corpus-based comparative research methodology to analyze and contrast the stylistic features of different online translation versions, thereby providing empirical insights and references for the translation practice of Chinese

web novels entering overseas markets.

2. Research Design

1. Research Question

1) This study examines the similarities and differences in the translation styles of ARMJI across different online platforms, seeking to identify the reasons for the differing popularity of the two translations in terms of lexical features, syntactic features, and text difficulty.

2) Characteristics observed when compared with English native-speaker novels.

2. Research subjects:

1) This study uses the Wuxiaworld English translation subcorpus, which consists of the ARMJI translation completed on the Wuxiaworld platform, totaling 5,043,434 words; for this analysis, the first 99 chapters—comprising 133,377 words—were selected and compared with the Amazon edition of ARMJI.

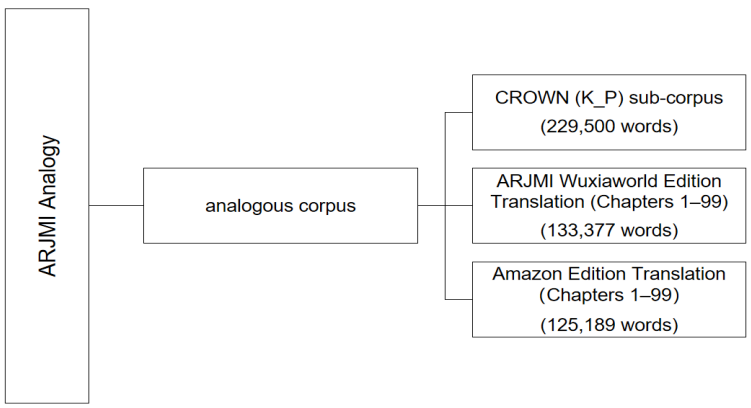
2) ARMJI Amazon Edition English Translation Sample Chapter: Taken from the ARMJI English translation available on the overseas e-commerce website Amazon; total of 99 chapters and 125,189 words; hereinafter referred to as the 'Amazon Edition Translation.'

3. Research Methods and Tools

3.1. This study adopts a corpus-based comparative approach

using the fiction subcorpus of CLOB_K_P—comprising 229,500 words—as the reference corpus. Lexical features are analyzed by calculating the type/token ratio, word frequency, and lexical density in the translated texts; syntactic features are examined through the total number of sentences, average sentence length, and standard deviation of sentence length; and readability indices and discourse connectives are statistically analyzed and compared. As shown in the figure below:

Figure 1. Design of self-built corpus



3.2. Corpus Processing

Save the text as a plain text file, use Editplus 6.1 for text cleaning and organization, remove redundant spaces, and split English words from punctuation to obtain clean text for analysis. Download the Crown_CLOB corpus from the Corpus Linguistics website of Beifang University as a comparative corpus. Compare the cleaned English translation corpus of the novel with the CLOB_K_P part of the literary sub-corpus of the Crown_CLOB corpus. Then, code the three corpora separately, use TreeTagger for Windows 3.0 to perform part-of-speech tagging on the text, and convert the generated POS files to txt format.

3.3. Corpus Analysis Tools

This study employs corpus analysis tools to conduct quantitative and qualitative analysis on two ARMJI English translations and the reference corpus CLOB_K_P. The specific steps and tools are as follows:

1) Basic analysis: Use Wordsmith 9.0 to extract basic data from two English translations of ARMJI, such as word forms (tokens) and types, to provide a foundation for subsequent analysis.
2) Lexical Density Analysis: Use BFSU PowerConc 1.0 beta for part-of-speech tagging and lexical density calculation.

   1: For the two English translations of ARMJI, load their plain text files respectively and use the TreeTagger part-of-speech tagging set (Reduce_POS_TreeTagger.txt) for automatic annotation, thereby calculating the distribution ratios of major parts of speech (such as nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs) in the text.

   2: For the novel sub-corpus (K-P part) of the reference corpus Crown_CLOB, load its annotated text and apply the corresponding CLAWS7 annotation set (Reduce_POS_CLAWS7.txt) for consistency processing. Calculate the lexical density of each part of speech to compare with the observed corpus.
3) Readability Measurement: The Readability Analyzer 3.0 (developed by Beijing Foreign Studies University) was used to conduct a readability index analysis on the English translation of ARMJI, including indicators such as Flesch Reading Ease and Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level, to quantitatively assess the difficulty of reading the text.
4) Keyword Analysis: Use AntConc software to extract keywords. Take the English translation version of wuxiaworld as the corpus of observation, and CLOB_K_P as the reference corpus, to generate a keyword list, thereby identifying culturally loaded words and core concepts with significant high frequency in the translation, assisting in the analysis.

4. Research Results and Analysis

(1) Based on lexical feature analysis

1. Token-type ratio

Type token ratio refers to the number of different words that appear in the text,

with each word counted only once, while token type ratio refers to the total number of words in the text. The type-token ratio can to some extent analyze the characteristics of the text. TTR (Type-Token Ratio) and STTR (Standardized Type-Token Ratio) can be calculated to measure it. The higher the type-token ratio value, the richer the vocabulary. Since the two corpora have large volumes, they affect the results displayed by TTR, so STTR standardized by 1000 characters is chosen as the data.

The results of the analysis using Wordsmith are as follows in the table:

Table 1. Token-type ratio Comparison

	ARMJI Wuxiaworld Edition Translation (Chapters 1–99)	Amazon Edition Translation （Chapters 1－99）	CLOB_K_P
type	8320	6539	19379
token	133377	125189	235820
STTR	42.30%	40.71%	46.45%

As shown in Table 1, the STTR of the ARMJI English translation version for wuxiaworld is closer to CLOB_K_P than the Amazon version, indicating that the wuxiaworld version is closer to the lexical richness of native English novels in the UK and US, providing readers with a more diverse reading experience.

2. Ratio of content words to total words

Table 2. Comparison of Lexical Density

	ARMJI Wuxiaworld Edition Translation (Chapters 1–99)	Amazon Edition Translation （Chapters 1－99）	CLOB_K_P
Noun	36061	30442	54197
Verb	26653	25684	49188
Adjective	10012	9859	15391
Adverb	12024	12990	16676
Total	133377	125189	235820
Lexical Density	63.54%	63.08%	57.44%

The higher the lexical density, the harder it is for people to perceive the text, Both English translations have a higher lexical density than the CLOB_K_P reference corpus, and the wuxiaworld version is higher than the Amazon version, indicating that its text reading difficulty is higher than the standard of contemporary American and British novels, both being high-density texts.

3. Word length

Table 4. Word Length Comparison

	ARMJI Wuxiaworld Edition Translation (Chapters 1–99)	Amazon Edition Translation （Chapters 1－99）	CLOB_K_P
2-letter words ratio（%）	17.58	17.45	15.67
3-letter words ratio（%）	21.49	23.29	23.66
4-letter words ratio（%）	17.91	19.17	18.68
5-letter words ratio（%）	11.57	11.35	11.95
Average length	4.51	4.34	4.35

Word length is one of the indicators reflecting the difficulty level of text; the higher the proportion of long letters, the higher the difficulty of the text. According to Table 4, compared to the two versions of the translated texts, the average word length of the English translation samples in the Amazon version is very close to that of native

English novels.

(II) Based on sentence feature analysis

The average sentence length is the average number of words per sentence in the text. The standard deviation of sentence length is the degree to which the length of each sentence fluctuates around the average sentence length. The larger the standard deviation, the greater the variation in the length of each sentence.

Table 5. Word Length Comparison

	ARMJI Wuxiaworld Edition Translation (Chapters 1–99)	Amazon Edition Translation （Chapters 1 – 99）	CLOB_K_P
Average sentence length	16.82	16.91	16.49
Standard deviation of sentence length	9.20	9.95	13.93

As shown in Table 5, the standard deviation of sentence length in the Amazon English translation sample is higher than that of the wuxiaworld version, and closer to the reference text. This indicates that the sentence length variation in the Amazon English translation sample is richer and more in line with the habits of native English and American texts.

(III) Analysis of overall readability

Table 5. Readability Analysis

	Flesch Reading Ease Score	**Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level**
ARMJI Wuxiaworld Edition Translation (Chapters 1–99)	67.17	8.14
Amazon Edition Translation （Chapters 1 – 99）	72.17	7.41
CLOB_K_P	80.89	4.91

Flesch Reading Ease (FRE) is one of the most famous and widely used readability measures, developed by Rudolf Flesch. It actually consists of two closely related tests:

1. Flesch Reading Ease Score

The higher the score, the easier the text is to read. Reference interpretation:

90-100: Very easy (comprehensible for students around 11 years old)

80-89: Easy

70-79: Relatively easy

60-69: Standard (comprehensible for students around 13-15 years old)

50-59: Considerably difficult

30-49: Difficult (University level)

0-29: Very difficult (graduate level)

2. Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level

The number corresponds to the grade level, for example, a score of 8.0 means the text is suitable for students in American eighth grade (approximately 14 years old) to read.

According to Table 4, the English translation of ARMJI on wuxiaworld has a FRE Readability Index of 67.17, which falls within the standard range. The Kincaid grade level is 8.14, indicating it is suitable for students in the United States at about the eighth-grade level. The Amazon version's English translation readability index falls

within the 'Fairly Easy' range, and the Kincaid grade level suggests this version is suitable for students in the United States at about the seventh-grade level. Therefore, it can be analyzed that the Amazon version's English translation is easier to read than the wuxiaworld version.

5. Translation Strategy Analysis of the English Translation of ARMJI Based on a Thesaurus

Using AntConc software, with the CLOB_K_P corpus as the reference corpus, obtain the topic word list of 99 chapters of the Amazon version, the topic word list of 99 chapters of the wuxiaworld version, and the topic word list of the entire book of the wuxiaworld version.

Table 3. Amazon Version 99 Chapter Keyword List

Order	Word	Target Frequency	Reference Frequency		Order	Word	Target Frequency	Reference Frequency
1	li	2865	0		11	zhang	183	0
2	han	2385	1		12	mysteries	175	1
3	mo	921	1		13	after	553	279
4	doctor	884	18		14	technique	162	1
5	sect	477	1		15	elder	153	0
6	his	2950	2620		16	senior	181	8
7	feiyu	320	0		17	jia	152	0
8	disciple	284	0		18	arts	154	1
9	this	1167	794		19	tianlong	147	0
10	wang	194	1		20	martial	151	2

Table 4. Wuxiaworld Version 99 Chapter Keyword List

Order	Word	Target Frequency	Reference Frequency		Order	Word	Target Frequency	Reference Frequency
1	li	2188	0		11	sect	310	1
2	han	1873	1		12	a	2979	5918
3	he	3148	3717		13	feiyu	247	0
4	mo	636	1		14	other	525	271
5	doctor	634	18		15	didn	228	1
6	his	2323	2620		16	not	948	1067
7	the	6668	13833		17	after	492	279
8	this	1250	794		18	party	270	43
9	and	3762	6257		19	master	225	21
10	was	2349	3631		20	that	1509	2585

As shown by a comparison of high-frequency words from the first 99 chapters of two different translations, it can be known that:

1) In terms of word complexity, the high-frequency words in the Amazon version are simpler. The proportion of content words with fewer than 5 characters in the high-frequency words is 15/20 for the Amazon version, while it is 7/20 for the wuxiaworld version, with a proportion lower than the former, indicating that the wuxiaworld version is more complex in terms of word usage compared to the Amazon version.

2) Judging from the approximate difference between the reference and target frequencies of content words, the high-frequency words in the Amazon version are closer to those in the reference corpus compared to the wuxiaworld version, such as 'other,' 'party,' 'that.' The wuxiaworld version, on the other hand, more frequently uses words less common in the reference corpus, like 'disciple,' 'mysteries,' 'technique,' and 'martial,' indicating a reference corpus different from that of native English and American novels. This suggests that the wuxiaworld version has a more distinct translator's style.

3) From the perspective of culture-loaded words, the high-frequency words in the first 99 chapters of the Amazon version have fewer occurrences of names, while the wuxiaworld version has many. In addition to the names that also appear in the Amazon version, it also includes 'wang,' 'zhang,' 'jia,' and 'tianlong.' The multiple mentions of names differing from Western styles can better make readers feel the difference between Eastern and Western cultures. Moreover, the words 'elder' and 'senior' appearing in the high-frequency words of the first 99 chapters of the wuxiaworld version do not appear in the high-frequency word list of the Amazon version, and their usage rate in reference frequency is also very low. This difference reflects the manifestation of the differences in ethical concepts between China and the West in the translation of titles. The translator of wuxiaworld has partially retained the Confucian ethical concept of hierarchical order in translation. For Western readers who want to learn about Eastern culture, the translation version of wuxiaworld is more attractive.

Table 5. Wuxiaworld Version All Chapter Keyword List

Order	Word	Target Frequency	Reference Frequency		Order	Word	Target Frequency	Reference Frequency
1	han	54124	1		11	immediately	8677	34
2	li	51393	0		12	azure	6322	1
3	light	21785	133		13	soul	7259	13
4	spirit	12153	9		14	devilish	6050	0
5	this	40697	794		15	daoist	5984	0
6	appeared	10463	30		16	qi	5940	0
7	cultivators	8031	0		17	able	8396	51
8	golden	8228	12		18	expression	7910	41
9	formation	7351	3		19	cultivator	5176	0
10	spiritual	6530	1		20	cultivation	4986	0

Due to cultural contextual differences between Chinese and Western readers, translators should take the target readers' cultural context into account and employ various translation strategies to bring the target-language readers' cultural context as close as possible to that of the source language. Dai Honghong argues, "The ARMJI English translation of the web novel on Wuxiaworld reconstructs the cultural context using translation strategies such as explanation, amplification, annotation, and substitution."

Analysis of the top-ranked keywords in Table 3 reveals that terms such as "cultivator," "cultivation," and "devilish" rank highly. These words appear scarcely, if at all, in the reference corpus and are not common vocabulary in native English or

American novels. Taking the xianxia (immortal cultivation) genre as an example—specifically the term "cultivation"—the translation employs substitution to reconstruct the cultural context: imagery-free terms replace the original culturally laden imagery. Meanwhile, terms in the translation relating to evil beasts or demonic cultivators—such as "devil" and "devilish"—are rendered using imagery familiar to the target culture, thereby facilitating readers' comprehension of the true meaning and narrative across differing cultural contexts.

The term 'sect' was also observed to rank highly. While 'sect' commonly refers to a religious faction or denomination in reality, within the xianxia (cultivation fantasy) universe, it serves as the corresponding English term for 'zongmen' (cultivation sects), such as 'the Ghost Spirit Sect' or 'the Ancient Sword Sect'—a usage markedly distinct from its conventional real-world meaning. Similar cases include words like 'devil', 'demon', and 'magic'. This indirectly suggests that translators may unconsciously simplify language, information, or underlying concepts.

6. Key Findings

Combining the various data presented earlier, the reading difficulty of both translated versions is generally higher than that of native English novels—for instance, they exhibit greater lexical density and lower overall readability compared to the CLOB_K_P corpus, thus placing higher demands on readers' reading proficiency.

Compared to the Amazon version, the Wuxiaworld translation has a higher overall reading difficulty, with greater lexical density and lower overall readability than the Amazon version, requiring readers with stronger reading abilities—such as those with higher educational attainment—a demographic that largely overlaps with overseas web novel readers; Although the Amazon version's score is lower than the Wuxiaworld version on difficulty-related metrics, it still scores significantly higher than native English novels. For instance, in terms of overall readability—as measured by the Flesch Reading Ease score—the Amazon version corresponds to a 7th- or 8th-grade reading level. Its reading difficulty is comparable to that of the Wuxiaworld version but far exceeds that of the native English novel CLOB_K_P. This contradicts Amazon's official recommendation that the book is suitable for readers aged 7–18. In summary, the Wuxiaworld version better aligns with its target audience's reading proficiency, which is one reason it attracts more readers and reviews than the Amazon version.

Meanwhile, the Wuxiaworld version of the ARMJI translation employs strategies such as substituting Chinese cultural concepts with existing English equivalents, making it easier for English-speaking readers to understand and embrace the Chinese cultural elements embedded in the novel's plot, thereby fulfilling English-speaking readers' interest in and desire to learn about Chinese culture, and is another reason why ARMJI's translations are popular on the overseas web

novel platform Webnovel.

7. Implications for the Overseas Expansion Model of Online Literature

Conclusion

Summary of research findings:

This study systematically analyzes the English translation of ARMJI using corpus linguistics methods and reveals that its linguistic features exhibit two seemingly contradictory yet co-occurring properties: 'high density' and 'high readability'.

On the one hand, its lexical density is significantly higher than the standard for contemporary English novels, and numerous culture-specific terms (e.g., "qi," "Daoist," "sect") appear frequently, constructing a vivid Eastern Daoist cultivation-and-immortality world, which renders the plot difficult to understand for some readers;

On the other hand, the overall readability of the text remains at a 'standard—to easy' level; average word and sentence lengths are well-controlled, aligning with English readers' reading habits. While preserving cultural heterogeneity, the narrative ensures smooth reception, resulting in a positive reading experience for target readers.

Practical significance:

The 'High Readability' feature prompt emphasizes syntactic simplification and the use of common vocabulary during translation, avoiding reading difficulties caused by excessive foreignization. It provides a concrete pathway for balancing 'cultural depth' and 'linguistic readability' in collaborative work between human translators and AI.

Research limitations and shortcomings:

This study still has several limitations: First, it selects only a single representative translation, failing to cover comparative analyses across multiple translations or different genres; thus, the generalizability of its conclusions requires further validation. Second, the research methodology relies primarily on quantitative analysis at the lexical and syntactic levels, without integrating reader reception surveys or sentiment analysis; consequently, its interpretation of the translation’s dissemination effectiveness remains incomplete. Third, it does not directly compare the cultural transmission efficiency of this translation against AI-generated translations, limiting its direct applicability and guidance for current technological practices.

Future Research Outlook:

Future efforts can advance in the following directions: First, conduct comparative studies across different translations and genres to systematically summarize linguistic commonalities among successful translations of web novels. Second, incorporate reception-end data—such as reader reviews and social media

interactions — and apply natural language processing techniques to perform sentiment and cognitive analyses, thereby constructing a bidirectional 'text–reader' evaluation model. Third, promote research on aligning AI translation outputs with the linguistic features of canonical translations, exploring optimal synergies between cultural depth and dissemination efficiency in human–AI collaborative translation.

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