



# Untranslatability in Science Fiction Narratives: A Study of Ideological and Linguistic Constraints in Translation

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## Abstract

This study explores the difficulties of untranslatability within science fiction narratives, with a particular emphasis on linguistic limitations (such as neologisms, specialised terminology, and syntactic complexity), cultural limitations (including historical references, mythological allusions, and region-specific metaphors), and ideological limitations (encompassing censorship, political discourse, and philosophical viewpoints). Grounded in the cultural turn of translation studies, the research investigates how science fiction reflects socio-political ideologies and presents distinct challenges for translators, especially when dealing with texts originating from non-Western cultures. The Chinese science fiction novel *The Three-Body Problem* is chosen as the focal case study owing to its worldwide importance and intricate ideological content. The research seeks to examine how translators negotiate ideological and linguistic obstacles, evaluate the strategies employed to address sensitive material, and consider the impact of translators' own ideological positions on the resulting translations. A qualitative methodology was adopted, involving semi-structured interviews with eleven professional translators, literary scholars, and editors. The data were subjected to thematic analysis to extract significant themes and common translation strategies. The findings reveal that translators utilise adaptation by modifying culturally specific terms to suit the target audience's understanding, omission by removing politically sensitive or untranslatable content to avoid misinterpretation, and creative reinterpretation by reformulating complex scientific or ideological ideas to maintain narrative coherence. These approaches uphold cultural accuracy and readability while addressing ideological constraints. Furthermore, the translators' ideological perspectives markedly affect their translation decisions. This research offers fresh perspectives on the ideological dimensions of literary translation, highlighting the translator's crucial role in mediating cultural narratives within the global science fiction community.

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## Introduction

The cultural turn in translation studies, which emerged near the end of the twentieth century, shifted the focus of research away from solely linguistic equivalence towards the exploration of socio-political, ideological, and cultural facets of translation. This perspective underscores the active role of translators in negotiating cultural and ideological nuances, rather than simply transferring meaning mechanically from one language to another (Foran, 2023). Within this framework, science fiction is recognised as a genre profoundly intertwined with socio-political ideologies, projecting visions of the future while engaging with pressing contemporary social issues. Often employed as a platform to critique and examine subjects such as technological innovation, political repression, and cultural evolution, science fiction embeds rich ideological layers within its storytelling (Gao & Hua, 2021).

The notion of untranslatability in science fiction refers to concepts, languages, or components that resist straightforward translation due to their distinctive or complex nature. Such challenges may stem from invented alien languages, futuristic technologies, or societal systems lacking equivalents in the target culture, presenting a paradox where the genre both expands and complicates communication and understanding. Translating science fiction is notably demanding because of its lexical creativity, including neologisms, specialised technical vocabulary, and hypothetical terms which often have no direct counterpart in the target language (Hlushchenko, 2022). Moreover, the cultural and ideological layers within the narrative further complicate translation, requiring translators to strike a delicate balance between maintaining the author's original intent and adapting the text to resonate within different cultural contexts (Rumpala, 2021). These complexities are especially relevant in works such as *The Three-Body Problem*, a pioneering Chinese science fiction novel by Liu Cixin that has gained international acclaim for its advanced scientific themes, deeply embedded with Chinese political and cultural symbolism (Møller-Olsen, 2020).

Given its global prominence and the inherent challenges in rendering its content, *The Three-Body Problem* serves as an ideal case study. Conveying the novel's themes to readers unfamiliar with Chinese culture, without sacrificing its cultural authenticity, presents significant difficulties due to its thorough engagement with China's political, ideological, and historical backdrop. Translating science fiction from non-Western origins demands navigating a complex interplay of linguistic, cultural, and ideological challenges. Translators of *The Three-Body Problem* must delicately balance the novel's political allegories, culturally specific allusions, and speculative scientific content. The task becomes even more complex when dealing with ideologically sensitive materials, as certain political motifs and historical references may be interpreted differently by foreign readers. This necessitates informed translation choices that balance fidelity to the source text with the expectations and cultural sensibilities of the target audience (Huang, 2024).

Additionally, the ideological standpoint of the translator exerts considerable influence over their translation decisions. Individual beliefs and cultural prejudices subtly shape how political and cultural elements are rendered, affecting both the tone of the narrative and its reception by readers abroad. This raises critical questions about the authority and responsibility of translators as cultural intermediaries (Lin, 2022). The research also investigates how these ideological influences affect the reception of translated texts and whether the ideological messages are perceived differently from those in the original. By examining these challenges through the context of *The Three-Body Problem*, this study contributes to the broader discourse on untranslatability in science fiction, focusing particularly on political discourse, scientific terminology, and cultural metaphors as key obstacles. Insights gathered from translators working on comparable texts further illuminate strategies employed to overcome linguistic and ideological barriers in cross-cultural literary translation. The study is guided by the following research questions and objectives:

- To identify the main ideological and linguistic challenges encountered when translating science fiction narratives.
- To explore how translators manage ideologically untranslatable elements within *The Three-Body Problem*.
- To assess the translation methods used to preserve readability across cultures while addressing ideological concerns.
- To examine the effect of translators' personal ideologies on their translation choices.

This research holds both theoretical and practical significance for the field of translation studies. Theoretically, it expands the body of knowledge on untranslatability by revealing how ideological and linguistic constraints manifest during the translation of science fiction texts. It also enhances understanding of the influence of socio-political contexts on translation practices, particularly in texts originating from non-Western countries such as China. Drawing upon contemporary translation theories, including those proposed by Catford, Lefevere, and Venuti, the study contributes to scholarship on the cultural turn in translation studies. Catford's linguistic framework assists in identifying structural translation challenges, Lefevere's focus on rewriting uncovers ideological influences, and Venuti's concepts of foreignisation and domestication elucidate how cultural differences inform translation strategies. These theoretical perspectives directly inform the research's investigation into preserving meaning and cultural specificity within science fiction narratives.

From a practical standpoint, this study provides valuable insights for translators, editors, and publishers handling politically sensitive materials. The strategies highlighted can aid practitioners in negotiating the

complexities of conveying politically charged content while maintaining fidelity to the author's original intent and ensuring the narrative remains engaging for international readers. By centring on The Three-Body Problem, the research exemplifies the challenges inherent in translating science fiction from foreign languages and cultures. Ultimately, the study examines the translator's role as a cultural broker within today's global literary market.

## Literature Review

### *Untranslatability in Translation Studies*

Untranslatability, a key concept within translation studies, pertains to instances where linguistic or cultural aspects of a source language cannot be rendered into a target language without some degree of loss in meaning or nuance (Adawiyah & Firdausi, 2023). This phenomenon is generally classified into three types: linguistic, cultural, and ideological untranslatability. Linguistic untranslatability arises from structural disparities between languages, which hinder direct word-for-word or expression-for-expression equivalence (Zhang, 2024). Cultural untranslatability occurs when culture-specific expressions—such as idioms, customs, or social practices—lack corresponding forms in the target language (Nguyen & Thanh, 2022). Ideological untranslatability, meanwhile, concerns the deeper political or philosophical contexts embedded within language, which may differ significantly across cultures, rendering exact replication impossible (Ma'shumah & Sajarwa, 2022). These forms of untranslatability are particularly significant in science fiction, where specialised vocabulary and speculative concepts amplify the complexity of translation.

Several prominent scholars have developed theoretical frameworks to better understand untranslatability. Li (2021) distinguished between linguistic and cultural untranslatability, suggesting that while linguistic gaps might be bridged through inventive equivalence, cultural gaps often necessitate more adaptive translation strategies. Mohar, Orthaber, and Onič (2020) explored dynamic equivalence theory, which prioritises conveying meaning over formal correspondence, a perspective especially pertinent to science fiction's inventive lexicon. In contrast, Cao (2023) critiqued the notion of translator invisibility, emphasising how domestication and foreignisation strategies reveal inherent cultural and ideological biases. Together, these theories highlight that translating science fiction transcends mere linguistic transfer, involving instead a complex negotiation of meaning within unfamiliar cultural and ideological terrains.

### *Ideological Manipulation in Translation*

Ideological constraints often exert an indirect influence on translation, shaping how texts are rendered across cultural boundaries. According to Daghigh and Amini (2022) rewriting theory, translations are invariably subject to, and shaped by, the prevailing hegemonic ideologies within the target culture. In the context of science fiction, this influence frequently manifests through the suppression or alteration of themes that conflict with dominant societal norms. Translators may modify or omit politically sensitive content to align with the expectations of the target audience or to comply with institutional guidelines (Naghmeh-Abbaspour, Mahadi, & Zulkali, 2021). Consequently, ideological manipulation becomes an inherent aspect of the translation process, particularly when the narrative challenges existing power structures or presents speculative visions of future societies.

The norm theory advanced by Guerberof-Arenas and Toral (2022) further elucidates how translations conform to the sociocultural norms of the target culture. Following Toury (2021) framework, translators observe initial and operational norms that direct the adaptation of source texts to address cultural sensitivities. This is especially pertinent in the translation of science fiction, where futuristic themes often intersect with contemporary ideological concerns (Hartley, 2022). When narratives touch upon contentious topics such as technological surveillance or posthumanism, translators may, whether consciously or unconsciously, adjust the text to fit within acceptable cultural parameters, thereby altering the ideological trajectory of the original work.

The role of power structures in shaping translation practices, as examined by Yahiaoui, Aldous, and Fattah (2021), provides further insight into ideological mediation. Attridge (2021) contends that translations are embedded within systems of power that govern how texts are received and interpreted. In science fiction, dominant power relations influence which works are selected for translation and how their speculative elements are presented to diverse audiences (Attridge, 2021). These power dynamics are particularly pronounced in politically sensitive contexts, where market forces or governmental controls impose boundaries on permissible translation content (Fani, 2021). This underscores how ideology can either diminish or enhance the subversive potential of science fiction narratives as they traverse different cultural landscapes.

### *Challenges in Translating Science Fiction*

Science fiction as a literary genre poses distinct challenges for translators due to its inherent linguistic innovation and extensive use of neologisms. Unlike more conventional genres, science fiction frequently constructs entirely novel lexicons, speculative terminologies, and futuristic themes that often lack direct

equivalents in the target language (Imbach, 2021). These newly coined terms—used to describe imagined technologies, extra-terrestrial species, or alternative realities—require translators to strike a delicate balance between accuracy and readability (Adawiyah & Firdausi, 2023). Furthermore, the genre's technical vocabulary, often grounded in legitimate scientific theories or hypotheses, demands not only advanced linguistic proficiency but also a nuanced understanding of scientific discourse in order to sustain textual authenticity (Lin, 2022).

In addition to lexical complexities, cultural and ideological references introduce further challenges in the translation of science fiction. Much of the genre is deeply embedded in the socio-political context of its origin, resulting in narratives infused with cultural nuance and ideological subtext under speculative or futuristic scenarios (Erney, 2021). For instance, dystopian narratives frequently serve as critiques of contemporary power structures, while utopian visions may reflect culturally specific ideological aspirations (Eszenyi, Bednárová Gibová, & Robin, 2023). Previous research focusing on Chinese science fiction translation has highlighted persistent difficulties arising from both linguistic and ideological untranslatability.

Contemporary Chinese science fiction, in particular, has emerged as a crucial medium for articulating national identity, technological aspirations, and socio-political concerns (Hosek, 2024). Translating these narratives into English involves more than rendering linguistic content; it also necessitates interpreting culturally embedded metaphors, historical references, and ideological nuances (Karmazin, 2024). Huang (2024) illustrates how translators have struggled to convey the intricate interplay of Confucian philosophy, revolutionary heritage, and scientific controversy that characterises much of modern Chinese science fiction. As such works attract increasing global readership, translators face the complex task of preserving cultural specificity without alienating audiences unfamiliar with the implicit social and political frameworks.

### *The Three-Body Problem as a Case Study*

Liu Cixin's *The Three-Body Problem* represents a pivotal contribution to the global science fiction canon, distinguished both by its sophisticated scientific conjectures and its profound engagement with Chinese political history and philosophical thought (Hosek, 2024). The novel's widespread international acclaim, particularly following its English translation by Ken Liu, has drawn significant attention to the unique challenges associated with translating Chinese science fiction (Hartley, 2022). As one of the first works in the genre to achieve substantial global recognition, it exemplifies the difficulty of rendering speculative fiction accessible to an international readership while preserving the cultural intricacies that define its original character (Wittmann, 2023).

A central ideological component of the novel is its evocation of historical trauma, especially the Cultural Revolution, which forms the backdrop for much of the narrative (Erney, 2021). By integrating historical experience with speculative scientific inquiry, the novel presents a complex critique of political repression, technological progress, and existential uncertainty (Imbach, 2021). Translating such politically and philosophically loaded content into English required a particularly nuanced approach to ensure that the underlying ideological implications were neither diluted nor misrepresented in light of contemporary Chinese political sensitivities (Judy, 2022). The translation of *The Three-Body Problem* into English brings to light broader issues within science fiction translation, notably the difficulties of conveying cultural and ideological meaning. Ken Liu's approach reflects a strategic compromise between loyalty to the source material and the necessity of ensuring comprehension for Western audiences (Lawrence, 2023). In some instances, cultural metaphors were annotated or adapted, and historical references were explicated to compensate for the limited familiarity of the target audience with China's socio-political landscape (Gao & Hua, 2021).

The issue of untranslatability in science fiction may be explored through several translation theories that address linguistic, cultural, and ideological boundaries. Hosek (2024) differentiates between linguistic untranslatability, which stems from structural divergences across languages, and cultural untranslatability, which occurs when specific cultural notions lack equivalents in the target language. Fani (2021) builds upon the concept of dynamic equivalence, suggesting that translators should convey intended meaning rather than adhering strictly to literal wording to achieve communicative effectiveness. The framework of foreignisation and domestication, discussed by Erney (2021), highlights how translators choose either to retain the cultural distinctiveness of a text or to adapt it in alignment with the expectations of the target readership, thereby shaping the transfer of speculative and ideological content.

Further theoretical insights are offered by Eszenyi et al. (2023), who draw on the theory of rewriting, and by Lin (2022), who examines translation norms. Both perspectives suggest that ideological untranslatability can result when political and cultural power dynamics influence translation practices, leading to adaptations that favour dominant discourses. Attridge (2021) expands upon these ideas by illustrating how translation processes are affected by broader institutional and socio-political structures, which ultimately determine which texts are translated and how their ideological dimensions are represented. In the case of *The Three-Body Problem*, these theoretical approaches provide a lens through which to understand the interplay between linguistic challenges, ideological transformations, and cultural negotiation involved in its translation. They reinforce the view that translating science fiction entails more than the transference of

language—it is a complex act of cross-cultural interpretation that navigates competing ideological and cultural frameworks.

### Gap in Literature

Despite extensive scholarly attention to the concepts of untranslatability and ideological influence within translation studies, a significant gap persists in understanding how these challenges are specifically encountered in the translation of Chinese science fiction for international audiences. Although studies such as those by Eszenyi et al. (2023) and Erney (2021) have rigorously explored the impact of ideology on translation practices, considerably less attention has been paid to how ideological constraints shape the cross-cultural reception of speculative fiction—particularly against the backdrop of China’s expanding influence in the global science fiction arena (Hartley, 2022). Furthermore, while previous research has addressed general translational issues in science fiction, such as the rendering of neologisms and culturally embedded references (Hosek, 2024), limited scholarly discourse exists on how translators balance the dual imperatives of scientific precision and the nuanced sociohistorical and political undertones present in narratives like *The Three-Body Problem* (Karmazin, 2024). Although the broader translation of Chinese literature has been a subject of inquiry (Lin, 2022), studies explicitly examining the role of translator agency in shaping the ideological framing of Chinese science fiction for a global readership remain scarce. As Chinese science fiction continues to garner international attention, there is an urgent need for further research into how translation strategies influence its reception, and to what extent translation serves either as a vehicle for ideological reinterpretation or distortion. This study seeks to address these gaps by investigating the specific linguistic and ideological complexities involved in translating Chinese science fiction into English, using *The Three-Body Problem* as a case study to illustrate how cultural, scientific, and political dimensions are actively negotiated in the translation process.

## Methodology

### Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative approach to explore the complexities of untranslatability in science fiction, with particular emphasis on ideological and linguistic constraints. This methodology was chosen as it enabled an in-depth understanding of the experiences and perspectives of translators, literary scholars, and editors engaged in the translation of Chinese science fiction.

### Participant Selection

**Table 1:** Demographic Profile of the Participants.

| Participant ID | Profession              | Years of Experience | Specialization                     | Involvement in Chinese Science Fiction Translation           |
|----------------|-------------------------|---------------------|------------------------------------|--|
| P1             | Professional Translator | 12                  | Literary Translation               | Translated Multiple Chinese Science Fiction Novels           |
| P2             | Literary Scholar        | 10                  | Science Fiction Literature         | Published Research on Chinese Speculative Fiction            |
| P3             | Editor                  | 8                   | Science Fiction Editing            | Edited English Translations of Chinese Science Fiction Texts |
| P4             | Professional Translator | 15                  | Technical and Literary Translation | Specialized in Neologisms and Cultural References            |
| P5             | Literary Scholar        | 9                   | Translation Studies                | Focused on Ideological Constraints in Translated Works       |
| P6             | Editor                  | 7                   | Cross-cultural Editing             | Edited Bilingual Science Fiction Anthologies                 |
| P7             | Professional Translator | 14                  | Science and Technology Texts       | Specialized in Translating Scientific Jargon                 |
| P8             | Literary Scholar        | 11                  | Chinese Political Narratives       | Analysed Ideological Discourse in Science Fiction            |
| P9             | Editor                  | 6                   | Genre Fiction Editing              | Worked on Western Adaptations of Chinese Speculative Fiction |
| P10            | Professional Translator | 13                  | Modern Chinese Literature          | Focused on Culturally Sensitive Translation Practices        |
| P11            | Literary Scholar        | 10                  | Comparative Literature             | Researched East-West Translation Issues in Science Fiction   |

Participant selection was based on professional expertise in translating the science fiction genre. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure that only specialists from relevant fields—such as professional translators, literary scholars, and editors—were included. Participants were chosen due to their

direct involvement in translating Chinese science fiction, providing valuable insights into both linguistic and ideological challenges. The sample size was limited to 11 individuals, a number deemed sufficient to reach data saturation, where no new themes or information were expected from additional interviews. [Table 1](#) outlines the demographic details of participants engaged in Chinese science fiction translation, comprising professional translators, literary scholars, and editors. The four translators (P1, P4, P7, P10), with experience ranging from 12 to 15 years, specialise in literary, technical, and contemporary Chinese literature translation, addressing both linguistic and cultural difficulties. The four literary scholars (P2, P5, P8, P11), with 9 to 11 years of experience, concentrate on ideological challenges, East-West translation relations, and political discourse within Chinese science fiction. The three editors (P3, P6, P9), with 6 to 8 years of experience, focus on refining translations, particularly in science fiction editing, cross-cultural adaptation, and bilingual anthologies. This diversity of expertise among participants ensures a well-rounded approach to translating, analysing, and refining Chinese science fiction for international readerships.

### Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews employing open-ended questions were conducted to allow participants the flexibility to articulate their experiences and interpretations freely. The interview framework was designed around four core themes: participants' experiences in translating science fiction; their understanding of linguistic and ideological constraints; the strategies employed to manage instances of untranslatability; and the extent to which their personal ideologies influenced translational decisions. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and was conducted either in person or via web-based video conferencing, depending on participants' convenience. Participants were asked to consent to audio recordings of the interviews, which were subsequently transcribed for analysis. Follow-up questions were employed to clarify responses and promote further reflection on key issues. This flexible interviewing approach enabled the elicitation of detailed, experiential insights while maintaining focus on issues pertinent to the study's objectives.

[Table 2](#) outlines the interview protocol developed to explore the principal challenges encountered in translating Chinese science fiction. The questions addressed six main variables: linguistic constraints, ideological constraints, cultural references, translational strategies, personal ideological influence, and professional experience. Linguistic constraints focused on the handling of neologisms and invented terminologies, whereas ideological constraints examined how cultural or political ideologies shaped translation choices. The section on cultural references investigated the translators' approaches to culturally specific elements that lack direct equivalents in the target language. Questions related to translational strategies explored the methods adopted to manage untranslatability while striving for both accuracy and reader accessibility. Additionally, the protocol sought to assess how translators' personal ideological positions may affect their decision-making and the means by which they mitigate potential bias. Finally, the professional experience section evaluated how translators' backgrounds and expertise informed their ability to navigate linguistic and ideological complexities. The structured yet flexible nature of the protocol ensured a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted challenges involved in translating Chinese science fiction.

**Table 2: Interview Protocol.**

| Variable                              | Interview Questions   |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| <b>Linguistic Constraints</b>         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What linguistic challenges have you encountered when translating science fiction texts?</li> <li>• How do you address issues such as neologisms or invented terminology in translations?</li> </ul>                |
| <b>Ideological Constraints</b>        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can you describe any ideological barriers you have faced during translation?</li> <li>• How do cultural or political ideologies influence your translation decisions?</li> </ul>                                   |
| <b>Cultural References</b>            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do you handle culturally specific references that may not have equivalents in the target language?</li> <li>• Could you provide examples where cultural references posed significant challenges?</li> </ul>    |
| <b>Translation Strategies</b>         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What strategies do you typically employ to overcome untranslatability in science fiction texts?</li> <li>• How do you balance faithfulness to the source text with readability for the target audience?</li> </ul> |
| <b>Personal Ideological Influence</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have your personal beliefs or ideologies influenced your translation decisions? If so, how?</li> <li>• How do you navigate personal biases when translating ideologically sensitive content?</li> </ul>            |
| <b>Professional Experience</b>        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How has your professional background prepared you for translating science fiction?</li> <li>• What role does experience play in addressing linguistic and ideological challenges?</li> </ul>                       |

### *Data Analysis*

The interview data were analysed using the thematic analysis approach outlined by [Braun and Clarke \(2023\)](#). Initially, the data were familiarised through transcription and a thorough reading of the interview responses to gain a comprehensive understanding. Subsequently, initial coding was conducted by identifying recurring patterns and themes within the dataset. These codes were then grouped into broader themes related to translation challenges and strategies. The development of themes involved comparing responses across participants to ensure that the thematic categories were coherent and accurately reflected the data. Finally, the findings were interpreted by linking the themes to relevant theoretical frameworks and existing scholarship on untranslatability in science fiction translation.

### *Ethical Considerations*

All participants gave informed consent before taking part in the study. Ethical standards were rigorously observed, ensuring that participants' responses remained anonymous and confidential. Each participant was informed of the voluntary nature of their involvement and their right to withdraw from the study at any point without any negative consequences. Throughout the research process, confidentiality was maintained by removing identifying information from the analysis and reporting of the final results.

## **Results**

### *Theme 1: Linguistic Untranslatability*

Linguistic untranslatability emerged as a major challenge in translating Chinese science fiction, largely due to the genre's extensive reliance on neologisms, specialised terminology, and distinctive syntactic structures. The majority of respondents emphasised that science fiction authors frequently create novel terms to describe hypothetical technologies, alien entities, and speculative scientific concepts, making it difficult to locate exact equivalents in the target language. One professional translator (P3) remarked, "Many of the words in Chinese science fiction are entirely new, invented by the author to suit a specific world. Finding a corresponding English term that captures the same nuance is almost impossible." The inventive use of language within science fiction often pushes the boundaries of standard vocabulary, compelling translators to either coin new terms themselves or resort to descriptive explanations.

Beyond terminology, the grammatical differences between Chinese and English posed additional obstacles. An academic writer (P7) observed, "Chinese sentence structures are more flexible and can accommodate ambiguity, whereas English requires greater syntactic precision. Consequently, literal translations often disrupt the narrative's natural flow, necessitating rephrasing." Moreover, linguistic untranslatability frequently overlapped with ideological concerns, particularly when certain expressions carried cultural or political connotations. An editor (P6) noted, "Some futuristic terms are metaphorically linked to China's historical or political contexts, and literal translation causes their intended meanings to be lost." This highlights the significant intersection between linguistic and ideological constraints, demonstrating that certain words or phrases function not only as linguistic units but also as carriers of culture-specific ideologies. Therefore, translators must make interpretative choices that balance fidelity with readability, requiring a negotiation between linguistic accuracy and cultural adaptation.

### *Theme 2: Ideological Constraints*

Ideological constraints constituted a significant factor influencing translation decisions, often intertwining with linguistic challenges as translators navigated politically and culturally sensitive content. In particular, Chinese science fiction frequently serves as an allegorical medium for addressing historical occurrences, political ideologies, and metaphysical concepts, making the accurate transmission of these ideas a complex endeavour. One publishing editor (P5) explained, "Translating science fiction is not merely about finding the perfect words; it involves ensuring that themes and ideological messages are effectively conveyed to a different audience while maintaining their original relevance." This perspective aligns with [Eszenyi et al. \(2023\)](#) rewriting theory, which emphasises the influence of ideology in producing variations within translations. Some participants also highlighted the constraints imposed by publishers and external parties on the translation of politically sensitive themes.

A professional translator (P9) revealed, "In several cases, publishers requested softened translations of politically sensitive passages to avoid controversy within the target market." Furthermore, personal ideological perspectives were found to shape translation choices. A bilingual literary critic (P2) noted, "Although I strive for neutrality, my awareness of political ideologies inevitably affects how I translate certain passages. Some concepts simply resonate differently across cultures and languages." These observations indicate that translators are not passive transmitters but active interpreters, whose decisions shape the ideological content presented in the target language. Consequently, the translation of science fiction is far from a neutral process; it represents a complex negotiation between culture, ideology, and language, wherein translators must balance fidelity to the original text with the expectations and norms of the target culture.

### *Theme 3: Cultural Barriers in Translation*

Cultural constraints emerged as a persistent challenge in translating Chinese science fiction, closely intertwined with both linguistic and ideological factors. Most participants highlighted the difficulty of conveying cultural symbols, historical references, and philosophical ideas that lack direct equivalents in English. One literary critic (P1) observed, "Chinese science fiction often incorporates Confucian ethics or Taoist philosophy, yet such concepts do not seamlessly fit within Western interpretative frameworks." This challenge was especially apparent when translating culturally specific idioms and metaphors, which often necessitated inventive reinterpretation or additional explanation. Participants further noted that ideological limitations frequently overlapped with cultural translation issues, as political or historical allusions required careful handling to avoid misinterpretation or distortion of their intended meaning.

An editor (P6) remarked, "Certain political metaphors in *The Three-Body Problem* needed subtle adaptation because a literal translation would diminish their nuanced effect in the target language." This perspective corresponds with Lee (2024) assertion that translation operates along a continuum between domestication and foreignization, compelling translators to make strategic decisions that reconcile reader accessibility with cultural authenticity. Most translators found themselves navigating the tension between remaining faithful to the source text and rendering the material comprehensible to a global audience. A science fiction translator (P3) explained, "When a cultural allusion is highly specialised, I occasionally replace it with an analogous concept familiar to English readers, although this inevitably alters the original meaning." This exemplifies how cultural and linguistic untranslatability converge, highlighting the complexity inherent in translating science fiction. Ultimately, through these navigations, translators significantly shape the reception of Chinese science fiction in international contexts and contribute to the broader dynamics of cross-cultural literary exchange.

### *Theme 4: Translation Strategies for Untranslatability*

To tackle the interconnected challenges posed by linguistic, cultural, and ideological untranslatability, translators employed a variety of strategies aimed at balancing fidelity to the source text with overall readability. One frequently adopted method was creative adaptation, especially when dealing with neologisms and culturally specific elements. A professional translator (P4) noted, "Science fiction contains many invented terms that do not exist in reality, so we must create English equivalents that retain the same imaginative essence." This approach aligns with Nelli and Kendenan (2025) concept of translation shifts, which involves structural modifications to bridge linguistic differences while preserving meaning. Additionally, explanatory glosses and footnotes were commonly utilised, particularly to clarify ideologically sensitive or historically significant content.

A literary editor (P8) explained, "When working with politically sensitive terminology, I sometimes add brief footnotes to provide context without interrupting the narrative's flow." However, this strategy carried the risk of disrupting reader engagement if overused. More frequently, localisation was employed, whereby certain elements were modified to enhance comprehension for the target audience while maintaining the core thematic integrity of the narrative. Overall, the findings indicate that translating science fiction is a continuous process of negotiation between preserving the original material and adapting it to be accessible for an international readership.

### *Theme 5: Personal and Professional Influence*

The study revealed that both personal beliefs and professional experience significantly influenced how translators approached the challenges posed by linguistic and ideological barriers, often favouring the overcoming of translation and cultural difficulties. Participants acknowledged that their ideological orientations subtly shaped their lexical decisions, particularly when handling politically sensitive content. A literary translator (P2) remarked, "My perception of political freedom and authority impacts the way I interpret and translate metaphors related to government control." This suggests that translation extends beyond a purely linguistic act to become an interpretive process shaped by individual convictions. Furthermore, professional experience played a crucial role in managing ideological constraints, with more seasoned translators demonstrating a refined ability to balance fidelity to the source text and necessary adaptation. An experienced editor (P7) stated, "Having worked on politically sensitive material, I recognise when to soften certain expressions without compromising the original's core meaning." This highlights the interplay between personal ideology and the conventions of publishing culture.

Additionally, organisational demands frequently influenced translation decisions, complicating the effort to maintain loyalty to the source text while catering to market expectations. A literary critic (P9) observed, "Publishers often insist on modifications that make the text more acceptable to international audiences, even at the cost of diluting its ideological depth." These competing pressures—personal interpretation, professional expertise, and commercial imperatives—underscore the complexities involved in adapting ideologically dense narratives, reinforcing the broader themes of cultural challenges and translation strategies identified in the research.

### *Theme 6: Reception and Interpretation*

The reception of science fiction narratives in translation is heavily influenced by how issues of untranslatability are managed, as well as by the ideological nuances embedded in the original text.

Interviewees highlighted that politically sensitive cultural elements are perceived differently by foreign readers compared to local audiences, largely due to disparities in their familiarity with the relevant historical and ideological contexts. One expert (P5) noted, “Western readers cannot grasp the political subtext within Chinese science fiction because they lack the indigenous historicity that local readers inherently bring to the work.” This underscores the difficulty of preserving ideological density in translation, often rendering such content opaque or inaccessible to external audiences. The strategic choices translators make—whether to foreignize or localize—also have significant implications for how the work is received.

A science fiction editor (P6) reflected, “Deciding whether to explain a cultural reference or leave it unelaborated often determines if readers engage with deeper themes or simply view the narrative as an exotic curiosity.” This exemplifies the concept of translator invisibility, where efforts to maintain cultural authenticity may inadvertently alienate international readers. Moreover, participants emphasised that translation decisions can shape the ideological framing of the work itself, steering its interpretation across different markets. Ultimately, the findings reveal that the reception of translated science fiction is influenced not only by the cultural backgrounds of readers but also by translators’ mediation of ideological, linguistic, and cultural constraints, highlighting the interconnected nature of the principal themes explored in this research.

## Discussion

The findings of this study provide nuanced insights into the translation of science fiction narratives, particularly concerning the ideological and linguistic limitations associated with untranslatability. Addressing the research questions, the participants emphasised that ideological mediation, cultural factors, and translator intervention are crucial considerations guiding the translation process. A primary research question sought to examine the role that ideological and linguistic challenges play in the translation of Chinese-to-English science fiction. Results revealed that ideological issues—especially those embedded within political and historical narratives—constituted the foremost concern for translators, who endeavoured to balance preserving the original meaning with producing a readable text that appeals to international audiences (Abdolahi & Fakharzadeh, 2022). This was notably evident in novels such as *The Three-Body Problem*, where the intricate interweaving of scientific terminology and deeply embedded political ideologies required meticulous translation and interpretation. Linguistic challenges were the second key concern, involving specialist jargon, neologisms, and genre-specific vocabulary characteristic of science fiction (Karmazin, 2024). Consequently, the study highlights the complexity of translating Chinese science fiction, where ideological and linguistic factors are pivotal. Translators must strike a balance between fidelity and readability, underscoring broader implications of untranslatability in literary translation.

Translators faced the challenge of producing literal translations for invented terms and technical vocabulary without resorting to simplifications that could render such terms meaningless or fail to convey their intended significance. The thematic analysis also indicated that the cultural divide extended beyond language to how readers from differing backgrounds interpret metaphors, idioms, and cultural references. This directly addresses the research inquiry regarding the influence of cultural and ideological forces on the translation process (Naghmeah-Abbaspour et al., 2021). Translators navigated tensions between localising content to facilitate target readers’ comprehension and preserving elements of the source culture to maintain authenticity. Findings showed that while some translators prioritised accessibility for global readers, others emphasised retaining cultural diversity inherent in the original text, resulting in a range of translation strategies (Nguyen & Thanh, 2022). Ultimately, the study reflects the enduring dilemma faced by translators—balancing accessibility with authenticity—mirroring wider cultural and ideological concerns that shape the reception and translation of science fiction across diverse readerships. This underscores the sophistication of untranslatability and the varied strategies employed to address it.

The synthesis of key challenges revealed common trends across respondents’ experiences. Ideological manipulation of texts often compelled translators towards creative adaptation and nuanced wording adjustments to preserve authorial intent while satisfying publishers and international market demands. This outcome reflects the interplay of personal and professional influences, as translators’ individual experiences and assumptions naturally shape their handling of ideologically sensitive content (Yahiaoui et al., 2021). Cultural provenance of metaphors and allusions posed a recurring difficulty, with translators frequently struggling to render terms related to Chinese history or socio-political developments without resorting to extensive explanatory notes (Li, 2021). Strategies such as footnotes and glossaries were therefore utilised, albeit sometimes at the expense of narrative flow. The overarching conclusion highlights the translators’ challenge in balancing ideological fidelity, cultural context, and readability. Their decisions exemplify the intricate nature of untranslatability, employing nuanced methods to preserve both meaning and narrative coherence.

Translators’ approaches to untranslatability encapsulate the tension between professional expertise and pragmatic problem-solving. For the participants, decisions were typically guided by the need to reconcile faithfulness to the original with the target audience’s capacity for comprehension. This aligns with the conceptualisation of the translator’s triadic role as interpreter and cultural mediator, consistent with prior

translation theories such as Fäldt (2024) foreignization and domestication framework. The findings also indicate that science fiction translation demands expertise beyond language proficiency, encompassing cultural sensitivity, ideological awareness, and genre-specific knowledge. In relation to extant scholarship, the results corroborate several established translation theories. For example, Baer (2022) distinction between linguistic and cultural untranslatability is supported, with participants experiencing both forms: linguistic challenges manifested in translating neologisms and scientific terminology, while cultural untranslatability arose from limited vocabulary to express socio-political allusions within Chinese history and culture. Similarly, Alhajri (2024) rewriting theory is reflected in the influence of institutional and market pressures on translators' decisions. The research illustrates that editorial and global publishing demands often compelled translators to moderate ideological content for wider acceptability, consistent with Lefevere's theory of translation as ideological manipulation. Hence, this study affirms existing frameworks by highlighting translation as both a linguistic challenge and an ideological act.

Toury (2021) norm theory of translation is also validated, especially regarding translators' adherence to the sociocultural expectations of their target audiences. Translators adapted their strategies based on anticipated cultural familiarity, balancing fidelity to the source text with modifications aimed at enhancing reader accessibility. This tension encapsulates the contradiction between preserving the author's ideological intent and rendering the translation appealing to foreign readerships. Moreover, the findings extend Bohren et al. (2024) conception of power relations in translation by illustrating how personal ideologies and institutional influences jointly shape translators' contributions to the final work. Compared to previous research on Chinese science fiction translation, such as studies focusing on *The Three-Body Problem*, this study reveals both convergence and divergence. Prior research has highlighted the difficulty of translating genre-specific technical terminology and culturally embedded metaphors (Huang, 2024). The current study concurs, with participants universally citing challenges related to scientific precision and culturally nuanced metaphors. However, it advances understanding by emphasising the ideological dimension of translation—specifically, how translators' personal beliefs and professional practices influence their choices. While earlier studies primarily concentrated on linguistic difficulties, this research recognises the complex interplay of ideological manipulation, cultural interpretation, and professional ethics.

A notable distinction of this study lies in its focus on professional and personal determinants of translation strategies. Whereas much prior literature has portrayed translators as neutral conduits of meaning, the present findings demonstrate that translators' ideological positions and experiences significantly affect how they render politically sensitive material. This challenges Moreno-Bello (2021) theoretical model by positioning translators not only as mediators between languages but also as intermediaries between competing ideological frameworks. Although other studies have explored linguistic innovation in science fiction translation (Karmazin, 2024), this research provides greater depth by investigating the influence of ideological constraints on translators' creative decisions. Finally, the findings contrast with previous research by emphasising the broader cultural and political implications of translation strategies for cross-cultural understanding. While earlier studies have acknowledged translation's role in cultural mediation, this research argues that translators' choices carry the potential to shape international readers' perceptions of the source culture's political and ideological landscape. Decisions to foreignize or domesticate specific elements may either enhance comprehension of the target culture or obscure key ideological themes. This extends Yahiaoui et al. (2021) theory by asserting that the visibility of translators' choices holds significant cultural and political consequences, particularly when handling texts with substantial ideological content.

## Conclusion

This study finds that translating science fiction, especially from Chinese into English, involves a complex interplay of ideological, linguistic, and cultural challenges. Translators must carefully preserve the original text's dense ideological content, specialised scientific terminology, and culturally specific references, while simultaneously making the work accessible to an international readership. The translation process is shaped not only by these textual demands but also by the translators' professional expertise and personal beliefs, which influence how political and historical nuances are rendered. The research demonstrates that translators function as active intermediaries, negotiating between remaining faithful to the source material and meeting the expectations of both target audiences and publishing stakeholders. By shedding light on the intricate phenomenon of untranslatability, this study contributes significantly to translation scholarship, emphasising the importance of cultural awareness, ethical responsibility, and creative problem-solving in addressing the distinct challenges of translating science fiction.

## Implications

### *Practical Implications*

This research holds practical significance, offering valuable insights for professionals engaged in science

fiction narratives—such as translators, editors, and publishers—particularly those working with Chinese texts and their translation into other languages. The findings underscore the need for specialised training programmes designed to equip translators with the skills necessary to navigate linguistic innovation, including neologisms and culturally specific allusions prevalent in science fiction. Furthermore, the study emphasises the importance of translators maintaining an acute awareness of ideological influences, both from the source material and their own perspectives, to ensure a balanced and faithful representation of the original work. Publishers and editors can also benefit by fostering closer collaboration with translators and promoting discussions aimed at preserving the integrity of the narrative while adapting it for a global readership. Additionally, the focus on employing creative strategies to address the challenges of untranslatability encourages translators to adopt innovative linguistic approaches that safeguard both the meaning and stylistic qualities of the source text.

### *Theoretical Implications*

The theoretical implications of this study enrich ongoing discussions within translation studies by offering a more nuanced examination of the intersection between linguistic and ideological constraints in the translation of science fiction. This research advances untranslatability theories by demonstrating the applicability of established models such as Catford's concept of linguistic untranslatability and Lefevere's theory of ideological rewriting within the context of contemporary science fiction translation. Moreover, it extends Toury's framework on sociocultural norms by providing new insights into how cultural expectations shape translation strategies on a global scale. By situating these conclusions within the wider field of translation scholarship, the study lays important groundwork for future research focused on genre-specific challenges and the increasingly pivotal role of translators as cultural mediators in the international literary arena.

## **Limitations and Future Direction**

### *Limitations*

A key limitation of this research lies in its relatively small and specialised participant group, which comprised translators, literary scholars, and editors experienced in Chinese science fiction translation. While purposive sampling ensured participants possessed relevant expertise, it may have constrained the applicability of findings to broader translation contexts or other literary genres. Furthermore, the use of qualitative interviews as the primary data collection method yields insights based on subjective interpretation, which, despite being valuable, may be influenced by personal biases or the unique professional backgrounds of respondents. The focus on *The Three-Body Problem* as a case study, although situated within an international framework, further limits the generalisability of results to other science fiction works with differing cultural or ideological backgrounds. Lastly, the study did not incorporate the perspectives of readers, whose engagement with translated texts could offer additional nuance regarding the impact of untranslatability. Future research involving readers would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how translation choices affect comprehension, engagement, and cultural interpretation. Such insights could reveal the effectiveness of domestication or foreignisation strategies in facilitating understanding and illuminate how ideological subtleties are perceived across diverse audiences. Including reader viewpoints would thus enrich the overall picture of untranslatability's influence on global readership.

### *Future Direction*

Future research could expand on this study by employing a mixed-methods approach that integrates qualitative interviews with quantitative surveys, thereby enabling the inclusion of larger and more diverse participant groups such as readers, critics, and publishers from a wide range of cultural backgrounds. Further investigations might explore the translation of science fiction from other languages and cultural contexts to assess whether the challenges identified in translating Chinese works are common across the genre. Additionally, research into the application of emerging technologies, such as AI-powered translation tools, in addressing issues of untranslatability would offer valuable insights to the field. Longitudinal studies examining how the reception of translated science fiction evolves over time in different markets could also provide important evidence regarding the enduring effects of ideological and linguistic adaptations in translation strategies.

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