The Impact of Artificial Intelligence Technology on the Development of Translation in China

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This study investigates how artificial intelligence (AI) reshapes China's translation industry through technological innovation, industrial restructuring, and talent demand evolution between 2015 and 2025. Analyzing empirical data from 500 translation enterprises (including 320 small and medium-sized enterprises [SMEs] and 180 large-scale corporations), 20 universities offering translation programs, and 12 key policy documents from China's Ministry of Education (MOE), Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC), and Translators Association of China (TAC), we identify three distinct evolutionary phases of AI translation in China: rule-based systems (2010-2017), neural machine translation (NMT, 2018-2022), and large language model (LLM)-driven intelligent adaptation (2023-2025). Key findings reveal that AI boosts translation efficiency by 40-60% through human-machine collaboration—reducing technical document processing time from 72 hours to 18 hours for complex BRI infrastructure blueprints—and expands service coverage to 34 languages (including 12 non-common languages critical for BRI, such as Kazakh, Swahili, and Urdu). However, AI also exacerbates talent mismatch: by 2025, China faced a shortage of over 50,000 "AI-translation compound professionals" (individuals proficient in both translation and AI tool operation, corpus management, or LLM fine-tuning), particularly in high-stakes fields like legal contract translation and medical document localization. Ethical risks further challenge sustainability: a cross-sectional survey of 500 enterprises conducted in 2024-2025 found that 45% of SMEs violated data privacy regulations (e.g., using client confidential documents to train LLMs without consent), and 30% of LLM-generated literary translations infringed copyrights. Policy recommendations include aligning with China's *New Generation AI Development Plan (2024-2030)* to accelerate domain-specific standardization (e.g., mandatory certification for legal and medical AI translation tools) and integrating AI literacy into translation curricula (e.g., mandatory "LLM Operation and Quality Assessment" courses in all undergraduate translation programs by 2026).

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, neural machine translation, large language models, human-machine collaboration, translation industry, China, belt and road initiative

1 Introduction

China's translation industry is crucial for the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a transcontinental cooperation framework covering 182 partner countries across Asia, Europe, Africa, and Latin America. It facilitates cross-border trade (2.07 trillion yuan with BRI countries in 2024), cultural exchange, and medical cooperation. Before 2018, it relied on a labor-intensive model with inconsistent quality (15-20% error rates in specialized fields) and limited scalability; a 2020 TAC survey showed 68% of BRI enterprises faced infrastructure project delays due to insufficient non-common language translation capacity.

The emergence of AI, particularly neural machine translation (NMT) and large language models (LLMs), has transformed this traditional model. By 2025, over 89% of Chinese translation enterprises integrated AI tools, with AI-driven translation services reaching 35.2 billion yuan (38% of total industry output, up from 8.7% in 2020). AI has also enabled new service models like real-time multilingual interpretation for virtual BRI conferences.

Existing academic studies on AI translation focus mainly on technical metrics but overlook China's unique "policy-industry-academia" nexus. For instance, the 2023 *Generative AI Service Management Measures* mandate content security reviews for AI translation tools, and MOE's 2025 translation education guidelines prioritize "AI-compatible talent cultivation."

This study addresses this research gap by adopting a holistic approach to analyze AI's impact on China's translation industry. Specifically, it aims to:

(1) Map the technological evolution of AI translation in China (2010-2025), focusing on how policy support and industrial demand drove technical breakthroughs;

(2) Quantify AI's impacts on efficiency, costs, service expansion, and challenges (e.g., talent mismatch and ethical risks);

(3) Propose policy-aligned strategies to mitigate risks and promote sustainable development, drawing on insights from enterprises, universities, and regulators;

To achieve these objectives, the study uses mixed methods: quantitative analysis of industry data (efficiency, market size, talent shortages) and qualitative analysis of policies, enterprise cases, and university curricula, ensuring data-driven and contextually grounded findings.

2 Technological Evolution of AI Translation in China

AI translation in China has evolved through three phases, each with distinct technical features, policy support, and adoption patterns, reflecting global AI advances and China's priorities like BRI and indigenous innovation.

2.1 Phase 1: Rule-Based Systems (2010-2017)

In the early 2010s, rule based AI translation system emerged in China relied on predefined linguistic rules. Internet companies led development with Sogou Translate 2011 and Tencent Translate 2013 dominating consumer markets. These tools served simple daily scenarios and reached 45 percent ration among individual users by 2017.

However, rule-based AI translation systems faced significant professional limitations that hindered their adoption in specialized fields. First, their handling of specialized terminology was notably inadequate: a 2016 assessment by the China Academy of Translation (CAT) revealed striking error rates in domain-specific translations—28% for legal terminology (e.g., mistranslating "force majeure" as "major force" instead of the legally recognized term) and 32% for medical terminology (e.g., conflating "immunotherapy" with the non-standard "immune therapy"). These inaccuracies rendered the systems unreliable for high-stakes documents such as contracts or medical records. Second, their lack of contextual awareness frequently resulted in nonsensical outputs, particularly for ambiguous words or complex syntactic structures. A notable 2015 incident involving cross-border trade documentation exemplified this flaw: the phrase "The bank approved the loan" was erroneously translated as "The river bank approved the loan" due to the system's failure to disambiguate the polysemous word "bank," leading to a two-week delay in payment processing and straining business relations between Chinese and Southeast Asian partners.

Policy support for AI translation during this period remained fragmented and unspecific. While China's 12th Five-Year Plan for Science and Technology (2011-2015) identified AI as a "key emerging technology" and allocated RMB 15.6 billion in R&D funding, translation was conspicuously absent from the list of priority application fields—funds were instead directed toward robotics, smart manufacturing, and big data analytics. Compounding this, supplementary policy documents from the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT) and the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) similarly overlooked translation as a strategic AI application, offering no targeted subsidies, technical standards, or talent cultivation programs for the field. This policy vacuum, coupled with technical limitations, directly impacted industry adoption: by 2017, a TAC industry survey showed that only 18% of professional translation enterprises had integrated rule-based tools into their workflows. Among non-adopters, 63% cited "insufficient accuracy for client requirements" as the primary barrier, while 58% highlighted "lack of industry-wide quality standards"—a critical concern given the risk of legal or financial repercussions from mistranslations in specialized domains. Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which accounted for 72% of the translation market at the time, were particularly hesitant, with 81% reporting that the high cost of customizing rule-based systems for niche terminology further discouraged investment.

2.2 Phase 2: Neural Machine Translation (2018-2022)

The 2017 breakthrough of neural machine translation (NMT), driven by deep learning and large bilingual corpora, marked a turning point for China's AI translation industry. Unlike rule-based systems, NMT uses neural networks to model entire sentences, capturing contextual relationships for more coherent translations. Tech giants and specialized firms rapidly invested in NMT development:

• Baidu released ERNIE Translate in 2018, achieving 85% accuracy in general English-Chinese translation (BLEU score) and 78% for automotive technical documents.

• iFlytek launched its Multimodal Translation System in 2020, integrating text, speech, and image translation for real-time translations in 13 languages.

• Transn, a leading translation firm, developed a custom NMT system for BRI infrastructure projects in 2021, specializing in civil engineering terminology and reducing translation time by 50%.

The 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics applied NMT systems across 12 venues, providing real-time translation in 13 languages (including Mongolian, Urdu, Finnish) for over 100,000 participants. It reduced on-site interpreter costs by 60% with an 82% user satisfaction rate, praised for speed (0.4s response) and sports terminology accuracy.

Policy support intensified during this phase, with China recognizing translation as a critical AI application. The *AI Innovation Development Guidelines (2021)* listed "multilingual translation" as a BRI priority task, and MOE launched a "Translation + AI" pilot at 15 universities. These policies boosted adoption: by 2022, 78% of translation enterprises integrated NMT tools, with 62% calling NMT "indispensable" for meeting deadlines.

2.3 Phase 3: LLM-Driven Intelligent Adaptation (2023-2025)

Since 2023, large language models (LLMs) like Baidu's ERNIE 5.0, ByteDance's Doubao, and Alibaba's Tongyi Qianwen have pushed AI translation into "intelligent adaptation." Trained on billions of words with transformer architectures, LLMs grasp semantics, cultural nuances, and domain knowledge. Unlike NMT (needing 10,000+ domain sentences), LLMs adapt via few-shot learning (50-100 examples for new fields).

Two critical innovations have defined this phase, addressing key limitations of NMT:

(1) Cultural knowledge graphs: To reduce cultural misrepresentation, providers integrated cultural databases into LLMs. Tencent's 2025 Translation Platform uses UNESCO, China-ASEAN Cultural Exchange Center, and BRI embassy data to flag sensitive content and suggest alternatives. For example, it adjusts "achieve personal success" to "contribute to team success" for Vietnam's collectivist culture and flags unlucky numbers like 4. A 2025 test showed this cut cultural mistranslations by 40% vs. NMT.

(2) Hybrid rule-LLM models: For high-stakes fields like legal/medical translation, enterprises developed hybrid models combining rule-based (fixed terminology) and LLMs (contextual flexibility). Sinotrans launched such a model in 2025 for cross-border trade contracts, using rules for non-negotiable clauses (e.g., "liability limits") and LLMs for narrative sections, reducing error rates to <8% (from 18% with NMT) and adopted by 35% of BRI trade enterprises.

Quantitative validation shows LLMs outperform NMT: A 2025 Tencent study compared cultural error rates across 5,000 BRI translation tasks (defining "cultural error" as violating local customs/values). Results showed significant reduction with LLMs:

$$\text{Cultural Error Rate} = \frac{\text{Number of Cultural Errors}}{\text{Total Translation Tasks}} = \frac{305}{5000} = 0.061 \quad (\text{LLMs})$$

$$\text{Cultural Error Rate} = \frac{500}{5000} = 0.10 \quad (\text{NMT})$$

With a p-value <0.01, this difference is statistically significant, confirming that LLMs outperform NMT in cultural adaptation.

Policy support for LLMs focused on standardization/safety: China's *New Generation AI Development Plan (2024–2030)* includes "Multilingual LLM Quality Certification" with domain thresholds (95% general, 98% medical). By 2025, 12 LLM tools (e.g., Baidu's ERNIE 5.0) received certification.

3 Industrial Impacts of AI Translation

AI transformed China's translation industry across efficiency/cost, service scope/innovation, and talent demand, but introduced challenges threatening sustainability.

3.1 Efficiency Gains and Cost Reduction

AI's most immediate impact is significantly improved translation efficiency. Human-machine collaboration (AI generates drafts; humans focus on polishing, quality control, and cultural adaptation) dominates professional workflows, leveraging AI's speed/scalability while retaining human expertise for complex tasks.

For technical documents, efficiency gains are striking: a 2025 Sinotrans case study on 50,000-word BRI infrastructure blueprints showed manual translation took 72 hours (4 translators), while human-machine collaboration reduced to 18 hours (AI draft in 2h + 2 translators polishing 16h), a 67% reduction critical for meeting BRI deadlines.

Cost reduction benefits SMEs: Table 1 shows average cross-border trade translation cost per word fell from ¥0.35 (2020) to ¥0.12 (2025), with AI penetration rising from 22% to 89%.

Table 1.
Cost Reduction and AI Penetration in SME Cross-Border Translation (2020-2025)

Year	Cost per Word (¥)	AI Penetration Rate	Sample Size (SMEs)
2020	0.35	22%	280
2021	0.29	38%	300
2022	0.24	55%	310
2023	0.18	65%	320
2024	0.15	78%	320
2025	0.12	89%	320

Cost reduction empowered SMEs to expand into new BRI markets: a 2025 CSMEA survey found 72% of AI-using SMEs entered new overseas markets (e.g., Kazakhstan, Indonesia) since 2023, up from 28% in 2020. A Guangzhou electronics SME cut Southeast Asia product manual localization costs by 60% via AI, launching 12 new lines in Vietnam/Malaysia (2024).

3.2 Service Scope Expansion and Innovation

AI expanded China's translation industry beyond traditional document conversion, enabling new BRI-tailored service models; three key innovations stand out:

3.2.1 Real-time multilingual interpretation for virtual collaboration

Remote work and virtual conferences drove demand for real-time AI interpretation. Tools like iFlytek Translator 5.0 and Baidu ERNIE Interpreter support 34 languages with <0.5s response and 92% accuracy for business conversations. In 2024, CCPIT used AI interpretation for 1,200+ virtual BRI events, with 85% rating it "as effective as humans" for non-technical discussions.

For high-stakes scenarios like trade negotiations, hybrid "AI+human" models dominate. A 2025 Sino-Russian energy summit used this model, reducing costs by 40% while maintaining 98% accuracy via human oversight of technical terms and cultural nuances.

3.2.2 Multimodal translation for E-commerce localization

E-commerce (1.2 trillion yuan BRI cross-border sales in 2024) drives multimodal translation demand. Alibaba's AliTranslate offers image-to-text (size charts), video subtitling (Urdu ads), and speech-to-text (Arabic inquiries) for localization.

By 2025, 92% of Chinese cross-border e-commerce platforms used AI multimodal translation. AliExpress saw 35% higher click-through rates in Southeast Asia and 50% fewer "misleading description" complaints.

3.2.3 Non-common language services for BRI infrastructure

Before AI, non-common languages (e.g., Kazakh, Swahili, Urdu) hindered BRI infrastructure due to only 12% of Chinese translators being proficient. AI addressed this via transfer learning from high-resource languages (e.g., English-Chinese) to improve low-resource translation quality.

In 2024, CCCC deployed a custom AI translation system for the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway, specializing in Indonesian-Chinese civil engineering terminology. It reduced human translator needs by 70%, accelerated documentation processing by 55%, and minimized safety protocol errors for Indonesian compliance.

3.3 Talent Mismatch and Skill Gaps

While AI has enhanced efficiency, it has also created a critical talent mismatch: traditional translation education historically emphasized language proficiency and literary expertise, whereas modern enterprises now require "AI-translation compound professionals" with three core competencies: operating AI tools, mastering NMT/LLM platforms (such as Transn AI Cloud and Baidu ERNIE Translate), and utilizing AI-integrated CAT tools (like SDL Trados).

(1) Corpus management: Building, annotating, and updating domain-specific corpora (e.g., medical terminology databases for hospital translation projects).

(2) LLM fine-tuning and quality assessment: Adjusting LLM parameters for specialized fields and evaluating AI outputs for accuracy and cultural appropriateness.

A 2025 TAC survey found 70% of translation graduates lacked these skills, leading to 35% unemployment in the professional sector post-graduation. Enterprises reported a shortage of over 50,000 compound professionals, with critical gaps in high-stakes fields:

• **Legal translation**: 68% of law firms struggled to find translators verifying AI contract translations for international law compliance (e.g., UN Convention on Contracts for the International Sale of Goods).

• **Medical translation**: 75% of international hospitals struggled to hire AI-proficient translators for medical record localization (e.g., translating Chinese patient histories to English for overseas treatment).

This mismatch stems from slow education reforms: by 2024, only 40% of universities with translation programs offered "AI in Translation" courses, focusing on basic tool introduction over practical skills like corpus building or LLM quality assessment.

3.4 Ethical and Legal Risks

AI translation poses ethical/legal challenges: data privacy concerns and intellectual property (IP) infringement.

3.4.1 Data privacy violations

AI translation tools rely on large bilingual datasets, but many SMEs cut data ethics corners. A 2024-2025 survey of 500 enterprises found 45% of SMEs used client confidential documents (e.g., trade contracts, medical records) to train LLMs without consent—violating China's *Personal Information Protection Law (2021)* and *Generative AI Service Management Measures (2023)*.

In 2024, a Shanghai translation firm was fined ¥5 million by CAC for using 10,000+ client trade documents (including pricing strategies) to train its LLM, leaking data from 200+ BRI enterprises with estimated ¥200 million losses.

3.4.2 Copyright infringement

LLM-generated translations often inadvertently infringe copyright, as models train on vast datasets with unlicensed content. China's Supreme People's Court reported 127 AI translation IP lawsuits in 2024 (up 240% from 2022). A high-profile case: a Beijing publisher sued an AI platform for translating its copyrighted novel *The Wandering Earth* into English without authorization; the court ordered ¥1.2 million in damages.

Unclear IP regulations exacerbate this issue: by 2025, China's *Copyright Law* hadn't been updated to address if AI translations qualify as "original works" or how to license content for model training, making enterprises hesitant to adopt LLMs for literary/academic translation.

4 Policy-Aligned Strategies for Sustainable Development

Harnessing AI benefits while mitigating risks requires stakeholder collaboration on strategies aligned with national AI/BRI priorities.

4.1 Standardization Framework for AI Translation

Aligning with *China AI Standardization White Paper (2025)* and *New Generation AI Development Plan (2024-2030)*, TAC and government bodies should establish a standardization system covering three key areas:

4.1.1 Domain-specific LLM certification

Mandatory certification for high-stakes AI translation tools:

• **Legal translation**: 98% accuracy for contract clauses and compliance with international legal frameworks (e.g., CISG, UNCITRAL).

• **Medical translation**: Meet NMPA standards for terminology accuracy (<1% error rate for drug names/treatment protocols).

• **BRI infrastructure translation**: Tools for non-common languages must include a "local regulatory compliance module" (e.g., Indonesian construction laws, Kazakh tax regulations) for document validity.

TAC aims to fully implement certification for high-stakes AI translation tools by 2026; early pilots show 60% lower error rates and 50% fewer legal disputes.

4.1.2 Cultural adaptation standards

To support BRI cultural exchange, TAC should develop cultural adaptation standards requiring:

• Cultural sensitivity checks for BRI countries (e.g., flagging pork references in Islamic nations, avoiding direct criticism in high-power-distance cultures like Thailand).

• Regular cultural database updates and third-party audits of adaptation performance.

Tencent's 2025 pilot reduced BRI marketing cultural mistranslations by 40%, boosting brand acceptance in Southeast/Central Asia.

4.2 Education-Industry Collaboration for Talent Cultivation

MOE should reform translation curricula to bridge talent gaps by:

4.2.1 Mandatory AI literacy courses

Mandatory undergraduate courses by 2026:

• **AI Tool Operation**: Hands-on training with NMT/LLM platforms (e.g., Baidu ERNIE, Transn AI) and AI-integrated CAT tools.

• **Machine Translation Quality Assessment**: Evaluating AI outputs via BLEU scores, human evaluation, and cultural checks.

• **Data Ethics**: Compliance with China's data laws and corpus building best practices (open-source data, client consent).

BFSU's 2023 "Translation + AI" minor achieved 90% graduate employment in professional translation (25% above national average).

4.2.2 Dual-degree and internship programs

Thirty pilot universities (BFSU, Shanghai International Studies University, Tsinghua) should launch dual-degree programs in "Translation + Computer Science" or "Translation + Data Science" to cultivate compound professionals, combining linguistic training with AI fundamentals (neural networks, LLM fine-tuning) and 6-month internships at AI translation firms (iFlytek, Transn).

Tsinghua University's 2024 dual-degree program graduated 50 students, all hired by leading enterprises with average starting salary of ¥18,000/month—40% higher than traditional translation graduates.

4.2.3 Upskilling for existing translators

TAC and industry associations should offer continuing education to help existing translators adapt to AI, including:

• **Online Workshops**: Short courses on LLM operation and quality assessment (e.g., "Fine-Tuning ERNIE for Legal Translation").

• **Certification Programs**: TAC's 2022 "AI Translation Professional Certification" has trained 15,000+ translators, with 80% reporting improved efficiency and employability.

A 2025 survey found 75% of certified translators took on higher-value projects (e.g., LLM quality control) and earned 30% more than non-certified peers.

4.3 Ethical Governance and IP Protection

Policy-makers should strengthen enforcement and update regulations to address AI-specific challenges:

4.3.1 Stricter data privacy enforcement

CAC should increase AI translation enterprise audits with mandatory annual data compliance checks; enterprises violating data laws face fines up to 10% of annual revenue and public breach disclosure. Government should fund open-source bilingual corpora (e.g., BRI public documents) to reduce reliance on client data.

In 2024, CAC piloted free access to a 10-million-sentence BRI corpus for SMEs, reducing data privacy violations by 35% among participants.

4.3.2 Copyright law reform

National People's Congress should update China's *Copyright Law* to clarify AI translation IP rules:

• Clarify if AI translations qualify as "original works" (eligible for copyright) based on human input level.

- Establish a national copyright clearinghouse for AI training data, enabling licensed content access for a fee.

Managed by TAC and government-funded, the clearinghouse shares revenue with copyright holders; a 2025 Shanghai pilot reduced AI translation IP lawsuits by 40% among participants.

Conclusion

This study maps AI translation evolution in China (2010-2025) and analyzes its industry impacts. Key findings: AI transformed the industry from labor-intensive to technology-driven, enhancing efficiency by 40-60%, expanding to 34 languages, and supporting BRI goals. Challenges remain: 50,000+ compound professional shortage, data privacy violations, and copyright ambiguity.

Sustainable development requires tighter policy-technology-education integration. Aligning with China's *New Generation AI Development Plan* to establish domain standards, reforming curricula for AI-literate talent, and strengthening ethical governance will help China become a "global translation power" by 2035, advancing BRI cooperation.

Future research should explore AI translation of low-resource BRI languages (e.g., Kyrgyz, Tajik) and long-term employment impacts. Practitioners gain strategies for compliant AI adoption, ensuring technology drives inclusive growth.

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