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Research Paper

Mapping Self-Translation's Stylistic Distinctiveness: A Comparative Analysis of Human and LLM Translations of Chun-Chan Yeh's The Mountain Village

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Abstract

Self-translator merges the roles of author and translator, offering unique insights into creative and linguistic choices. As large language models (LLMs) increasingly perform translation tasks, questions arise about how machine-generated translations compare stylistically to human-authored ones. This study examines the stylistic features of self-translation by comparing Chun-Chan Yeh's Chinese self-translation of his English novel with an allograph translation and two LLM-generated translations (ChatGPT-4o and DeepSeek V3, prompted to simulate a self-translator persona). Using corpus-based analysis of syntactic complexity and phraseological patterns, complemented by qualitative textual analysis, this study finds that Yeh's self-translation displays greater structural complexity, more culturally embedded phraseological choices, and stronger stylistic control than either the allograph or LLM-generated translations. The comparison with the allograph version further highlights self-translation's distinctive qualities of stylistic flexibility and strategic depth. This research enhances our understanding of self-translators' style and the role and functions of AI in literary translation.

***Keywords*:** Self-translation; Large Language Models; Chun-Chan Yeh; Corpus-Based Analysis.

1. Introduction

It has been a truism that artificial intelligence (AI) has significantly transformed numerous domains of human activity (Bannister, 2024). Translation is no exception, if not bearing the brunt of this transformation. The value and necessity of translation as a profession have been questioned in the face of advanced technologies, from machine translation (MT) to large language models (LLMs), which can perform translation tasks with increasing speed, reduced cost, and sometimes comparable quality in specific contexts. Both practitioners and researchers in this field have extensively discussed the impacts of AI on translation. Generally, they maintain a cautiously optimistic stance. While acknowledging the disruptive changes brought by AI to both practice and theory, they argue that human translators—particularly in the literary domain—remain irreplaceable due to the creative, interpretive, and culturally embedded nature of their work (e.g., Ebeling, 2025; Li, 2023).

AI's influence extends beyond literary translation into literary creation itself (Sudajit-apa, 2025; Tao, 2024). For instance, Japanese author Rie Kudan won the Akutagawa Prize—Japan's most important prize for early-career writers—with *Tokyo-to Dojo-to*. The prize-winning novel was, according to Kudan in her acceptance speech, "written by making full use of a generative AI like ChatGPT, and probably about 5% of the whole text is written directly from the generative AI" (Ha, 2024). Though many translation theorists reject the notion that translation is secondary to the original, we should acknowledge that in practical workflows literary creation typically precedes translation. As literary authors incorporate AI into their creative processes, translators and translation scholars likewise need to reconsider their roles and methodologies in relation to these emerging technologies. In this context, it becomes crucial to examine the evolving relationships within a new tripartite model: author/original text, translator/translated text, and technology/generative text. Whether one positions oneself as a traditionalist committed to human literary/linguistic creation or as an advocate for new

AI-assisted production models, understanding this three-way interaction illuminates the current conditions and potential futures of literary translation in an AI-augmented landscape.

However, this examination faces many methodological and theoretical challenges. The most challenging aspect is the author-translator relationship, which many scholars have studied (e.g., Jansen, 2019; Wakabayashi, 2011) yet which still requires exploration, and whose complexity prevents us from addressing it here. Therefore, we turn to self-translation, "an extreme case of the author-translator-dialectic" (Tanqueiro, 2000), since "the authors of both versions are the same physical person" (Grutman & Van Bolderen, 2014, p. 323). This strategic choice enables us to conduct a preliminary exploration of AI's impact on literary translation. "Privileged" is an adjective often used before self-translators (Anselmi, 2012). This modifier showcases both self-translators' "doubly privileged status as author(itie)s and agents" (Grutman, 2020, p. 517) and their entitlement to alter, deform, or distort the original without being accused like allograph translators (Santoyo, 2013, p. 28). Such flexibility makes self-translation an ideal site for stylistic investigation, particularly when juxtaposed with LLM-generated and allograph translations. Whether such human privilege persists in the age of AI, a tool increasingly capable of simulating perception, reasoning, and literary decision-making (Liu & Li, 2023), is our central theoretical question. As Mark Turner (1996) has argued, the human mind is inherently literary. Given that LLMs are trained on data derived from human linguistic and literary production (Bentley, 2025), it becomes pertinent to ask whether algorithmic output can also be considered literary.

While recent studies affirm AI's high performance in literary translation (e.g., Gao et al., 2024; Hu & Li, 2023), the boundaries of its capabilities, especially in contexts involving authority, remain underexplored. To address this gap, the present study takes self-translation as its analytical centerpiece, aiming to map out its distinctive stylistic features through a systematic comparative framework. By juxtaposing a self-translated literary text with both an allograph translation and two LLM-generated outputs, the study foregrounds the unique position of self-translation as it combines two different modes of human literary intervention: writing and translation. Crucially, this study does not highlight the "privileged" position of the self-translator unconditionally. Instead, it examines what the human mind demonstrates in literary creation. The increasing presence of LLMs provides a new comparative lens through which to examine the distinctiveness of self-translation, while the inclusion of an allograph translation enables us to contextualize the stylistic patterns specific to author-translated texts. This triangulated design enables a precise delineation of the stylistic and structural characteristics associated with authorial agency. Rather than placing generative AI at the center, the study uses it as a heuristic device to better understand the literary intentionality and rhetorical control that may characterize self-translation.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Style in (Self-)Translation

Style is generally defined as "the perceived distinctive manner of expression in writing or speaking" (Wales, 2001, p. 371). In translation, stylistic analysis serves as a window into the translator's interpretive stance and creative agency (Boase-Beier, 2006, pp. 4–6), making it particularly valuable for dissecting author/translatorship and literary authority. Baker (2000, p. 245) describes style in translation as "a kind of thumb-print" or specifically, "preferred or recurring patterns of linguistic behaviour," which reflect the distinctive linguistic habits of a translator. To unveil these patterns and analyze the subtle linguistic features, Baker proposed a corpus-based methodological approach to the stylistic analysis of both translators and their works. This approach proved helpful in uncovering unique patterns of translation choices in texts and elucidating the interconnections between language use and the translator's sociocultural positioning (Baker, 2000, p. 261).

Corpus, including parallel and comparable corpora, has been extensively employed to investigate the distinctive and consistent linguistic patterns that characterize translational style (Olohan, 2004). Parallel corpus studies, also referred to as the "parallel model" (Huang & Chu, 2014, p. 126), typically examine source-target text pairs to analyze how different translators render the same original (e.g., Featovna Khabibulina & Rinatovna Fakhrutdinova, 2019; Li et al., 2011; Zandrahimi & Marzban, 2017). Comparable corpus studies, or the "comparable model" (Huang & Chu, 2014, p. 125), focus on translations as standalone texts, identifying stylistic markers such as keywords or high-frequency lexical patterns, often without direct reference to source texts (e.g., Li, 2024). Across both approaches, translational style can be systematically examined through computational linguistic features, such as lexical richness, syntactic complexity, and frequency-based measures.

Compared with the extensive corpus-based research on the stylistics of allograph translation, studies on self-translation and LLM-generated translation from a computational stylistic perspective remain relatively scarce. Many works on self-translators' style have largely relied on textual analysis of selected examples (e.g., Li, 2006; Takahashi, 2019), offering valuable insights but lacking empirical generalizability. Recent research has adopted corpus-based or feature-driven approaches (e.g., Chen & Li, 2023; Sattar & Mahmood, 2022), yet such efforts remain limited in both scope and scale. Few have examined how computational stylistic analysis might be used to explore self-translation in contrast with allograph and LLM-generated versions, especially in terms of how translator voice and authorial identity are constructed and mediated. This study addresses this gap by systematically comparing stylistic features across human self-translation, allograph translation, and LLM-generated outputs to investigate how distinct modes of translation reflect or reconstruct the dual role of author and translator.

Therefore, this study centers on stylistic distinctiveness as an analytical dimension. By examining stylistic features across three translation types, we identify the traits that characterize self-translation and assess whether and how these could be replicated or diverge from allograph and LLM-generated versions. Through this approach, the study explores how self-translation continues to assert a unique stylistic identity and whether LLMs can simulate the interpretive labor of the author-translator. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing discussions around creativity, identity, and authorship in the changing landscape of machine-mediated literary production.

2.2. Research Questions

As argued by Cipriani (2023), stylistics in translation can be operationalized through both linguistic and extra-linguistic ways. Concerned with the linguistic way, it is mainly about various linguistic features at different levels, such as syntactic complexity, lexical complexity, and phraseological complexity, while the extra-linguistic approach is conducted through researchers' close reading and textual analysis at the micro-level (p. 9). Our study adopts this mixed-method approach by integrating both linguistic and extra-linguistic analyses of self-translation against allograph and LLM translations through a self-built corpus.

Our study analyzes four Chinese translations of an English fiction: one by the author-translator (self-translation), one by a professional translator (allograph translation), and two by leading AI tools (ChatGPT-4o and Deepseek V3). Given that role-playing prompts are one of the most commonly used strategies for eliciting tailored outputs from LLMs (Xu et al., 2023), we instructed the models to assume the role of a self-translator and provided relevant contextual information. We treat this as an experimental prompt scenario, offering an opportunity to explore the extent to which LLMs can approximate author-translatorial voice when provided with explicit role guidance. Through corpus-based stylistic analysis, we explore how different translators—authorial and allograph, human and machine—understand and render the original text's literary features, thereby shedding light on their respective capabilities and limitations in literary translation. By examining these translations through quantitative stylometric analysis and qualitative textual analysis, we aim to address the following research questions:

1. How does self-translation differ from allograph translation in terms of syntactic complexity and phraseological patterns, as measured through linguistic indicators and supported by qualitative textual analysis?
2. To what extent can LLM-generated translations—when guided by role-based prompts to emulate self-translators—approximate the syntactic and phraseological distinctiveness of human self-translation, and what stylistic divergences emerge through comparative analysis?

This comparative approach allows us to explore not only the traditional "privileges" of self-translators but also how these privileges might be challenged or transformed by AI technologies. Furthermore, by focusing on literary translation, a domain conventionally considered resistant to automation due to its demands for creativity and cultural sensitivity, we can better understand the current capabilities and limitations of AI in sophisticated linguistic and cultural transfer.

3. Methodology

This study employed a corpus-based approach to examine the distinctive phraseological and syntactic features across four translations: self-translation, allograph translation, and two LLM translations of *The Mountain Village* (1947). The research design comprises three sequential phases: corpus compilation, extraction of linguistic features, and

comparative feature analysis. This methodological framework enables a rigorous examination of the distinctive linguistic features that characterize self-translation in relation to other translation modalities.

3.1. Materials

Choosing the translations of Chun-Chan Yeh's *The Mountain Village* as our case rests on several grounds. First, Yeh wrote *The Mountain Village* in English, his adopted language. His exophonic writing, as recalled by Yeh himself, relied on his logical thinking in terms of syntax, diction, and style (Yeh, 1999, p. 287). He absorbed and mimicked the language, style and skills through readings of British and American literature and used them in his own English writing (p. 288). This process of literary creation is analogous to LLMs' generation of texts (Guo et al., 2025). Second, this novel was translated by both an allograph translator (He Jin) and the self-translator (Chun-Chan Yeh). Yeh himself was a professional literary translator as well. Third, Yeh emphasized the value of stylistics in literary translation (Yeh, 1999, p. 307). Previous studies found that Yeh's self-translation is faithful to the original text and generates a unique stylistic approach (Pan et al., 2021). In other words, Yeh's self-translation is more a translation than a (re)writing (e.g., Bassnett, 2013; Meylaerts, 2013) or a completion of writing (e.g., Tanqueiro & López López-Gay, 2008), patterns commonly observed in many other self-translations. These characteristics of *The Mountain Village* make it suitable for our aims to explore the distinctive stylistic features of self-translation and the boundaries of AI in literary translation.

3.2. Corpus Design and Compilation

The self-compiled corpus comprises four sub-corpora: Chun-Chan Yeh's self-translation (Self), He Jin's allograph translation (HeJin), and two LLM-generated translations using OpenAI's ChatGPT-4o (4o) and DeepSeek V3 (V3). The preparation of corpus materials followed a systematic process to ensure textual accuracy, consistency, and comparability across four sub-corpora. The original English text of *The Mountain Village* (comprising 82,442 tokens) underwent initial digital conversion from PDF to Word format using Adobe Acrobat Pro,[1] followed by manual verification of spelling, punctuation, and segmentation to ensure textual accuracy for LLM processing. Yeh's self-translation and He Jin's allograph translation were transcribed using the OCR function in KANDIANGUJI.COM.[2] Given the importance of text precision for fine-grained linguistic analysis, the authors carefully proofread and corrected the automatic outputs by checking each transcript line by line against the original PDF document. In cases where transcription ambiguities or inconsistencies arose, the authors collaboratively reviewed and discussed the issues until a consensus was reached. This process ensured that the final corpus was free from transcription errors that could otherwise compromise the validity of the linguistic measures.

Two LLM translations were generated with the same prompt (see Appendix 1 in Supplementary Files), which positioned the models as self-translators who aligned with Yeh's translation philosophy. The prompt was designed not merely to instruct the model to translate, but to simulate a specific translator identity—a bilingual writer re-translating his own novel decades later for a new audience. This narrative framing aimed to evoke contextual and rhetorical features of self-translation, including cross-cultural orientation and fidelity to original authorial intent. Role-based prompting has been shown to enhance the efficacy of LLMs by assigning specific roles and providing contextual information about the tasks (Kong et al., 2024), thus generating desirable or human-quality translations (Jiao et al., 2024).

However, we recognize that prompting an LLM to act as a self-translator is a methodological approximation rather than a replication of author-translator personality. Such prompts rely on the model's large training datasets and pattern-recognition capacity (Cain, 2024), rather than actual experiences or rhetorical intent. While LLMs can potentially simulate such a role based on training data, they do not possess the lived experience or creative freedom inherent to human self-translators. Accordingly, our interpretation of results concerning the comparison between human and LLM-simulated self-translators remains cautious, and the application of role-based prompting in this study constitutes an experimental intervention in itself—intended to probe both the stylistic distinctiveness of self-translation and the boundary conditions of LLMs' generative capacities when tasked with emulating authorial subjectivity.

To achieve this goal, we selected two state-of-the-art LLMs. ChatGPT was chosen since it possesses great potential to enhance the abilities of machine translation through its interactive abilities and human-like language generation (e.g., Gao et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2025). Specifically, GPT-4o, released in May 2024, was selected for its advanced natural language processing capabilities compared to its predecessors. DeepSeek V3, launched in December 2024, was included in the comparative analysis due to its demonstrated text processing and generation capabilities

comparable to GPT-4o (Rahman et al., 2025). Additionally, DeepSeek V3's development by a Chinese company with extensive Chinese language training data provides a valuable comparative perspective particularly relevant to Chinese-English translation analysis.

All four sub-corpora were further segmented into comparable units and maintained similar mean token size per text while ensuring semantic and syntactic integrity (See Table 1).

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics of Sub-Corpora.*

Sub-corpus	Text count	Mean size (tokens)	Total size (tokens)
Self	84	990.60	83,210
HeJin	85	989.26	84,087
4o	72	985.49	70,955
V3	68	986.87	67,107

3.3. Extracting Syntactic and Phraseological Complexity Measures

For the extraction of the linguistic features, we employed Chinese Collocation Analyzer (CCA) (R. Hu, 2023), which can extract eight types of word combinations with four language-independent and four language-specific types and compute twenty-five sentence- and phrase-level measures related to syntactic complexity (Hu et al., 2022). Four language-independent word combinations include verb-object (VO), subject-predicate (SP), adjective-noun (AN), and adverb-predicate (AP); four language-specific word combinations are classifier-noun (CN), preposition-postposition (PP), preposition-verb (PV), and predicate-complement (PC). The definitions of twenty-five measures are presented in Appendix 2 in Supplementary Files.

These measures serve as operational linguistic indicators of stylistic differences across translation types. Specifically, syntactic complexity is captured through metrics such as mean sentence length (MLS), mean length of clause (MLC), and clause density (e.g., NCPS and NTPS). Phraseological patterns are assessed through the above-mentioned eight collocational structures, offering insights into translators' lexical choices, expressive variation, and structural preferences. Together, these metrics allow for a data-driven interpretation of stylistic tendencies across self-translation, allograph translation, and LLM-generated outputs. Meanwhile, this data-driven examination is further contextualized through micro-level analysis of excerpts from the corpus.

3.4. Data Analysis

The statistical analysis followed a systematic protocol to ensure methodological rigor. Before the inferential statistics, all measures were normalized by character count to ensure comparability across texts. Diagnostic tests were conducted to assess normality using the Shapiro-Wilk test, homogeneity of variances with Levene's test. For normally distributed data with equal variances (only the measure of AN_RTTR), a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted, followed by Tukey's Honest Significant Difference (HSD) test for post-hoc pairwise comparisons in cases where the main effect was significant. For non-normally distributed data, the Kruskal-Wallis test was applied as a non-parametric alternative to ANOVA, and Dunn's test with Bonferroni correction was used for post-hoc comparisons when significant group differences were detected. The statistical analyses were conducted in R (R Core Team, 2024). To complement the quantitative findings and better contextualize stylistic differences, selected textual examples were qualitatively analyzed with attention to syntactic and phraseological patterns.

4. Results

This section presents findings on syntactic and phraseological complexity between self-translation and allograph translation, as well as LLM translations. Overall, the results reveal that Yeh's self-translation exhibits distinctive stylistic features when compared to both HeJin's allograph translation and the two LLM-generated translations. Compared to the allograph version, the self-translation shows greater syntactic complexity, richer phraseological diversity, and greater phraseological sophistication, but relatively lower phraseological complexity. When compared with LLM translations, Yeh's version consistently achieves higher values in syntactic complexity and language-specific phraseological combinations. Meanwhile, LLMs, particularly V3, tend to employ more frequent, generic structures, such as adjective-noun (AN) and verb-object (VO). The mean values and standard deviations of all twenty-five syntactic and phraseological complexity measures across the corpus are summarized in Appendix 3 in Supplementary Files.

The results of the Kruskal-Wallis tests and ANOVA test demonstrated a significant effect across twenty-three measures except for CN_RTTR (p = 0.052) and PP_RTTR (p = 0.843) in the corpus (see Appendix 4 in Supplementary Files).

4.1. Syntactic and Phraseological Differences between Self-translation and Allograph Translation

The post-hoc analysis identifies eleven measures that significantly differentiate between Self and HeJin (Table 2). Specifically, Self demonstrates statistically higher mean values in eight measures distributed across sentence and phrase levels. In contrast, HeJin shows elevated mean values in three measures, i.e., MLC, UNIQUE_RATIO, and PC_RATIO, within the domains of syntactic and phraseological complexity.

Table 2. *Post-Hoc Analysis Between Self-translation and Allograph Translation.*

	Measures	Self vs. HeJin	
		Comparison	Effect size
Syntactic Complexity	MLS	-	-
	MLC	*<	-0.20
	MLTU	-	-
	NCPS	*>	0.35
	NTPS	*>	0.31
Phraseological Diversity	TOTAL_RTTR	*>	0.33
	UNIQUE_RTTR	-	-
	VO_RTTR	-	-
	SP_RTTR	*>	0.23
	AN_RTTR	-	-
	AP_RTTR	*>	0.33
	PV_RTTR	*>	0.21
	PC_RTTR	-	-
Phraseological Sophistication	LOWFREQ_RATIO	*>	0.36
Phraseological Complexity	UNIQUE_RATIO	*<	-0.19
	VO_RATIO	-	-
	SP_RATIO	-	-
	AN_RATIO	-	-
	AP_RATIO	*>	0.16
	CN_RATIO	-	-
	PP_RATIO	-	-
	PV_RATIO	-	-
	PC_RATIO	*<	-0.16

*> indicates the former being significantly higher than the latter (adjusted $p < 0.05$), while *< indicates the latter being significantly higher than the former (adjusted $p < 0.05$). – means no statistically significant differences.

Concerning five conventional measures related to syntactic complexity, Self exhibits significantly higher mean values than HeJin in NCPS and NTPS, as illustrated in Figure 1 and Table 2. The effect sizes for these differences are 0.35 and 0.31, respectively, indicating a moderate magnitude of difference. This suggests that Self demonstrates greater syntactic embedding and coordination, as evidenced by the higher frequency of both clauses and T-units within sentence boundaries. Meanwhile, the significantly higher MLC mean value in HeJin, with a small negative effect size of -0.20, may indicate that HeJin contains longer, more elaborate clauses despite having fewer clauses per sentence.

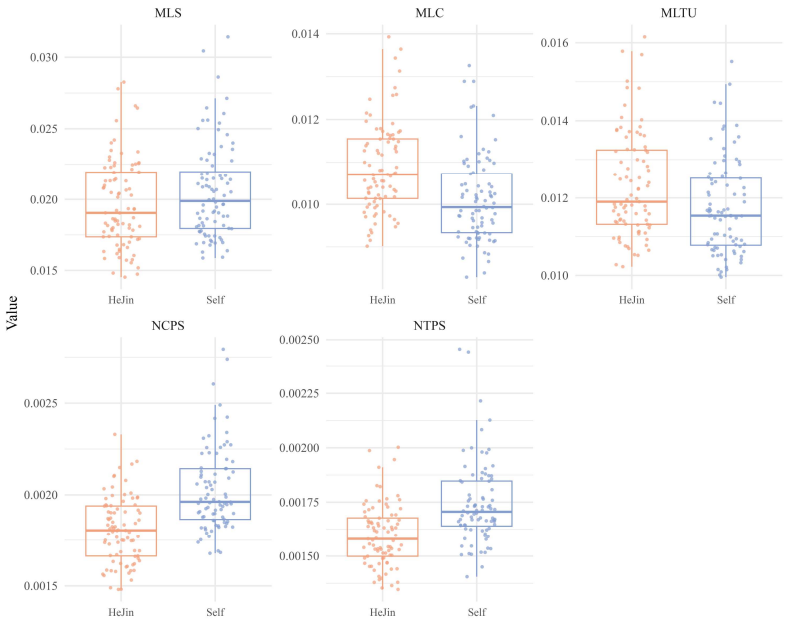


Figure 1. Syntactic Complexity Measures Between Self- and Allograph Translations.

Regarding phraseological diversity measures, Self has significantly higher means in four measures, including TOTAL_RTTR, SP_RTTR, AP_RTTR, and PV_RTTR, than HeJin (Figure 2 and Table 2), with effect sizes of 0.33, 0.23, 0.33, and 0.21, respectively. These values suggest small-to-moderate effects, reinforcing the claim that Self consistently demonstrates greater phraseological diversity across multiple linguistic patterns, from the language-independent word combinations of SP and AP to the Chinese language-specific word combination of PV and the overall word combinations. The elevated AP_RTTR particularly indicates a more frequent use of predicate modification through adverbs, which allows for finer rhetorical nuance, such as shifts in tone, attitude, or evaluative stance, further enhancing the control over expressions. The moderate effect size in TOTAL_RTTR also highlights broader lexical variations in the self-translated texts.

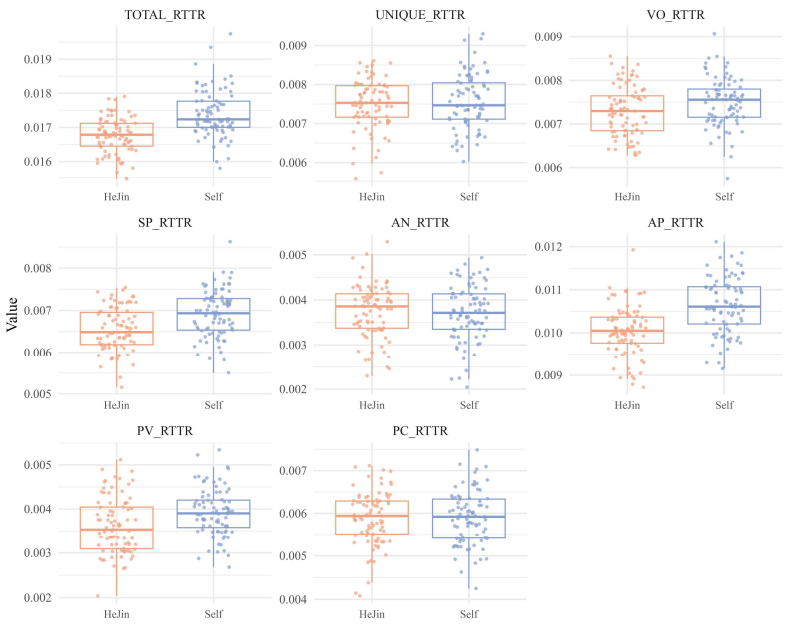


Figure 2. Phraseological Diversity Measures Between Self- and Allograph Translations.

As shown in Figure 3, the mean value for LOWFREQ_RATIO is significantly higher in Self, (effect size = 0.36), suggesting a more frequent deployment of sophisticated and less commonly used phraseological combinations.

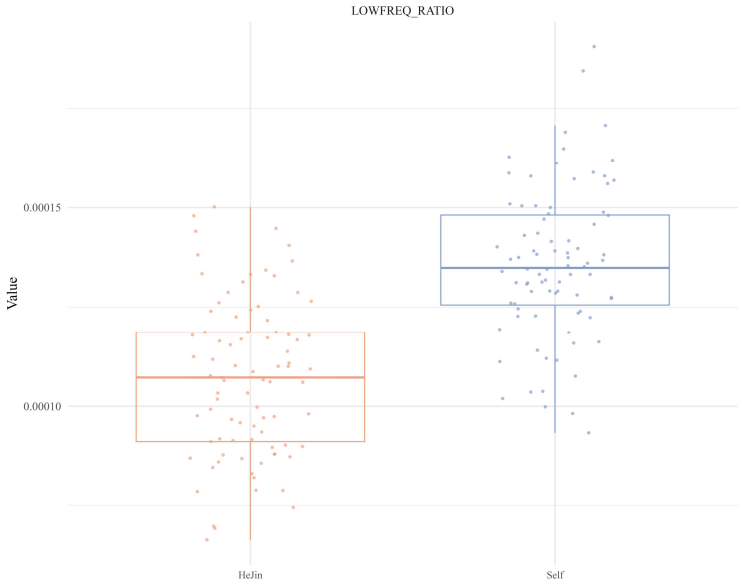


Figure 3. Phraseological Sophistication Measure of Self- and Allograph Translations.

For the phraseological complexity measures, contrasting tendencies emerge. Self exhibits a significantly higher mean in AP_RATIO (effect size = 0.16), suggesting a mild preference for adverbial modification of predicates. Meanwhile, HeJin yields significantly higher mean values in UNIQUE_RATIO and PC_RATIO, with effect sizes of -0.19 and -0.16, respectively (Figure 4 and Table 2). This indicates a slight advantage in HeJin's use of diverse and Chinese-specific predicate-complement structures. Such divergence reveals that both self-translation and allograph translation manifest a certain degree of phraseological complexity, but through different linguistic mechanisms.

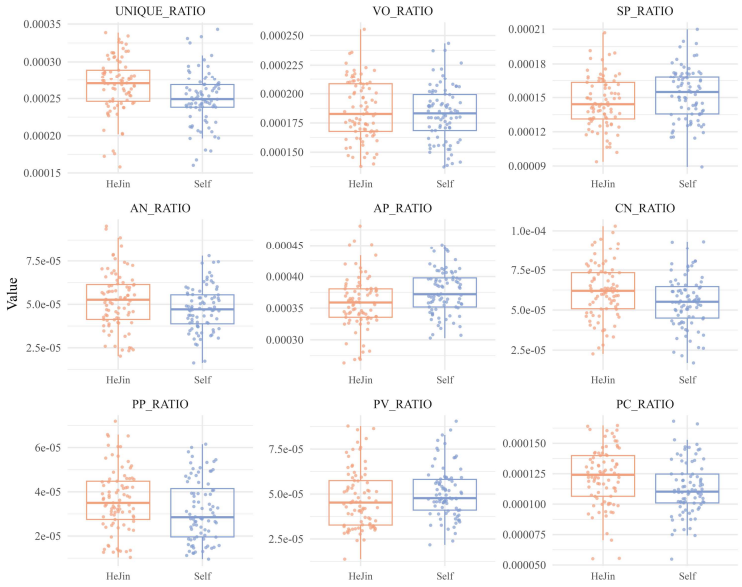


Figure 4. Phraseological Complexity Measures of Self- and Allograph Translations.

4.2. Syntactic and Phraseological Differences between Self-translation and Two LLM Translations

As presented in Table 3, Self significantly diverges from 4o-generated translation in eleven out of the twenty-three measures and differs from V3-generated translation in eighteen out of the twenty-three measures. Notably, eight measures demonstrate consistent patterns of divergence where Self significantly differs from both 4o and V3 in the same direction. However, the other significant measures reveal distinct patterns of differences, suggesting complex variations in how self-translation differs from both LLMs.

Table 3. *Post-Hoc Analysis Between Self-Translation and Two LLM Translations.*

	Measures	Self vs. 4o		Self vs. V3	
		Comparison	Effect size	Comparison	Effect size
Syntactic Complexity	MLS	*>	0.20	*>	0.42
	MLC	*>	0.36	*>	0.37
	MLTU	*>	0.33	*>	0.38
	NCPS	-	-	*>	0.24
	NTPS	-	-	*>	0.25
Phraseological Diversity	TOTAL_RTTR	-	-	*>	0.29
	UNIQUE_RTTR	-	-	*>	0.36
	VO_RTTR	*<	-0.21	*<	-0.21
	SP_RTTR	-	-	-	-
	AN_RTTR	*<	-0.54	*<	-0.63
	AP_RTTR	-	-	*>	0.38
	PV_RTTR	*>	0.30	*>	0.25
	PC_RTTR	-	-	*>	0.36
Phraseological Sophistication	LOWFREQ_RATIO	*<	-0.26	*<	-0.23
Phraseological Complexity	UNIQUE_RATIO	*>	0.17	-	-
	VO_RATIO	*<	-0.23	*<	-0.37
	SP_RATIO	-	-	-	-
	AN_RATIO	*<	-0.20	*<	-0.27
	AP_RATIO	-	-	*>	0.25
	CN_RATIO	-	-	-	-
	PP_RATIO	-	-	*<	-0.16
	PV_RATIO	*>	0.29	-	-
	PC_RATIO	-	-	*>	0.19

*> indicates the former being significantly higher than the latter (adjusted $p < 0.05$), while *< indicates the latter being significantly higher than the former (adjusted $p < 0.05$). – means no statistically significant differences.

Concerning syntactic complexity measures, Self demonstrates significantly higher mean values in MLS, MLC, and MLTU than 4o, with effect sizes of 0.20, 0.36, and 0.33, respectively, indicating small to moderate effects. Compared to V3, Self shows significantly higher means across all five measures, with effect sizes ranging from 0.24 (NCPS) to 0.42 (MLS), suggesting a moderate to considerable syntactic advantage (Figure 5 and Table 3). These results highlight a higher level of complexity in terms of the three production unit lengths in Self. The significantly higher means in NCPS and NTPS in Self over V3 further reveal a greater propensity for subordination and embedding of clauses in the self-translated text.

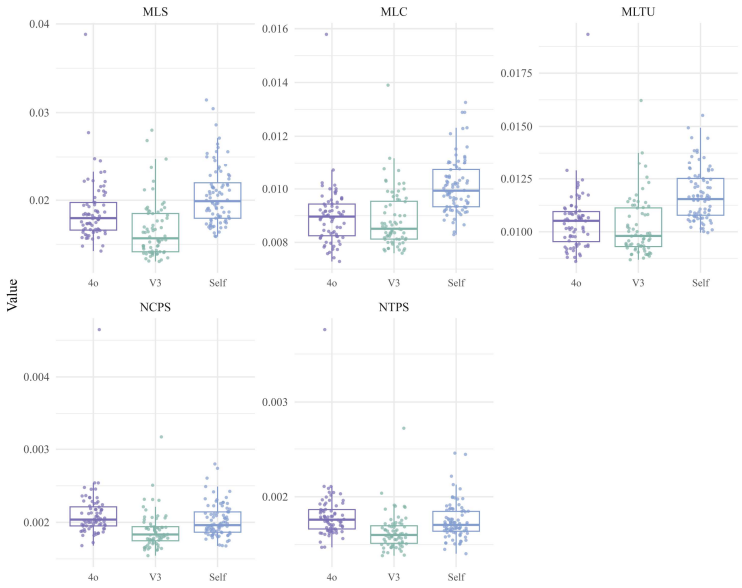


Figure 5. Syntactic Complexity Measures of Self- and LLM Translations.

Regarding phraseological diversity (Figure 6 and Table 3), Self shows significantly lower means in VO_RTTR and AN_RTTR compared to both LLM translations, with effect sizes of -0.21 and -0.54 (vs. 4o), and -0.21 and -0.63 (vs. V3), respectively, indicating moderate to large negative effects. These suggest a notable reduction in language-independent combinations in Self, especially in terms of conventional verb-object and adjective-noun collocations, which are statistically more common in LLM outputs. However, the significantly higher mean in PV_RTTR compared to both models, with effect sizes of 0.30 (vs. 4o) and 0.25 (vs. V3), signals a deliberate emphasis on Chinese-specific phraseological structures. In comparison with V3, Self also achieves higher means in TOTAL_RTTR (0.29), UNIQUE_RTTR (0.36), AP_RTTR (0.38), and PC_RTTR (0.36), reflecting moderate effects in all cases.

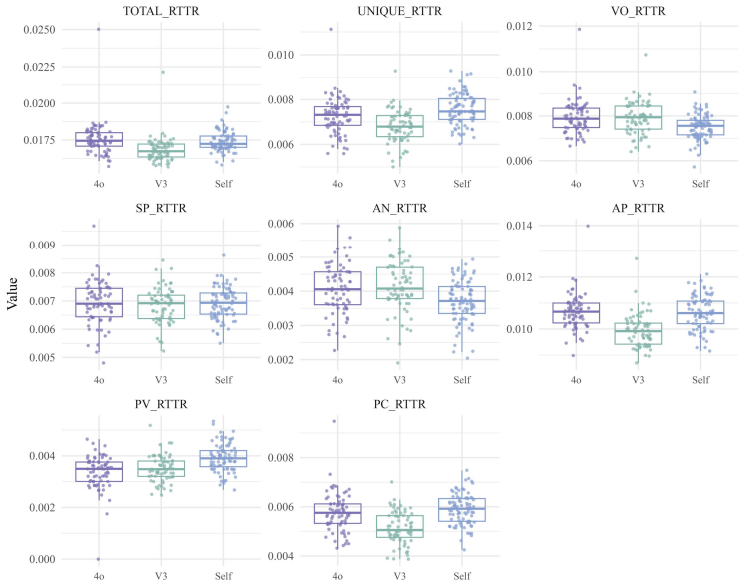


Figure 6. Phraseological Diversity Measures of Self- and LLM Translations.

As illustrated in Figure 7, a consistent pattern emerges for phraseological sophistication: Self yields significantly lower means in LOWFREQ_RATIO compared to both 4o and V3, with effect sizes of -0.26 and -0.23, respectively (Table 3). These small-to-moderate negative effects suggest that Self features fewer rare or low-frequency word combinations.

This pattern indicates a more cautious and possibly reader-conscious approach to phraseological choices, where Yeh privileges familiar or conventional expressions.

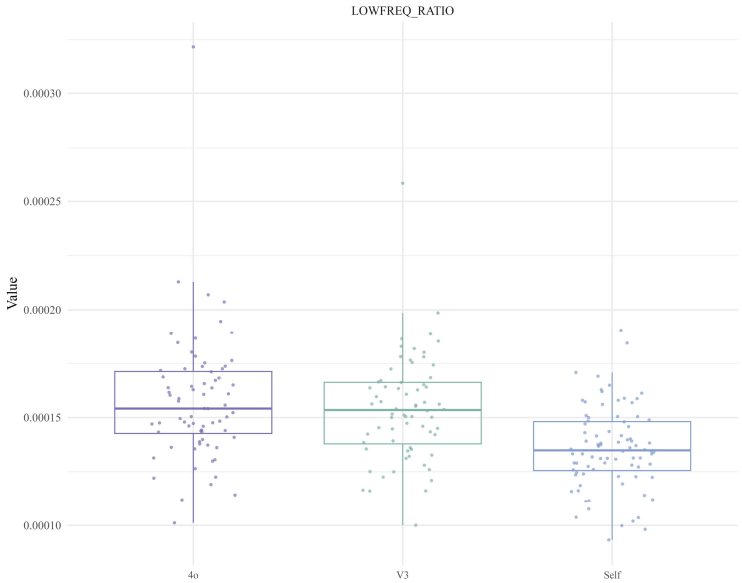


Figure 7. Phraseological Sophistication Measure of Self- and LLM Translations.

The analysis of phraseological complexity measures reveals nuanced and divergent patterns across different translation types (Figure 8 and Table 3). Compared to 4o, Self shows significantly higher means in UNIQUE_RATIO (0.17) and PV_RATIO (0.29), suggesting small-to-moderate effects and a preference for lexical variety and Chinese-specific preposition-verb combinations. These distinctions, however, are not observed in comparison with V3. Against V3, Self demonstrates significantly higher means in AP_RATIO (0.25) and PC_RATIO (0.19), but a significantly lower mean in PP_RATIO (-0.16), reflecting small but consistent differences. Importantly, Self consistently shows significantly lower means in both VO_RATIO and AN_RATIO across both comparisons, with effect sizes of -0.23 and -0.20 (vs. 4o), and -0.37 and -0.27 (vs. V3), indicating moderate negative effects. These patterns reveal that while LLMs adhere more closely to generic phraseological templates, Self introduces distinctively Chinese syntactic patterns and rhetorical preferences.

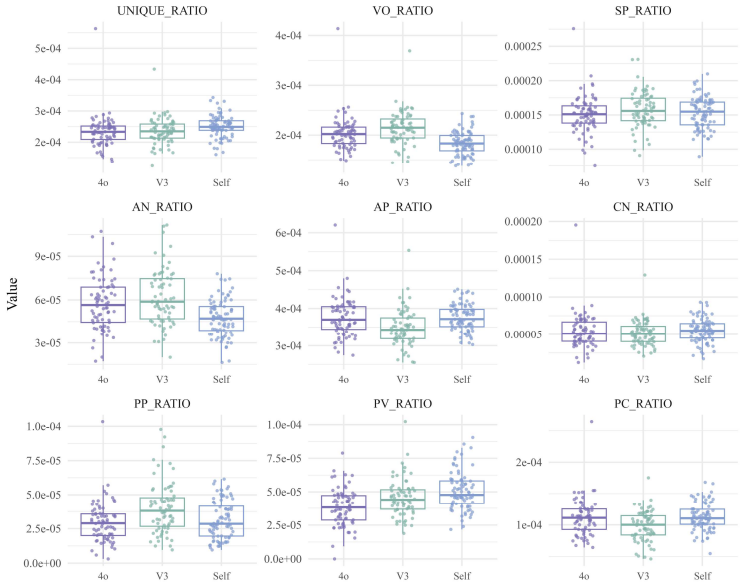


Figure 8. Phraseological Complexity Measures of Self- and LLM Translations.

5. Discussion

By adopting a corpus-based approach, this study reveals the stylistic differences between Yeh's self-translation and He Jin's allograph translation, as well as the LLM translations, through the lens of syntactic and phraseological features. Compared to the allograph translation, Yeh's self-translation exhibits greater syntactic complexity, characterized by higher levels of syntactic embedding and subordination, and a broader range of phraseological diversity and sophistication. Comparisons with LLM translations (V3 and 4o) show that self-translation not only maintains higher syntactic complexity but also displays greater selectivity and cultural sensitivity in phraseological choices, favoring deliberate diversity and complexity in Chinese-specific constructions.

5.1. Stylistic Divergence Between Self-Translation and Allograph Translation

By analyzing a range of syntactic and phraseological measures, the findings demonstrate that Yeh's translation is characterized by greater syntactic embedding, more diversified phraseological constructions, and selective complexity in specific structures. These patterns reflect the self-translator's unique authorial agency and stylistic confidence, in contrast to the more structurally conservative profile evident in He Jin's allograph translation.

Yeh's self-translation shows higher values in NCPS and NTPS, and a lower value in MLC, pointing to a greater degree of syntactic embedding and clause chaining. These indicators signal a complex sentence style with subordinate clauses functioning within larger sentence boundaries. As Hu (2021) suggests, NCPS has the strongest predictive power at the sentence level for assessing L2 Chinese writing quality, as it reflects a writer's ability to construct layered syntactic relationships. Additionally, Hao et al. (2024) found that lower MLC values, when combined with higher NCPS and NTPS, correlate with more quality writing, as they indicate the strategic use of shorter, functionally dense clauses within complex sentence frameworks. Taken together, these three measures reflect not only structural complexity but also syntactic efficiency. Yeh's sentence-level style thus reveals a nuanced control of information flow, where syntactic complexity is achieved through modular yet hierarchically organized clause structures, rather than through long, elaborated units. This stylistic tendency is illustrated in Yeh's translation of an exemplary passage: "I liked to stir it up with my bare feet, and today I went to do it again. The fine sand at the bottom whirled upwards like a spiral of smoke, as I swung one of my feet, obscuring the clear water" (Yeh, 1947, p. 7) (see Appendix 5 in Supplementary Files).

In Yeh's self-translation, the passage is organized into a sequence of short but syntactically embedded clauses, creating a layered rhythm. Three action verbs, "走到" (walk over), "伸进" (stretch into), and "搅混" (stir up), are each structured in parallel with ellipsis of the subject, a typical feature of Chinese narrative construction that produces a compressed but dynamic sentence flow. The subsequent clause "于是沙子便从河底盘旋地往上浮，像一柱旋转的烟" (Back translation: so the sand swirled up from the riverbed, like a spinning column of smoke) features an embedded cause-and-effect relationship, where the imagery unfolds in sync with the movement. This mirrors the visual effect of spiraling sand through syntactic coordination and smooth progression, reflecting the cumulative layering effect evidenced by the higher NCPS and NTPS values.

The rhythmic, layered syntactic structure evident in Yeh's self-translation reflects his early aesthetic philosophy as a writer. When composing *The Mountain Village* in English, Yeh explicitly aimed to create prose that was "vivid and vigorous" and "with rhythm" (Yeh, 1992, p. 13). This stylistic approach, emphasizing accessible, rhythmic prose, would also prove instrumental in his subsequent success as a translator and writer of children's literature. As one of the most celebrated figures in this field, Yeh became renowned for his captivating and engaging storytelling techniques (Liu & Luo, 2014, p. 57), which suggests that the narrative strategies he developed in works like *The Mountain Village* established a consistent stylistic signature that would characterize both his original writing and self-translation practices throughout his career.

In contrast, HeJin's version contains a nested temporal clause "当我把一只脚搅着把水搅混了的时候" (Back translation: When I stirred the water with one foot to stir it up), resulting in a longer, more compact structure. This MLC-heavy sentence leads to denser phrasing, but also slower rhythm and reduced kinetic quality of the scene. These

contrasting choices confirm the quantitative trend that Yeh's self-translation relies more on clause chaining than on long, internally complex clauses, yielding a more dynamic narrative style.

Yeh's self-translation also exhibits significantly higher values in multiple phraseological diversity indices, including TOTAL_RTTR, SP_RTTR, AP_RTTR, and PV_RTTR. TOTAL_RTTR has been identified as a strong indicator of Chinese writing proficiency (Hu, 2021), and Self's higher value may signal Yeh's more advanced and deliberate command of phraseological repertoire in literary translation. In particular, the elevated use of predicate-centered constructions, such as SP and AP, could further support this, as these constructs are important indices of Chinese writing quality and proficiency (Hu et al., 2022). The enhanced use of Chinese-specific combinations, like PV, is not only complex but also culturally embedded, serving as reliable indicators of higher language proficiency.

The higher LOWFREQ_RATIO in Self suggests a tendency to occasionally integrate rare or less formulaic word combinations. Since LOWFREQ_RATIO is measured against pedagogical and Chinese Wikipedia corpora (Hu, 2021), higher values indicate a deviation from standard, pedagogically or informationally dominant phraseological patterns. This stylistic choice suggests that Yeh, as a self-translator, draws from a broader, more expressive lexical repertoire and is less constrained by conventional formulae, thereby allowing for a greater degree of rhetorical nuance and authorial voice. As St-Pierre (1996, p. 233) argues, self-translation is not merely linguistic transfer but literary creation. Yeh's translation thus extends his writing, rather than reproducing it.

This creative extension is made possible by Yeh's unique position as a bilingual and bicultural author who possessed the cultural status in both language communities that is considered essential for effective self-translation (Jung, 2004, p. 530). Such bicultural competence enables him to transcend conventional linguistic boundaries and create texts that are received as original works within the target literary system (Irshad & Yousaf, 2024; Khalilovna Ashrapova et al. 2020), thereby challenging traditional hierarchies between originals and translations (Tanqueiro & López López-Gay, 2008, p. 175). Through his employment of rare and innovative stylistic devices in his self-translation, Yeh demonstrates how bilingual writers can expand the expressive possibilities of both languages and literatures. Ultimately, his work exemplifies how self-translation provides insights into writerly creativity across linguistic boundaries, revealing how self-translators serve as cultural mediators who enrich literary traditions through cross-linguistic innovation (Meylaerts, et al., 2017).

Complexity measures reveal mixed tendencies. Self shows a higher AP_RATIO, reflecting greater use of adverbials to convey aspect, intensity, or modality in Chinese (Hu et al., 2022; Li & Thompson, 1981). In contrast, He Jin's allograph translation exhibits higher UNIQUE_RATIO and PC_RATIO, both associated with language-specific constructions. While PC combinations are considered by Hu et al. (2022) as strong correlates of advanced proficiency and writing quality, Yeh's preference for AP and PV structures, coupled with high diversity scores, suggests a more fluid and responsive style—one that dynamically modulates phrase structure to meet communicative goals. He Jin's relatively higher complexity scores in a narrow band of structures may reflect a more cautious, form-driven stylistic model, where complexity is less a tool of expression than a formal constraint to fulfil.

To contextualize the observed quantitative findings, the following excerpt illustrates the differences between the self-translation and the allograph translation: "She was often like that, mooing without a cause, staring hazily at the water which flowed down west rhythmically, day and night, always in its own peaceful way. So, I found nothing new in that direction either, except that the stream made a slight bend round a terrace in front of the town" (see Appendix 6 in Supplementary Files).

Yeh's self-translation demonstrates a pronounced use of AP constructions, predominantly marked by the Chinese character "地," which functions as a modifier marker for adverbial phrases. These constructions cluster together to build a rhythmically rich and emotionally textured narrative. The phrase "日夜不停地、有节奏地、平静地、向西方流去的河水" (Back translation: the river that day and night, rhythmically, peacefully flows to the west) features three adverbial modifiers leading to the PV structure "向…流" (flow to…), creating cascading, almost musical phrasing that mirrors the continuous, hypnotic movement of the river. This syntactic parallelism reinforces the temporal and spatial progression of the water flow, with each adverb contributing a distinct sensory dimension: temporal ("日夜不停地," day and night),

acoustic ("有节奏地," rhythmically), and emotional ("平静地," peacefully) qualities before culminating in the directional movement ("向西方流," flow to the west).

He Jin's version is comparatively more compressed in phraseological terms. While it contains certain AP usage, as seen in "有节奏地流" (rhythmically flowing), these modifiers are embedded within longer, more complex noun phrases rather than forming the clear sequential pattern found in Yeh's version. Generally, He Jin's translation "朦懂地望着那朝朝夜夜老是走着它自己的平静的路途的，有节奏地流向西去的水流" (Back translation: vaguely gazing at the water that, day and night, always followed its own calm path, rhythmically flowing westward) creates a dense, nested structure where the adverbial elements are subordinated within relative clauses, reducing their rhythmic impact. The PV usage is also minimal, with spatial movement being expressed through simpler verbal structures such as "绕过了" (wound past), which lacks the dynamic buildup characteristic of Yeh's longer PV strings.

In short, the contrast highlights two distinct translator styles. Yeh, as the original author, exerts strong stylistic control through flexible syntactic embedding, high phraseological diversity, and selective sophistication. His choices reflect not only bilingual fluency but a profound cultural and rhetorical awareness rooted in his dual author-translator identity. This finding supports previous studies suggesting that both bilingualism and biculturality are prerequisites for self-translation (Jung, 2004). He Jin's style, conversely, appears more uniform and conservative, favoring certain complex forms but with less variation and modulation. He himself acknowledged this point in his translator's note: "I feel sorry that my clumsy translation spoils the original writer's clear and simple style in English" (Yeh, 1950, p. 273). Self-translators like Yeh engage in bilingual projects that allow them to explore expanded stylistic possibilities. Throughout his translation career, Yeh consistently viewed translation as "recreation of a fine work," believing translated works should become cultural treasures in the target literature (Yeh, 1997, p. 29). Our findings demonstrate that Yeh approached self-translation as an opportunity to recreate his own work within Chinese literature, transforming his translated text into an integral part of the Chinese literary tradition rather than merely a derivative, or in Yeh's own words, "transplanted" work (Yeh, 1997, p. 29).

5.2. Emulating the Self-Translator or Not?

Despite a carefully crafted self-translator framing with the same prompts for the two LLMs, the resulting translations demonstrate clear and consistent stylistic divergences from Yeh's human self-translation, differences that reflect not only linguistic outputs but also distinct epistemologies of authorship, translation, and meaning-making.

Yeh's self-translation exhibits higher syntactic complexity across all five core measures, especially MLC, MLTU, and MLS, producing long, embedded structures. Moderately higher NCPS and NTPS values compared to V3 further indicate a preference for subordinated, layered syntax. This style reflects a rhetorically dense and cognitively planned structure, unlike LLM outputs that favor syntactic regularity and surface fluency. Muñoz-Ortiz et al. (2024, p. 10) similarly observe that LLM-generated sentences are less diverse and more uniform due to probabilistic "register levelling." Even when prompted as a self-translator, LLMs lack the stylistic intentionality evident in Yeh's planning—an authorial fingerprint shaped by social and cultural experience (Baker, 2000). Overall, Yeh's translation is more elaborate, both in longer production units and in the greater frequency of syntactic subordination and clause chaining, as confirmed by significantly higher NCPS and NTPS values. To illustrate, the same example used in the comparison with HeJin is revisited here (see Appendix 5 in Supplementary Files).

Different from Yeh's version featuring short yet intricately connected clauses, marked by ellipsis, coordination, and causal subordination, both 4o and V3 produce grammatically sound outputs but favor syntactically flatter structures. 4o compresses the entire sequence into two main clauses, eliminating the procedural breakdown that characterizes both the source text and Yeh's version. The second sentence employs participial modification "随着我的脚" (with my foot) rather than the causal progression found in Yeh's "于是" (so) construction. V3 follows the temporal clause "当我摆动一只脚时" (as I moved one foot) presented in the original, but maintains a binary structure that lacks the coordinated chaining and cumulative layering observed in Yeh's self-translation. The temporal subordination creates grammatical

complexity without achieving the rhythmic flow of Yeh's coordinate sequence. These choices align with their lower syntactic complexity scores and result in a more compressed, mechanically structured rhythm.

Concerning phraseological diversity, both LLM-generated translations contain fewer predicate-centered and culturally embedded structures, such as AP, PV, and PC combinations, forms central to grammatical and rhetorical nuance in Chinese (Hu et al., 2022; Li & Thompson, 1981). Another telling indicator is UNIQUE_RTTR, which captures the richness of Chinese-specific phraseological combinations. Yeh's self-translation exhibits a higher UNIQUE_RTTR value than both 4o and V3, reflecting a broader range of phrase structures. Although not statistically significant against 4o, the elevated value nonetheless suggests that the human author-translator draws from a more varied and controlled phraseological repertoire, deploying diversity in a measured, context-sensitive way that LLMs fail to emulate. This also echoes Muñoz-Ortiz et al. (2024), who link greater lexical richness and variation with human-generated texts, an insight that holds true not only in general writing contexts but also in Chinese and literary translation. It is also worth noting that both LLMs register significantly higher VO_RTTR and AN_RTTR values. According to Hu et al. (2022), these two structures are language-independent and thus less discriminative of proficiency in Chinese. In contrast, the predicate-centered and Chinese-specific combinations are more diagnostic of stylistic maturity and competence. The higher VO_RTTR and AN_RTTR values observed in LLM-generated translations likely result from their reliance on high-frequency, language-independent structures within large-scale pretraining corpora, thus reflecting statistical representations instead of nuanced, culturally enriched meanings (Bender et al., 2021). This systematic bias could also stem from the prompt that instructs the LLMs to "remain faithful to the original text, without rewriting or adapting it." This author-translator's translation idea, when transferred to LLMs, may result in what Guo et al. (2025) identify as an "English accent" in LLMs, where non-English outputs systematically reflect English-based linguistic structures.

However, the extent of divergence in phraseological diversity varies: 4o's translation aligns more closely with Yeh's, while V3 exhibits significantly greater stylistic deviation. In discriminative measures like TOTAL_RTTR, UNIQUE_RTTR, AP_RTTR, and PC_RTTR (Hu, 2021; Hu et al., 2022), significant differences emerged only between self-translation and V3 translation. This difference may index a more controlled stylistic identity produced by 4o—aligning more closely with the human self-translator—and also supports the previous findings that 4o registered relatively better performance in literary translation than other LLMs, but still could not achieve the human-level quality (Zhang et al., 2024).

As Hu et al. (2022) note, UNIQUE_RATIO and PC_RATIO are reliable indicators of advanced L2 Chinese writing quality. Yeh's higher scores signal not only increased phraseological complexity but also a strategic deployment of modifying and complement structures, especially those conveying aspectual, modal, or comparative meanings. These forms are particularly common in high-proficiency L2 writing (Hu, 2021) and thus serve as powerful tools for shaping rhetorical emphasis in Chinese. Conversely, VO_RATIO is significantly lower in Yeh's translation, a pattern that aligns with Hu's (2021) finding that VO_RATIO negatively correlates with Chinese writing quality and proficiency. This can be attributed to the syntactic nature of Chinese as a topic-prominent language (Hu et al., 2022; Yu, 2020), where verbs and objects often exhibit looser syntactic dependency and more flexible positioning than in subject-prominent languages like English (Liu, 2010). Yeh's reduced reliance on VO structures, therefore, reflects a native sensitivity to Chinese discourse conventions, privileging rhetorical coherence and thematic progression over rigid syntactic patterns.

Altogether, the phraseological complexity profile of Self reflects a strategic distribution of stylistic density, aligned with the translator's literary and cultural intent rather than statistical regularity. We examine the same excerpt in the previous section to demonstrate how Self specifically differs from LLM translations (see Appendix 6 in Supplementary Files).

Different from the rich chain of AP structures complemented by PV and PC constructions in the Self, 4o and V3 reduce this density through fewer AP, PV, and PC structures. For example, while 4o maintains one PC structure "看去" (look), the sentence structure is simpler and more standardized. V3 replicates the PV construction of "向…流" (flow to), but lacks additional adverbial modifiers, thus failing to create the rhythmic dynamics found in the self-translated text. Meanwhile, its AP usage remains minimal and less concentrated. For instance, compared to the stacked AP sequence in Self, V3 compresses this richness into "日夜有节奏地" (rhythmically day and night), omitting the auditory and temporal texture.

Taken together, this analysis suggests that Yeh's translation is not simply more complex at the phraseological level in a statistical sense but also rhetorically richer, with choices that create a more immersive and affective reading experience. The LLM translations, while grammatically accurate, tend toward functional rather than literary expression, prioritizing clarity and comprehension over the kind of stylistic density that generates aesthetic and emotional resonance in literary translation.

Most critically, this study shows that even when explicitly instructed to perform the identity of a self-translator, LLMs fail to replicate the stylistic depth, structural selectivity, and cultural-linguistic awareness embedded in Yeh's self-translation. While both 4o and V3 produce fluent and coherent outputs, they default to statistically frequent, language-independent patterns and lack the rhetorical modulation found in human translation. These findings highlight a fundamental limitation of current LLMs: they can mimic the surface of self-translation but not the interpretive and cultural labor that underpins it, thus struggling to achieve human stylistic variations (Reinhart et al., 2025). It also extends the scope of previous findings that human-generated text tends to exhibit more flexibility with higher syntactic complexity and richer expressions in essay writing (e.g., Opara, 2025; Yildiz Durak et al., 2025) by demonstrating that in literary translation, these stylistic differences between human and AI-generated texts become even more pronounced, reflecting the heightened demands of rhetorical nuance, cultural sensitivity, and authorial voice in this domain. Self-translation, as exemplified by Yeh, is not only a linguistic act but a stylistic positioning—one that remains uniquely human.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the distinctiveness of self-translation by comparing the stylistic features in Yeh's self-translated work with those in He Jin's allograph translation and two LLM-generated translations prompted to simulate a self-translator persona. Through a corpus-based analysis of syntactic and phraseological features, the study found that Yeh's self-translation stands apart in distinct ways. Compared to the allograph translation, Yeh's translation demonstrates greater syntactic embedding and a more controlled use of clause length and displays more diversified and sophisticated phraseological structures. These patterns reflect a style featuring hierarchical and strategic structuring and attuned rhetoric with richer expressions, which could be hallmarks of a self-translator with authorial insight into the source text's meaning and greater freedom in his or her creation. When contrasted with the LLM-generated translations, Yeh's translation reveals an even deeper stylistic divergence. Despite being prompted with a detailed persona that mirrors the self-translator's role, both 4o and V3 fall short of replicating the rhetorical intentionality, cultural embeddedness, and structural selectivity found in human translation. Taken together, these findings suggest that self-translation is characterized by a unique blend of authorial control, cultural sensitivity, and stylistic deliberation

These findings have several implications for translation practice and the evaluation of AI performance in literary translation. Firstly, they highlight that literary translation cannot be simply evaluated through functional equivalence or reading fluency. Instead, stylistics and creativity that are central to literary works should be fully considered as evaluative criteria. Secondly, while LLM-generated translations in this study exhibited technical competence, they lacked the stylistic innovation and creative experimentation that characterizes human literary translation. This points to a crucial value proposition for human translators: their capacity to explore and expand the boundaries of language and literature through creative risk-taking and cultural sensitivity, capabilities that current AI systems cannot replicate. Rather than viewing AI as a replacement technology, these findings suggest that human translators should position themselves as stylistic innovators who contribute to the evolution of both national and world literature. Thirdly, for translation pedagogy, these insights indicate that training programs should extend beyond linguistic accuracy and intercultural competence to emphasize creativity, rhetorical control, and stylistic experimentation, preparing translators as cultural and literary agents in an AI-mediated landscape. Future research should extend this line of inquiry by incorporating reception studies, examining how readers perceive and evaluate stylistic differences across human and LLM-generated translations, and by testing a broader range of prompts, genres, and language pairs to probe the limits of LLM stylistic capacity.

This study is not without limitations. Its focus on a single author and text, while enabling controlled comparison, restricts generalizability. Yeh's linguistic and cultural background may produce patterns not representative of wider self-translation practices, and the single-text corpus makes it difficult to distinguish author-specific traits from general tendencies. Expanding the dataset to include multiple authors, texts, and LLM models would clarify these boundaries. Finally, while combining quantitative and qualitative approaches, this study could be complemented by a deeper

qualitative analysis of how self-translators negotiate cultural and linguistic boundaries beyond what numerical measures can capture.

Notes

[1] https://www.adobe.com/acrobat/acrobat-pro.html

[2] https://www.kandianguji.com/shuzihua?page_mode=pdf_file

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Information on Informed Consent or any Data Privacy Statements

Informed consent is not applicable in this study. Data is available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Author Contributions

Jiaxing Hu: Conceptualization; data collection; investigation; methodology; project administration; validation; writing – original draft; writing – review & editing.

Wenkang Zhang: Conceptualization; data collection; data curation; formal analysis; investigation; methodology; software; writing – original draft; writing – review & editing.

Rui Xie: Methodology; software; writing – review & editing.

Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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Appendices

The appendices are available at https://rals.scu.ac.ir/jufile?ar_sfile=247659

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