

T&I REVIEW

June 2026. Vol. 16. No. 1.

From Canon to Code: Rethinking the Translation Policy of the BDK Buddhist Canon Project in the Age of AI*

Yanfei Zhao and Huijuan Ma*****

In recent years, AI technologies have increasingly been applied to the translation of sacred texts, a field often regarded as one of the last bastions of human translation. Drawing on González Núñez's framework of translation policy, this paper examines the translation management, practice, and beliefs of the BDK Buddhist Canon Project, one of the most ambitious modern efforts to translate the Chinese Buddhist canon into English. The findings demonstrate that BDK has developed a scholar-led, dissemination-oriented model that seeks to balance translation accuracy with reader accessibility. Compared with AI translation, this model retains clear strengths in interpretive depth, philological accuracy, and ethical accountability. At the same time, AI translation continues to intensify some of its own limitations, including the absence of a clear AI-use policy, insufficient collaboration, and a minimalist annotation policy that may obscure interpretive complexity. The paper suggests that BDK could move toward a human-AI collaborative model in which machines support drafting and technical organization, while the interpretive and editorial authority remains with human experts.

Keywords: Buddhist translation, the BDK project, translation policy, AI-assisted translation, institutional translation

* This research was supported by the China Scholarship Council Program (Project ID: 202506530284) and the Department of Religious Studies at Yale University. We would also like to thank the two anonymous reviewers and Professor Eric Greene of Yale University for their valuable insights and support.

** Beijing Foreign Studies University

*** Beijing Foreign Studies University

1. Introduction

Throughout human civilization, Buddhist translation has constituted one of the most significant forms of cultural exchange. It not only facilitated the spread of Buddhism across linguistic and cultural boundaries, but also contributed to the development of a wide range of cultural forms. So far, existing scholarship has paid substantial attention to the early transmission of Buddhist texts, especially the translation of Indian Buddhist scriptures into Chinese from the second to the eleventh century (e.g., Hung 2005; Nattier 2008; Funayama 2013). Yet Buddhist translation did not end with the medieval period. It has remained an ongoing tradition that has continued well into the modern era.

From the mid-nineteenth century onward, European missionaries and scholars began translating Buddhist texts into Western languages, primarily from Pali and Chinese into English. By the late nineteenth century, key Buddhist texts, such as the Jātaka tales, the *Diamond Sutra*, the *Lotus Sutra*, and *The Awakening of Faith in Mahāyāna*, had been translated by European scholars including Max Müller (1879–1910), Samuel Beal (1871), and Timothy Richard (1907). In the 1970s, with the establishment of Buddhist Studies as a standalone discipline, modern Buddhist translation entered a phase of rapid growth, supported by translators' improved proficiency in Asian languages and the increasing availability of Buddhist dictionaries and reference tools.

However, unlike the systematic translation of the Pali canon under the auspices of the Pali Text Society, Chinese Buddhist texts were more often translated individually, without sustained institutional support or a comprehensive long-term plan. This situation began to change with the emergence of large-scale organized translation projects, among which the BDK Buddhist Canon Project has been the most ambitious and influential. BDK (Jpn. 仏教伝道協会; Bukkyō Dendō Kyōkai), also known as the Numata Foundation, is a public-interest organization established in 1965 by Yehan Numata (1897–1994). The Numata Foundation seeks to promote Buddhist teachings, culture, and research and one of its major undertakings has been the English translation of the Chinese Buddhist canon.

In 1982, the BDK Buddhist canon project was initiated and two years later, the Numata Center for Translation and Research was established in Berkeley, California. The project initially selected 139 works for translation and adopted the long-term goal of rendering the entire Taishō Tripiṭaka into English. By the end of 2025, 114 texts had been translated and published in 57 volumes under the collective title “The English Buddhist Canon,” making the BDK project one of the most significant institutional enterprises in the modern history of Buddhist translation.

Despite its scale and influence, the BDK project has received limited scholarly attention. Existing studies on the English translation of Chinese Buddhist texts remain relatively few. Pan (2021) sketches the broader landscape of English translations of Chinese Buddhist texts, providing valuable statistical observations such as the number of translated texts and productivity of translators. Jiang (2021) offers a more specific overview of the English translation of Chinese Buddhist texts in the United States, noting that the BDK project is a particularly important case. However, no study to date has systematically examined the BDK project in terms of its institutional structure, translation management as well as translation activities. The gap is noteworthy, since BDK is not merely a translation initiative, but also a concrete institutional model for how Buddhist texts are selected, translated, edited, and presented to English readership. Further, with the emergence of AI-powered translation in recent years, the BDK project has also entered a new context, where the key question is no longer how Buddhist texts should be translated by human translators, but how institutional translation projects such as BDK should respond to new technological environments.

Drawing on archival materials, project guidelines, newsletters, published translations, and related paratextual materials, this study examines the translation policy of the BDK project from its inception in 1984 to the present. It also assesses the strengths and limitations of the BDK model in the age of AI-powered translation and considers how its policy might be recalibrated in response to changing technological environments. By placing BDK’s human-centered model in dialogue with AI translation, this paper offers a case study for rethinking translator

competence, institutional translation management, and translators' ethical accountability in the age of AI. Specifically, this paper addresses three questions:

- (1) What constitutes the BDK's Buddhist translation policy?
- (2) Compared with AI translation, what are the strengths and limitations of the BDK model?
- (3) How might Buddhist translation policy be recalibrated in the age of AI?

2. Institutional Translation and Translation Policy

Over the past two decades, “institutional translation studies” has emerged as a burgeoning field in translation research. As early as the 1980s, Mossop (1988: 65–66) called attention to translating institutions as a “missing factor” in translation theory, arguing that institutional settings can shape the general approach taken in translation. Institution does not only refer to concrete organizations such as companies, churches, publishers, or governmental bodies. It may also refer to a set of norms or expectations that influence behaviors. Toury (2012: 7), for instance, describes translating as “an institutionalized mode of text generation” governed by norms.

The concept of “institutional translation” was proposed by Koskinen (2008: 22) in her seminal work on the EU translation. For Koskinen, institutional translation is carried out by official bodies as “a means of speaking” to a particular audience (*ibid*). Translation is therefore not a neutral act of linguistic transfer, but a regulated communicative practice shaped by institutional aims, authority, and ideology. Similarly, Kang (2009: 141) argues that institutional translation concerns the “organizational, structural, relational, ideological or historical aspects” of a translating institution and their impact on translators, translation processes, and translation products.

Closely related to institutional translation is the notion of “translation policy.” As Meylaerts (2011: 163) notes, almost all institutions, whether official or informal, have a “policy” dimension. She defines translation policy as “a set of legal rules

that regulate translation in the public domain” (ibid: 165). This conception is further advanced by González Núñez (2016), who proposes a more comprehensive model for translation policy, which comprises “translation management,” “translation practice,” and “translation beliefs.” This tripartite model is neither too narrow nor too diffuse, and it allows for a systematic exploration of how translation is carried out within specific institutional settings.

According to González Núñez (2016: 54–55), “translation management” refers to the decisions made by those in authority regarding the use, organization, and regulation of translation within a given domain. These decisions may concern such matters as whether translation is undertaken at all, which texts are selected, who is authorized to translate, and how translation is supervised or funded. Because such decisions are often codified in written documents, translation management is usually the most visible and overt dimension of translation policy.

“Translation practice” concerns what happens in the process of translation. It may involve such questions as “what texts get translated, what modes of interpreting are used, into and out of what languages, and where it takes place” (ibid: 55). In this sense, translation practice may reveal implicit policies that are not formally stated but can be observed in pragmatic problem-solving processes.

Finally, “translation beliefs” refers to the beliefs held by members of a community about the value, purpose, and proper form of translation (ibid). These beliefs may be explicitly articulated in prefaces, guidelines, public statements, or institutional narratives, but they may also remain unspoken and must be inferred from institutional choices and translational behavior.

Taken together, these three dimensions provide a methodologically useful framework for the present study. By investigating the translation policy of the BDK project, we hope to unravel more intricate layers of institutional translation practice and contribute to broader discussions of Buddhist translation in the modern age.

3. Buddhist Translation Policy of the BDK Project

Since its inception in the early 1980s, BDK has gradually developed a relatively clear translation policy governing the selection of texts, the recruitment of translators, and editorial procedures. In 1983, two steering committees, the Editorial Committee and the Publication Committee, were established to oversee the project. The former is based in Tokyo, Japan and composed of nine Japanese scholars. The latter is based in Berkeley, the United States and consists of six scholars working at American academic institutions. The composition of its two steering committees suggests that BDK has a strong academic orientation. In what follows, its translation policy will be examined through three dimensions: translation management, translation practice, and translation beliefs.

3.1. Translation management

BDK's translation management is most clearly articulated in its guideline for English translation of the Chinese Buddhist canon. The guideline was first formulated in 1982 by its editorial committee, with the latest revision released in 2023 (BDK 2023: 6–8). This brief document contains sixteen items covering the selection of source texts, the execution of translation, and the duties and rights of translators.

3.1.1. *Selection of source Buddhist texts*

First, BDK stipulates that the primary textual basis for translation is the Taishō Tripiṭaka, the standard modern edition of the Chinese Buddhist canon edited by Takakusu and Watanabe (1990). Yet the project does not aim to translate the canon in a sequential or comprehensive manner. Instead, it follows a selective and curated model, prioritizing certain texts over others. By the end of 2025, BDK had translated and published 114 Buddhist texts in 57 volumes. To examine its pattern of selection, we have grouped its published translations into different categories (see Figure 1).

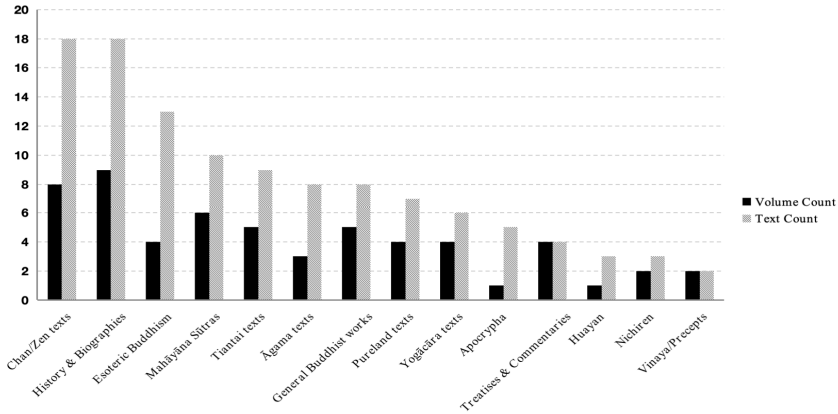


Figure 1. The distribution of BDK's published Buddhist texts across different categories

As shown in Figure 1, BDK gives priority to influential works in East Asian Buddhism, especially Zen texts (Chn. Chan; Kor. Seon). The prominence of Zen is significant since it is one of the most recognizable symbols of Japanese Buddhist culture. Associated with meditation, simplicity, and spiritual liberation, Zen has occupied a privileged position in the Western imagination of Asian Buddhism (Dumoulin 1992: ix). In addition to Zen works, BDK also includes major Mahāyāna scriptures such as the *Lotus Sutra* and the *Vimalakīrti Sutra* (see Paul and McRae 2004; Kubo and Yuyama 2007). This further suggests its preference for classical texts with doctrinal centrality and broad prestige within Buddhist traditions.

Beyond “scriptures” in the narrow sense, BDK has also published translations across a wide range of genres, including commentaries, treatises, monastic regulations, biographies, and travel records. This generic diversity suggests that the project seeks not only to transmit Buddhist teachings, but also to represent the historical, institutional, and cultural dimensions of Buddhism. For instance, BDK shows a strong interest in the life and legacy of Xuanzang (ca. 602–664), an eminent Chinese monk and translator. Both Xuanzang’s biography and his travel record to the Western Regions have been translated into English (Li 1995, 1996). This case illustrates that, for BDK, the Buddhist canon is understood not merely

as a repository of sacred sermons, but also as a broader cultural and institutional archive.

3.1.2. Selection of Buddhist translators

With respect to translator recruitment, the collected data on BDK translators shows that the project's translator pool is relatively concentrated and dominated by scholars from Japan (39%) and North America (37%). Much smaller representation comes from Europe, Australia, New Zealand, Chinese mainland, and Taiwan (see Figure 2). Most of the translators are trained in Buddhist Studies, while very few identify themselves as professional translators. This pattern is also reflected in BDK's translator recruitment. For instance, Kenneth Tanaka, the chair of the BDK Editorial Committee, once posted a call for translators on the academic portal of H-Buddhism, requiring applicants to submit a statement of qualifications, an academic curriculum vitae, and two letters of reference (Tanaka 2016). This procedure clearly shows its emphasis on institutional credentials and scholarly expertise. Yet practical translation experience or formal translation training is not explicitly required. Thus, the ideal BDK translator is conceived more as a specialist in Buddhist Studies than as a professionally trained translator.

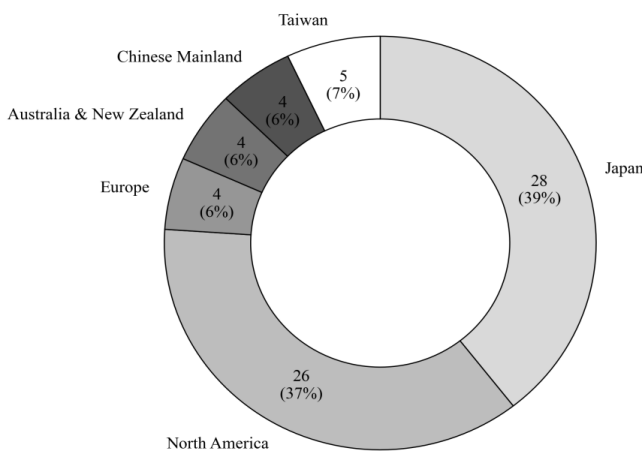


Figure 2. The regional distribution of BDK translators

As for remuneration, BDK pays translators 350 US dollars per Taishō page. One Taishō page is estimated to have 1,500 Chinese characters. This amounts to 0.23 US dollars per Chinese character. In nominal terms, this rate is not low compared with the literary translation rates reported by PEN America (2026), according to which translators are commonly paid 0.12 to 0.16 US dollars per word. However, given the highly specialized expertise required for Buddhist translation, BDK's remuneration level remains modest. A useful comparison can be made with the Buddhist translation project organized by the Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism (2012). According to Muller (2014: 3), the Jogye project paid translators approximately four times BDK's per-page rate. This more generous remuneration enabled the project to secure the cooperation of leading experts in the field within a relatively short period.

A further observation is that BDK relies on a relatively older translator base, which is largely composed of senior scholars in Buddhist Studies. Among the eight most productive BDK translators, six have already passed away while the remaining two are senior scholars.¹⁾ This raises concerns about the project's long-term sustainability, since senior scholars usually have heavier academic responsibilities. If BDK is to remain sustainable, it needs to cultivate a younger and more diverse translator base, including professionally trained translators and scholars in Translation Studies, literature, Asian Studies, and even digital humanities. Such diversification would strengthen the sustainability of the project and enrich the interpretive horizons through which Buddhist texts are read and translated.

3.2. Translation practice

In terms of translation practice, BDK aims to balance translation reliability with reader accessibility. On the one hand, the project implements strict quality control. As illustrated in Figure 3,²⁾ the editorial committee usually commissions one text

1) The eight most productive BDK translators are Rolf W. Giebel (10 translated works), Li Rongxi* (8), John R. McRae* (5), Charles Willemen* (4), Harumi Hirano Ziegler* (4), Shohei Ichimura* (4), John P. Keenan* (4), and Paul L. Swanson (4). Asterisks indicate deceased translators.

2) Source: Kenneth Tanaka's presentation at the "BDK Symposium: Translating the Abhidharmakośa,"

to one translator (in rare cases, two co-translators), who prepares the draft independently. The completed translation will undergo three rounds of review before going into publication.

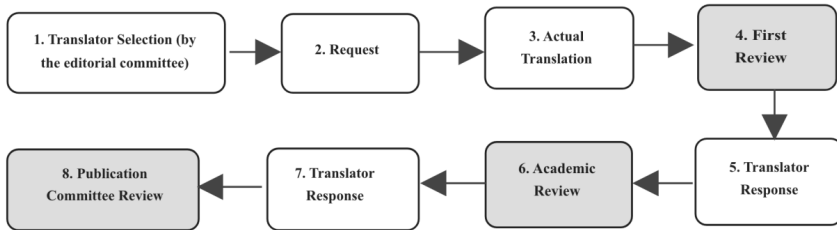


Figure 3. Current workflow of the BDK translation project

In addition to implementing strict quality control, BDK requires translators to provide an introduction explaining the historical and doctrinal background of the source text (BDK 2023: 6). *Zuochan sanmei jing* 坐禪三昧經 (*The Sutra on the Concentration of Sitting Meditation*, T 614), for example, is an important early meditation scripture composed by Kumārajīva (ca. 350–410). Since it teaches both traditional and Mahāyāna meditation methods, readers may find it difficult to navigate its complex doctrinal system. In their introduction, Yamabe and Sueki (2009: xiv–xviii) clarify its structure and doctrinal composition, offering an analysis indispensable for further scholarly investigation.

Although translators are required to contextualize the source text in their introductions, annotations are expected to be kept to a minimum so that they do not distract readers from the main text (BDK 2023: 6). This policy reflects the project’s dissemination-oriented aim. As former committee chair Mayeda Sengaku explains, BDK’s primary goal is not to promote academic scholarship in the narrow sense, but to make Buddhist teachings accessible to a wider readership (see Paul and McRae 2004: vii). This minimal-annotation policy also encourages an explanatory translation method, in which doctrinal or contextual clarification is

UBC, 15 October 2022. For the recording of this symposium, visit <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sXEGrHeC-Ao>.

embedded in the translation itself rather than presented in notes. Example (1), drawn from *The Sutra on the Concentration of Sitting Meditation*, illustrates this tendency. The passage explains how meditation may be used to treat practitioners' mental disorders.

(1)

ST: 第五法門治等分行, 及重罪人求索佛, 如是人等當教一心念佛三昧。
(《坐禪三昧經》 T614, p. 276a07)³)

[The fifth method is for treating those of equal disposition, and also for persons burdened with grave offenses who seek out the Buddha; such persons should be taught single-minded Buddha-recollection samādhi.]

TT: The fifth method is a practice [designed] to cure people equally [troubled with multiple problems]. [The method is also intended for] people who have committed grave transgressions and who seek for [help from] the Buddha. [The master] should teach such people the single-minded concentration on calling the Buddha to mind. (Yamabe and Sueki 2009: 33).

In Example (1), the main translation difficulty lies in the phrase *zhì děng fēn xíng* 治等分行, which can be literally translated as “treating those of equal disposition.” However, such a rendering would make little sense in context. To clarify its meaning, the translators added bracketed explanations, indicating that this meditation method is intended for practitioners equally afflicted by multiple mental defilements, such as hatred, lust, and anger. Likewise, *qiúsuǒ fó* 求索佛 in this context does not simply mean “seeking out the Buddha” but rather “seeking help from the Buddha.”

This example illustrates how BDK's minimal annotation policy can shape translation practice. Since translators cannot rely on footnotes to explain doctrinal or textual difficulties, they may need to incorporate explanation into the main translation. This strategy can make the translation more readable and accessible, but it also entails a trade-off: the more explanation is absorbed into the main text, the

3) In Taishō Buddhist canon, texts are indicated by volume, page, register and line number(s). For instance, “T 614, p. 276a07” here refers to the text in Vol. 614, Page 276, Register a and Line 7.

more transparent and self-contained the translation appears. Such transparency, however, may obscure the text's multiple voices and interpretive complexity.

3.3. Translation belief

The third dimension of translation policy is “translation belief,” which refers to the collective beliefs held by a community regarding the value of translation (González Núñez 2016: 56). In the case of BDK, the value of translating Buddhist texts is clearly affirmed since the project is devoted to transmitting Buddhist teachings to English-language readers. Meanwhile, the specific form of this belief is shaped by the background of translators. Because most BDK translators are trained Buddhist scholars, the project tends to place greater value on doctrinal fidelity and philological reliability. Charles Muller (2014: 1), the current chair of the BDK Publication Committee, makes this point clearly:

“One basic problem lies in the fact that in the field of Buddhist Studies the art of translation has never been taken as the primary focus of training or scholarship. Linguistic training is of course important, but graduate school courses generally do not take on the role of judging the best rendering of a text into modern vernacular languages. And scholarly translations usually take place as a detailed philological study of a particular text, without an emphasis on the readability of the translation itself.”

Muller's observation suggests that, in Buddhist Studies, translation is often treated as an extension of philological research. The primary concern is whether a rendering accurately conveys the semantic, doctrinal, and historical meaning of the source text. Questions such as translation strategy, target-text readability, and stylistic coherence usually receive less attention. This helps explain why BDK translations are often strong in textual accuracy and interpretive depth, while sometimes appearing less self-conscious about translation as a communicative and literary practice.

That notwithstanding, the BDK project has also involved a smaller number of

translators whose orientation extends beyond Buddhist scholarship. Thomas Cleary (1949–2021) is a notable example. After earning a doctorate in East Asian Languages and Civilizations from Harvard University, Cleary became a professional translator of Asian classics and grew into one of the most prolific translators of East Asian religious and philosophical texts. His BDK translation—*The Blue Cliff Record* appeared in 1998 (Cleary 1998). Unlike many scholar-translators who approach translation primarily as a philological exercise, Cleary emphasized accessibility for a wider readership. In an interview, he argued that translation should convey not only the semantic meaning, but also the original text’s intention, experiential force, and practical significance (Burton-Rose 2004). This approach suggests a broader view of translation as an ethical and communicative practice, one that makes classical knowledge publicly available, counters ignorance, and opens classical texts to contemporary readers.

In summary, the BDK project is shaped by a dual translation belief that values both academic rigor and broader dissemination of Buddhist teachings. This dual orientation underlies its scholar-led, dissemination-oriented translation model. On the one hand, BDK is governed by committees composed largely of Japanese and American academics, relies on a relatively concentrated translator base dominated by Buddhist Studies scholars, and implements a strict review procedure to ensure doctrinal and philological reliability. On the other hand, it favors readable and minimally annotated translations intended for both practitioners and general readers. In this sense, BDK has made an important attempt to mediate between translation accuracy and accessibility.

4. Recalibrating the Buddhist Translation Policy in an AI Age

In recent years, the rapid development of Large Language Models (LLMs) has placed new pressure on the BDK translation model. When AI tools can rapidly generate fluent translations, the key question is no longer how Buddhist translation should be institutionally organized, but how to redefine the role of human

translators in the new technological context. This section therefore compares the strengths and limitations of the BDK model in relation to AI translation, before proposing directions for revising its Buddhist translation policy.

The comparison that follows examines selected Chinese Buddhist passages by comparing AI translation with BDK's human translation. Due to space constraints, only four examples are discussed. They were selected because they illustrate recurrent challenges in translating ancient Chinese Buddhist texts into English, particularly in terms of doctrinal terminology, genre-specific rhetoric, Buddhist compounds, compressed syntax, and practice-oriented instructions.

The AI translations cited below were generated in March 2026 using the ChatGPT-5.4 thinking model. For each passage, the source text and its Taishō reference were provided with the same prompt: "Translate the following passage from a classical Chinese Buddhist text into English." No information about genre, doctrinal background, or broader context was supplied. The comparison is necessarily asymmetrical, since BDK translations have undergone human revision and institutional review, whereas ChatGPT's outputs are immediate responses to a single prompt. That said, this asymmetry does not invalidate the comparison because our aim is not to evaluate AI translation under ideal conditions, but to identify what human scholarly translation still contributes when AI can already produce fluent and rapid first drafts.

4.1. The continuing strengths of the BDK model

4.1.1. Interpretive depth

A key strength of the BDK model lies in its interpretive depth, namely the translator's ability to reconstruct the doctrinal, contextual, and genre-specific implications of a passage beyond its surface lexical meaning. This competence is crucial in Buddhist translation, since Buddhist texts often contain "dense philosophical concepts" and employ "layered language, metaphor, or even intentional ambiguity" (Vasylieva 2026: 8). Translating them therefore requires not only linguistic knowledge, but also interpretive judgment and deep familiarity with

Buddhist doctrine. Recent studies suggest that AI translation tools still lack sufficient knowledge of Chinese religions and history and often render religious terms literally without adequate contextual awareness (Wei 2024; Rousan et al. 2025). Building on these insights, the following comparison focuses on how ChatGPT and BDK translations handle doctrinal terminology and genre-specific rhetoric.

(2)

ST: 佛身無漏，諸漏已盡。（《維摩詰所說經》 T 475, p. 542a17)

TT1: The Buddha's body is free from all outflows; all defilements have already been exhausted. (Produced by ChatGPT-5.4)

TT2: The Buddha's body is without flaws, the flaws having been extinguished. (Translated by John McRae; Paul and McRae 2004: 95)

Example (2) is drawn from the *Vimalakīrti Sutra*, where the layman Bodhisattva Vimalakīrti expounds the extraordinary qualities of the Buddha's body. The main difficulty here is the term *wulou* 無漏 (literally, "without outflows"). In Buddhism, it refers to an untainted or unflawed state in contrast to *youlou* 有漏 (Skt. āsrava), a flawed state tainted by intentional thoughts.⁴ Therefore, the meaning of the sentence is that the Buddha's body is free from taint. In this sense, McRae's translation "without flaws" better conveys this doctrinal nuance, while ChatGPT's translation "free from all outflows" is seemingly fluent but doctrinally inaccurate. This example shows that AI-generated fluency can conceal its weakness in handling abstract terminology that requires deeper doctrinal interpretation.

(3)

ST: 至道無難 (非難非易) 唯嫌揀擇 (眼前是什麼。三祖猶在)。(《碧巖錄》 T 2003, p. 141b27-28)

4) See the entry for "無漏" in the Digital Dictionary of Buddhism, accessed December 1, 2025, from <http://www.buddhism-dict.net/cgi-bin/xpr-ddb.pl?q=無漏>.

TT1: “The supreme Way is not difficult;” (Neither difficult nor easy.) “It only rejects picking and choosing.” (What is right before your eyes? The third patriarch is still here.) (Produced by ChatGPT-5.4)

TT2: “The ultimate Way is without difficulty;” (It is neither difficult nor easy.) “just avoid discrimination.” (What is in front of your eyes? The third patriarch is still alive.) (Translated by Thomas Cleary; Cleary 1998: 19)

Example (3) is drawn from *The Blue Cliff Record*, a classic collection of Chan koans compiled by Chan master Yuanwu Keqin (1063–1135 C.E.). Usually taking the form of sayings or encounter dialogues between Chan masters and disciples, koans (Chn. *gong’an* 公案) constitute a distinctive genre of Chan Buddhist literature (Cleary 1998: 3). The language of koans tends to be symbolic and enigmatic, full of poetry, idioms, paradoxes, and highly perplexing expressions (Zhu 2011: 377–378). Such language aims to unsettle habitual conceptual thinking and perform pedagogical functions.

The main difficulty in translating this passage lies in the phrase *wéi xián jiǎnzé* 唯嫌揀擇, which ChatGPT rendered literally as “it only rejects picking and choosing.” This translation is problematic in two ways. First, it introduces an ambiguous, inanimate subject “it.” Second, it fails to capture the contextual meaning of *jianze* 揀擇 (literally “pick and choose”), which in this context refers to “a discriminative mind.” In Chan koan literature, the discriminative mind is often treated as the source of delusive attachment to binary distinctions such as sacred and profane, right and wrong, or difficult and easy. As Zhu (2011: 377) suggests, the purpose of koan dialogues is to trigger awakening to the original, non-discriminating state of human mind. In this sense, Cleary’s translation “just avoid discrimination” better conveys the Chan critique of dualistic discrimination than ChatGPT’s literal translation.

It is noteworthy that this sentence is also the opening line of *Xinxin ming* 信心銘 (Verses on faith in mind), traditionally attributed to Sengcan (d. 606 C.E.), the third patriarch of Chan Buddhism. This explains Yuanwu’s parenthetical remarks – *sānzǔ*

yóuzài 三祖猶在 (literally, “the third patriarch is still present”). Here *youzai* 猶在 (literally, “still present”) carries a Chan-style rhetorical force: The third patriarch’s insight is still alive in the present koan scene. From this perspective, Cleary’s “the third patriarch is still alive” better conveys the living presence implied by Yuanwu’s comment than ChatGPT’s “the third patriarch is still here.”

The above two examples illustrate the limitations of AI translation systems in capturing doctrinal nuances and genre-specific connotations in Buddhist texts. As Cultrera and Basalamah (2026: 2) point out, AI systems remain weak in handling contextual meaning because “they generate word sequences based on statistical probabilities from extensive datasets.” While the output of AI translation systems may appear fluent and accurate, they lack the interpretive judgment to navigate the semantic ambiguity, doctrinal complexity, and genre-specific rhetoric. These are precisely the areas where human scholarly expertise remains indispensable.

4.1.2. *Philological accuracy*

If interpretive depth concerns the doctrinal and genre-specific implications of a passage, philological accuracy concerns the textual and linguistic basis on which such interpretation rests. This is especially important for ancient Chinese Buddhist texts, whose language is often called the “Buddhist hybrid Chinese.” Unlike “monosyllabic” classical Chinese (each character constitutes one word), the Buddhist hybrid Chinese contains many disyllabic and multisyllabic words introduced through translation of Sanskrit words, such as *zhìhuì* 智慧 (“wisdom”), *fāngbiàn* 方便 (“expedient means”), and *fānnào* 煩惱 (“afflictions”) (Zhu 2017). To facilitate recitation and preserve rhythmic elegance, ancient Buddhist translators also frequently adopted compressed syntactic patterns such as four-character phrases in translated Chinese texts (Zhu 2003). These linguistic features can easily cause translation errors. As Muller (2014: 4) notes, translators may be misled by the modern meaning of Chinese words or wrongly break Buddhist compounds that in fact function as single conceptual units. Example (4), drawn from *The Sutra on the Concentration of Sitting Meditation*, illustrates the limitations of ChatGPT in identifying Buddhist compounds and parsing compressed Chinese syntax.

(4)

ST: 「未得道者結使未斷，六思覺強從心生亂，云何能除？」（《坐禪三昧經》 T 614, p. 273b4-6）

TT1: “For those who have not yet attained the Way, the fetters and defilements remain unsevered, and the six kinds of discursive thought arise forcefully from the mind, causing disturbance. How can they be eliminated?” (Produced by ChatGPT-5.4)

TT2: “One who has not attained awakening has not severed binding defilements. These six types of thoughts are powerful and disturb people at will. How can one sever them?” (Yamabe and Sueki 2009: 10).

The first difficulty lies in the Buddhist compound *jieshi* 結使 (literally, “binding and driving”), which functions as a single technical term meaning afflictions or defilement in Buddhist usage.⁵⁾ ChatGPT breaks this compound into two separate nouns, “fetters and defilements,” while Yamabe and Sueki’s translation “binding defilements” better preserves its status as one conceptual unit.

The second difficulty concerns the compressed syntax of *liù sījué qiáng cóngxīn shēngluàn* 六思覺強從心生亂. The line can be parsed into two four-character units: “The six kinds of thoughts are powerful” and “they cause disturbances in mind.” Yamabe and Sueki’s translation follows this structure: “The six types of thoughts are powerful and disturb people at will.” By contrast, ChatGPT appears to read the line through modern Chinese syntax, taking *qiang* 強 adverbially as “forcefully” and linking it to “arise from the mind.” As a result, it produces “the six kinds of discursive thought arise forcefully from the mind, causing disturbance,” a fluent but less precise rendering.

This example shows that philological accuracy requires more than general competence in classical Chinese. It demands sensitivity to Buddhist Chinese as a layered translation language shaped by Sanskrit terms, Chinese literary conventions, and specialized doctrinal vocabularies. BDK’s human translation is stronger here

5) See the entry for “結使” in the Digital Dictionary of Buddhism, accessed December 1, 2025, from <http://www.buddhism-dict.net/cgi-bin/xpr-ddb.pl?q=結使>.

because it more accurately identifies the lexical units and syntactic structure on which interpretation depends.

4.1.3. *Ethical accountability*

The third strength of the BDK model lies in its ethical accountability. Buddhist texts not only serve as objects of intellectual study, but also provide guidance for spiritual practices (Vasylieva 2026: 3). In other words, translated scriptures are not only texts to be read or interpreted, but also enacted through embodied practices, such as meditation, rituals, observance of precepts, and other devotional practices. Buddhist translators thus bear responsibilities toward practitioner communities. If their work is outsourced to disembodied machine translation systems, questions of responsibility, trust, and practical reliability will inevitably arise.

(5)

ST: 「若久習行，當教言身中一寸心却皮肉，繫意五處：頂、額、眉間、鼻端、心處。」（《坐禪三昧經》 T 614, p. 272a12-14)

TT1: If one has practiced for a long time, one should be instructed to say: within the body, at a point one inch beneath the skin and flesh, fix the mind on five locations: the crown of the head, the forehead, the space between the eyebrows, the tip of the nose, and the region of the heart. (Produced by ChatGPT-5.4)

TT2: If [the practitioner] is at the advanced level, [the master] should teach him as follows: “[First, mentally] remove the skin and flesh [and reveal] the heart of ‘one inch’ in the body, and [then] fix your mind to five spots: head, forehead, the area between the brows, the tip of the nose, and the heart.” (Yamabe and Sueki 2009: 33).

Example (5), also taken from *The Sutra on the Concentration of Sitting Meditation*, explains a contemplative practice for overcoming lust through the visualization of bodily impurities. ChatGPT rendered the instruction as “within the body, at a point one inch beneath the skin and flesh,” producing an ambiguous description. By contrast, Yamabe and Sueki translated the passage as a sequence

of meditative actions: “mentally remove the skin and flesh and reveal the heart of ‘one inch’ in the body.” Their version is more coherent as practical instruction because it recognizes the passage as describing a contemplation exercise rather than a physical location. This difference points to a broader limitation of AI translation. Although large language models can process linguistic patterns, they cannot engage with meditation as a lived or embodied practice. In texts intended to guide religious cultivation, such ambiguity is not merely stylistic, but also affects how practitioners understand and perform the practice.

In summary, Buddhist translation does not simply transmit semantic meaning. It also mediates norms, obligations, and communal practices. Ethical accountability is therefore central to Buddhist translation practice. While the BDK model does not guarantee perfect translations, it provides a visible structure in which translations can be attributed, reviewed, questioned, and revised. This is especially important for the translation of sacred texts, which can shape both scholarly understanding and religious practice. AI should therefore be understood not as a replacement for human translators, but as a tool whose outputs still require human philological scrutiny, interpretive judgment, and ethical responsibility.

4.2. AI as a stress test for the existing BDK policy

In June 2022, Bingenheimer (2022) announced on H-Buddhism that the entire Taishō Buddhist canon had been translated into English with the help of two AI translation systems trained on Chinese Buddhist texts: DeepL and Linguae Dharmae. As he noted, this meant that human translators might become “gleaners and cleaners following behind the translating machines.” Whether or not one accepts this view, AI translation has indeed changed the landscape of translation. What previously required decades of human effort can now be approximated, at least at the level of draft production, within a radically compressed time frame. For the BDK project, the emergence of AI translation also intensifies the limitations of its existing translation policy.

First, AI exposes the need for a clear policy on AI-assisted translation. In the

current model, the editorial committee usually assigns one text to an individual translator. This model has helped ensure scholarly responsibility and philological accuracy. In the AI age, however, it is no longer necessary or efficient for all stages of translation to depend on the solitary labor of one specialist. AI systems can assist with draft production, terminology retrieval, parallel passage identification, consistency checking, and other repetitive tasks. However, this does not mean that BDK should entrust translation to AI for the sake of speed. The key issue is that its current translation policy has not yet defined which tasks require human interpretive authority and which tasks can be technically assisted. The rise of AI translation calls for a more differentiated workflow that allows translators to concentrate on the most valuable aspects of their work.

Second, AI foregrounds the problem of limited collaboration in the current model. Earlier in this paper, this limitation was discussed mainly in relation to the limited participation of professional translators and its potential effects on translation readability and expressive quality. In the context of AI, interprofessional collaboration becomes more necessary. As Siu (2023a: 20) argues, LLMs like ChatGPT demonstrate remarkable “versatility” in handling translation-related tasks, such as analyzing source texts, explaining terminologies, generating translation drafts, detecting errors, and polishing translation style. While AI cannot replace human experts in doctrinal judgment or ethical responsibility, it can surpass any single human specialist in functional versatility and task integration. Under these conditions, the main bottleneck is no longer the shortage of qualified individual translators, but the lack of a collaborative workflow capable of integrating Buddhist textual expertise, translation craft, editorial judgment, and digital competence into a form of collective intelligence.

Third, AI also transforms the relevance of BDK’s minimalist annotation policy. In the print-based context, minimal annotation could be understood as a practical strategy to preserve readability and avoid distracting readers. However, AI changes the meaning of readability itself. AI-generated translations often appear smooth, coherent, and self-evident even when they misread doctrinal terms, flatten ambiguity, or ignore genre-specific features. If human translations also minimize

notes and absorb interpretive decisions silently into the body of translation, readers may not be able to distinguish a responsible Buddhist translation from a fluent machine-generated version. The new challenge today, therefore, is not to make translations merely readable and accessible, but also to make translators' interpretive labor more visible and accountable.

In short, AI puts the BDK model under a stress test. While its scholar-led orientation and commitment to translation accuracy remain important strengths, some of its limitations become more visible, such as the absence of a clear AI-use policy, insufficient collaboration and task differentiation, and overemphasis on minimal annotation. BDK therefore needs to recalibrate its translation policy so that human translators can work more visibly, collaboratively, and critically within an AI-assisted translation ecology.

4.3. Toward a revised Buddhist translation policy

The above discussion illustrates that human translators and AI can achieve more together than either could accomplish alone. We suggest that BDK could consider moving toward a human-centered, AI-assisted workflow, in which digital tools are integrated into specific stages of translation while interpretive and editorial authority remains with human translators and reviewers. Figure 4 visualizes a tentative human-AI collaborative Buddhist translation workflow.

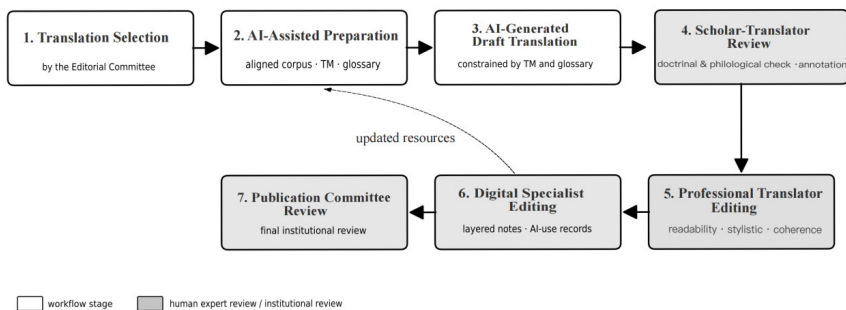


Figure 4. Human-AI collaborative Buddhist translation workflow

First, AI could support the preparation stage through the construction of a Buddhist translation memory and terminology database. A BDK translation memory could be built by aligning source Buddhist texts with their existing BDK translations and adding metadata on genre, translator, doctrinal context, and historical background. Such a system would allow translators to retrieve key terms, formulaic expressions, parallel passages, and semantically related phrases across different texts. In addition, a terminology management protocol could be developed to help translators distinguish preferred renderings, alternative translations, context-sensitive usages, and contested terms. This would improve consistency and accuracy in the rendering of Buddhist terminology.

The first-stage preparation work could be managed by digital specialists with the assistance of AI tools. In the next stage, translation memory entries, glossaries, and contextual information could be incorporated into AI prompts before producing draft translations. As Siu (2023a: 9–10) suggests, providing terminological, contextual, and other task-specific information can substantially improve the quality of AI translation outputs. This method is also feasible as LLMs develop increasingly larger context windows. For instance, GPT-5.4 can now support a context window of one million tokens in API settings (OpenAI 2026). This would substantially increase the amount of information that translators can provide in prompts. With appropriate prompting and domain-specific fine-tuning, AI-generated translation drafts would serve as a useful starting point for scholarly review and professional post-editing.

That said, AI should not be treated as an autonomous translator. It should function as a support tool that helps translators retrieve information, identify possible renderings, and reduce repetitive labor. Human review remains indispensable throughout the translation process, especially where decisions involve doctrinal interpretation, philological analysis, stylistic editing, and final quality control. As shown in Figure 4, a revised workflow could therefore involve several complementary forms of human review and post-editing. Buddhist scholars could examine doctrinal and philological accuracy and add annotations for difficult terms and passages. Professional translators could then improve readability, stylistic

consistency, and rhetorical coherence. Digital specialists would support the technical organization of the project by managing digital annotations, documenting AI use, maintaining translation memories, and updating terminology databases. Such a workflow would also require translators and editors to strengthen their digital literacy. They need not become programmers, but they should understand how AI and LLMs work, what their strengths and limitations are, and how they can be applied to translation-related tasks (Siu 2023b: 150; Vasylieva 2026: 16). This knowledge would help them evaluate AI outputs more critically, design better prompts, post-edit drafts more effectively, and decide when human judgment must override machine suggestions.

Finally, BDK could consider developing e-annotation in digital editions while preserving minimal annotation in print. E-annotation refers to optional, expandable, and searchable notes attached to an electronic translation. The main text could remain clean and readable, while readers who need further explanation could access additional layers of information. A basic layer might provide short notes on key figures, places, and terms. A second layer could offer philological and doctrinal explanations. A third layer could include a searchable glossary, Taishō references, parallel passages, and records of major translation decisions, including AI-assisted suggestions where relevant. This model would preserve BDK's commitment to accessibility while making translators' interpretive mediation more transparent. It would also increase the pedagogical, scholarly, and digital value of BDK translations by transforming them from static publications into reusable Buddhist translation resources.

5. Conclusion

This paper has examined the translation policy of the BDK Buddhist Canon Project and considered how it might be recalibrated in the age of AI. It has shown that BDK has developed a scholar-led, dissemination-oriented model that seeks to balance translation accuracy with reader accessibility. Compared with AI translation,

this model retains clear strengths in interpretive depth, philological accuracy, and ethical accountability. At the same time, AI-powered translation intensifies some of its limitations, including the absence of a clear AI-use policy, insufficient collaboration and task differentiation, and an overemphasis on minimal annotation that may obscure interpretive complexity.

For the path forward, this paper suggests that BDK could move toward a human-centered, AI-assisted translation model. In this model, machines would support drafting, checking, retrieval, and technical organization, while interpretive and editorial authority remains with human experts. This shift should be accompanied by fostering more interprofessional collaboration and cultivating a more diverse, sustainable, and digitally literate translator community. Digital layered annotation could also be adopted to make translators' interpretive labor more visible while preserving the readability of the main text.

Finally, it should be acknowledged that this study is limited by its reliance on publicly available BDK materials and selected translation examples. Future research could supplement this analysis with interviews with Buddhist translators, editors, and committee members, or with a larger corpus-based comparison of human and AI translations of Buddhist texts. Comparative studies of other Buddhist translation initiatives, such as the Korean Jogye Order's translation project and 84000: Translating the Words of the Buddha, could also reveal different layers of institutional Buddhist translation. Even so, the BDK case offers useful insights for rethinking translator competence, institutional translation management, and translators' ethical accountability in an increasingly AI-assisted translation ecology.

References

- Beal, S. (1871). *A Catena of Buddhist Scriptures from the Chinese*. London: Trübner.
- BDK. (2023). Revised guideline for the English translation of the Chinese Buddhist canon. *Newsletter Mahāpīṭaka* (online). Retrieved from <https://bdk-seiten.com/pdf/translation/Mahapitaka2023.pdf> on 4 May 2025.
- Bingenheimer, M. (2022). Machine translations of the CBETA corpus (online). Retrieved from <https://networks.h-net.org/node/6060/discussions/10365735/machine-translations-cbeta-corpus> on 4 May 2025.
- Burton-Rose, D. (2004). Thomas Cleary: An Oakland author and translator ranges through the many worlds of spiritual life (online). *San Francisco Bay Guardian Literary Supplement*. Retrieved from <https://healingtaousa.com/topic/thomas-cleary-interviews/> on 1 May 2025.
- Cleary, T. (Trans.). (1998). *The Blue Cliff Record*. Berkeley: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research.
- Cultrera, I. and Basalamah, S. (2026). Deconstructing the bubble of AI translation: translation as embodied creativity. *Philosophy of Translation*: 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/29984750.2026.2619748>.
- Dumoulin, H. (1992). *Zen Buddhism in the 20th Century* (J. S. O’leary, Trans.). New York: Weatherhill.
- Funayama, T. (2013). *Making Sutras into ‘Classics’ (jingdian): How Buddhist Scriptures were Translated into Chinese*. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten Publishers.
- González Núñez, G. (2016). *Translating in Linguistically Diverse Societies: Translation Policy in the United Kingdom*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Hung, E. (2005). *Rewriting Chinese Translation History*. Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong Press.
- Jiang, P. (2021). A study on English translation of Chinese Buddhist scriptures in the United States. *Shanghai Journal of Translators* (02): 46–51.
- Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism. (2012). *The Collected Works of Korean Buddhism*. Seoul: Compilation Committee of Korean Buddhist Thought.
- Kang, J. (2009). Institutional translation. In Baker, M., and G. Saldanha (eds.), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies* (2nd edn.). London: Routledge, 141–145.
- Koskinen, K. (2008). *Translating Institutions: An Ethnographic Study of EU Translation*. London: Routledge.
- Kubo, T. and Yuyama, A. (Trans.). (2007). *The Lotus Sutra*. Berkeley: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research.
- Li, R. (Trans.). (1995). *A Biography of the Tripiṭaka Master of the Great Ci’en Monastery of the Great Tang Dynasty*. Berkeley: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research.
- Li, R. (Trans.). (1996). *The Great Tang Dynasty Record of the Western Regions*. Berkeley: BDK America.
- Meylaerts, R. (2011). Translation policy. In Gambier, Y., and L. van Doorslaer (eds.), *Handbook of Translation Studies*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 163–168.

- Mossop, B. (1988). Translating institutions: A missing factor in translation theory. *TTR: Traduction, Terminologie, Rédaction* 1(2): 65–71.
- Muller, C. (2014, May). The making of an ‘outstanding’ translation: Obstacles and solutions. Paper presented at the 59th International Conference of Eastern Studies (Tōhō Gakkai), Retrieved from <http://www.acmuller.net/articles/2014-ices.docx> on 12 February 2024.
- Müller, F. M. (ed.) (1879–1910). *The Sacred Books of the East*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Nattier, J. (2008). *A Guide to the Earliest Chinese Buddhist Translations: Texts from the East Han [dong han] and Three Kingdoms [san guo] Periods*. Tokyo: International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology, Soka University.
- OpenAI. (2026). OpenAI API Documentation (online). Retrieved from <https://developers.openai.com/api/docs/models/gpt-5.4> on 1 June 2026.
- Pan, L. (2021). A brief English translation history of Chinese Buddhist texts: A survey based on the “Bibliography of Translations from the Chinese Buddhist Canon into Western Languages” in Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō. *Journal of Translation History* (1): 55–68.
- Paul, D. Y. and McRae, J. (Trans.). (2004). *The Sutra of Queen Śrīmālā of the Lion’s Roar; The Vimalakīrti Sutra*. Berkeley: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research.
- PEN America. (2026). Fairness in publishing (online). Retrieved from <https://pen.org/report/fairness-in-publishing/> on 3 April 2026.
- Richard, T. (Trans.). (1907). *The Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana Doctrine: The New Buddhism*. Shanghai: Christian Literature Society.
- Rousan, R., Jaradat, R. and Malkawi, M. (2025). ChatGPT translation vs. human translation: An examination of a literary Text. *Cogent Social Sciences* (11): 1–21.
- Siu, S. C. (2023a). ChatGPT and GPT-4 for professional translators: Exploring the potential of large language models in translation. *Computational Linguistics & Natural Language Processing eJournal* 5(24). <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4448091>.
- Siu, S. C. (2023b). Navigating the world of Large Language Models: Inspiration for AI-assisted Buddhist translation—A review of *Foundation Models for Natural Language Processing*. *Translation Quarterly* (108): 149–158.
- Takakusu, J. and Watanabe, K. (1990). *Taishō Shinshū Buddhist Canon*, Taibei: Shihua Publishing House. Reprint of Tokyo: Taishō issaikyō kankōkai, 1924–1932.
- Tanaka, K. (2016). Searching for translators of Chinese Buddhist texts (online). Retrieved from <https://networks.h-net.org/node/6060/discussions/109901/searching-translators-chinese-buddhist-texts> on 4 May 2025.
- Toury, G. (2012). *Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Vasylieva, M. (2026). The vanishing “untranslated” in the age of AI: Challenges for translator training in Buddhist Studies. *Contemporary Buddhism* 26(1): 71–92.
- Wei, X. (2024). The use of large language models for translating Buddhist texts from classical Chinese to modern English: An analysis and evaluation with ChatGPT 4, ERNIE Bot 4, and Gemini Advanced. *Religions* 15(12): 1–33.
- Yamabe, N. and Sueki, F. (Trans.). (2009). *The Sutra on the Concentration of Sitting Meditation*. Berkeley: BDK America.
- Zhu, C. (2011). The hermeneutics of Chan Buddhism: Reading koans from *The Blue Cliff Record*. *Asian*

- Philosophy* 21(4): 373–393.
- Zhu, Q. (2003). The impact of Buddhism on the development of Chinese vocabulary. *Pumen Magazine* (15): 1–41.
- Zhu, Q. (2017). Buddhist Chinese (Buddhist Hybrid Chinese). In Behr, W., Y. Gu, Z. Handel, C. T. J. Huang, and J. Myers (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Chinese Language and Linguistics*. Vol. 1. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 318–330.

This paper was received on 6 May 2026; revised on 7 June 2026; and accepted on 15 June 2026.

Authors' email addresses

sophiezhao1994@qq.com

mahuijuan@bfsu.edu.cn

About the authors

Yanfei Zhao (first author) is a PhD candidate in Translation Studies at Beijing Foreign Studies University and a visiting student in Religious Studies at Yale University (2025~2026). Her research interests mainly include translation theory, Chinese Buddhist translation history and literature.

Huijuan Ma (Co-author) is a professor of Translation Studies and doctoral supervisor at Beijing Foreign Studies University. Her research fields include translation history, translation teaching, and cross-cultural translation studies. She has published widely in prestigious international translation journals, including *Perspectives*, *Meta*, and *Babel*.