

**Dialogue on posthuman's power: generative
AI and the ethical rewriting
in translated literature**

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Abstract

This study explores the dialogue between posthuman power and generative AI within the context of translation studies, building upon the Chinese translation of Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* by Kun Zhang. The novel presents a posthuman society where clones serve as organ donors for extending human lives. Zhang's translation, *莫失莫忘* ("莫失莫忘"), highlights the paradox of clones embodying humanity through discipline while humans transcend into posthumanism via organ transplantation. This paper delves into the translation's focus on power dynamics by analyzing mechanisms of power discipline and the subversive assimilation of power, providing a detailed examination of how the text is rewritten within the Chinese sociocultural context. Through this lens, the study reveals how the translation underscores the inevitability of the clones' tragic fate as a means to deepen the understanding of power structures in the original work. Furthermore, the integration of generative AI is considered as a contemporary manifestation of posthuman technology, engaging in the rewriting of power relationships and ethical dilemmas. The study argues that generative AI not only amplifies the exploration of power dynamics but also introduces a new layer of ethical considerations in the translator's role and decision-making process.

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1. Introduction

Never Let Me Go (2005) is the sixth novel by Japanese-British writer Kazuo Ishiguro (1954–), which won second place in the Booker Prize selection that year, and the author was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2017. As a science fiction novel, *Never Let Me Go* unfolds through the recollections of a clone, Kathy H., recounting the life experiences of her and her companions as appendages to “normal people”, or actually “organ donors”. Once their major organs are donated, their lives come to an end accordingly.

This novel was not only quickly translated into multiple languages (Walkowitz 2007, 216), but was also adapted into a film in 2010. Since 2007, *Never Let Me Go* has had several Chinese translations, including *Qianwan Bie Diu Xia Wo* (2007), *Bie Rang Wo Zou* (2011), and *Mo Shi Mo Wang* (2019). Among them, some scholars believe that in *Mo Shi Mo Wang* (“莫失莫忘”) translated by Kun Zhang, the translator demonstrates a strong subjectivity, breaking free from the constraints of the original expression (Wang and Wang 2020, 210). The various domesticating strategies in *Mo Shi Mo Wang* also seem to echo Ishiguro's own response to readers' doubts about the plausibility of the novel's plot.

In interviews, Ishiguro uses an allegorical form that metaphorically reflects the human condition and life course to express, refute, or evade accusations of seemingly illogical narrative breaks in the novel (Shaffer and Huang 2022, 220). The painful predicaments faced by the clones not only signify the failure of resistance, but also the strengthening of power resulting from such failure. In other words, in a certain sense, the very act of resistance by the clones inversely intensifies their own enslavement and exploitation. This also tests whether the translator is capable of keenly perceiving and deeply contemplating the mechanisms of power.

Therefore, I intend to approach the issues of power and identity in the original work through the lens of Stephen Greenblatt's theory on the ideological function of literature. Specifically, power issues revealed in source text will be addressed under the model of subversion and containment, which is representative in the fields of New Historicism and cultural poetics. It offers a detailed analysis of how the Chinese translation and the embodied generative artificial intelligence (Gen-AI) rewrite identity, ethics, and power. By revealing both the commonalities and divergences between the translated texts and Greenblatt's theorization of power mechanisms, I explore the essence of power, using the inevitability of the clones' tragic fate in *Mo Shi Mo Wang* as the entry point.

2. The sci-fi vision imagined by Kazuo Ishiguro

2.1. Clones: the "posthuman" bearers of tragic fate in the original novel

Like other post-isms, posthumanism refers to a condition that comes after humanism and is closely related to it. As one of the representative figures of posthumanism, Haraway (1991) defines the posthuman as the "cyborg", a hybrid of machine and organism, a body controlled by automation, a mixture of the real and the fictional.

Moreover, Hayles (1999) proposes three key concerns in the debate between human and posthuman: First is the discussion about the dematerialization of information, the embodiment of the cyborg, and the posthumanization of the human: posthumanism emphasizes the transmission of information rather than its material carrier. Second, posthumanism holds that the body is not a natural given. When flesh is replaced by metal and consciousness is controlled by coded information, the essential difference and absolute boundary between the human body and the mechanisms of computer-simulated, controlled bio-organisms cease to exist. Third, posthumanism argues that consciousness is not the origin of human identity and plays only a secondary role in the process of evolution. The posthuman, as a coupling of organism and technology, indicates that the traditional human body is being gradually dematerialized by technology and information. Humanity is progressively detached from its physical flesh and becomes a cluster of information, with human consciousness even capable of being downloaded and permanently preserved, much like computer data (Heffernan 2003, 118).

Overall, posthumanism, which focuses on the relationship between humans and machines/technology, comprises two main branches. One is transhumanism, which inherits the ideals of humanism, emphasizes rational thinking, and maintains an optimistic view of the posthuman future. The other, known as critical posthumanism, arises in response and critique of the former. This latter form of posthumanism does not entirely reject humanism but advocates for its critical inheritance. It is in this sense that I intend to employ the term "posthumanism" in this paper.

2.2. "Hailsham": an attempt to discipline posthuman power within institutional paradox

Kazuo Ishiguro sets the novel in the late 1990s at Hailsham, a boarding school in England. The students (the clones) at Hailsham come into the world through the cloning of human genes. Although the beginning of their lives differs from that of a fertilized egg, clones inherit human

physiological characteristics through somatic cells containing human DNA and are physically indistinguishable from ordinary humans. Since clones are used as tools for human organ transplantation, the physical body is of great importance to them (and to humans). The school offers physical education classes and organizes exercise activities to keep the students in good health, along with routine weekly medical checkups.

However, human understanding of the body has long surpassed the flesh itself; cognitive and social factors related to the body have become crucial components in constructing self-subjectivity and self-awareness. Cloning technology grants the clone a physical body, but having a body is only the most basic element of being human. Miss Emily, a founding figure of Hailsham, aimed not simply to ensure the clones' physical health but to prove their potential for moral and intellectual growth. As she states, if students were raised in "humane, cultivated environments," they could become "decent, thoughtful beings, just like anyone else" (Ishiguro 2019, 293). Therefore, Hailsham, a boarding school modelled after human society, simulates a human environment in cultivating the clone students, which is essentially the process of their embodiment.

In the novel, the educational institution of Hailsham strongly embodies the concept of "containment" and has long been seen as a paradigmatic text for the disciplining of ideology in authoritarian societies. Though doubts, confusion, and constant questioning always simmer beneath the surface, the institution nevertheless "carefully designs an environment for students that eliminates the possibility of rebellion and dissent" (Levy 2011, 16). Foucault (2003a) argues that "discipline" is a kind of "physics" or "anatomy" of power, applying a series of methods, techniques, procedures, levels of application, and targets repeatedly upon segmented bodies to train and normalize them — an approach that can be adopted by institutions such as schools, hospitals, military camps, and prisons.

Besides, delaying donation through romantic love is seen as a strategy to resist fate in the novel. When Kathy and Tommy find Miss Emily and submit their request to defer donation, they are told that every year, at least two or three couples have made similar appeals. All of them had made almost the same choice: even at the final stage of life, even in the face of impending death, they still attempted to navigate the limited options available to them through legal procedures and formal channels, rather than by escaping or taking their own lives.

Similarly, Hailsham, which is jointly founded by Miss Emily and Madame (Miss Lucy), had once attempted to "challenge the entire system of donations that prevailed at the time" (Ishiguro 2019, 238), yet it remained dependent on funding from large corporations and politicians. It is not difficult to see that their actions themselves were already embedded within the rules established by dominant power, and their discourse was

naturally contained within the ruling ideology. In other words, the strategies and methods they employed in resistance were in fact the very privileges granted by power in order to better preserve systemic stability.

At the same time, it is through the repeated rejection of deferral requests by Miss Emily and Madame Miss Lucy, both of whom acting as intermediaries in the exercise of power, and through the repurposing of the once-defiant Hailsham into a "government garden", that sovereign authority repeatedly asserts and affirms its own power. In this process, power continuously reveals and legitimizes itself, while everyone unknowingly participates in its operation (see Figure 1).

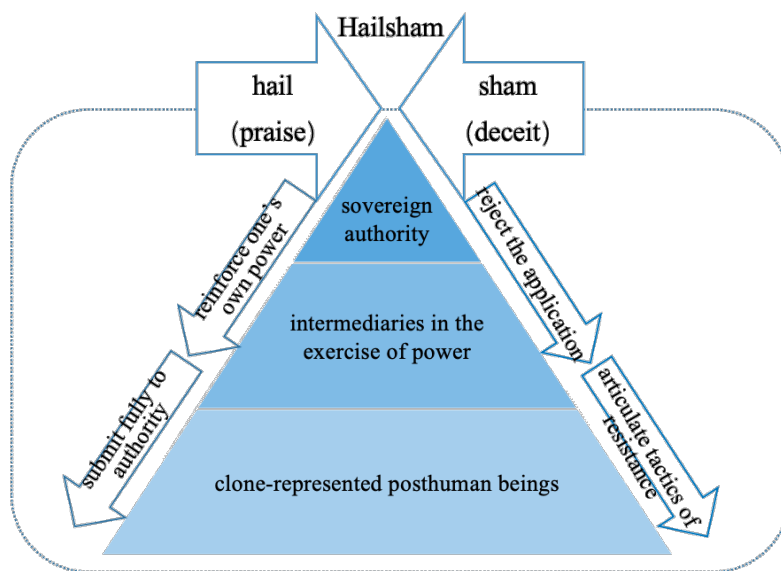


Figure 1. The paradox inherent in Hailsham's disciplinary regime

Seen in this light, Hailsham is undoubtedly a complex entity riddled with internal contradictions, where an empty shell is filled with the false performances of humanity. The very name "Hailsham" reflects Ishiguro's satirical intent: "Hail" meaning "praise", and "sham" meaning "deceit". Though this institution was ultimately doomed to fail, its pursuit of a humanitarian ideal cannot be erased. Precisely for this reason, Hailsham becomes the foundation of the clones' collective identity. After all hope has been destroyed by reality, it is Hailsham that continues to provide Kathy with an inexhaustible source of spiritual support.

3. Research methodology: the subversion and containment of posthuman power

The paradox of Hailsham inevitably recalls the work of New Historicist scholar Stephen Greenblatt, who pays particular attention to the political functions of literature and the ways they operate. As a New Historicist,

Greenblatt also focuses on politicized literary criticism, observing how Shakespeare's plays repeatedly explore the emergence of subversion and disorder, along with their control and containment (Greenblatt 1988, 40). In addressing the ideological function of literature, he proposed the model of subversion and containment in relation to power.

This model builds upon Michel Foucault's research on disciplinary power, serving as both a supplement and a concretization of it. Foucault argues that discipline "is not external to the power it opposes"; on the contrary, "it coexists with power in a symbiotic relationship" (Foucault 1997, 46). In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault asserts that "where there is power, there is resistance" (Foucault 2002, 62), and that "resistance is the other pole of the power relation, its inescapable opposite" (ibid., 63). Yet he also points out that resistance can lead to a redistribution and rebalancing of power relations, which may in turn reinforce the effects of power.

Foucault's understanding of power and resistance, especially the interactive dynamics between them, inspired Greenblatt to further explore the relationship of power in the "subversion and containment" model.

Through his in-depth analysis of Shakespeare's history plays, Greenblatt uses the example of the Englishman Thomas Harriot, whose destructive actions during the spread of Protestantism in the Virginia region unexpectedly led to the establishment of Christian order. He points out that this was possible because the subversion of power was subsequently contained, thereby further affirming and promoting the legitimacy of power's existence. "Subversion is itself a product of power," and "power not only produces subversion, but is founded upon it" (Greenblatt 1988, 30). In this way, power constructs a complete and self-consistent system of domination (see Figure 2), which sustains its operation and maintains stability through repeated and cyclical performances.

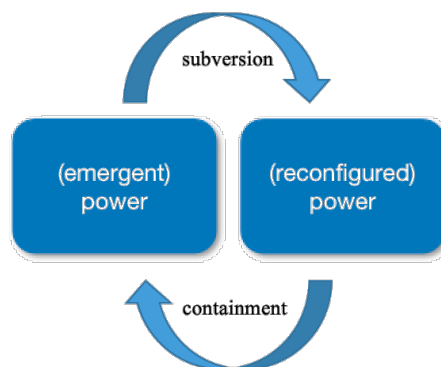


Figure 2. Greenblatt's "subversion-containment" mechanism of power

Overall, the model of subversion and containment offers a distinctive perspective for approaching literary works, considerably providing a framework for analysing and interpreting texts.

Building on posthumanist theories proposed by Haraway and Hayles, I consider Gen-AI as a contemporary manifestation of posthuman technology. While Hayles emphasizes the dematerialization of the body and the decentring of consciousness as the foundation of posthuman identity, Gen-AI exemplifies this shift by functioning as a disembodied, non-human translator. Its intervention in the translation process not only challenges the traditional human-centred model of authorship and agency but also reconfigures the ethical landscape of translation practice. From this perspective, the translator is no longer a solely embodied subject but is now situated within a hybrid network of human and machinic cognition.

Furthermore, I draw on Greenblatt's model of subversion and containment, which is originally rooted in Foucault's theory of power and discipline, to examine how Gen-AI both disrupts and reinforces existing power structures within translation. On the one hand, Gen-AI subverts the authority of the human translator by participating in meaning-making; on the other hand, it is itself contained within technological, institutional, and ideological systems that limit its agency and embed it within dominant discourses. By situating AI-generated translations within this dual framework, the paper analyses how posthuman technologies not only amplify the exploration of power dynamics but also introduce new ethical dilemmas regarding authorship, responsibility, and identity.

4. Dialogue on posthuman's power: generative ai and the ethical rewriting

To critically explore how literary translation participates in the ideological reproduction and transformation of power, I conduct a comparative reading of two Chinese translations of *Never Let Me Go*: one produced by a generative AI model ChatGPT-4o, the other by human translator Zhang. Anchored in Greenblatt's framework of subversion and containment, the analysis investigates how each version reconfigures the power relations encoded in the source text, particularly as embodied in the Hailsham institution. By positioning AI translation as a posthuman mode of rewriting and contrasting it with a human translator's interpretive agency, I examine how both forms of translation engage with, appropriate, or resist the hegemonic logic of power, ultimately shaping new meanings within the target cultural context.

For instance, considering the referential and meaning-making functions of translated language in shaping and interrogating subjectivity, such expressions undoubtedly carry implications of suggestion and persuasion, thus producing a form of discursive vertical control. Over time,

this exerts influence on the ideological formation of the cloned children. Through sustained discursive dissemination, the very concept of "donation" becomes gradually internalized as an accepted, normalized, and seemingly truthful mode of understanding.

Example 1:

ST	"If no one else will talk to you," she continued, "then I will. <u>The problem</u> , as I see it, is that <u>you've been told</u> and <u>not told</u> . <u>You've been told</u> , but none of you really understand, and I dare say, some people are quite happy to leave it that way. But I'm not." (Ishiguro 2005, 81)
Zhang's translation	"如果其他人不跟你们讲,"她继续说道,"那我来讲。老师告诉过你们, <u>但你们没有人真正理解</u> ,我敢说,有些人还很愿意听之任之。但我不。"(Ishiguro 2019, 90)
Back translation	"If others won't tell you," she continued, "then I will. The teachers have told you, <u>but none of you truly understood</u> . I dare say, some people are even quite willing to let it be that way. But I won't."
ChatGPT-4o's translation	"如果没有其他人愿意告诉你们,"她继续说道,"那我来说。问题在我看来是这样的: <u>你们既被告知了,又没有被真正告知</u> 。是的,你们听说过,但你们谁也没有真正明白。我敢说,有些人正是乐意让事情保持这种模糊的状态。可我不是。"
Back translation	"If no one else is willing to tell you," she continued, "then I will. The problem, as I see it, is this: <u>you have been told</u> , and <u>yet not truly told</u> . Yes, <u>you've heard about it</u> , but none of you has truly understood. I dare say, some people are quite happy to let things remain in this vague state. But I am not."

Zhang's translation omits and alters certain parts of the original text. The sentence "The problem... not told." is entirely absent from the translated version, which may be seen as a slight shortcoming. However, it can also be interpreted as the translator's implicit gesture to preserve the original tension, allowing the suspense to remain latent in the narrative and thus postponing the sense of posthuman fatalism. Nevertheless, Zhang's handling of the phrase "you've been told" appears more natural. By converting the passive voice of the original into an active voice in Chinese, Zhang subtly shifts the locus of discursive power. This subversion of narrative authority makes the translation more accessible and acceptable to Chinese readers.

By contrast, Gen-AI's translation intentionally preserves the ambiguous tension embedded in the original speech act, foregrounding the dual function of language as both a means of revelation and a tool of containment. The original phrase "you've been told, but not truly told" captures the paradoxical nature of institutional communication, in which partial disclosure masquerades as transparency while maintaining epistemic asymmetry. By maintaining this layered ambiguity, Gen-AI's translation mirrors how power operates not simply through suppression, but through strategic dissemination of information.

Thus, Gen-AI's translation reproduces the ideological function of the discourse, where disclosure itself becomes a vehicle of power, and language operates as an instrument of both resistance and regulation.

Another example can be found in how, for most of the time at Hailsham, power appears to be abstracted or suspended within the text, yet it remains omnipresent. It manifests as a spectral force, which is constantly reflected upon and reinforced through casual conversations and reiterated prohibitions. The horror stories that circulate widely among the students are never questioned for their authenticity. Yet older students have revealed that these seemingly absurd tales were, in fact, "what the guardians told them when they were very young" (Ishiguro 2019, 56). Over time, through repeated "retellings" (ibid., 57) and with the tacit approval of the institution's authorities, such rumours were allowed to "grow and grow again" (ibid., 289), gradually becoming embedded and transmitted among students of all levels.

Example 2:

ST	"She was never like that! How could Hailsham have been the way it was if the person in charge had been potty? Miss Emily had <u>an intellect you could slice logs with.</u> " (Ishiguro 2005, 43)
Zhang's translation	"她从来没有那样！如果负责人这么不中用，黑尔舍姆怎么会是这样？艾米丽小姐的 <u>头脑锋利得可以用来切木头。</u> " (Ishiguro 2019, 49)
Back translation	"She was never like that! If the person in charge had been so useless, how could Hailsham have turned out the way it did? Miss Emily had <u>a mind so sharp it could be used to cut wood.</u> "
ChatGPT-4o's translation	"她才不是那种人！如果真是个疯子，黑尔舍姆怎么可能办成那个样子？艾米丽小姐可是个极有头脑的人，精明得很。"
Back translation	"She was not that kind of person at all! If she had really been crazy, how could Hailsham have turned

out the way it did? Miss Emily was incredibly sharp-minded."

In this example, Zhang's version renders the original phrase "slice logs with" as "锋利得可以切木头" (sharp enough to cut wood), which constitutes a form of foreignization. The phrase essentially conveys the meaning of "sharp" and is later repeated in the original text to highlight Miss Emily's exceptional acuity. However, from the perspective of containment, the unnameable fear, which is just like the deep shadows cast by the dark woods behind the school, looms over the entirety of Hailsham and extends its influence to everyone within it. The unpowered wooden fence, never actually electrified, becomes a psychological boundary that none of the students dares to cross. It resonates more with the inner landscape of each Hailsham student, where internal surveillance and self-regulation are formed.

Gen-AI's translation is revealed as a deliberate act of domesticated interpretation that amplifies the affective and ideological undercurrents of the source text. While departing from a literal rendering, the translation preserves and even heightens the internalized loyalty and rationalization mechanisms at play in the source text. Moreover, the rendering choice subtly reinforces Miss Emily's legitimacy within the ideological apparatus of Hailsham, turning a quirky metaphor into a culturally resonant affirmation of her rational power.

Thus, while Gen-AI's translation appears to defend Miss Emily, it in fact mirrors the narrative's deeper process of containment: the characters' efforts to resist unsettling truths are absorbed back into a discourse that upholds institutional logic. This is a prime example of how translation, even through domesticated and idiomatic choices, can reproduce the ideological function of the original text and participate in the subtle reaffirmation of power.

As Foucault (2003a) argues, "a fictional relationship automatically produces a real subjugation". The students must understand that they are being watched, judged, and condemned. The connection between transgression and punishment must be self-evident, and guilt must be socially acknowledged (Foucault 2003b, 247). Even in the main building, from which the silhouette of the woods cannot be seen, "you can never really get away from them" (Ishiguro 2019, 56).

Example 3:

ST	"The song," I said, "it was called ' <u>Never Let Me Go</u> .'" Then I sang a couple of lines under my breath for her. " <u>Never let me go</u> . Oh, baby, baby. <u>Never let me go...</u> " (Ishiguro 2005, 271)
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Zhang's translation	“那首歌，”我说，“名叫《莫失莫忘》。”随后我轻轻压低了声音唱了几句给她听。“ <u>莫失莫忘</u> 。噢，宝贝，宝贝。 <u>莫失莫忘</u>” (Ishiguro 2019, 305)
Back translation	“The song,” I s...” (, “was called ‘ <u>Do not lose, do not forget</u> ’.” Then I softly sang a few lines to her under my breath. “ <u>Do not lose</u> . Oh, baby, baby. <u>Do not forget</u> ...”
ChatGPT-4o's translation	“那首歌，”我说，“名字叫《别让我走》。” 接着，我低声哼了几句给她听： “ <u>别让我走</u> ，哦，亲爱的..... <u>别让我走</u>”
Back translation	“The song,” I said, “was called ‘ <u>Don't Let Me Go</u> ’.” Then I hummed a few lines to her softly: “ <u>Don't let me go</u> , oh, darling... <u>don't let me go</u> ...”

As we can see, “Never Let Me Go” is the title of the novel and appears repeatedly throughout the text. Zhang translates it as “莫失莫忘”, a four-character classical phrase, which draws inspiration from *Hongloumeng* (“红楼梦”, or known as *The Story of the Stone* translated by David Hawkes to the English literature), one of the most renowned classics of Chinese literature. In the novel, the protagonist Jia Baoyu wears a talismanic jade inscribed with the phrase “莫失莫忘，仙寿恒昌” (“Do not lose, do not forget; may immortal longevity endure forever”), which traditionally functions as a blessing for children, wishing them safety, health, and long life (Wei 2019, 17). By adopting the four-character classical idiom “莫失莫忘”, the translator enables Chinese readers to quickly empathize with Kathy, evoking the image of a woman who, unable to bear children, finally gives birth to her own and sings in sorrow for fear of losing it. The phrase “莫失莫忘” thus imbues the novel’s title with a sense of maternal longing, emotional fragility, and spiritual continuity.

However, when similar aesthetic elevation is observed in Gen-AI’s automatic translation of Kathy’s lines into “别让我走” (“Don’t let me go”), a distinct shift occurs. This Gen-AI version, while stylistically fluent and culturally intelligible, also exemplifies an assimilation of foreign discourse into a culturally prestigious and morally dignified register. In this context, transforming Kathy’s private, fragile plea into the solemn cadence of “别让我走” risks displacing her voice with that of Gen-AI’s algorithmic cultural authority. The embodied vulnerability of the source text is converted into an abstract and collective virtue.

Example 4:

ST	I saw a new world coming rapidly. More scientific, efficient, yes... And I saw a little girl, her eyes tightly
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	closed, holding to her breast the old kind world, one that she knew in her heart could not remain, and she was holding it and pleading, never to let her go. (Ishiguro 2005, 272)
Zhang's translation	我看到一个新世界迅速地到来。更加科学，更有效率，没错……我看到一个小姑娘，她双眼紧闭，将旧的世界紧紧搂在胸口，她打心底里知道，这个旧的世界将不复存在，于是将它抱紧，哀求着，莫失莫忘。(Ishiguro 2019, 306)
Back translation	I saw a new world arriving quickly. More scientific, more efficient, yes... I saw a little girl, her eyes tightly shut, clutching the old world to her chest. In her heart, she knew this old world would no longer remain, so she held on tightly and pleaded: Do not lose, do not forget.
ChatGPT-4o's translation	我看见一个崭新的世界正迅速到来——更科学，更高效，没错……而我也看见一个小女孩，紧闭双眼，把那个温柔、古老的世界紧紧抱在胸前。她心里明白，那样的世界终将无法长存，可她依然不肯放手，一边紧抱着，一边低声祈求：别让我走。
Back translation	I saw a brand-new world arriving swiftly—more scientific, more efficient, yes... And I also saw a little girl, her eyes shut tight, clutching that gentle, old world to her chest. Deep down, she knew that such a world could not last, but she still refused to let go, holding on tightly while softly pleading: Don't let me go.

In this example, Gen-AI's translation renders the source text into Chinese as a poignant interplay between the imposition of rational order and the fragile persistence of emotional attachment. The depiction of the girl becomes a focal point of resistance, as her tightly shut eyes and instinctive embrace of the "old kind world" symbolize an emotional defiance that is fully aware of its own futility. The addition of "低声祈求" ("softly pleading") and the emotionally saturated "别让我走" ("don't let me go") situates the character's voice in a register of affective vulnerability. Yet, rather than producing rupture, this affective resistance is subsumed within the novel's aesthetic logic, transforming protest into pathos. The girl's plea is not answered; it is narrated, observed, and finally contained within a broader narrative of irreversible transition.

In fact, this paragraph is spoken by Madame Miss Lucy of Hailsham to Kathy: a newer, more scientific and efficient world is rapidly arriving. Madame recalls the moment when she saw Kathy holding a pillow and singing "Never Let Me Go", for it is a scene that deeply saddened her. In

her interpretation, the pillow Kathy clutched to her chest symbolized a benevolent but old world. As time passes and things change, the old will be washed away and replaced, and the new world will inevitably emerge.

The Chinese translation “莫失莫忘” in Zhang’s version omits the direct reference to “me” in the original, thereby enriching the interpretive layers of the phrase. It can be read as self-directed, for one thing, “she” pleading with the old world not to abandon her; for another, as an exhortation to the young, innocent girl in her eyes: life is short, even for clones, and though fate cannot be resisted, “莫失莫忘” (“do not lose, do not forget”), for you still have “things to do” and “places to go.”

Under a highly structured disciplinary system and rigid social hierarchy, all forms of “otherness” (subversive elements) are swiftly identified and suppressed, allowing the power structure to internally cleanse and absorb potential threats. Miss Lucy who spoke the truth, is dismissed and expelled. Tommy, who once said he had “too many things to figure out” (Ishiguro 2005, 123), and who, “deep down, knew things the others didn’t” (ibid., 310), is among the first to develop a consciousness of self and the external world. Yet he suffers prolonged isolation, exclusion, and even physical abuse, unless he conforms (or “performs”) outwardly to behave indistinguishably from the other students.

5. “Why don’t the clones run”: translated literature’s subversion and containment

Critics have long raised a recurring question in response to the novel’s plot construction: why don’t the clones attempt to escape? (Sim 2006, 89). The depiction of disciplinary mechanisms at Hailsham offers an implicit answer. Regular health check-ups, morning assemblies, heart-to-heart conversations, and strictly scheduled classes all point to a regime of temporal discipline. The school is described as “set in a smooth hollow, surrounded by gentle slopes” (Ishiguro 2019, 38), with the main building of Hailsham, constantly subjected to the gaze from all directions, functioning as a panoptic centre.

5.1. Disciplinary language and the internalization of power

Hailsham’s internal structure is reinforced by a hierarchical network: the headmistress, Madame, the guardians, lower-level agents who actively uphold the system, such as Ruth, who organizes a “secret guard”, and even the students themselves, all form part of a multilayered surveillance system. Above them, there are other obscure and unnamed authorities. The honour of being selected for the Gallery, the token economy, and Miss Emily’s assessments all function as instruments of normative judgment.

Furthermore, the source text is saturated with discursive shaping, from everyday language to institutional rhetoric.

Discourse and power are inextricably linked, as power operates through discourse. It is through interpretive discourse that we come to understand ourselves, and acquire the capacity to make judgments about value, truth, and correctness (Danaher, Schirato, Webb 2002, 37). In this way, Zhang's translation not only preserves but also intensifies the depiction of how discourse disciplines bodies and minds, offering insight into why the clones, immersed in such a meticulously constructed order, never even imagine resistance or flight.

In contrast, Gen-AI's rendering is more likely to neutralize the ideological tension embedded in the original. By favouring syntactic fluency and semantically "safe" equivalents, AI translation tends to dilute the disciplinary force of terms such as "discipline" and "resistance," often rendering them as generic notions of regulation or behavioural conformity. As a result, Gen-AI's version unintentionally reinforces the logic of containment by presenting the clones' failure to rebel as a naturalized outcome, rather than a politically constructed impossibility. Furthermore, lacking ethical subjectivity, the AI translation risks effacing the human affect embedded in the original, thereby participating unconsciously in the re-objectification of the clones. This highlights how the posthuman translator not only replicates meaning but also, through its formal neutrality, contributes to the ideological normalization of power.

This normalized submission is sustained not only by physical discipline but also through Hailsham's distinct discursive system. The human translator's use of nouns like "捐献" ("grant") and "完结" ("completion") mirrors the conscious effort of Ishiguro to soften the horror of death and mask the clones' lack of agency. Guardians redirect existential anxiety into more manageable emotions by linking donation to sexuality, while students' jokes about "unzipping" trivialize their fate. These strategies recast trauma as routine, embedding dissent within a controlled narrative. In line with Greenblatt's subversion-containment model, the translation retains traces of resistance only to reframe them within dominant ideological structures.

5.2. Mimicry, humanization, and the crisis of identity

Moreover, the recurring motif of "being told and not told" (Ishiguro 2005, 92) functions as a form of psychological suggestion, where ambiguous statements deliver fragmented information that lingers vaguely in the students' childhood memories. As the narrative explains: "We were always young. The new information couldn't be fully understood. But of course, in some vague way, we did take it in... so that when we were older and the guardians talked to us about these things, there was no great

shock" (ibid., 92). In essence, Hailsham ultimately betrayed its founding ideal. Over the years, it became a system that continuously cultivated and supplied "docile bodies" to serve human society. The humanization of clones is attributed to the guardians' intentional shaping and the clones' active mimicry.

Unlike the clones' longing to identify with human beings, the human response to clones (an uncanny Other) is marked by fear and rejection, a response that even the guardians, who raise them, are not exempt from. Ishiguro's use of retrospective narration sustains the mystery surrounding Hailsham's existence until the novel's final chapters. As is revealed in the human translator's version above, both humans and clones appear to be constructing their own identities, only to discover a profound uncertainty at the core of those identities.

In fact, the identity of clones (originating from humans) and that of humans (who receive organs from clones) becomes increasingly indistinct (Nayar 2014, 87). On one hand, neither humans nor clones can erase the natural attributes they are born with; on the other, their identities are subtly reshaped by forces such as culture, education, and technology.

This transformation is reflected in the evolution of humans from "natural beings" to "posthumans," and of clones from "organ-objects" to human-like subjects. The two categories permeate and mirror one another. Whether human or clone, both are caught in the entanglement of dual identities, constantly questioning who or what they truly are. As guardians of clones and as clones destined for organ donation, they coexist within a contradictory, interdependent and oppositional space.

5.3. Translation as ideological mediation: naming, silencing, and sentimental containment

As previously discussed, Greenblatt's model of subversion and containment has sparked considerable scholarly debate since its inception. Returning to the original work, the case of Miss Lucy offers a vivid illustration of this dynamic. Expelled from Hailsham for revealing the truth, she is driven out but not entirely subdued. She becomes a figure of perpetual escape, namely a resistant subject who continues to haunt the system as a permanent, latent subversive force.

Moreover, tragedy and meaning are closely intertwined. The failure of resistance undoubtedly deepens the clones' psychological suffering and reinforces their self-othering. Yet at the same time, it is precisely through the pain and misfortune they endure that the meaning of their lives is articulated. In other words, although their failed resistance and resulting despair cannot help the clones survive any better, it brings them closer to being truly human. Their capacity for memory, along with the bright trace

of humanity projected onto the "kind old world" Kathy clutches to her chest, together testify to the clones' essential equivalence to real human beings.

This recognition carries profound ethical implications. The realization that artificial beings are capable of feeling, remembering, and longing for meaning may trigger public moral panic and existential anxiety. Yet this very awareness becomes a powerful subversive force, one that cannot be erased simply by eliminating the clones themselves.

Against the sombre backdrop of the human translator's rendering, the clone protagonist undergoes a gradual collapse of belief in the ideals instilled in her from childhood, particularly the glorification of creativity. Her understanding of death and fate evolves from ignorance, to partial awareness, and finally to acceptance. This trajectory echoes one of Kazuo Ishiguro's consistent thematic concerns: using a posthuman perspective to magnify the existential predicaments and mortality anxieties of ordinary human beings. In this convergence, the posthuman meets the human: both respond to the absurdities of life with endurance, live with conscious awareness, and resist the void of death through memory embedded within life itself.

As demonstrated in the examples above, Zhang's version foregrounds existential reflection and ethical ambiguity, portraying the reconstruction of selfhood and the pursuit of meaning as subtle forms of discursive resistance. By contrast, Gen-AI's version presents these moments as narrative procedures, often framing the failure of resistance as natural or inevitable. This comparison reveals that translation itself becomes a site of ideological negotiation, where the capacity to preserve or contain subversion is deeply shaped by both the human and the posthuman translators' positionality.

Translation, as a mediating act, allows the translated text to reproduce a series of subversive elements within its internal structure. However, such subversion is never complete. Instead, it is appropriated and absorbed, reinforcing the monologic nature of power and the inescapability of the clones' tragic destiny (see Figure 3). By rendering visible the process through which power suppresses and assimilates subversive forces, the translator rewrites, within the Chinese linguistic and cultural context, a tragic elegy for artificial life. In doing so, the translation not only addresses the recurring question of "Why don't the clones run?" but also conveys to Chinese readers Ishiguro's keen interrogation of power—subtle, indirect, yet profoundly critical.

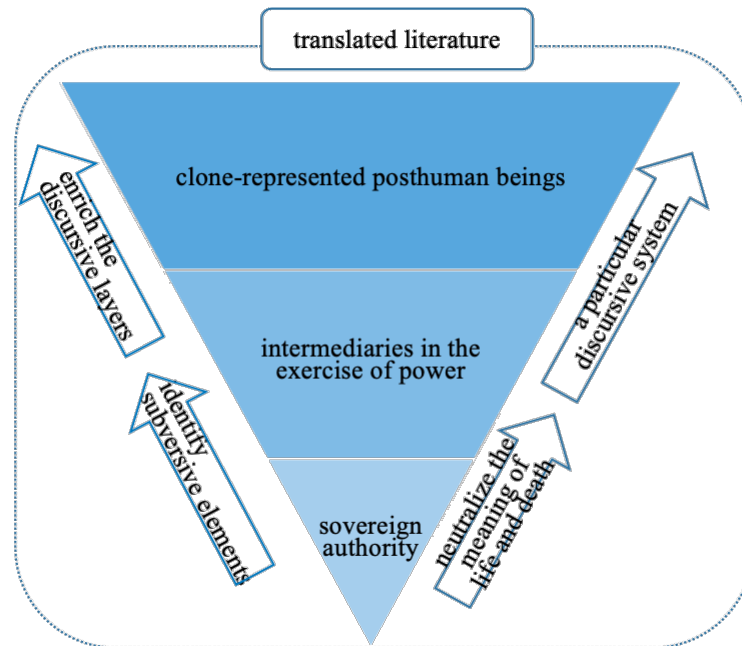


Figure 3. The translated literature's rewriting of posthuman power

In sum, the translated versions of *Never Let Me Go*, both human and AI-generated illustrate how translated literature can both expose and reproduce the mechanisms of power through discursive, narrative, and aesthetic strategies. From the normalized vocabulary of “donation” and “completion” in the source text to the sentimental reframing of resistance and memory, both of the translations reflect what Greenblatt describes as the containment of subversion. It preserves traces of dissent while simultaneously transforming them into forms that are more acceptable within dominant ideological structures. The clones’ inability to escape becomes not a failure of agency, but a consequence of a meticulously internalized system of control. Within this framework, the translation, especially the AI-generated, serves not only as a linguistic medium but also as an ideological space where power is rearticulated and naturalized.

6. Conclusion: subversion, containment, and the limits of resistance

Through an analysis of the human's and Gen-AI's translation, the study explores the dual nature of Hailsham, the clones' anxiety over identity, and the reconstruction of power. It reveals how Ishiguro's narrative presents a complex process of subversion being gradually contained, with power simultaneously suppressing and incorporating disruptive elements. From the perspective of New Historicism, the text conveys the presence of resistance and subversive voices within the clone community. Yet these voices are ultimately absorbed by dominant power,

redirected through institutional discourse, and reinserted into the operational structure of power that sustains social order and control.

However, Greenblatt's theory has also been critiqued for overemphasizing the totalizing nature of power and for offering an overly generalized and reductive model. This theoretical limitation also points to a lack of terminological specificity and typicality in parts of this paper's textual analysis.

As a prominent contemporary writer on the theme of internationalism, Kazuo Ishiguro has consistently regarded the novel as a global literary form. By allowing readers to accompany Kathy through her full cognitive journey, Ishiguro employs a first-person narrative to dismantle the deeply held human bias that clones are devoid of humanity. In doing so, he encourages readers to confront the fragility, selfishness, and cruelty embedded in human nature, and to reflect on society's possible attitudes toward clones as "commodified beings."

While Zhang's translation is marked by a high degree of domestication, it nonetheless retains key aspects of the source text's alterity. When approached through the lens of power, the translation effectively addresses the posthuman subjectivity of the clones and offers us a glimpse into an alternative social reality, one that is complicit in systems of power and yet remains largely invisible within dominant public discourse.

Furthermore, the integration of generative AI is considered as a contemporary manifestation of posthuman technology, engaging in the rewriting of power relationships and ethical dilemmas. I argue that generative AI not only amplifies the exploration of power dynamics but also introduces a new layer of ethical considerations in the translator's role and decision-making process. When posthuman translators such as generative AI engage with texts like *Never Let Me Go*, they not only participate in literary meaning-making, but also inherit the responsibilities and risks of mediating power, identity, and human emotion. In this sense, translated literature becomes a site where both human and posthuman agents negotiate the limits of resistance and the ethics of containment.

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