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Human–AI Collaboration under Constraint: Mediatized Translation Production and Cross-Cultural Risks - A Case Study of iQIYI International

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Abstract: Amid expanding global cultural circulation and rapid AI-driven transformation, human–AI collaboration has become increasingly central to the translation and localization of Chinese audiovisual content for overseas markets. Drawing on mediatization theory and a socio-technical perspective, this article examines how AI, as a technological medium, restructures audiovisual translation production and how this restructuring shapes cross-cultural communication. Based on a qualitative case study of iQIYI International combining seventeen semi-structured interviews with technology managers and frontline practitioners, internal production documents, and public materials, the study identifies three interconnected dimensions of mediatized restructuring: spatiotemporal, agentive, and institutional. Their interaction produces an efficiency-oriented production architecture characterized by accelerated production, bounded human intervention, and technically encoded rules. This configuration generates three recurrent production-side risks for cross-cultural communication: *semantic thinning*, *contextual and affective fragmentation*, and *reduced interpretive flexibility*. The study argues that cultural discount in the AI era may be shaped not only by linguistic and cultural distance, but also by production-side mechanisms embedded in the institutional organization of translation. It therefore proposes a differentiated translation workflow architecture, stronger human interpretive authority at culturally sensitive points in the workflow, and more negotiable rules and culturally sensitive feedback mechanisms to embed cultural judgment within AI-assisted translation systems.

Keywords: AI-assisted audiovisual translation; human–AI collaboration; mediatization; cultural discount; Chinese audiovisual content; cross-cultural communication.

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1. Introduction

Digital streaming platforms have become increasingly important infrastructures of global audiovisual distribution, reshaping the geography of television circulation across borders (Lobato 2019). Against this backdrop, the overseas circulation of Chinese television has become increasingly platformized, with Chinese streaming services such as iQIYI International and WeTV expanding into overseas markets,

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particularly in Southeast Asia (Sarkar and Yang 2025).

Greater circulation, however, does not guarantee deeper cultural communication. This gap is often described as "cultural discount": media products may lose intelligibility or appeal among audiences lacking relevant cultural knowledge or proximity (Hoskins and Mirus 1988: 500). Translation is therefore a key site for negotiating cultural distance, either reproducing discount through simplification or mitigating it by making meanings accessible without erasing difference.

AI complicates this process. Translation was long approached primarily as linguistic conversion, and translation technologies were conceptualized as tools and resources integrated into practice (Alcina 2008). Today, AI intervenes across speech recognition, machine translation, subtitle generation and editing, synthetic voice production, and quality inspection, making translation increasingly inseparable from human–computer interaction (O'Brien 2012). This technological turn reorganizes translation practice rather than merely automating linguistic tasks (Jiménez-Crespo 2020).

Existing scholarship has examined this technological transformation from several important dimensions. One line of research emphasizes efficiency and quality, examining how computer-assisted translation and machine translation technologies can increase productivity and support translation quality (Doherty 2016). Such research demonstrates the productivity gains enabled by translation technologies, but tends to evaluate them primarily in terms of technical performance. A second line of research focuses on translator agency and labor. Recent audiovisual-translation research has shown that AI-powered subtitling is shifting human subtitlers from primary content production toward post-editing and evaluation (Jia and Díaz-Cintas 2026), while critical political-economy approaches have shown how automation, market pressure, and post-editing practices may alter professional autonomy and devalue translation labor (Moorkens 2017). Research on translator-technology relations has similarly emphasized that human and technological agency are negotiated through situated practice rather than functioning as two independent forces (Olohan 2011).

A third body of scholarship approaches translation as cultural mediation. Audiovisual translation research has long demonstrated that subtitling and dubbing are shaped by formal, linguistic, and industrial constraints rather than constituting transparent linguistic transfer (Díaz-Cintas and Remael 2007). More broadly, research on translation in the digital age has argued that translation technologies are neither culturally nor politically neutral, since technical infrastructures inevitably participate in determining what forms of meaning can be preserved, transformed, or omitted (Cronin 2013). Recent research on AI-powered media localization further shows that the expansion of automation must be understood together with questions of human expertise, professional agency, and the specific requirements of creative audiovisual translation (Orrego-Carmona 2024).

These strands illuminate efficiency, labor, and cultural mediation, but often treat them separately. Less understood is how AI architectures, platform rules, institutional standards, human labor, and cultural judgment interact within an integrated production system. The key question is therefore how technology structures the conditions under which translation decisions are made.

A socio-technical perspective is useful for addressing this problem because it rejects both technological determinism and an exclusively human-centered explanation of technological practice. Technology is neither an external force that independently determines organizational outcomes nor a passive instrument fully controlled by its users; rather, technological arrangements and human practices are mutually constituted through their ongoing interaction (Orlikowski 1992: 405-406). Translation-technology research has likewise called for viewing translation as a socio-technical-cultural system in which technological design, translator subjectivity, and intercultural mediation are interdependent (Li et al. 2020). Building on this relational understanding, this study further draws on mediatization theory to examine how AI technologies acquire structuring power over the organization of audiovisual translation production. Mediatization provides a means of moving beyond the question of human–AI interaction itself to ask how technological logics reorganize production rhythms, actor relations, and institutional rules.

This study therefore examines AI-assisted audiovisual translation not simply as a question of linguistic accuracy or technological performance, but as a technologically mediated process of cultural production. Its central concern is how the integration of AI into audiovisual translation reorganizes the conditions under which cultural meanings are interpreted, transformed, standardized, and circulated across borders.

The study contributes theoretically by linking translation studies with media and communication research through socio-technical and mediatization perspectives, shifting attention from individual tools to production arrangements. Practically, it examines why faster, larger-scale localization does not necessarily yield deeper cultural understanding, and under what conditions technological efficiency can support meaningful cross-cultural communication.

2. Theoretical Framework and Research Methods

2.1. Theoretical Framework

Mediatization shifts attention from media as channels to media as constitutive conditions of social and cultural practice. Hjarvard (2008: 113) defines it as growing dependence on media and their institutional and technological logics. Couldry and Hepp (2013) likewise emphasize the longer-term transformation of social practice as media infrastructures become pervasive. Work on deep mediatization further shows how digital infrastructures become entangled with the organization of practice (Hepp 2020).

This shift—from media as channels to media as constitutive conditions—is particularly relevant to AI-assisted audiovisual translation. If AI is understood only as a translation tool, analysis is likely to focus on measurable performance indicators such as accuracy, speed, or cost. A mediatization perspective instead asks how technological logics become embedded in the organization of translation production. Large language models (LLMs) operate through probabilistic computation, scalability, standardization, and rapid feedback; when incorporated into platform workflows, these properties do not merely improve individual translation tasks but may reshape production schedules, divisions of labor, evaluative criteria, and the range of decisions available to human practitioners. AI translation can therefore be understood as a form of technological mediation with

mediatizing consequences when its operating logics become institutionalized within translation practice.

A socio-technical perspective clarifies the relation between technology and human actors. Orlikowski (1992: 405-406) rejects both technological determinism and voluntarism, treating technologies and organizational practices as recursively related. Translation has similarly been conceptualized as human–computer interaction (O'Brien 2012), while STS-informed studies show translator and technological agency as negotiated rather than fixed (Olohan 2011). Recent scholarship therefore links workflow changes to broader transformations in labor, professional relations, and infrastructure (Tieber and Baumgarten 2024). Here, the socio-technical perspective serves as a relational premise: AI effects emerge through technical affordances, institutional arrangements, and situated practice.

The study is also situated within the broader transformation of global cultural flows. Earlier accounts of international cultural circulation often foregrounded either structural asymmetries in the movement of media products or the hybridization and reinterpretation of cultural texts across contexts. The expansion of digital platforms has added an infrastructural dimension to this process. Platformization research demonstrates that platforms intervene not only in distribution but also in the production, circulation, modularization, and continual adjustment of cultural commodities (Nieborg and Poell 2018: 4275). From this perspective, translation constitutes an important but comparatively underexamined node at which platform infrastructures participate directly in the transformation of cultural meaning. Global cultural flow therefore serves here as the macro-context of the study rather than as a second causal theory: the central analytical question is how mediatized translation production conditions the movement of cultural meanings across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

On this basis, the article develops three analytical dimensions through which the mediatization of audiovisual translation production can be empirically examined: spatiotemporal restructuring, agency reconfiguration, and institutional reconfiguration. These dimensions are not treated as fixed components of mediatization theory, but as an analytical operationalization developed for the present study.

First, spatiotemporal restructuring concerns the mediatization of the conditions of production. AI systems and platform infrastructures may alter the temporal sequence, speed, simultaneity, and geographical organization of translation work. The relevant question is not simply whether translation becomes faster, but how acceleration, parallel processing, cloud-based collaboration, and synchronized distribution redefine the temporal and spatial conditions under which cultural translation takes place.

Second, agency reconfiguration concerns the mediatization of the actors who produce translations. The incorporation of AI redistributes tasks, competencies, and decision-making authority among translators, reviewers, technical personnel, and automated systems. This dimension therefore examines changes in professional identity, division of labor, deskilling and reskilling, and the practical scope of human cultural judgment.

Third, institutional reconfiguration concerns the mediatization of the rules that govern production. Translation standards, terminology databases, prompt templates, workflow protocols, quality thresholds, and

traceable evaluation systems may convert previously flexible professional conventions into technically executable rules. The focus here is on how organizational norms become encoded within technological systems and how such codification shapes the range of permissible translation choices.

These dimensions are mutually constitutive rather than independent effects. Acceleration shifts human work toward review and correction; standardized workflows stabilize that division of labor; and codified standards make large-scale production manageable. Mediatization thus operates through the conditions, actors, and rules of production.

The framework treats technological efficiency and cultural expression as an empirical tension rather than a predetermined opposition. Large-scale localization favors scalability, predictability, and control, whereas cross-cultural communication often requires contextual interpretation, cultural specificity, emotional nuance, and creative judgment. How these logics interact must be examined in practice.

Based on this framework, the study examines how the mediatization of audiovisual translation production is connected to its cross-cultural risks. Because the study is based on production-side rather than audience-reception data, it does not seek to demonstrate cultural discount as an observed audience effect. Instead, it examines production-side mechanisms through which cultural discount may be reproduced or intensified in AI-assisted translation. It addresses the following three research questions:

RQ1: How does AI reshape audiovisual translation production through human–AI collaboration?

RQ2: What production-side risks for cross-cultural communication emerge from this transformation?

RQ3: How can translation systems and practices be adjusted to address these risks while retaining the efficiency benefits of AI?

2.2. Research Methods

This study uses a qualitative single-case design centered on AI-assisted audiovisual translation at iQIYI International. Semi-structured interviews, internal organizational documents, and public materials are combined to examine how AI becomes embedded in production and reshapes workflows, human–AI relations, institutional arrangements, and cross-cultural mediation.

2.2.1. Case Selection

iQIYI International was selected as the focal case through strategic case selection based on three considerations.

First, the case provides a relatively complete setting in which to observe AI-assisted audiovisual translation as an integrated production process. iQIYI has incorporated AI technologies into multiple stages of translation and localization, including speech recognition, machine translation, subtitle processing, synthetic voice production, and quality inspection. The case therefore makes it possible to examine human–AI collaboration not at the level of a single translation tool, but across an interconnected production workflow.

Second, iQIYI International provides a particularly relevant setting for examining the relationship between technological production and cross-cultural communication. Its audiovisual content is distributed across multiple overseas markets, including Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America, requiring translation and localization across different linguistic and cultural contexts. Translation practices on the platform are therefore situated directly at

the intersection of technological standardization and cross-cultural adaptation.

Third, the researchers obtained research access through the "AI Translation & Dubbing Practice Base" jointly established by Communication University of China and iQIYI. This institutional connection provided access to internal materials that are normally difficult to observe from outside the production process, including translation workflow documents, quality-standard manuals, and internship production reports. It also facilitated interviews with technology managers and frontline practitioners involved in AI-assisted translation.

The case is not statistically representative of the Chinese audiovisual industry. It is instead an information-rich case for examining mechanisms linking technological systems, organizational arrangements, human labor, and cultural translation, with analytical rather than statistical generalization as the goal (Yin 2018: 20).

2.2.2. Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 17 participants directly involved in the AI translation workflow. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling on the basis of their involvement in relevant technical, managerial, or production tasks. The sample consisted of two technology managers and fifteen frontline practitioners.

The interview guide followed the three research questions while remaining open to emergent issues. It covered changes in workflows and quality control; problems involving culturally specific, contextual, and emotional meanings; and the scope for human judgment, technical adjustment, feedback, and alternative translation strategies.

The two technology managers were involved in products based on large language models (LLMs). Interviews focused on system design, optimization objectives, workflow configuration, human–AI task allocation, technical and quality standards, culture-specific expressions, and feedback mechanisms.

The fifteen frontline practitioners worked on AI-assisted translation and copyediting, prompt design, subtitle polishing, AI voice production, multilingual content operation, and professional translation and proofreading. Of these participants, ten were interns participating in translation-related projects associated with the practice base, while the remaining participants were involved in relevant production or professional translation tasks. Interviews focused on everyday human–AI collaboration, recurring technical and cultural problems, emotional adaptation, and the practical scope for review and revision.

The predominance of interns in the frontline sample calls for qualification. Interns were directly involved in operational tasks and therefore provided detailed accounts of routine human–AI interaction, workflow constraints, error correction, and system use. At the same time, their experiences may not fully represent those of senior professional translators, particularly with regard to long-term professional autonomy, bargaining power, or decision-making authority. Their accounts are therefore treated as evidence of situated production practices within the observed workflow rather than as representative of audiovisual translators as a profession.

The interviews were conducted in March 2026 and lasted approximately 40–60 minutes each. With participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed. Recruitment was guided by the principle of information

power, according to which the adequacy of a qualitative interview sample depends on factors such as the specificity of the sample, the focus of the research question, the use of established theory, and the quality of the interview material rather than on a predetermined numerical threshold (Malterud et al. 2016: 1754). Later interviews with frontline practitioners produced progressively fewer substantively new themes relevant to the research questions. Given both the small number of technology managers and the intern-heavy composition of the frontline sample, however, the study does not claim formal saturation across all participant categories or professional levels.

Meetings, seminars, and follow-up visits associated with the practice base also provided contextual familiarity with the production environment and helped refine the interview guide. Unless formally documented and incorporated into the analytic corpus, however, these interactions were treated as contextual background rather than as data equivalent to the recorded interviews.

Table 1: *Interview participants and research focus*

Participant Group	Number	Roles/work functions represented	Main interview focus
Technology Managers	2	Developers and managers of products based on large language models (LLMs)	System architecture and optimization; human–AI division of labor; technical and quality standards; treatment of culture-specific expressions; feedback and iteration mechanisms
Frontline Practitioners	15	AI-assisted translation and copyediting; prompt design; subtitle polishing; AI voice production; multilingual content operation; professional translation and proofreading	Everyday workflow; human–AI collaboration; error correction; cultural adaptation; emotional calibration; workload and time constraints; scope for human judgment

2.2.3. Data Analysis

The interview transcripts and internal documents were analyzed through a theoretically informed thematic analysis combining deductive and inductive coding. The three analytical dimensions developed for the present study from the mediatization framework—spatiotemporal restructuring, agency reconfiguration, and institutional

reconfiguration—served as sensitizing concepts rather than fixed coding categories. They guided attention to changes in production rhythms and coordination, human roles and decision-making, and the formalization of organizational rules, while allowing additional themes to emerge from the empirical material.

The analysis proceeded in two stages. In the first stage, the researchers coded recurrent descriptions of workflow changes, human–AI task allocation, time and cost constraints, cultural and contextual problems, translation standards, and feedback mechanisms. In the second stage, these codes were compared across interviews and documentary materials and grouped into broader analytical patterns. This process clarified how the three forms of mediatized restructuring interacted within the production system and also generated three recurring analytical categories—semantic thinning, contextual and affective fragmentation, and reduced interpretive flexibility—that the analysis treats as potential production-side risks for cross-cultural communication.

Analytical claims were developed through comparison across participant groups and data sources. Accounts from frontline practitioners were compared with those of technology managers, while interview evidence was checked against internal workflow documents, quality standards, and relevant public materials where possible. Divergent or qualifying accounts were retained rather than forced into a single interpretation. The analysis therefore moved iteratively between theoretical concepts and empirical materials, with the aim of identifying mechanisms rather than measuring their prevalence.

Affiliation with the joint practice base enabled unusual access but also created institutional proximity to the research setting. To maintain reflexivity, interview questions avoided techno-optimist or techno-critical assumptions; platform documents were treated as situated organizational materials; claims were triangulated across interviews, internal documents, and public materials; and discrepant accounts were retained where they complicated the dominant interpretation.

All participants provided informed consent. Recordings and transcripts were used solely for academic research, participants were anonymized, and identifying or commercially sensitive information was removed where necessary.

3. Human–AI Collaboration in Practice: Mediatized Restructuring of Audiovisual Translation Production

3.1. Spatiotemporal Restructuring: From Sequential Production to Parallelized Platform Coordination

The first transformation concerns the temporal and spatial organization of audiovisual translation production. Conventional audiovisual translation has generally depended on coordinated linguistic and technical stages, with subtitling in particular involving translation, timing, segmentation, and revision under substantial temporal and spatial constraints (Díaz-Cintas and Remael 2007). The growing platformization and technologization of translation production increasingly alter this organization by decomposing work into technically defined tasks and enabling different production stages to be coordinated through shared digital infrastructures (Moorkens 2020: 12).

In AI-supported workflows, speech recognition, first-pass translation, timeline alignment, and other technically standardized procedures can increasingly be processed in parallel rather than waiting for one stage to be fully completed before the next begins.

Internal production materials from the practice base indicate that, with AI support, the production cycle of some audiovisual translation projects can be compressed to approximately two to three days per episode. Parallel processing is not merely an incidental technical advantage but an explicit design objective of the system. As one technology manager explained:

"The system's optimization objective is to let speech recognition, first-pass translation, and timeline alignment run in parallel, so that human review no longer has to wait for upstream stages to finish". (T1, 2026-03-04)

Human review is consequently inserted into a continuous stream of machine output instead of awaiting the completion of upstream tasks. Production shifts from a largely sequential process toward a continuous, parallelized workflow, consistent with the broader fragmentation of translation into smaller, platform-coordinated units (Moorkens 2020).

The temporal consequences extend beyond the internal production process. AI-supported localization facilitates the preparation of multiple language versions within shorter timeframes, making near-synchronous overseas distribution more technically feasible. Chinese audiovisual content can therefore enter different linguistic markets with reduced delay, narrowing the temporal gap between domestic release and overseas circulation. Translation is consequently incorporated more directly into platform release schedules instead of functioning primarily as a separate post-production activity undertaken after domestic distribution. In this sense, technological mediation compresses not only translation time but also the interval between cultural production and transnational circulation.

At the same time, AI-supported workflows reconfigure the spatial organization of translation work. Audiovisual localization no longer necessarily requires translators, reviewers, technical personnel, and other production resources to be physically co-located. Cloud-based production systems allow computational tasks to be processed centrally while human participants access translation outputs, terminology resources, and production interfaces from geographically dispersed locations. Similar tendencies have been identified in studies of platform-mediated translation, where shared digital infrastructures support highly collaborative workflows while enabling tighter procedural coordination and monitoring (Moorkens 2020).

Spatial restructuring therefore does not imply that geographical location becomes irrelevant. Rather, the basis of coordination shifts from physical co-presence toward infrastructural connectivity. Technical teams responsible for system optimization, model configuration, and resource maintenance and practitioners responsible for linguistic review, cultural adaptation, and voice production may be geographically dispersed, yet their work remains connected through the same technical architecture. Access to centrally maintained terminology databases, prompt configurations, workflow interfaces, and quality-control mechanisms becomes a crucial condition of participation in production. AI-mediated translation thus combines geographical dispersion with infrastructural re-coordination.

This arrangement also alters the rhythm under which human work is performed. As

machine-generated outputs become available more rapidly, review and correction increasingly become points at which production pressure is concentrated. Technology may accelerate upstream generation without proportionally expanding the time available for culturally sensitive human intervention. Research on contemporary translation technologies has similarly shown that automation and post-editing can reorganize labor conditions and intensify pressure around revision-oriented forms of work (Moorkens 2017: 464). One frontline practitioner described the pace of work as follows:

"For a 45-minute episode of a costume drama with about 430 lines, the production time is only around 11 hours". (N3, 2026-03-01)

Time compression therefore reorganizes the production environment around short turnarounds, parallel processing, and rapid machine-human handoffs, requiring human review to adapt to rhythms set by both technical capacity and delivery schedules.

Spatiotemporal restructuring thus makes audiovisual translation more parallelized, distributed, and platform-coordinated while establishing the conditions under which human roles and authority are reorganized.

3.2. Agency Reconfiguration: Redistributing Roles, Competences and Human Judgment

The second transformation concerns the position of human actors within the translation process. AI does not simply replace particular translation tasks. Its incorporation into production redistributes tasks, competencies, and decision-making responsibilities among translators, reviewers, technical personnel, and automated systems. Research on translation technology has long emphasized that human and technological agency are relational rather than independent, with technological systems simultaneously enabling and constraining particular forms of professional action (Olohan 2011). More recent work on AI-powered localization similarly suggests that automation is reorganizing human participation rather than simply removing it from media translation (Orrego-Carmona 2024).

This redistribution is particularly visible when machine-generated translation becomes the default starting point of production. In more conventional forms of audiovisual translation, translators may participate across a relatively continuous chain of comprehension, linguistic conversion, and expression. Under AI-assisted production, this chain becomes increasingly segmented. Machine systems generate first-pass translations or voice outputs, while human practitioners intervene at specific stages to review, correct, refine, or reconfigure these outputs. Comparable shifts toward post-editing and evaluation of AI-generated output have been observed in contemporary audiovisual-translation environments (Jia and Díaz-Cintas 2026).

Human labor remains central but is redistributed across specialized points of intervention, from prompt design and subtitle polishing to AI voice production and professional proofreading.

Crucially, however, the redistribution of tasks should not be equated with a redistribution of agency. Human practitioners may assume new responsibilities for evaluation, diagnosis, and cultural calibration while having limited authority over the workflow architecture, time budgets, technical parameters, and quality thresholds within which such judgment can be exercised. What changes is therefore not only the quantity or type of human labor but also the conditions under which professional discretion becomes possible.

As routine grammar, terminology, and formatting are increasingly pre-processed by AI, human work shifts toward identifying residual errors, diagnosing mismatches with audiovisual context, and deciding when machine output requires revision.

The redistribution of tasks also alters the competence profile expected of practitioners. Linguistic competence remains fundamental, but it is no longer sufficient on its own. Translation-technology research has increasingly emphasized the need to integrate linguistic expertise with technological literacy and the ability to evaluate machine-generated outputs (Mellinger 2017). In the present case, AI-assisted audiovisual production requires at least three overlapping forms of competence: bilingual and audiovisual knowledge; technical competence in operating AI systems and diagnosing model output; and contextual competence in interpreting cultural meaning, emotional expression, and situational appropriateness.

AI voice production illustrates this combination: practitioners identify unnatural intonation or pauses, assess emotional fit with the scene, adjust segmentation and speed, and improve synchronization. Human value increasingly lies in evaluating, contextualizing, and culturally calibrating machine output.

Yet the expansion of these competence requirements does not necessarily produce a corresponding expansion of decision-making authority. Studies of post-editing have shown that resistance to technologically reorganized translation work may arise precisely because professional knowledge remains necessary while translators experience reduced control over how that knowledge can be exercised (Sakamoto 2019: 201, 209). Within AI-powered media localization, the practical exercise of human agency is likewise shaped by the production priorities and arrangements through which automation is implemented (Orrego-Carmona 2024: 9). In the present case, the practical scope of intervention is shaped by workflow design, production deadlines, and cost constraints.

One frontline practitioner described the tension between the expected quality of translation and the actual conditions of production:

"The current film and television translation workflow is overly industrialized. Yet translation should not be mechanical correspondence, let alone word-for-word literal translation. It should be a combination of accuracy and artistry. But in practice, we simply cannot attend to both". (N7, 2026-03-03)

The constraint is therefore not simply a lack of skill, but a production environment in which machine output is the default and human revision is bounded by time and predefined procedures.

This boundary becomes particularly evident in AI dubbing. One practitioner noted:

"AI dubbing still has noticeable shortcomings in voice naturalness, emotional appeal, contextual adaptation, and most importantly, cost. But considering cost constraints, the number of optimization rounds per episode cannot exceed two". (N5, 2026-03-01)

A technology manager described the same constraint from the platform side:

"Emotional expressiveness is technically solvable, but each additional optimization round multiplies the cost; at current price levels, two rounds per episode is the ceiling that the business model can sustain". (T2, 2026-03-04)

These accounts show that agency depends not only on what practitioners can technically change, but on what organizational and economic conditions

allow them to change. Cultural and emotional refinement may be feasible yet constrained by time, iterations, and resources.

Agency reconfiguration is therefore neither simple substitution nor empowerment. AI absorbs routine linguistic work while increasing demand for technical diagnosis, contextual interpretation, and cultural calibration. Human expertise remains crucial at points of ambiguity and cultural specificity, but is exercised within technologically and institutionally bounded spaces.

3.3. Institutional Reconfiguration: From Professional Conventions to Technically Encoded Workflow Governance

The third transformation concerns the institutional rules through which translation production is organized and evaluated. Audiovisual translation has always been governed by professional conventions, linguistic standards, organizational requirements, and quality-control procedures.

With AI, requirements once sustained by professional knowledge, memory, or interpersonal coordination can increasingly be formalized for technical reproduction, monitoring, and enforcement.

We use *technical codification* to refer to the conversion of professional and organizational norms into machine-readable and technically executable forms. From a socio-technical perspective, technologies do not merely implement rules located outside the system; organizational assumptions and institutional priorities can become materially embedded in technological arrangements themselves (Orlikowski 1992: 405). Digital systems may thereby participate directly in structuring organizational behavior by defining permissible actions, recording performance, and making particular forms of evaluation technically routine (Kellogg et al. 2020: 366-368).

In AI-assisted translation, technical codification takes several forms. Translation requirements may be embedded in terminology databases, prompt libraries, workflow protocols, model configurations, and automated or semi-automated quality-control mechanisms. Translation technologies have long facilitated terminological consistency and standardized production practices (Paulsen Christensen and Schjoldager 2016). In the present case, generative AI and integrated platform workflows extend such codification into the generation and evaluation process itself.

This process is visible in iQIYI's internal translation standards. Certain terminology and formatting requirements are specified in advance and applied consistently across projects. For example, the platform's subtitle translation standards prescribe fixed renderings for particular politically sensitive expressions. Once incorporated into terminology databases or prompt configurations, such rules no longer depend entirely on individual translators remembering or interpreting them during production. AI systems can apply standardized forms during initial generation, while human reviewers verify their implementation.

A technology manager described the logic behind this codification:

"Whatever can be written as a rule goes into the prompt library or the terminology base; that is the only way to guarantee consistency when dozens of titles are being processed at the same time". (T1, 2026-03-04)

At scale, consistency must be technically reproducible across projects, languages, and participants. Codification embeds platform standards in infrastructure rather than

relying on individual memory or repeated instruction.

Technical codification extends beyond individual terminology choices to the organization of the workflow as a whole. Audiovisual translation is divided into a series of defined production stages, including preparation, translation, dubbing production, cross-review, quality inspection, and final delivery. Each stage is associated with specific tasks, expected outputs, and responsible actors. Human–AI collaboration is therefore not organized through continuous informal negotiation alone. It is structured through a workflow architecture that assigns particular forms of intervention to particular nodes of the production process.

Predefined task boundaries, review stages, optimization rounds, and quality thresholds can shape professional action without the system making every translation decision directly. Discretion is thus reorganized into technically structured sequences of action.

Technical systems further reinforce this structure by making work increasingly traceable. Operation logs can record revisions, quality-inspection mechanisms can identify errors, and review results can be connected to particular production stages or practitioners. Research on digitally mediated organizational control has shown that the capacity to record, evaluate, and attribute actions is central to the ways technological systems reorganize workplace governance (Kellogg et al. 2020). Similar tendencies have been observed in platformized translation environments, where digital infrastructures facilitate increasingly granular task allocation and monitoring.

One frontline practitioner explained:

"If there are too many errors, it gets sent back to the original translator for revision". (N10, 2026-03-03)

Quality control thus becomes continuous process governance rather than only an end-stage assessment: errors can be identified, attributed, and returned upstream, increasing consistency and traceability.

Institutional reconfiguration under AI should therefore not be understood as the complete replacement of professional judgment by automated rules. Not every translation problem can be formalized, and practitioners continue to encounter situations requiring contextual interpretation, cultural knowledge, and creative intervention. Rather, the institutional significance of AI lies in altering the relationship between standardized rules and discretionary judgment. An expanding range of expectations can be formalized and embedded within the technological system before individual translators encounter particular translation problems. Professional judgment consequently operates increasingly in relation to an already configured technical environment.

Together, spatiotemporal restructuring, agency reconfiguration, and institutional reconfiguration reorganize production conditions, redistribute decision-making, and encode professional norms. They also reinforce one another: modular standards enable parallel production, while the resulting division of labor concentrates human work at points of review, diagnosis, and correction.

The resulting architecture makes efficiency, scalability, human judgment, and institutional control interdependent. Accelerated rhythms, bounded intervention, and codified rules jointly shape which cultural meanings can be preserved, negotiated, transformed, or discarded.

4. Cross-Cultural Risks of AI-Mediated Translation: Potential Mechanisms of Cultural Discount

4.1. Semantic Thinning: Comprehensibility at the Cost of Cultural Specificity

We use the term semantic thinning to describe translations that preserve basic propositional intelligibility while reducing the culturally specific associations carried by the source expression. The first risk concerns the treatment of culturally specific meanings. Cultural references have long posed particular problems for audiovisual translation because their interpretation depends not only on linguistic knowledge but also on familiarity with culturally situated practices, narratives, objects, and associations (Pedersen 2011: 43). The problem observed in the present case is therefore not unique to AI. What AI-mediated production changes is the production environment in which such problems are resolved.

In many of the examples reported by practitioners, machine-generated translations are not incorrect in a narrow linguistic sense. They convey a recognizable propositional meaning and are readily understandable to target-language audiences. What is attenuated is the network of cultural associations through which the original expression acquires its specificity. Examples include:

“鲤鱼跃龙门” (carp leaping over the Dragon Gate) rendered as “to achieve a meteoric rise”;

“一炷香时间” (the time it takes to burn a stick of incense) simplified to “half an hour”;

“烂桃花” (literally, rotten peach blossoms, referring to undesirable romantic entanglements) generalized as “bad romance”.

All three renderings preserve a basic communicative function, but do so by replacing culturally marked meanings with more generic target-language equivalents.

Yet each rendering also entails a loss of cultural specificity. “鲤鱼跃龙门” evokes a culturally specific narrative of transformation, advancement, and recognition associated with the Dragon Gate legend; replacing it with a general metaphor of rapid advancement preserves the outcome while removing the cultural image through which that outcome is imagined. Similarly, “一炷香时间” does not function only as an abstract numerical measurement. It encodes duration through the material practice of incense burning and thus associates temporal experience with a culturally situated activity. Rendering it simply as “half an hour” converts an embodied and culturally marked expression into standardized clock time. “烂桃花”, meanwhile, loses the metaphorical associations attached to “桃花” in Chinese vernacular understandings of romantic fortune.

Translation studies has long framed such choices through domestication and foreignization. Venuti (2008: 19-20) describes domestication as reducing source-text foreignness in favor of target-culture fluency. Nornes (1999: 18) similarly criticizes subtitling that erases difference in pursuit of transparent readability. The issue here is not that domestication is inherently inappropriate, but whether production systematically privileges immediate intelligibility when cultural difference itself carries meaning.

Such renderings resonate with long-documented tendencies of translated language toward simplification and leveling (Baker 1996; Chesterman 2004). Semantic thinning differs from these text-level tendencies, however, in what it explains: not that translated texts exhibit flattened cultural specificity, but the production mechanisms—machine-generated defaults, compressed review cycles, and error-

oriented quality control—through which such flattening is systematically generated.

Semantic thinning therefore differs from ordinary mistranslation. A culturally thinned rendering may pass quality control because its grammar, terminology, and propositional meaning are acceptable even though its cultural associations have been reduced.

Such thinned renderings are reinforced by machine-generated defaults, short production cycles, and review procedures that prioritize consistently identifiable errors. Expressions requiring explanation, creative reformulation, or deliberate unfamiliarity impose higher temporal and interpretive costs, making cultural specificity easier to treat as optional.

Efficiency can therefore reduce linguistic barriers while reproducing cultural distance: accessibility expands without an equivalent preservation of cultural specificity.

4.2. Contextual and Affective Fragmentation: The Limits of Segment-Based Translation

We use the term contextual and affective fragmentation to describe situations in which linguistically or technically acceptable translation units fail to preserve coherence across narrative context, interpersonal relations, and emotional trajectories. The second risk therefore concerns the relationship between segment-level translation accuracy and broader contextual coherence. Audiovisual meaning is not generated by isolated sentences alone. It emerges through interactions among dialogue, visual action, sound, character relationships, narrative development, timing, and other semiotic resources. Subtitling research has therefore emphasized that audiovisual translation operates under multimodal and temporal constraints, requiring translators to coordinate linguistic choices with the unfolding audiovisual text rather than treating individual utterances as self-contained units (Díaz-Cintas and Remael 2021: 65, 91-101).

AI-assisted workflows complicate this requirement. Contemporary AI subtitling systems increasingly generate timed and segmented outputs that are subsequently subjected to different levels of human post-editing depending on quality requirements. Recent research on AI-generated subtitling likewise emphasizes that substantial human intervention remains necessary where higher linguistic and technical quality is required (Jia and Díaz-Cintas 2026). The present case extends this problem from linguistic correction to contextual and affective coherence.

One frontline practitioner described a recurring problem in AI dubbing:

"In scenes where characters engage in fierce arguments, AI voice output presents relatively flat, mechanized emotional processing. It cannot convey the agitated, angry psychological states of the characters". (N15, 2026-03-06)

The problem here is not that the individual words are necessarily mistranslated. Rather, the generated voice fails to reconstruct the relationship between verbal content, dramatic situation, character psychology, and the emotional trajectory of the scene. An output that is acceptable at the segment level may therefore still be inappropriate at the level of the scene or narrative as a whole.

Modularized production intensifies this gap by distributing translation across machine generation, review, correction, dubbing, and quality inspection. Platform-mediated workflows similarly fragment work into smaller, tightly coordinated units (Moorkens 2020). Such fragmentation enables scale but raises the cost of reconstructing meaning across segments.

Human practitioners remain crucial precisely at these points. Their work involves identifying when a sentence that appears linguistically acceptable does not fit

the preceding dialogue, when a voice fails to correspond to the visual performance, or when an apparently correct expression disrupts a character's emotional trajectory. Research on AI-powered media localization similarly stresses that creative audiovisual translation continues to require human expertise and that automation should be designed to work with, rather than marginalize, such expertise (Orrego-Carmona 2024: 12).

Recognizing these problems, however, does not guarantee sufficient scope to resolve them. Compressed schedules and limited optimization rounds constrain the time available for reviewing surrounding scenes, adjusting wording or voice, and reassessing the result in context.

The data therefore do not establish long-term deskilling. They show a narrower scope for exercising existing cultural and interpretive competence: practitioners may recognize inadequacies yet lack sufficient time, iterations, or authority to reconstruct them fully.

Contextual and affective fragmentation occurs when discrete linguistic or technical units are processed successfully but their relations are harder to sustain. Tone, interpersonal relations, humor, irony, emotional pacing, and narrative accumulation are especially resistant to independent optimization.

AI can thus scale the production of linguistically serviceable multilingual output more readily than it can preserve narrative and affective coherence at scale, concentrating the work of reconnecting segments in bounded moments of human intervention.

4.3. Reduced Interpretive Flexibility: Standardization and the Narrowing of Interpretive Alternatives

We use the term reduced interpretive flexibility to describe the narrowing of contextually legitimate translation alternatives as standardized rules and technical defaults increasingly preconfigure translation choices. Standardization is indispensable to large-scale localization, but problems arise when culturally contingent choices are treated like technical or terminological ones. Terminology databases, prompt templates, workflow protocols, and quality-control rules improve consistency while also preconfiguring translation options.

Translation frequently involves meanings for which no single context-independent equivalent exists. A culturally marked expression may be retained, paraphrased, explained, replaced with a functional analogue, or translated differently according to genre, character, narrative context, and anticipated audience knowledge. Cultural mediation consequently requires not simply the application of correct rules but a capacity to negotiate among legitimate alternatives.

Technical codification changes the conditions under which this negotiation takes place. Once preferred formulations are incorporated into terminology databases, prompt configurations, or predefined review criteria, they enter the translation process before individual practitioners encounter the specific context in which a choice must be made. The system does not need to make every translation decision autonomously in order to influence the result. It can instead preconfigure the range of solutions that appear normal, efficient, or institutionally acceptable.

The narrowing of alternatives described here also resonates with Toury's (1995) law of growing standardization, according to which translation gravitates toward pre-existing target-culture models. AI-assisted production adds an infrastructural twist: standardization no longer operates only on the textual product but is inscribed upstream, in the terminology databases,

prompt templates, and review criteria that preconfigure choices before the translator encounters the text.

Platformization research provides a broader context for understanding this shift. Digital platforms intervene not only in distribution but also in the organization and continual adjustment of cultural production itself, making infrastructures and production practices increasingly interdependent (Nieborg and Poell 2018). In AI-assisted translation, the platform likewise becomes part of the environment within which cultural decisions are produced, standardized, recorded, and evaluated.

Human discretion remains, but increasingly operates against a preconfigured technical background. As more expectations are encoded in advance, adaptation becomes negotiation around an established default rather than selection from an open range of alternatives.

The downstream feedback system reinforces this problem. A technology manager described the limitations of existing audience data:

"Our dashboards tell us how long viewers watch and where they drop off, but they do not tell us whether a particular translation choice caused confusion or offence". (T2, 2026-03-04)

This distinction is particularly significant in platform environments. Digital platforms possess extensive behavioral data, but behavioral trace data are shaped by particular regimes of measurement: they capture actions that platforms can record and operationalize for administrative purposes rather than providing transparent access to the full meanings users attach to those actions (Wu and Taneja 2021: 2650). Viewing duration, completion rates, clicks, or points of audience drop-off can indicate whether users remain engaged, but they cannot by themselves establish why a viewer misunderstood a culturally specific expression, failed to recognize an emotional cue, or interpreted a translation as culturally inappropriate.

The system therefore generates abundant behavioral data while providing comparatively limited information about culturally specific interpretation: upstream rules can be encoded with increasing precision, while downstream evidence capable of challenging them on cultural grounds remains weak.

Interpretive flexibility is narrowed both before and after circulation: encoded standards reduce choices requiring reconsideration, while behavior-oriented metrics provide limited evidence about cultural misunderstanding.

Standardization does not necessarily erase difference, but it privileges meanings that are easier to encode and evaluate when consistency is more measurable than ambiguity and behavior more measurable than interpretation.

5. Reconfiguring AI-Assisted Translation: Embedding Cultural Logic into Technical Systems

5.1. Differentiated Translation Workflow Architecture: Matching the Level of Human Intervention to Cultural Complexity

Current workflows tend to apply relatively uniform production rhythms and quality procedures across heterogeneous translation tasks. A more appropriate architecture would differentiate levels of human intervention according to cultural and contextual complexity rather than simply by content genre.

Low-complexity material, such as routine dialogue, standardized terminology, and informational expressions, can remain primarily AI-driven with light human review. Context-sensitive material involving humor, interpersonal relations, emotional conflict, or strong dependence on audiovisual context requires enhanced

contextual review. Culturally critical material—including historical references, culture-specific expressions, wordplay, dialect, metaphor, and value-laden language—should trigger a higher level of human intervention in which AI supports rather than leads cultural adaptation.

Such differentiation preserves the scalability of automation while directing scarce human attention toward points where semantic thinning and contextual fragmentation are most likely to occur. Recent work on AI-powered audiovisual translation similarly suggests that automation is most productive when combined with levels of human involvement appropriate to the quality and creative demands of particular tasks (Orrego-Carmona 2024: 12). For works with substantial culture-specific content, optional paratextual materials may further support audience understanding, but these should supplement rather than substitute for culturally sensitive translation.

5.2. Strengthening Human Interpretive Authority at Culturally Sensitive Points in the Workflow

Human presence in a workflow does not guarantee meaningful authority. Practitioners may identify culturally or emotionally inadequate output while remaining constrained by workflows, deadlines, and optimization limits; platform-mediated translation can make intervention dependent on tightly specified and monitored task structures (Moorkens 2020: 12).

Human participation should therefore be strengthened at culturally sensitive points in the workflow in three ways. First, translators should be able to override machine-generated defaults when they erase significant cultural meaning. Second, they should have sufficient discretion to move beyond sentence-level correspondence when contextual or affective coherence requires reformulation across segments. Third, culturally critical passages should allow additional rounds of revision rather than being subject to uniform optimization ceilings.

The goal is not maximum human intervention, but consequential professional judgment where cultural decisions resist standardization. Algorithmic control research shows that encoded rules shape action by restricting, recommending, recording, and evaluating work (Kellogg et al. 2020: 366). Interpretive authority must therefore be designed into the workflow.

5.3. Building Negotiable Rules and Culturally Sensitive Feedback Loops

Standardization should likewise become more negotiable without abandoning consistency. Terminology systems could distinguish between rules requiring fixed treatment and culturally contingent expressions requiring contextual choice. Rather than storing a single approved equivalent, culture-specific terms could be linked to several context-dependent options together with information on genre, usage conditions, and translation rationale. The aim is to move away from fixed equivalence while retaining institutional consistency and preserving space for culturally informed judgment.

Negotiability should also extend to audience feedback. Existing platform metrics are effective at measuring observable behavior but provide limited evidence about cultural understanding. Behavioral trace data reflect particular institutional regimes of measurement and should not be treated as transparent indicators of audience interpretation (Wu and Taneja 2021: 2650). For culturally sensitive material, viewing statistics could therefore be supplemented with targeted audience testing, qualitative feedback from target-market reviewers, or brief

assessments of comprehension, emotional fit, and cultural clarity.

These adjustments retain the speed and scalability of AI-assisted production while making cultural specificity, contextual coherence, and interpretive flexibility explicit design requirements rather than residual tasks for individual translators.

6. Conclusion

This study examines how AI-assisted audiovisual translation restructures the conditions of cross-cultural communication through a qualitative case study of iQIYI International. Rather than treating AI translation primarily as a question of technological performance, it focuses on how technological systems reorganize production practices, human agency, and institutional rules, and how these changes shape the circulation of cultural meaning.

The findings identify three interconnected forms of mediatized restructuring. Spatiotemporal restructuring accelerates production and enables parallelized, platform-coordinated workflows. Agency reconfiguration redistributes human labor toward review, diagnosis, contextual interpretation, and technical adjustment, while confining professional judgment to bounded points of intervention. Institutional reconfiguration embeds organizational expectations into terminology databases, prompt configurations, workflow protocols, and quality-control systems. Together, these mechanisms form an efficiency-oriented production architecture in which scalability, standardization, human expertise, and institutional control become increasingly interdependent.

This restructuring generates three recurrent production-side risks for cross-cultural communication. Semantic thinning occurs when culturally specific expressions remain understandable but lose some of their culture-specific associations. Contextual and affective fragmentation emerges when modularized production and compressed review make it difficult to preserve coherence across scenes, character relationships, and emotional trajectories. Reduced interpretive flexibility results when standardized rules narrow translation alternatives while platform feedback remains better at measuring audience behavior than cultural understanding. These findings suggest that cultural discount in the AI era is not only a consequence of distance between source and target cultures, but may also be reproduced through the institutional organization of translation production.

The study therefore argues that the challenge is not to choose between technological efficiency and cultural sensitivity, but to redesign their relationship. A differentiated translation workflow architecture, stronger human interpretive authority at culturally sensitive points in the workflow, and more negotiable rules and culturally sensitive feedback mechanisms can preserve the efficiency advantages of AI while creating greater space for cultural specificity and contextual judgment.

Theoretically, the study connects mediatization, socio-technical approaches, and platformized cultural production to audiovisual translation, shifting attention from individual technologies toward the institutional architecture through which translation decisions are made. Its main limitations lie in its reliance on a single-platform, production-side case and in the composition of the frontline sample, which includes a substantial proportion of interns. Although these participants provided close access to everyday AI-assisted translation practices, their experiences may not fully represent those of more senior professional translators or practitioners with greater organizational authority. Future research should compare different platforms, include participants across different levels of

professional seniority, and incorporate overseas audience reception to examine how these production arrangements are experienced across cultural contexts.

Declaration of AI use

AI model Kimi K3 was used for proofreading purpose.

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