

China-Japan Classic Literature Shared Reading Assisted by AI: A Case Study of *The True Story of Ah Q* and *I Am a Cat*

Huyue Mao*, Yanhua Xu

Zhejiang Yuexiu University

Received: May 7, 2026

Revised: May 8, 2026

Accepted: May 9, 2026

Published online: May 16, 2026

To appear in: *International Journal of Advanced AI Applications*, Vol. 2, No. 6 (Jun 2026)

* Corresponding Author: Huyue Mao (3400409664@qq.com)

Abstract. Against the backdrop of contemporary globalization, cross-cultural communication between China and Japan has become increasingly frequent. However, current Chinese-Japanese language teaching and learning predominantly focus on vocabulary and grammar, with insufficient attention paid to the cross-cultural analysis and exchange of classic literary works. Traditional cultural exchanges between the two countries have largely operated as one-way output, lacking genuine bilateral interaction. This project adopts a "shared reading" approach, in which Chinese and Japanese students read translated versions of each other's literary classics, thereby engaging in cross-cultural communication from the dual perspectives of readers and translators. Using Lu Xun's *The True Story of Ah Q* and Natsume Sōseki's *I Am a Cat* as examples, the project implements shared reading sessions and analyzes the two books' translations from three dimensions: language, culture, and style. The research reveals that while the translations exhibit certain problems — such as the loss of colloquial tone, simplification of culture-specific terms, and weakening of satirical style — both works nevertheless resonate with participants in their critique of human nature. The China-Japan shared reading model, to some extent, breaks through the limitations of traditional cultural exchange, fostering equal dialogue between the two countries' classic literary traditions. It can serve as a reference for cross-cultural activities in higher education.

Keywords: *China-Japan Shared Reading; The True Story of Ah Q; Cross-cultural Communication; Translation Comparison; AI*

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

With the continuous development of international relations and globalization, cultural exchanges between China and Japan have grown increasingly close. However, the current focus of exchange remains concentrated on popular culture fields such as anime, film, television dramas, and video games. The mutual reading and in-depth discussion of classic literary works remain relatively limited. Furthermore, Chinese-Japanese language teaching in both countries tends to emphasize vocabulary acquisition and grammatical accuracy, while much less attention is devoted to the exploration and analysis of each other's literary traditions. As a result, students often struggle to understand the deeper cultural connotations embedded in the language they are learning.

In addition, the promotion of Chinese and Japanese cultures has largely followed a one-way output model. China has translated a vast number of Japanese literary works, but these translations are primarily read by Chinese readers themselves, with few opportunities for dialogue with Japanese readers. Similarly, Japan has produced numerous translations of Chinese literary works, yet it also lacks a bilateral platform for exchange and discussion. This unidirectional model of translation and reading makes it extremely difficult to achieve genuine cross-cultural communication — a process that requires mutual understanding and dialogue rather than mere one-way transmission.

1.2. Research Methods

Against this background, the project titled "China-Japan Shared Reading: When Ah Q Speaks Japanese, when a Cat Speaks Chinese" uses two classic literary works as a bridge to build a platform for cross-cultural interaction among young students. The project organizes Chinese and Japanese students into shared reading groups, where they engage in in-depth reading of both books. Through this process, the participants analyze translation differences from three perspectives: language, culture, and style. By reading the Japanese translation of *The True Story of Ah Q* and the Chinese translation of *I Am a Cat* together, students from both countries are able to compare the original texts with their translated versions, discuss their observations, and develop a deeper understanding of each other's cultural and linguistic nuances.

This shared reading project is implemented with the assistance of Artificial Intelligence (AI).

First, when Chinese and Japanese students encounter words that are difficult to translate or comprehend during shared reading, they can use AI to obtain detailed explanations and

supplementary notes for these terms, which effectively removes their reading barriers.

Second, as Chinese and Japanese students lack familiarity with each other's cultural backgrounds, AI provides them with one-click access to historical contexts — including the 1911 Revolution, the Meiji Period, social customs and core values — helping students immerse themselves in the specific historical era and gain a deeper understanding of the literary characters.

Third, acting as an impartial intermediary free from cultural biases, AI can elaborate on the respective perspectives of both sides in their native languages, thereby reducing misunderstandings and cultural cognitive deviations arising from inadequate linguistic communication.

2. The Basic Framework of the China-Japan Shared Reading Model

2.1. Theoretical Foundations

This project draws upon several key theoretical frameworks.

First, cross-cultural communication theory suggests that genuine cross-cultural understanding does not merely involve accepting another culture on its own terms. Rather, it requires the ability to engage in dialogue from both perspectives simultaneously. This means that participants must be willing to see themselves as both learners and teachers, constantly moving between their own cultural framework and that of the other.

Second, the concepts of "domestication" and "foreignization" in translation studies provide useful analytical tools for examining translation differences. Domestication refers to translation strategies that make the target text read fluently and naturally, as if it were originally written in the target language. Foreignization, by contrast, refers to strategies that deliberately preserve elements of the source text that may seem strange or unfamiliar to target readers, thereby retaining the "foreignness" of the original. Both strategies have their respective advantages and disadvantages, and their use often reflects deeper cultural assumptions.

Third, reader-response theory posits that the same text can generate significantly different interpretations among readers from different cultural backgrounds. According to this theory, meaning is not fixed within the text itself but is actively constructed by readers based on their own experiences, cultural knowledge, and interpretive frameworks. These three theoretical perspectives — cross-cultural communication theory, domestication/foreignization in translation studies, and reader-response theory — together provide a solid foundation for the

shared reading model.

2.2. The Core Logic of the Shared Reading Model

When Chinese and Japanese students read the Japanese translation of *The True Story of Ah Q* together, several processes occur simultaneously. For Chinese students, reading the Japanese translation not only improves their Japanese reading ability but also allows them to discover how a classic Chinese literary character — Ah Q — is perceived and presented by Japanese readers and translators. They can observe the subtle differences between the original Chinese Ah Q and the "Japanese" Ah Q, differences that often reveal much about how Japanese culture interprets Chinese literature.

For Japanese students, the process is equally valuable. By helping their Chinese peers understand the Japanese translation of *The True Story of Ah Q*, Japanese students can better grasp the ideas and cultural emotions expressed in this foundational Chinese literary work. They gain insights into how Chinese readers might interpret their own explanations and how translation choices shape cross-cultural understanding.

Similarly, when reading the Chinese translation of *I Am a Cat* together, Chinese students assist Japanese students with Chinese reading comprehension while simultaneously absorbing the thoughts and emotions expressed in this classic Japanese work. Japanese students, in turn, discover differences between the original Japanese text and its Chinese translation, thereby experiencing firsthand how Chinese culture interprets and reinterprets Japanese literature. Through this shared reading model, participants not only enhance their foreign language abilities but also develop a deeper appreciation for the differences between original works and their translations. The reading process becomes an active exploration of cultural differences and shared understandings, promoting language acquisition and cross-cultural communication simultaneously.

3. Translation Comparison of *The True Story of Ah Q* and *I Am a Cat*

The translation comparison of the two works is organized around three analytical dimensions: language, culture, and style.

3.1. Linguistic Differences

The True Story of Ah Q makes extensive use of colloquial, vernacular, and streetwise satirical expressions. Lu Xun deliberately employed plain, unadorned language to depict the life and

psychology of a lower-class individual in early 20th-century rural China. For example, the original Chinese phrase "确乎很值得惊异" carries a deliberate, measured, almost leisurely tone. Its Japanese translation, 「実に驚くべきことだった」, converts this into standard written language, thereby weakening the original's subtle satirical edge.

Another telling example is the coarse expression "妈妈的" (a mild minced oath in Chinese, literally something like "mother's"). This expression, which conveys anger but not extreme profanity, carries the flavor of a Chinese lower-class insult. The Japanese translation renders it as 「ちくしょう」, which roughly means "beast" or is used as an expletive roughly equivalent to "damn it." While the Japanese translation retains the sense of anger, it loses the vernacular, folk quality of the original — a quality that reveals much about Chinese rural speech patterns. This example reflects the Japanese translation's tendency to prioritize semantic equivalence (conveying what words mean) while sacrificing stylistic register (how those words sound in context).

In *I Am a Cat*, the original Japanese text possesses strong classical colloquial features. For instance, the expression 「とんと見当がつかぬ」 (completely without any idea) and the pronoun 「吾輩」 (wagahai, an archaic, self-important way of saying "I" or "one") both evoke a particular period and style of Japanese writing. The Chinese translation renders 「とんと見当がつかぬ」 as "压根儿不知道" (yāgēnr bù zhīdào, meaning "not know at all," with a colloquial northern Chinese flavor) and 「吾輩」 as "我" (standard "I"). This relatively straightforward tone effectively conveys the casual, self-mocking quality of the cat's narration. This comparison indicates that the Chinese translation places greater emphasis on stylistic register — on preserving the way the narrative sounds — compared to the Japanese translation of *The True Story of Ah Q*.

3.2. Cultural Differences

In *The True Story of Ah Q*, terms such as "Weizhuang" (the name of Ah Q's village), "xiucai" (a degree holder under the imperial examination system), and "foreign devil" (a derogatory term for Westerners) all carry specific historical and cultural meanings that emerged in modern Chinese history. "Wei Zhuang" represents the closed, hierarchical, and tradition-bound nature of rural China during the period of the 1911 Revolution. "Xiucai" refers to individuals who had passed one level of the imperial examinations — a system that had shaped Chinese society for over a thousand years but was abolished in 1905. "Foreign devil" reflects the xenophobic sentiments prevalent among ordinary Chinese people during the late Qing dynasty and early

Republican period.

The Japanese translation renders 「秀才」 as 「紳士」 (shinshi, meaning "gentleman"). This is a clear example of domestication: the translator uses a term familiar to Japanese readers to replace one that would otherwise require lengthy explanation. While this domestication strategy certainly improves readability for Japanese readers, it also detaches the term from its historical and cultural context. As a result, Japanese readers may struggle to understand Ah Q's ambivalent attitude toward the *xiucais* — an attitude that mixes contempt for those who passed the exams with envy of their social status.

By contrast, the Chinese translation of *I Am a Cat* directly retains culturally specific Japanese terms such as "tatami" (traditional straw mats), "shoin" (a study or writing room), and "shōji" (paper sliding doors). The translation does not domesticate these terms into Chinese equivalents such as "floor mats" or "study." This foreignization strategy preserves the distinctiveness of Japanese culture. Moreover, because many Chinese readers already have some familiarity with these terms through exposure to anime, Japanese television dramas, and other forms of popular culture, the reading threshold is not significantly raised. Thus, the Chinese translation achieves effective cultural transmission without sacrificing readability.

3.3. Stylistic Differences

Lu Xun is known for his stark, understated style — sometimes called "cold white drawing" (冷峻白描) — a technique through which he criticized what he saw as the weaknesses of the Chinese national character. For example, in *The True Story of Ah Q*, Lu Xun writes: "He felt that since the world began, some people were bound to be arrested and brought to court, and some were bound to draw circles on a piece of paper — it was nothing to take to heart." This passage, on its surface, appears to show Ah Q consoling himself after a humiliating experience. But beneath the surface, it reveals his profound numbness: he has internalized his powerlessness to such an extent that even his own degradation no longer disturbs him. The Japanese translation transforms this cold, sharp satire into a more moderate, less pointed narrative, thereby somewhat weakening the original's critical force.

Natsume Sōseki, a central figure in the *Yōyū-ha* (School of Detachment), employed a style of satire that is characteristically understated, indirect, and subtle. His criticisms are delivered with a light touch, often through the voice of an ironic observer. In the Chinese translation of *I Am a Cat*, some of Sōseki's more implicit expressions are rendered more directly. For instance, phrases such as "任性又麻木" (selfish and numb) and "空谈一事无成" (empty talk, nothing

accomplished) convey the critical sentiment clearly and forcefully. This directness increases cross-cultural accessibility: Chinese readers can easily grasp what Sōseki is criticizing. At the same time, however, something of the original's "detached" quality — the subtlety and lightness that characterizes Sōseki's humor — is inevitably lost in the process.

3.4. Points of Resonance Between the Two Works

Is during periods of rapid social transformation. Ah Q's famous "spiritual victory" (精神胜利法) — his habit of mentally claiming victory to mask real-world failure — is one such coping mechanism. Kuzushū (the master in I Am a Cat), who engages in endless empty talk and pedantic discourse while avoiding meaningful action, represents another. Both are weak individuals who, faced with sweeping changes that they cannot control, develop pathological ways of coping that only deepen their powerlessness.

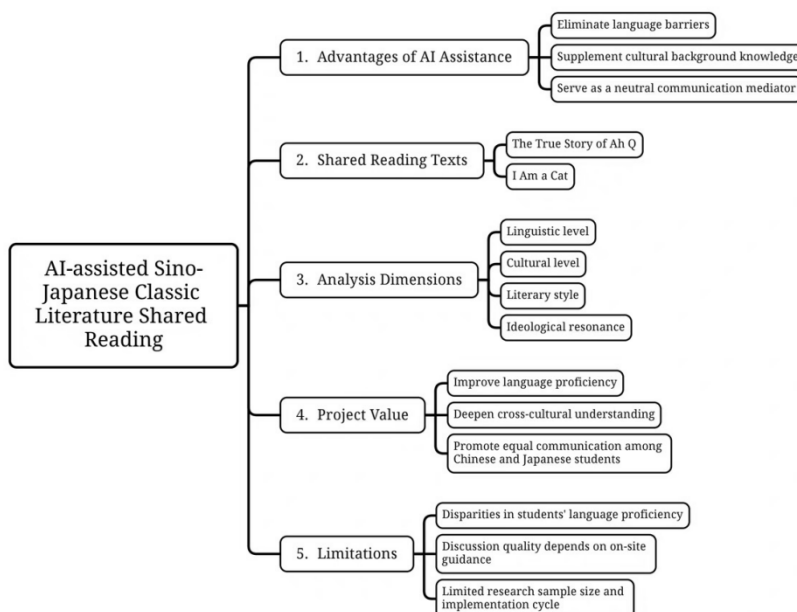


Figure 1. Mind map of the shared reading project.

During the shared reading sessions, both Chinese and Japanese students reported finding points of resonance in these themes. Some Japanese students felt that Ah Q's spiritual victory reminded them of the psychological coping strategies observed among the "lost generation" of Japanese youth who came of age during the prolonged economic stagnation following Japan's asset price bubble burst in the early 1990s. Some Chinese students noted that Kuzushū's state of "knowing a lot but doing nothing" can be observed among many young people in contemporary China, especially those facing intense competitive pressure in education and employment. These observations demonstrate the cross-cultural value of classic literature: the

"human weaknesses" they portray are not peculiar to any single national character but represent universal commonalities that emerge in societies undergoing modernization.

4. Practical Effectiveness and Limitations of the Shared Reading Project

4.1. Practical Effectiveness

The project produced three main areas of practical benefit.

First, differences between the Chinese and Japanese translations stimulated rich, in-depth discussion. When participants encountered the translation of "xiucai" as 「紳士」 (gentleman), Chinese students explained to their Japanese peers the historical nature of the imperial examination system and its profound social significance in pre-modern China. In return, Japanese students explained the semantic differences between the Japanese expression 「気味が悪い」 (kimochi ga warui, an expression of unease or creepiness) and the Chinese word "恶心" (ěxīn, meaning "nauseating" or "disgusting"). This mutual process of explanation was something that neither group could have achieved by reading alone.

Second, the shared themes identified in both works fostered genuine emotional connections among participants. The resonance that Chinese and Japanese students both felt regarding spiritual victory and empty pedantry allowed their discussions to move beyond mere textual analysis and enter the realm of personal reflection and cross-cultural empathy. Rather than impeding understanding, cultural differences in interpretation became the starting point for deeper mutual comprehension.

Third, the shared reading experience enhanced participants' language skills and cultural sensitivity. By comparing translations side by side, participants noticed details that they typically overlooked when reading alone. They learned to use translation discrepancies as entry points for exploring deeper cultural questions — a skill that has lasting value beyond the project itself.

4.2. Limitations

The shared reading model also presents certain limitations. The depth and quality of the discussion are constrained by participants' proficiency in the foreign language as well as their level of prior knowledge regarding each other's national histories. Participants with limited language ability struggle to perform meaningful translation comparisons. Participants who lack basic knowledge of the 1911 Revolution or the Meiji Restoration find it difficult to situate

literary characters within their specific historical contexts. Furthermore, the model requires a certain degree of facilitation skill on the part of discussion leaders. Without skilled facilitation, discussions risk remaining superficial or veering off-topic. Finally, because this project involved a relatively small participant sample and a limited implementation period, the generalizability of its conclusions — the extent to which they can be applied to other settings and other literary works — requires further testing.

5. Conclusion

This project used translation comparisons of *The True Story of Ah Q* and *I Am a Cat* as its entry point. By analyzing the two works from the perspectives of language, culture, and style, the research revealed that the translations exhibit varying degrees of loss and adjustment in conveying the original texts' colloquial tone, culture-specific terms, and satirical style. The Japanese translation of *The True Story of Ah Q* tends toward domestication and stylistic softening. The Chinese translation of *I Am a Cat* comparatively favors foreignization and more direct expression. These differences are likely inevitable outcomes of the different cultural aesthetics, translation traditions, and target reader expectations that shape translation choices in China and Japan.

Despite these differences, both works' shared critique of human weaknesses — their unflinching portrayal of how weak individuals cope with powerlessness and social change — produced sufficient cross-cultural resonance to support meaningful shared reading practice. Both Chinese and Japanese participants found something recognizable in Ah Q's spiritual victory and Kuzushū's empty pedantry.

The practice of the shared reading model demonstrates its effectiveness in breaking through the limitations of one-way cultural output. By engaging in translation comparison and mutual explanation, learners can enhance both their language abilities and their cultural understanding in a process that is simultaneously collaborative and reflective. Moreover, the shared reading model incurs low implementation costs, does not require sophisticated technology, and exhibits strong replicability. It can therefore be promoted and adapted for use in university-level language learning contexts beyond the two books examined here.

The primary limitations of this study are its small sample size and its brief, single-semester implementation period. Future research could expand the range of works examined — perhaps including poetry, drama, or modern prose — to further test the model's effectiveness and generalizability.

References

- [1] Lu Xun. (2020). 阿 Q 正传 [The True Story of Ah Q]. *Yangtze River Literature and Art Publishing House*. [in Chinese]
- [2] Lu Xun. (2020). 阿 Q 正传 (日文版) (井上红梅, 译) [The True Story of Ah Q (Japanese Edition) (Translated by Inoue Kōbai)]. *East China University of Science and Technology Press*. [in Chinese]
- [3] Natsume Sōseki. (2020). 我是猫 (林少华, 译) [I Am a Cat (Translated by Lin Shaohua)]. *Qingdao Publishing House*. [in Chinese]
- [4] Natsume Sōseki. (2020). 我是猫. [I Am a Cat]. *East China University of Science and Technology Press*. [in Chinese]
- [5] Sun Qiaona. (2014). 《我是猫》与《阿 Q 正传》中的社会批评比较研究 [A Comparative Study of Social Criticism in 'I Am a Cat' and 'The True Story of Ah Q']. *China National Knowledge Infrastructure*. [in Chinese]
- [6] Xie Nandou. (2003). 从《我是猫》到《阿 Q 正传》 [From 'I Am a Cat' to 'The True Story of Ah Q']. *Chinese Literature Studies*, (1), 61–63. [in Chinese]
- [7] Hu Min. (April 28, 2026). 成都市“AI+教育”迈向规模化应用 [Chengdu's 'AI Education' is moving towards large-scale application]. *Sichuan Economic Daily*, 003. [in Chinese]
- [8] Shang Qiaoqiao, Wang Jingying, & Lun Yingjie. (2021). 国外教育机器人辅助语言学习研究：认知激活与情感驱动 [Research on Foreign Educational Robots Assisting Language Learning: Cognitive Activation and Emotional Drive.]. *Digital Education*, 7(1), 79–84. [in Chinese]
- [9] Wang Dongfeng. (2025). AI 时代的文学翻译 [Literary Translation in the AI Era.]. *Foreign Language Audio-Visual Teaching*, (6), 3–11. [in Chinese]