

Creative Treason in Translating *I Shall Seal the Heavens*: A Skopos-Based Analysis of Cultivation Levels and Xia Culture

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Abstract: This paper examines the translation of cultivation levels and culturally-loaded words in *I Shall Seal the Heavens* by Deathblade, focusing on how creative treason is manifest in the adaptation of Xianxia terminology for a Western audience. Using Skopos Theory and Creative Treason as theoretical frameworks, this study analyzes how Deathblade translates key cultivation terms, such as Foundation Establishment, Core Formation, and Nascent Soul, and examines the challenges of conveying the metaphysical richness of Daoist and Confucian principles to English-speaking readers. This paper explores the translator's strategies in balancing the need for accessibility with the preservation of cultural integrity and philosophical depth. Through detailed textual analysis, the paper also reflects on how creative treason influences the narrative clarity and authenticity of the translation. The findings offer valuable insights into the process of translating culturally-rich fiction and the implications for future translations of Xianxia and other culturally dense genres.

1. Introduction

The translation of Xianxia fiction into English, particularly works like *I Shall Seal the Heavens* (ISSH) by Er Gen, presents significant challenges due to the complex metaphysical systems embedded in the narrative, particularly those related to the cultivation levels and Daoist cosmology. Terms such as Foundation Establishment, Core Formation, and Nascent Soul serve not just as narrative devices but also as markers of spiritual and philosophical progression, integral to the novel's themes of rebellion, self-cultivation, and immortality.

The goal of this paper is to critically examine how Deathblade, the translator, adapts these cultivation levels and Daoist terms for a Western audience. This involves analyzing the extent to which creative treason—the deliberate alteration of the original text—affects the translation's authenticity and accessibility. Through the use of Skopos Theory and Creative Treason, the study delves into the translator's decisions and their impact on the philosophical richness of the original text, exploring how these decisions shape readers' engagement with the spiritual journey and narrative progression.

This paper will examine Deathblade's translation strategies in light of the translator's purpose, considering both the textual adjustments and the cultural implications of translating complex cultivation terminology. The analysis will reflect on how Skopos Theory allows us to understand the translator's goal of making the text accessible while adapting key terms to fit Western frameworks of understanding.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Translation of Culturally-Loaded Words (CLWs)

The concept of culturally-loaded words (CLWs) plays a central role in translation studies, especially when dealing with genres like Xianxia fiction, where terms are deeply rooted in Chinese philosophical and cultural traditions. CLWs refer to terms whose meanings are intricately connected to specific cultural and social practices, beliefs, or worldviews that may not have direct equivalents

in the target language. The challenge of translating such terms lies in maintaining the cultural nuances while ensuring the text remains comprehensible for the target audience.

Venuti^[1] discusses how translation inherently involves the manipulation of cultural elements to suit the target audience, a process that is often influenced by the translator's cultural proximity to the source culture. Venuti emphasizes that creative treason (the deliberate alteration of source material) is sometimes necessary to adapt culturally-rich terms for accessibility, even if this leads to a loss of cultural authenticity. This issue is particularly pertinent to the translation of Xianxia terms like Qi, Dantian, and Nascent Soul that require simplification for Western readers.

Baker^[2] expands on the concept of CLWs and suggests that effective translation should bridge the cultural gap between the source and target languages by either retaining the cultural richness of the original or reinterpreting them through a lens that makes sense to the new audience. In her work, she highlights the importance of using explanatory footnotes or parallel concepts when a direct translation is not feasible, especially for spiritual or metaphysical terms. Her perspective is particularly relevant to the translation of Xianxia fiction, as it often involves the philosophical system embedded in cultivation terminology.

Moreover, Munday^[3] argues that CLWs often challenge the translator to make strategic decisions based on the intended skopos (purpose) of the translation. This aligns with Skopos Theory, which emphasizes that translation choices should prioritize the communication goal—in this case, making the text accessible to Western readers while preserving essential elements of the original cultural framework.

2.2 Skopos Theory and Its Application in Translating Xia culturally-loaded words

Skopos Theory, first articulated by Vermeer^[4], argues that the purpose (or "skopos") of the translation dictates the decisions made by the translator. According to this theory, the translator's primary responsibility is to ensure that the translated text meets the needs and expectations of the target audience. In the case of Xianxia fiction, this often means making complex Daoist concepts and cultivation stages understandable to a reader unfamiliar with Chinese metaphysics.

For instance, "Foundation Establishment" and "Core Formation" in ISSH represent stages in a character's spiritual development and the cultivation of Qi. According to Skopos Theory, Deathblade's translation choices are influenced by the goal of making these stages comprehensible to a Western audience, which might not be familiar with Daoist alchemy or Daoist cosmology. Skopos Theory suggests that these terms must be adapted in a way that reflects their narrative function while simplifying the Daoist philosophy to fit the Western cultural context.

However, House^[5] contends that such simplifications lead to the loss of cultural nuances in translation. She argues that when terms are altered or reduced, there is a risk of stripping away the spiritual depth and metaphysical richness of the original text. House warns that in genres like Xianxia, where the text's meaning is inextricably linked to its cultural background, this simplification compromises the authenticity of the translation. She suggests that translators must find ways to maintain cultural fidelity while still making the text relatable to a broader audience.

2.3 Creative Treason in the Translation of Xianxia Fiction

Creative Treason, as defined by Venuti^[1], refers to the deliberate transformation of the original text to suit the cultural expectations of the target audience. In the translation of ISSH, Deathblade's choices can be seen as an act of creative treason, where he adjusts terms like "Nascent Soul" and "Qi" to make them more accessible to a Western readership. For example, the translation of "Qi" as "energy" or "spiritual energy" simplifies the term for Western readers but loses much of the Daoist and cosmological significance embedded in the original text.

Shuttleworth and Cowie^[6] discuss the ethical implications of creative treason and suggest that such decisions must be justified by the translator's skopos. In the case of Xianxia, the translator must decide whether to maintain cultural richness or prioritize reader comprehension. Shuttleworth and Cowie argue that creative treason is not inherently negative but a necessary strategy for adapting culturally-specific terms in a way that serves the overall function of the translation.

In Deathblade's translation, terms like "Nascent Soul" are simplified to reflect the narrative

function rather than their philosophical depth. The term “Nascent Soul”, while understandable to Western readers, does not fully reflect the Daoist process of spiritual transformation and alchemical immortality that the term embodies in its original form. This simplification is a prime example of creative treason, where the metaphysical layers of the term are sacrificed to make the text relatable.

2.4 Cultural Adaptation and the Translator’s Role in Xianxia Translation

The role of the translator in Xianxia fiction is to navigate the delicate balance between faithfulness to the original philosophical principles and the need for accessibility in the target language. Koskinen^[7] emphasizes the role of cultural adaptation in translation, arguing that in texts deeply embedded in culture and philosophy, creative manipulation is necessary to ensure that the translation resonates with the target audience. Deathblade’s translation choices reflect this process of adaptation, where culturally-specific terms like Foundation Establishment and Nascent Soul are modified to fit a Western conceptual framework, thereby ensuring the text is understandable but at the cost of authenticity.

3. Theoretical Framework

This paper relies on Skopos Theory and Creative Treason as the central frameworks for understanding how Deathblade approaches the translation of cultivation-related terms in ISSH. Skopos Theory helps explain how the translator’s decisions are influenced by the purpose of the translation—accessibility for the Western reader. Creative Treason provides a lens for analyzing how culturally-specific terms are adapted or altered to fit the cultural context of the target audience.

4. Methodology

The study employs textual analysis to compare the original Chinese text with the English translation of ISSH. Key terms related to cultivation levels and Daoist metaphysical concepts will be analyzed to examine how they are adapted, simplified, or altered for the Western audience. The study will focus on how these changes affect the narrative progression and the philosophical depth of the original work.

5. Analysis of Cultivation Level Translation

The translation of cultivation levels in Xianxia fiction, particularly in ISSH, is an intricate process of cultural adaptation. Deathblade’s translations of terms such as (Spiritual Realm), (Qi Refining), and (Nascent Soul) are central to understanding the cultural and philosophical depth of the text. These terms reflect not only stages in a character’s cultivation journey but also embody Daoist philosophical principles that govern the spiritual and physical development of the protagonist.

5.1 The Challenge of Translating Daoist Terms

In traditional Chinese culture, terms like Qi and Dao are more than mere words; they encapsulate metaphysical concepts deeply rooted in Daoist cosmology and Chinese alchemy. Translating these concepts for a Western audience presents a challenge, as there are often no direct equivalents in English that can convey the spiritual significance of these terms.

For example, (Spiritual Realm) is translated directly as “Spiritual Realm”, which preserves the literal meaning of the original term but may not fully capture the spiritual journey implied by the term in its Daoist context. In Chinese philosophy, a spiritual realm goes beyond just a metaphysical plane—it is also a stage of self-realization, where one cultivates not just power, but balance between the self and the cosmos. The English term “Spiritual Realm” may not necessarily convey this deeper layer of Daoist balance and metaphysical ascension, and thus the translation, while functional, simplifies the original concept for a Western audience.

5.2 Skopos Theory and the Translator's Purpose

According to Skopos Theory^[4], the purpose of the translation—making it accessible and understandable for a Western audience—dictates the translation choices made by the translator. In the case of ISSH, the purpose is clear: Deathblade's task is to make the complex Daoist concepts, cultivation stages, and moral values understandable without overwhelming readers with unfamiliar spiritual ideas.

Thus, Deathblade often translates terms in a way that prioritizes clarity and relatability over faithfulness to the original metaphysical significance. For instance, the term (Qi Refining) is translated as “Qi Refining”, which is understandable but somewhat reductive. The original term refers not only to refining spiritual energy but to the cultivation of one's essence in harmony with Daoist principles of balance. By translating simply as “Qi Refining”, the translator makes the concept more accessible, but the Daoist foundation of the term is not fully conveyed. Skopos Theory would argue that this translation decision aligns with the purpose of the translation, which is to make the text readable for an English-speaking audience while maintaining the narrative function of the term.

5.3 Creative Treason in Translation Choices

In translation studies, creative treason^[1] describes the deliberate manipulation of the source text to make it more palatable or comprehensible for the target audience. This process is visible throughout Deathblade's translation of ISSH, especially with regard to cultivation terminology. Deathblade's decision to simplify or modify the Daoist terminology in order to facilitate the understanding of the target audience can be seen as a necessary sacrifice of cultural authenticity to ensure that the text is relatable.

For example (Nascent Soul) is a term rich in Daoist alchemical and spiritual significance, representing the development of a spiritual essence that grows and evolves during cultivation. In Deathblade's translation, this term is rendered as “Nascent Soul”, which captures the basic meaning but loses the depth of Daoist alchemy that is present in the original. The “Nascent Soul” in Chinese philosophy is not merely a spiritual entity; it is considered a key element in the alchemical process of attaining immortality, reflecting the Daoist goal of spiritual transcendence. However, for a Western audience, the term “Nascent Soul” is simplified to be understood as just another step in the cultivation journey, missing out on the philosophical depth tied to Daoist immortality practices.

5.4 Analysis

Translating Cultivation-Level Terminology in ISSH. ISSH is a classic Xianxia (“immortal hero”) cultivation novel deeply rooted in Daoist cosmology. Its power progression is divided into a series of realms –, and ultimately (Immortal Ascension) – through which the protagonist ascends to immortality. These terms encapsulate complex cultural and philosophical notions from Chinese lore: for example, in Daoist thought refers to the vital energy or breath that permeates all life, and denotes the Way – the fundamental principle of the cosmos and spiritual path in Daoism. Rendering such concepts for English readers poses significant challenges. Translator Deathblade's solutions exhibit a strategic blend of foreignisation (retaining exotic terms or literal meanings to preserve cultural flavour) and domestication (using familiar expressions for clarity). Below, we examine each major cultivation term in context, the translation strategy employed (e.g. semantic translation, transliteration, etc.), and how these choices align with Skopos and Creative Treason theories – considering their impact on narrative clarity, philosophical integrity, and cultural resonance.

Case Study I: (Foundation Establishment)

Context in the source: literally means “building a foundation.” In the novel's cultivation hierarchy, the Foundation Establishment stage follows after one has completed Qi Condensation. It represents the solidification of one's core energy foundation – metaphorically analogous to laying the cornerstone of a building in one's spiritual development. Narratively, reaching is a momentous breakthrough that marks the end of mortal limitations: “After Qi Condensation comes Foundation Establishment, the shedding of the mortal body. This is true spiritual cultivation, and truly being a

Cultivator.”. Upon entering this realm, a cultivator significantly increases their longevity (to ~150 years) and forms an internal “Dao pillar” or spiritual foundation. The term carries connotations of firmness and preparation – one’s “foundation” must be strong and pure to support higher levels (indeed, the novel describes different qualities of foundations, such as Flawless Foundation vs. cracked ones, affecting future potential).

Translation strategy: Deathblade translates as “Foundation Establishment”, an almost word-for-word rendering of the Chinese. This literal translation is a straightforward semantic choice: both “foundation” and “establishment” are common English words, yet their combination here closely mirrors the structure of the Chinese term (noun + verb). By choosing this calque, the translator has domesticated the grammar but foreignised the concept – that is, the phrase is in English, but it is not an idiomatic expression that pre-exists in English usage. Instead, it reads as a technical term likely unfamiliar to new readers, albeit one they can parse logically (to “establish a foundation” for one’s cultivation). This approach relies on the reader’s cognitive ability to infer meaning from context. Indeed, the translator provides context within dialogue and narrative to reinforce understanding. For example, characters explain that at Foundation Establishment “a Dao pillar will grow within your body” as one forms the base for further cultivation. The use of plain English terms avoids opaque jargon; there’s no attempt to dress the term in Western mystical language (such as calling it “Apprentice” or “Adept” stage, which might have been a domesticating approach).

By opting for a transparent English phrase, the translator leans toward faithfulness to the original imagery, implementing what Venuti calls foreignization – bringing some of the source culture’s linguistic flavour directly over, rather than substituting a culturally neutral term. Notably, alternate translations in fan communities have sometimes used “Foundation Building”; Deathblade’s choice of “Establishment” carries a slightly more formal tone, but essentially the same meaning. This indicates an attempt at consistent terminology that is serious and descriptive, matching the novel’s semi-formal register when discussing cultivation ranks.

Skopos and Creative Treason analysis: The Skopos (purpose) behind rendering in such a literal manner appears to be maintaining narrative continuity and clarity while respecting the source culture’s concept. For an English reader, “Foundation Establishment” is immediately comprehensible in a literal sense – it evokes the act of establishing a base – even if the exact mystical significance unfolds gradually through the story. This satisfies the coherence rule of Skopos theory: the target text segment is coherent for readers once they’re a bit familiar with the cultivation context, and it aligns with the overall purpose of educating the reader in the novel’s cultivation system as the plot progresses. Crucially, Deathblade’s translation here shows minimal creative distortion of meaning; there is little “treason” in the sense of altering content, aside from the necessary reordering of words. If anything, the creativity lies in deciding not to simplify or replace the term with a more target-friendly concept, which is itself a strategy aligned with a goal of cultural authenticity. By not exercising a more drastic adaptation, the translator demonstrates what we might call restrained creative treason: the act of faithfulness can be viewed as a conscious choice to let the foreign term exert its original weight on the reader. In line with Xie Tianzhen’s observations on creative treason, even seemingly straightforward translations are guided by the translator’s own interpretation and aims. Here, the aim was likely to keep the philosophical and narrative integrity intact – preserving the notion that a cultivator literally builds a spiritual foundation. The effect on cultural resonance is positive: English readers are introduced to the idea that immortality is achieved through methodical inner development, a concept rooted in Daoist alchemical traditions of “foundation building.”

Moreover, “Foundation Establishment” as a term has since entered the lexicon of English-speaking Xianxia fans, indicating that the translator’s foreignizing approach succeeded in conveying the concept in a durable way. By adhering closely to the source term, the translation invites readers to adapt to the story’s world rather than adapting the world to the readers, fulfilling a skopos of immersion. The clarity of the English words ensures readers do not get confused in the narrative (they can always grasp that it’s about establishing a foundation of power), while the

cultural specificity ensures the term remains a marker of Chinese cultivation culture rather than a generic fantasy trope. In summary, the translation of exemplifies a semantic translation strategy serving both clarity and authenticity: it upholds the story's internal logic and Daoist spirit (the integrity of the metaphor of cultivation as construction) and resonates culturally by retaining the didactic flavour of the original term, all in line with the translator's purpose of delivering an accessible yet distinctively Chinese fantasy experience.

Case Study II: (Core Formation)

Context in the source: refers to the stage of “forming the core,” often understood as forming the “Golden Core” in Daoist inner alchemy. In the novel's sequence, this realm follows Foundation Establishment. At , a cultivator's refined qi coalesces into a solid core – envisioned as a golden elixir or pill within the dantian (lower abdomen). This concept draws from Daoist alchemical texts, where the human body is likened to a furnace refining the elixir of immortality. Achieving Core Formation is a significant milestone: the cultivator's lifespan roughly doubles (to ~300 years), and they gain qualitatively greater power. The text makes clear that after forming a core, one is considered a true adept on the “great path” toward immortality. In ISSH, the sect leader is at Core Formation, indicating its high status. The term literally means “knitting/congealing a cinnabar pill,” evoking imagery of bringing together energies to crystallize a Dan (cinnabar elixir). It's inherently a metaphor-laden term: in Chinese also means a medicinal pill or elixir, often golden – a reference to jindan (Golden Core) concepts in Daoist practice. Translation strategy: Deathblade translates as “Core Formation.” This is another literal-leaning translation, comprising simple English words that closely parallel the source term. The translator chooses core for and formation for , thereby directly conveying the notion of forming a core. Notably, he omits the adjective “golden,” even though Chinese readers would culturally associate in this context with a golden elixir. This suggests a small domestication tweak for brevity and clarity: calling it just “Core Formation” focuses on the process rather than specifying color, trusting that readers will later understand the core's nature (indeed, within the narrative the core is described and can be inferred as golden). By not using a loaded word like “elixir” or “pill” in the term itself, the translator avoids potential confusion – “Core” is more intuitive as a metaphor for a central, condensed essence.

This choice exemplifies semantic translation that errs on the side of clarity: “Core Formation” reads as a technical term in English, but it is immediately decipherable (the reader can guess it means the character is forming some sort of core inside themselves). Like the previous terms, this is a foreignizing calque – it's not a term native to English parlance, but it's constructed from familiar vocabulary. The translation aligns with what the Chinese corpus analysis found: many (xianxia-specific terms) in ISSH are rendered by (word-for-word/literal translation) to preserve their cultural meaning while remaining readable. By using “Core Formation,” Deathblade ensures consistency in the translation of cultivation ranks across the novel and even across the genre, as this term is now standard in English discussions of Xianxia.

It is also worth noting that Core Formation mirrors terminology from earlier fan translations of similar novels, indicating a possible genre norm that the translator adhered to for the target community's familiarity (a kind of intertextual domestication within the subculture). No transliteration is involved here – unlike “Qi” or “Dao,” the concept of a core did not require a Chinese word in pinyin, since “core” in English sufficiently captures the idea of a concentrated essence (and perhaps resonates with Western alchemical notions of a “philosopher's stone” or inner core, though that connection is indirect).

Skopos and Creative Treason analysis: The goal (skopos) for translating seems to be efficient communication of a complex concept without extensive exposition. “Core Formation” cleanly and quickly tells the reader what is happening: a core is being formed. This aids narrative clarity – when a character is said to “enter Core Formation stage,” even new readers can surmise this is an advanced level where something called a “core” is attained. It spares the translator from having to insert footnotes or long explanations mid-story, thus respecting the cohesion and flow of the target text. In terms of Skopos theory's fidelity rule, the translation is loyal to the original's intent: the metaphor of cultivation as producing an internal alchemical core is preserved, fulfilling a kind of

functional equivalence – target readers get a similar impression as Chinese readers do, that a solid spiritual nucleus is the hallmark of this level. As for Creative Treason, the translator’s choice here is relatively conservative, implying little “treason” against the source.

If anything, the creative liberty was in omitting “golden,” an adaptation arguably meant to avoid potential misinterpretation (e.g. a literal-minded reader puzzling over a “golden core” without context). This omission is a subtle form of creative interpretation – the translator decided that specifying the color was not crucial in English, perhaps because in Western narrative context the color might seem superfluous or because the imagery would be conveyed elsewhere (indeed, later in the series the quality of cores—golden, purple, etc.—is discussed, and at that point the translator introduces those qualifiers).

This indicates a Skopos-informed treason: the translator anticipates the target audience’s needs, adjusting minor details to optimize understanding while not sacrificing the overarching cultural concept. The philosophical integrity of remains intact. In Daoist cultivation philosophy, forming the Jindan is a critical step to transcend mortality; by translating it plainly as forming a “Core,” the translator keeps the symbolic meaning (a crystallization of life energy) comprehensible. It arguably even broadens cultural resonance: the term “core” might evoke for readers the heart or center of something, a universal concept, thereby bridging cultures. At the same time, the explicitly Chinese alchemical notion of a “pill” is toned down – this could be seen as a slight domestication to fit the sensibilities of the target audience (who might otherwise imagine a literal pill one swallows).

According to Creative Treason theory, such adaptation can be viewed as the translator’s creative re-creation to ensure the target audience’s reception aligns with the source’s intended effect. Western readers, less versed in Daoist elixir imagery, receive a term that invites them into the concept without confusion. Culturally, “Core Formation” still strongly connotes the idea of inner transformation and remains distinct from Western fantasy tropes – it resonates as something uniquely tied to the novel’s Eastern paradigm of self-cultivation. Thus, the translation strikes a balance: it is readable and succinct (fulfilling the communicative purpose), yet it does not dilute the exotic concept of forming an internal immortal core, preserving the novel’s cultural essence for the international audience.

5.5 Daoism and Western Perception of Rebellion

Another key aspect of Xianxia fiction is the moral conflict that arises from the rebellion of the protagonist against his sect or the heavens. The concept of rebellion in Xianxia is deeply embedded in Daoist and Confucian values, where it is not merely a personal act of defiance but a moral duty to protect the weak or pursue righteousness. In the context of the cultivation system, rebellion is often framed as a spiritual journey, where the practitioner challenges the limitations of their world in search of greater truth and immortality.

Western readers, however, might interpret this rebellion more individually—as a quest for personal freedom and self-determination. The Daoist framework of rebellion as a moral duty might not fully resonate with a Western audience, which could lead to a shift in interpretation. Deathblade’s translation decisions influence this shift, as terms like “Nascent Soul” and “Foundation Establishment” may make the rebellion seem more individualistic, aligning with Western ideals of personal empowerment rather than the communal moral duty suggested in the original text.

6. Conclusion

The translation of cultivation levels in ISSH reveals a complex negotiation between cultural fidelity and accessibility. Using Skopos Theory as the framework, Deathblade’s translation strategy prioritizes reader comprehension while simplifying key Daoist and Confucian concepts. Creative treason, evident in the adaptation of terms such as Nascent Soul, Foundation Establishment, and Qi, illustrates how cultural authenticity is often sacrificed in favor of making the text relatable to a Western audience.

However, these adaptations inevitably lead to a loss of the spiritual depth and Daoist metaphysical

richness inherent in the original text. By sacrificing some of the philosophical layers, Deathblade's translation ensures that the narrative clarity remains intact, but it also diminishes the cultural significance of key terms. This balance between accessibility and authenticity is essential for future translations of Xianxia fiction.

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