

# The Horror That Travels: A Comparative Analysis of Herbert Giles' and GPT's Translations of "The Painted Skin" through the Lens of Horror Aesthetics

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the translation of horror aesthetics in Pu Songling's "The Painted Skin" (《画皮》) by comparing Herbert Giles' canonical 1880 Victorian-era translation with a contemporary GPT-generated translation. Drawing upon Freud's theory of the uncanny (Das Unheimliche), Kristeva's concept of abjection, and Carroll's framework of art-horror, this study argues that the two translations produce fundamentally different horror effects due to diverging translational strategies. Giles' translation, shaped by Victorian literary conventions and bowdlerization practices, domesticates the horror through Gothic narrative framing and moralistic distancing, thereby mediating the uncanny for an English readership. The GPT translation, by contrast, generated through large-scale language modeling and contemporary language conventions rather than the publishing norms of a specific historical period, so it adopts a literalist approach that preserves the original's narrative abruptness and visceral detail, generating a more immediate and unsettling horror experience. Through close comparative analysis of key horror sequences—the skin-painting revelation, the heart-tearing murder, and the abject resurrection—this paper demonstrates how translational choices at lexical, syntactic, and discursive levels reconfigure the aesthetic experience of horror across cultural and historical boundaries. The findings suggest that horror, far from being a stable textual property, is substantially reconstituted through translation, with each translational framework activating different dimensions of the horror aesthetic embedded in Pu Songling's original.

**Keywords-** horror aesthetics, translation studies, "The Painted Skin," Herbert Giles, GPT translation, the uncanny, abjection, Liaozhai zhiyi.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Pu Songling's (1640–1715) *Liaozhai zhiyi* (《聊斋志异》), or *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*, stands as one of the most influential collections of supernatural fiction in Chinese literary history. Among its nearly five hundred tales, "The Painted Skin" (《画皮》) occupies a singular position for its concentrated deployment of horror imagery: a demon wearing a painted human skin seduces a scholar, is exposed in a scene of grotesque revelation, murders the scholar by tearing out his heart, and is ultimately exorcised through Daoist intervention, followed by a bizarre resurrection sequence involving the forced consumption of spittle. The tale's horror operates not through atmospheric suggestion alone but through a systematic assault on the boundaries of the human body and the stability of visual perception.

The translation history of *Liaozhai zhiyi* into English provides a rich site for investigating how classical Chinese horror travels across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Herbert Giles' *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* (1880), the first substantial English translation of *Liaozhai* tales into English, remained highly influential in the Anglophone world for decades (Minford, 2006). Produced within the intellectual environment of Victorian sinology, Giles' translation was shaped

by the literary tastes and publishing conventions of late nineteenth-century Britain. Recent scholarship has demonstrated that Giles frequently employed bowdlerization and adaptation strategies when rendering culturally sensitive, erotic, or grotesque elements (Jin, 2022). By contrast, contemporary GPT-generated translation represents a new mode of textual mediation that relies on large-scale language modeling and statistical language patterns. The contrast between these two translation paradigms offers a valuable opportunity to investigate how horror aesthetics are reconstructed across different historical, cultural, and technological contexts.

This paper asks a central question: How do these two translation frameworks—the Victorian sinological and the contemporary computational—reconfigure the horror aesthetics of "The Painted Skin"? By examining key passages through the lens of established horror theory, I argue that Giles and GPT produce divergent horror effects that reflect not merely different translation strategies but fundamentally different orientations toward the relationship between language, body, and the uncanny.

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: HORROR AESTHETICS AND TRANSLATION

### 2.1 *The Uncanny, Abjection, and Art-Horror*

Three theoretical frameworks are particularly relevant to analyzing the horror aesthetics of "The Painted Skin." First, Sigmund Freud's (1919) essay "The Uncanny" (Das Unheimliche) identifies the uncanny as that class of the frightening that leads back to what is known and long familiar. Freud traces the uncanny to the return of repressed infantile complexes or primitive beliefs that have been surmounted. The figure of the double, the fear of being buried alive, and the uncertainty about whether an object is animate or inanimate are paradigmatic uncanny motifs. In "The Painted Skin," the demon's ability to shift between human and monstrous form activates precisely this uncertainty: the beautiful woman is simultaneously familiar (desirable, human) and unfamiliar (monstrous, inhuman), creating a sustained uncanny tension.

Second, Julia Kristeva's (1982) concept of abjection in *Powers of Horror* provides a framework for understanding the tale's preoccupation with bodily boundaries and their violation. The abject is that which disturbs identity, system, order—the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. The corpse is the utmost of abjection: it is death infecting life. In "The Painted Skin," abjection operates at multiple levels: the skin itself, torn from a body and painted like an object; the ripped-open abdomen and the torn-out heart; the forced ingestion of spittle; and the vomiting forth of a new heart. Each of these moments stages a crisis of bodily boundary that Kristeva identifies as the core of abjection.

Third, Noël Carroll's (1990) cognitive theory of art-horror in *The Philosophy of Horror* defines the genre through the presence of monsters that are "impure" and "categorically interstitial"—creatures that violate the conceptual categories through which we normally perceive the world. The demon in "The Painted Skin" is a paradigmatic Carrollian monster: it is neither fully human nor fully animal, neither alive nor dead, but a composite being that crosses the boundary between surface and depth, appearance and reality. Carroll argues that such monsters generate horror precisely because they threaten our established conceptual schemata.

### 2.2 *Translation and the Transcultural Transmission of Horror*

Translation theory has increasingly recognized that the transfer of literary texts across languages involves not merely linguistic substitution but the reconfiguration of aesthetic effects. Venuti's (1995) distinction between domestication and foreignization is particularly relevant: domesticating translation assimilates the source text to target-language cultural values, while foreignizing translation resists this assimilation. Giles' translation, as I will demonstrate, is heavily domesticating, reshaping Pu Songling's horror to conform to Victorian Gothic conventions. The GPT translation, by contrast, tends toward foreignization through literalism, though this literalism produces its own distinctive effects.

The translation of horror presents unique challenges. The horror effect depends on precise timing, lexical choice, and the management of narrative distance. A single lexical substitution—rendering "狞鬼" (ning gui) as "hideous devil" versus "hideous monster"—can shift the horror register from the theological to the biological. The syntactic pacing of revelation scenes can accelerate or retard the horror experience. These micro-level choices cumulatively determine whether the translated text terrifies, disgusts, or merely informs.

Horror is not transmitted through semantic content alone. As Carroll (1990) argues, horror emerges from readers' emotional and cognitive responses to monsters and category violations. Likewise, Freud's uncanny depends on narrative conditions that destabilize familiar perceptions, while Kristeva's abjection arises from culturally mediated experiences of bodily contamination and boundary disruption. Translation therefore participates directly in the production of horror by reshaping the linguistic and narrative mechanisms through which these aesthetic responses are generated. Lexical selection, syntactic organization, narrative pacing, and the treatment of culture-specific imagery all influence whether the uncanny, the abject, and art-horror remain effective in the target text.

### III. GILES' VICTORIAN TRANSLATION: DOMESTICATING HORROR

#### 3.1 *The Context of Victorian Sinology and Bowdlerization*

Herbert Giles (1845–1935) was a British diplomat-scholar who served in China for twenty-six years before becoming Cambridge University's second Professor of Chinese. His translation of *Liaozhai zhiyi* was published in 1880, at the height of the Victorian era. The translation was shaped by multiple constraints: the need to make Chinese literature palatable to Victorian readers, the conventions of Victorian publishing that demanded moral propriety, and Giles' own position as a mediator between Chinese and Western cultures. Giles' translation was produced within the intellectual environment of Victorian sinology and addressed a late nineteenth-century English readership (Giles, 1880; Jin, 2022).

Scholars have extensively documented Giles' bowdlerization of erotic and scatological content (Jin, 2022). However, the impact of these translational choices on horror aesthetics has received less attention. I argue that Giles' domesticating strategy systematically modifies the horror effect in three ways: through Gothic narrative framing, through moralistic distancing, and through the attenuation of bodily abjection.

#### 3.2 *Gothic Framing and Narrative Mediation*

Giles opens the tale with a conventional Gothic frame: "At T'ai-yüan there lived a man named Wang. One morning he was out walking when he met a young lady carrying a bundle and hurrying along by herself." This establishes a narrative distance characteristic of the nineteenth-century Gothic novel, where the supernatural is contained within a realist frame. The GPT translation, by contrast, opens with a more direct and less mediated statement: "In Taiyuan there lived a scholar named Wang. One morning, while traveling before dawn, he encountered a young woman hurrying along the road with a bundle in her arms."

More significantly, Giles adds explanatory connective tissue absent from the original. When Wang suspects the girl after the Daoist's warning, Giles writes: "This startled Wang, who at first thought of the girl; but then he reflected that a pretty young thing as she was couldn't well be a witch, and began to suspect that the priest merely wanted to do a stroke of business." The phrase "a pretty young thing as she was couldn't well be a witch" introduces a rationalizing psychology that mediates the horror. The GPT translation renders the same moment more sparsely: "The strange warning troubled Wang. For the first time he began to suspect the girl. Yet when he recalled her radiant beauty, he found it impossible to imagine her as a demon." While both versions provide psychological motivation, Giles' version is more colloquial and distancing, GPT's more restrained and immediate.

#### 3.3 *The Skin-Painting Scene: Lexical Choices and Horror Intensity*

The central horror sequence—Wang's discovery of the demon painting the human skin—reveals the most significant differences between the two translations. The original Chinese reads:

见一狞鬼，面翠色，齿巉巉如锯，铺人皮于榻上，执彩笔而绘之。已而掷笔，举皮如振衣状，披于身，遂化为女子。

Giles translates:

[He] saw a hideous devil, with a green face and jagged teeth like a saw, spreading a human skin upon the bed and painting it with a paint-brush. The devil then threw aside the brush, and giving the skin a shake out, just as you would a coat, threw it over its shoulders, when, lo! it was the girl.

GPT translates:

There he saw a hideous monster. Its face was green as jade, and its jagged teeth protruded like the teeth of a saw. Upon the bed lay a human skin spread flat. Holding a colored brush, the creature was painting upon it. After a while, it threw down the brush, lifted the skin as though shaking out a garment, and draped it over its own body. In an instant, it became the beautiful young woman once more.

Several differences are noteworthy. First, Giles renders "狞鬼" (ning gui) as "hideous devil," introducing a Christian theological framework absent from the original. GPT's "hideous monster" is more neutral and biologically oriented. Second, Giles adds the interjection "lo!"—a conventional Gothic marker that distances the reader from the horror through theatricality. GPT avoids such markers, maintaining a more clinical observational tone.

Third, and most crucially, Giles adds the simile "just as you would a coat," which domesticates the uncanny gesture by comparing it to an everyday action. This simile performs what Freud identifies as the defense against the uncanny: by assimilating the monstrous to the familiar, it reduces the cognitive dissonance that generates horror. GPT's "as though shaking out a garment" preserves more of the uncanny quality because the simile is less colloquial and the action less familiarized.

#### 3.4 *The Heart-Tearing and the Attenuation of Violence*

The murder scene presents another significant divergence. The original reads:

径登生床，裂生腹，掬生心而去。

Giles translates: "walked straight up to the bed, where she ripped open Wang and tore out his heart, with which she went away."

GPT translates: "strode directly to Wang's bed, ripped open his abdomen, seized his heart, and departed."

Giles' version is notably more compressed and less anatomically specific. "Ripped open Wang" is vaguer than "ripped open his abdomen," and "tore out his heart" is less visceral than "seized his heart" (which implies a grasping, physical contact). More importantly, Giles omits the detail of the wife's reaction as rendered in the original: "陈骇涕不敢声" (Chen was terrified, weeping, not daring to make a sound). Giles renders this as "His wife, who was in an agony of fright, hardly dared cry for fear of making a noise," while GPT writes "Madam Chen was so horrified that she could scarcely weep." Giles adds "for fear of making a noise," introducing a prudential motivation absent from the original, which describes a paralysis of terror rather than a calculated silence.

### 3.5 *The Resurrection Sequence and the Abject Body*

The most striking divergence occurs in the resurrection sequence, which involves the forced consumption of spittle. The original reads:

乞人咯痰唾盈把，举向陈吻曰：“食之！”陈红涨于面，有难色；既思道士之嘱，遂强啖焉。觉入喉中，硬如团絮，格格而下，停结胸间。

Giles translates: "After this he produced a loathsome pill which he told her she must swallow, but here she broke down and was quite unable to do so. However, she did manage it at last."

This is a remarkable instance of bowdlerization. Giles transforms "痰唾盈把" (a handful of phlegm and spittle) into "a loathsome pill," completely sanitizing the abject bodily fluid that is central to the scene's horror. The act of swallowing another person's spittle is a quintessentially Kristevan abject act: it violates the boundary between inside and outside, self and other, clean and unclean. By substituting "pill" for "spittle," Giles eliminates the abject dimension entirely, converting a scene of bodily horror into one of mere disgust at an unspecified substance.

GPT translates the same passage: "The beggar then coughed up a handful of thick phlegm and held it before her mouth. 'Eat it!' Madam Chen flushed crimson with humiliation. Yet remembering the Daoist's warning, she forced herself to swallow it. The substance slid down her throat like a hard wad of cotton and lodged in her chest."

GPT preserves the abject nature of the substance ("thick phlegm"), the sensory detail of its texture ("like a hard wad of cotton"), and the physical sensation of its passage ("slid down her throat... lodged in her chest"). The GPT translation here is more faithful to the original's horror aesthetic precisely because it does not flinch from the abject.

## IV. GPT'S COMPUTATIONAL TRANSLATION: THE RETURN OF THE LITERAL

### 4.1 *Literalism and the Preservation of Abruptness*

The GPT translation is characterized by a literalism that preserves many of the original's stylistic features that Giles' Victorian prose smooths over. The original Chinese narrative is notable for its abrupt transitions and paratactic syntax—short clauses connected by minimal conjunction, creating a breathless, inexorable quality. GPT largely preserves this paratactic structure. For example, the sequence of the demon's transformation is rendered in short, declarative sentences: "She collapsed. The human skin split open and fell away. A fierce demon emerged, shrieking like a slaughtered pig." Giles renders the same sequence as a single, grammatically subordinated sentence: "down she fell flat, the human skin dropped off, and she became a hideous devil."

The paratactic style of GPT creates a more immediate, less mediated horror experience. Each clause is a discrete event, forcing the reader to process each horror sequentially without the syntactic cushioning that subordination provides. Giles' hypotactic style, by contrast, integrates the horror into a flowing narrative that diminishes its disruptive impact.

### 4.2 *The Absence of Moralistic Commentary*

Giles' translation frequently adds moral or explanatory commentary that distances the reader from the horror. For instance, when the Daoist priest explains his initial reluctance to destroy the demon, Giles adds the parenthetical note that the creature "must be in great distress to be seeking a substitute for herself." This psychological explanation rationalizes the demon's behavior, reducing its monstrous alterity. GPT renders the same moment more straightforwardly: "This creature has suffered greatly itself. It has only just found a substitute victim. I am reluctant to take its life." The GPT version is more direct and less apologetic, preserving the Daoist's ambivalence without explaining it away.

Similarly, Giles' translation of the beggar's mockery—"You can get plenty of other husbands. Why raise the dead one to life?"—introduces a pragmatic, almost commonsensical tone that domesticates the scene's grotesque absurdity. GPT's rendering—"All men die eventually. Why bring him back?"—is more philosophically stark and less colloquially reassuring.

### 4.3 *The Production of a Different Uncanny*

The GPT translation's literalism produces a distinctive uncanny effect that is paradoxically both more foreign and more immediate. Because GPT does not possess a conscious translational ideology, its choices reflect the statistical patterns of contemporary English usage applied to the source text. The result is a translation that is linguistically fluent but aesthetically foreign—familiar words arranged in unfamiliar configurations that mirror the original's syntactic patterns.

This produces what might be called a "computational uncanny": the text is perfectly grammatical and idiomatic, yet its narrative rhythm and focalization differ subtly from conventional English horror prose. The GPT translation's tendency toward shorter paragraphs, more frequent paragraph breaks, and more cinematic scene division creates a fragmented, almost

screenwriting-like quality that contrasts with Giles' flowing Victorian paragraphs. This fragmentation itself generates a kind of horror—the horror of a narrative that refuses to integrate its shocking elements into a smooth, digestible whole.

## V. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: THREE DIMENSIONS OF HORROR

### 5.1 *The Uncanny: Familiarity and Its Disruption*

Freud's uncanny operates through the return of the familiar in unfamiliar form. Both translations activate the uncanny, but through different mechanisms. Giles' translation generates uncanny effects through the very familiarity of its Gothic conventions: the reader recognizes the tropes of Victorian ghost stories, and this recognition creates a comfortable uncanny—horror within known parameters. The GPT translation generates a more radical uncanny through its preservation of the original's cultural specificity: the Daoist priest, the fly-whisk, the gourd for capturing souls—these elements remain culturally foreign, producing an uncanny that is not the return of the repressed but the encounter with the culturally unfamiliar.

### 5.2 *Abjection: The Body and Its Boundaries*

The treatment of abjection most clearly distinguishes the two translations. Giles systematically attenuates bodily abjection: the spittle becomes a pill, the torn abdomen is described euphemistically, the visceral details of the resurrection are compressed. GPT preserves the abject body in its full materiality: phlegm, blood, entrails, and the warm, throbbing heart are all rendered with clinical precision.

This difference has significant implications for the horror effect. Kristeva argues that abjection is fundamental to horror because it threatens the symbolic order by exposing the material reality of the body. Giles' sanitization of the abject effectively contains this threat, allowing the reader to experience horror as a safe, aesthetic emotion. GPT's preservation of the abject forces the reader to confront the material body in its most vulnerable and disgusting states, producing a more visceral and less easily contained horror.

### 5.3 *Art-Horror: The Monster and Cognitive Threat*

Carroll's theory of art-horror emphasizes the cognitive dimension: monsters horrify because they violate categorical boundaries. The demon in "The Painted Skin" is categorically interstitial in multiple ways: between human and animal, between living and dead, between surface and depth. Both translations preserve this categorical violation, but they frame it differently.

Giles' translation emphasizes the demon's moral dimension: it is a "devil," a term that places it within a Christian cosmological framework. This moral framing partially contains the categorical threat by assimilating it to a known category (the demonic). GPT's translation emphasizes the demon's biological monstrosity: it is a "hideous monster" with "green as jade" skin and "jagged teeth." This biological framing leaves the categorical violation more raw and less theologically resolved.

## VI. CONCLUSION

This comparative analysis of Herbert Giles' and GPT's translations of "The Painted Skin" reveals that horror aesthetics are not stable textual properties that survive translation intact but are substantially reconstituted through translational choices. Giles' Victorian domesticating strategy produces a mediated, moralized, and attenuated horror that conforms to nineteenth-century Gothic conventions and Victorian standards of propriety. The GPT translation, through its literalist approach, preserves more of the original's abject materiality and narrative abruptness, generating a more immediate and less culturally assimilated horror.

These findings have implications for both translation studies and horror theory. For translation studies, they demonstrate that the translation of horror requires attention not merely to lexical accuracy but to the management of narrative distance, the pacing of revelation, and the handling of bodily abjection. For horror theory, they suggest that horror is not a universal aesthetic category but is culturally and historically mediated through the linguistic frameworks that convey it.

The emergence of machine translation introduces a new variable into this equation. GPT's translation is neither a product of a specific cultural moment (like Giles') nor a purely mechanical substitution (like earlier machine translation systems). It is a statistical approximation of human language use that produces unpredictable aesthetic effects. The computational uncanny of GPT's translation—its simultaneous fluency and foreignness—may be the most distinctive contribution of machine translation to the transcultural transmission of horror.

The emergence of large language models introduces a new dimension to the study of literary translation. GPT-generated translation occupies a position distinct from both traditional human translation and earlier machine translation systems. Its relative literalism often preserves textual features that earlier translators modified or omitted, allowing contemporary readers greater access to the bodily, uncanny, and culturally specific dimensions of the source text. At the same time, GPT translation remains shaped by the linguistic conventions embedded in its training data and therefore constitutes a historically situated mode of textual mediation. The comparison between Giles and GPT ultimately

demonstrates that horror is not merely transferred through translation but continually re-created through different linguistic, cultural, and technological frameworks.

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