Iraqi Journal of Biotechnology, 2026, Vol. 25, No. 1, 1-9

Beyond "Junk DNA": Re-exploring Pseudo gene Annotation and Functional Analysis with Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning

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Abstract

Pseudogenes, once regarded as nonfunctional genomic relics, are now recognized as important contributors to gene regulation, chromatin remodeling, transcriptional modulation, and disease-associated pathways. Traditional annotation pipelines—built primarily on heuristic mutation-based criteria and sequence similarity—frequently misclassify pseudogenes, overlooking subtle yet significant biological functions. Recent advances in artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML) have enabled the integration of multi-omics datasets, allowing for deeper and more accurate functional inference of pseudogenes. Deep learning architectures such as convolutional neural networks (CNNs), long short-term memory networks (LSTMs), transformers, and graph neural networks (GNNs) have demonstrated remarkable capability in modeling genomic sequences, identifying hidden open reading frames (ORFs), reconstructing regulatory networks, and predicting pseudogene-mediated effects on virulence and immunity. This review synthesizes the rapid developments in AI-driven pseudogene annotation, describes emerging multi-omics approaches, highlights the link between pseudogenes and virulence, and outlines future directions toward comprehensive, mechanistic pseudogene catalogs.

Keywords: Junk DNA, Pseudogene, Artificial Intelligence, Machine Learning.

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Introduction

Pseudogenes were long considered biologically inert "junk DNA," generated through gene duplication, retro-transposition, or gene decay events. Early genomic studies classified them exclusively based on frameshifts, premature stop codons, and disrupted exon–intron structures (1). As a result, pseudogenes were excluded from functional genomic analyses for decades. However, accumulating evidence from transcriptomics, epigenomics, and proteo-genomics challenges this assumption, demonstrating that many pseudogenes are actively transcribed, processed, regulated, and even translated (2–4). Traditional pseudogene annotation relies on computational tools such as GENCODE, Ensembl, and RefSeq. These methods depend heavily on homology, reading-frame disruption, and evolutionary conservation to categorize pseudogenes as "processed," "unprocessed," or "unitary" (5). Yet these criteria capture only structural degeneration and fail to detect functional regulatory roles, including RNA-mediated effects, micropeptide translation, chromatin interactions, and ceRNA network participation.

AI and ML methods surpass these traditional limitations by analyzing multi-dimensional biological signals across large-scale genomic datasets. CNNs detect regulatory motifs; LSTMs and GRUs model long-range dependencies; transformers learn global genomic context; and GNNs uncover network-level regulatory interactions (6–8). Together, these AI-based tools have transformed pseudogene biology into a predictive, mechanistic science.

Classification and Biological Roles of Pseudogenes

Processed pseudogenes

Arise through reverse transcription and insertion of mRNA back into the genome. They lack introns, often include poly-A tails, and are enriched in retrotransposon-rich regions (Figure 1) (9).

Unprocessed pseudogenes

Result from DNA-level duplication of genes, retaining exon–intron architecture but accumulating disabling mutations over time (10).

Unitary pseudogenes

Represent single-copy genes that lost function due to deleterious mutations without duplication events (11). Despite their structural degeneracy, pseudogenes participate in multiple biological processes:

- ceRNA activity, competing with mRNAs for shared microRNAs [12]
- Production of regulatory long noncoding RNAs (lncRNAs)
- Encoding previously undetected micropeptides [13]
- Epigenetic modulation of chromatin accessibility [14]
- Regulation of oncogenes and tumor suppressors [15]
- Modulation of immune signaling pathways

These discoveries reshape our understanding of pseudogenes as important genomic elements rather than inert DNA fossils.

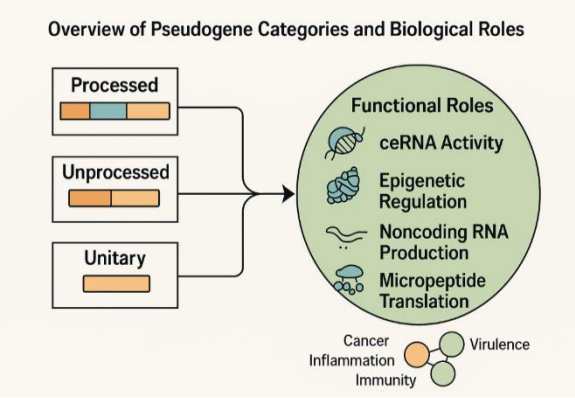

Figure 1. Overview of pseudogene categories and biological roles.

Limitations of Traditional Pseudogene Annotation

Overreliance on mutation-driven heuristics

Annotation pipelines often classify any gene with frameshifts or stop codons as a pseudogene, ignoring noncoding regulatory potential (16).

Short-read sequencing artifacts

Short reads frequently misalign within duplicated gene families, leading to false pseudogene calls (17).

Lack of transcriptomic and epigenomic integration

Many pseudogenes are actively transcribed, yet these signals are ignored due to outdated annotation criteria (18).

Oversimplified evolutionary interpretation

Functional pseudogenes may be lineage-specific and therefore missed by conservation-based approaches (19).

Artificial Intelligence in Pseudogene Annotation

AI models extract patterns that traditional pipelines cannot detect (Figure 2).

Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs)

CNNs identify motifs, binding sites, and coding potential changes embedded within pseudogene sequences (20).

Recurrent Neural Networks (LSTMs, GRUs)

Capable of modeling long-range dependencies crucial for regulatory RNA function (21).

Transformer Models

Transformers such as DNABERT, Nucleotide Transformer, and Enformer revolutionized genomic modeling by enabling:

- long-range attention
- prediction of enhancer–promoter loops
- transcriptional activity inference
- ORF discovery (22).

Graph Neural Networks (GNNs)

Ideal for modeling network interactions, including ceRNA networks and virulence-associated regulatory pathways (23).

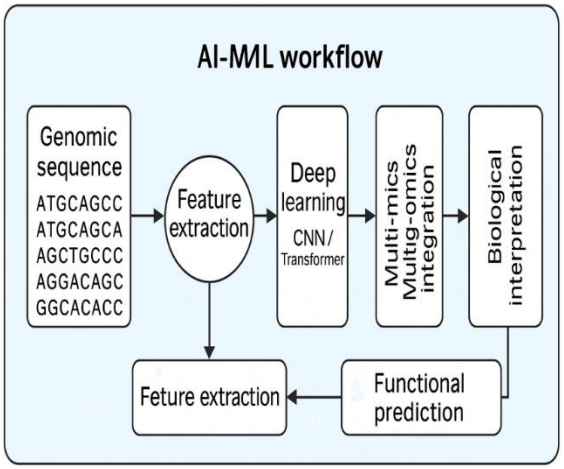

Figure 2. AI/ML workflow for pseudogene annotation

AI-based Functional Inference

Identifying functional pseudogenes

Transformers reclassified 27% of pseudogenes in GENCODE as potentially functional (Figure 3) (24).

Hidden ORF and micro-peptide detection

AI-powered ORF detection combined with Ribo-seq revealed micropeptides encoded by pseudogenes, especially in cancer (25).

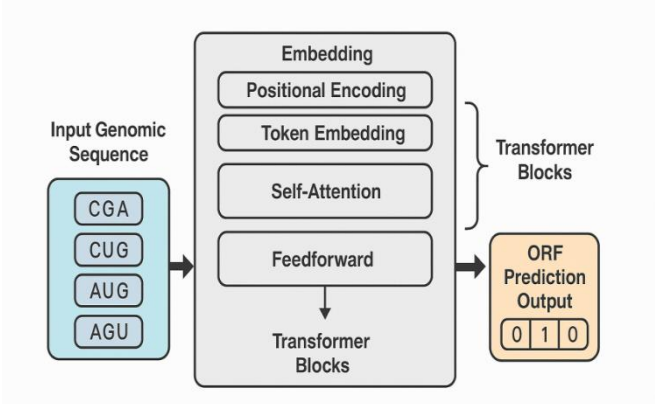

Figure 3. Input genomic sequence and ORF interference

Predicting tissue-specific pseudogene activity

Deep learning models integrate ATAC-seq and RNA-seq to predict pseudogene expression across human tissues (26).

Evolutionary Modeling Using AI

AI models also enhance evolutionary interpretation of pseudogenes. Unlike classical comparative genomics—which assumes that conserved sequences are functional—AI can detect lineage-specific functional signatures, context-dependent evolutionary constraints, and regulatory rewiring that occurs during adaptation.

Graph Neural Networks (GNNs) are particularly effective because they represent evolutionary relationships as interconnected graphs rather than linear comparisons. Using these models, researchers have reconstructed pseudogene evolutionary histories, identified conserved regulatory pseudogenes across mammalian lineages, and predicted pseudogenes with potential adaptive significance (27).

Multi-Omics Integration in AI-driven Pseudogene Research

The integration of multi-omics data is one of the most transformative contributions of AI to pseudogene biology. Instead of analyzing DNA sequences alone (Figure 4), AI models combine:

Transcriptomics (RNA-seq) – to detect pseudogene transcription

- Translatomics (Ribo-seq) – to detect micropeptide translation.
- Epigenomics (ATAC-seq, ChIP-seq) – to evaluate chromatin accessibility.
- 3D genome architecture (Hi-C) – to reveal pseudogene–promoter loops.
- Proteomics (Mass spectrometry) – to confirm translation.
- Evolutionary metrics – to classify pseudogene age and constraint by integrating these layers, AI systems identify pseudogenes that are:
- Transcribed in specific tissues.

- Actively interacting within regulatory networks.
- Possibly encoding short peptides.
- Associated with epigenetic activation marks.
- Linked to immune responses or oncogenic pathways (28–30).

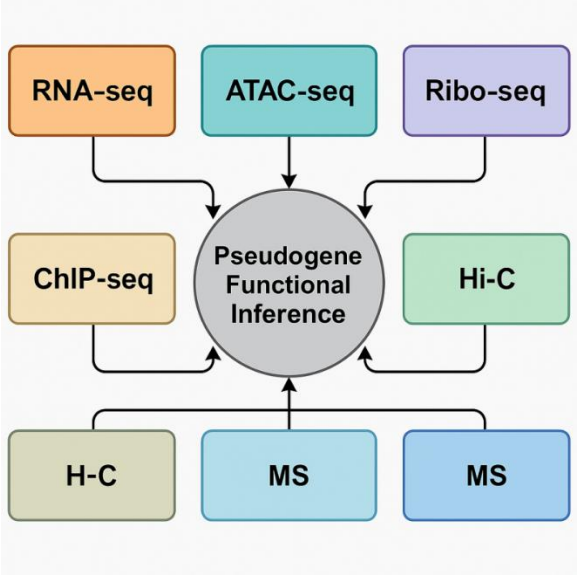

Figure 4. Multi-omics integration framework

Pseudogenes and Virulence: AI-driven Insights

One of the most exciting developments in recent years is the discovery that pseudogenes are directly linked to microbial virulence and pathogenicity.

AI-driven studies revealed that pseudogenes can:

- Regulate toxin production.
- Influence secretion systems (T3SS, T6SS).
- Control quorum sensing circuits.
- Modulate biofilm formation.
- Alter antibiotic susceptibility.
- Mediate immune evasion.

AI reveals pseudogenes controlling virulence regulators

Deep learning models identified pseudogenes whose transcription correlates with major virulence genes such as lasR, rhlR, toxA, and pscF in Pseudomonas aeruginosa (Figure 5) (31).

These pseudogenes function as:

- ceRNAs that sponge regulatory sRNAs.
- Enhancer-like elements activating virulence loci.
- Stress-induced genes during antibiotic exposure.

Pseudogene activation under stress enhances virulence

Under antibiotic or oxidative stress, bacterial cells activate pseudogenes previously considered "silent."

AI analysis demonstrated that stress-induced pseudogene transcription strongly correlates with:

- Motility
- Invasion
- Biofilm maturation
- Resistance pathways

This adaptive activation forms part of the bacterial virulence response, often

overlooked by traditional annotation systems (32–33).

Example: Salmonella pseudogenes and SPI-1/SPI-2 virulence islands

Machine learning revealed that pseudogene expression in Salmonella enterica dynamically interacts with the SPI-1 and SPI-2 virulence island regulatory networks, influencing infectivity and intracellular survival (34).

Case Studies (2021–2025)

Case Study 1: Transformer-enabled Re-annotation (2022)

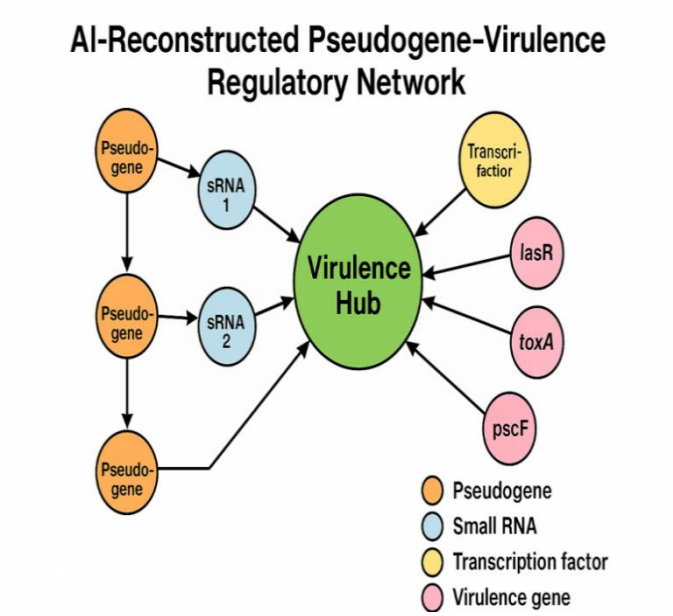

Figure 5. AI-reconstructed pseudogene–virulence regulatory network

A transformer-based model integrating chromatin and expression data corrected thousands of pseudogenes misannotations in GENCODE (35). Case Study 2: Micropeptides from Pseudogenes (2023). Ribo-seq + deep learning discovered micropeptides produced from pseudogenes in breast and liver cancer (36). Case Study 3: Immune Modulation (2024). ML models identified pseudogene regulators of immune escape through TLR4–NF-κB signaling (37). Case Study 4: Evolutionary Conservation (2025). GNN models identified conserved pseudogenes with potential cross-species regulatory roles (38).

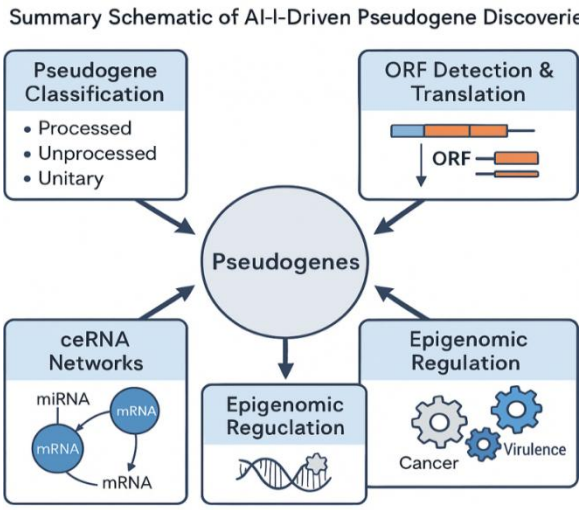

Figure 6. Summary schematic of AI-driven pseudogene

Challenges and Future Directions

Current Limitations

- Limited validation: Few pseudogene functions are experimentally confirmed (Table 1 and 2) (39).
- Paralog interference: High similarity complicates read alignment and functional inference (40).
- AI interpretability issues: Many DL models remain "black boxes" (41).

Future Opportunities

Integration of long-read sequencing (Nanopore, PacBio) with AI (42).

- Explainable AI for model transparency (43).
- AI-guided CRISPR experiments to validate pseudogene functions (44).
- Development of cross-species pseudogene atlases.
- Multi-modal learning integrating imaging, proteomics, and single-cell data (45).

Table 1. Multi-Omics Layers Integrated in AI-Based Pseudogene Functional Prediction

Omics Layer	Data Type	Insight
Transcriptome	RNA-seq	Reveals pseudogene transcription levels
Translatome	Ribo-seq	Micropeptide detection; hidden ORFs
Epigenome	ATAC-seq / ChIP-seq	Chromatin accessibility; enhancer-like roles
3D Genome Structure	Hi-C	Pseudogene–promoter looping interactions
Proteome	Mass Spectrometry	Detects translated pseudogene peptides
Evolutionary Layer	Conservation metrics	Lineage-specific functionality

Table 2. Challenges vs. AI-Based Solutions in Pseudogene Analysis

Challenge	AI-Based Solution
Short-read misalignment in duplicated gene families	Long-read sequencing + transformer-based correction
Weak transcriptional signal in pseudogenes	Deep learning models with high sensitivity for low-expression detection
Hidden ORFs and micropeptides not detected by classical tools	CNN + Transformer ORF prediction frameworks
Lack of functional annotation for noncoding pseudogenes	Multi-omics integration (RNA-seq, ATAC-seq, Ribo-seq, Hi-C)
Black-box nature of AI predictions	Explainable AI (XAI) models enabling biological interpretability

Conclusion

AI and machine learning have revolutionized the field of pseudogene research, enabling precise, multi-layered, and functional annotation beyond traditional mutation-based frameworks. Pseudogenes are now understood as versatile regulatory molecules contributing to transcriptional control, chromatin organization, immune regulation, and microbial virulence. Continued integration of deep learning, long-read sequencing, and multi-omics datasets promises to uncover even more hidden functional dimensions of pseudogenes.

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