



Selling China to the World: Translators beware!

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China no longer tries to keep a low diplomatic profile. It has recognised the need to deploy public relations strategies to enhance its global image and ward off a global backlash. However, if inaccurate translation occurs in China's public diplomacy, the resulting misperceptions can have far-reaching consequences. The CCP understands the importance of accurate translation—[the head](#) of its Compilation and Translation Bureau holds a rank equivalent to vice minister.

While interpreters are one of the few things China's domestic media can focus on during China's interminable Party congresses—stories of "[glamorous translators](#)" are a staple—the role of translators as active parties in the political realm is rarely highlighted. The role of translators in foreign relations remains unrecognised. This is not for want of a precedent in China.

The consequences when translation goes awry were demonstrated in China's exchanges with the rising power of the 18th century. In 1792, Lord McCartney, envoy of George III, confronted the Emperor Qianlong, the great ruler of the Chinese Empire, who saw his nation as the most powerful state and the only true civilisation under heaven. Every effort to expand British trade (a classic setting for political translation) was a [complete failure](#), disastrous for a nation facing a tea-driven trade deficit. The crux of the debacle was the lack of translators with political expertise. The only Chinese language speaker in the 700-strong mission was a 12-year-old boy.

When the British mission tried to present [gifts](#) to the Chinese Emperor, "to excite at Peking a taste for many articles of English workmanship hitherto unknown there", poor explanations roused derision for the "Western knickknacks". Many were found untouched 70 years later when the Imperial Palace was plundered by British and French forces.

There is a greater need for professional translators to act as cultural mediators, yet misunderstandings persist. Deng Xiaoping's well-known *taoguang yanghui* (韬光养晦) diplomatic strategy is one example. Hawkish Chinese commentators saw Deng's call for China to maintain a low international profile and put off international rivalry as an expression of weakness, and continue to deride it. Yet their equivalents in the U.S. saw it as a cunning strategy to ultimately usurp the West. The perception gap around this phase in part arises from its numerous English translations. The U.S. Defense Department's 2016 [China Military Power Report](#) refers to the policy as "hide capabilities and bide time", implying a menacing waiting game.

Although China invests substantial funds in external propaganda—[estimates](#) run to \$10 billion per year—the payoff in terms of burnishing China’s image has disappointed China’s leaders. The importance of translation in these international publicity campaigns has also remained obscure, yet it is relevant not only to China but also to its trading partners, as the case of the China Australia Free Trade Agreement (ChAFTA) shows.

ChAFTA: You keep using that word...

The documents that make up China’s Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) are the embodiment of political and economic development in contemporary China. In analysing the translation quality of China’s FTA documents, a number of unsolved translation problems can be found in official publications, government reports, and the official web portal published by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and the Ministry of Commerce of China (MOFCOM). Here is one example:

[Chapter 9.1.d.v.iv](#): ...rights under contracts, including turnkey, construction, management, production or revenue sharing contracts

[Target text](#): 合同权利，包括交钥匙、建设、管理、生产或者收益分享合同；

In this case, “turnkey” in the source text refers to a tradable service to deliver a completed product to consumers. However, in the target text, “turnkey” is literally rendered as “交钥匙 (*jiao yao shi*)”, which means “hand in the key”. Equivalence in political translation is one of the main approaches used by Chinese translators. Formal equivalence could be accurate if there was an exact equivalent in Chinese for each word and grammatical pattern in the original English text, but there is no absolute equivalence between two different languages. Literal translation that seeks to preserve the structure of the original language has appeal as a “conservative” approach, but it only achieves equivalence at the cost of making sense. Here is another example from ChAFTA.

[Chapter 2.10.2](#): In accordance with Article VIII of GATT 1994, neither Party shall impose substantial penalties for minor breaches of customs regulations or procedural requirements.

[Target text](#): 根据《1994年关税与贸易总协定》第8条，任何一方不得对轻微违反海关规定或程序性要求进行实质性惩罚。

The phrase “substantial penalties” in the English text is translated as “实质性 (*shi zhi xing*)”, which means “any actual penalties”, implying a fine on the same level as a parking infringement. According to Article 17.5 of the trade deal, the Chinese and English texts of ChAFTA are equally authentic. These inconsistencies could result in intractable arguments when a trade dispute arises. Mistranslations could become a source of controversy, bringing ChAFTA’s efficacy into question.

Selling Free Trade in China

Inconsistencies in the documents which are intended to underpin China’s regional trade expansion reveal gaps in China’s translation capacity, a limitation that is even more glaring when translations of speeches designed to send positive signals to foreign investors are examined. Zheng Jianrong, director

general of General Affairs Office of Guangdong's newly established Free Trade Zone, gave a speech that was immediately translated and publicised on 15 January 2016.

Source text: 按照中央正确定位，广东自贸区自挂牌以来取得了一系列实实在在的制度创新的成效，应该说走在全国前列。

Target text: With the three missions assigned by central government, Guangdong FTZ focused on mechanism changes in the past months, and became top mechanism innovator in China.

By literally translating “制度创新 (*zhi du chuangxin*)” into “mechanism innovator”, the text makes no sense to an English-speaking target audience. Zheng was trying to stress that the Guangdong FTZ has adopted a series of innovative approaches, but the translation gives no inkling of this. Political language—which is where this translation becomes unstuck—is grounded in rhetorical terms that often make no sense beyond their socio-cultural setting. There will never be a satisfying translation for Jiang Zemin's theory of “The Three Represents.”

Professional translators are critical in facilitating communication in world affairs, yet in China they face specific pressures. In complex political discourses, translators and text producers should rewrite the original text and act as cultural mediators, taking into account target-reader expectations. Yet the time pressures faced by Chinese translators and a desire to avoid offence by misrepresenting their superiors means that we may be stuck with inaccurate prose, to the detriment of China's soft power dreams.