



RESEARCH NOTES

The Problems of Translation: More than Issues of Semantics?

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Introduction

*It's a range viewed in face and peaks from the side,
Assuming different shapes viewed from far and wide.
Of the Mountain Lu we cannot make out the true face,
For we are lost in the heart of the very place.*

Su Shi. Song Dynasty

Many Chinese and foreigners have been to or heard of Mount Lu which is located by the Yangtze River in Jiangxi province, China. This is a famous landmark and a summer resort that has been recognized as a World Heritage site in 1996. Many poets down the ages have sung the praises of this mountain. The poem on Mount Lu quoted above was penned by Su Shi (1037-1011), one of the literary giants of the Song Dynasty, and has retained its popularity down the ages. Its central message is that, despite the physical fact of the towering presence of the mountain from time immemorial, its appearance is so multi-faceted that it conveys vastly different impressions to onlookers viewing it from different positions and angles. Just as the visual view of the mountain may give rise to distinctly different images, so also the ideas and concepts around certain entities. This is particularly so when ideas and concepts are subjected to translation that involves the personal understanding and interpretation of the translator.

Translation from one language to another is an important and necessary literary exercise. It is also highly intellectual and beneficial in that it builds bridges of cross-cultural understanding. However, translations that miss the essence of the original text are in danger of introducing interpretative biases that may lead on to semantic confusions. Worse still, this may produce misunderstandings and misjudgments of a permanent nature. This note is to illustrate how mistakes have arisen from

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the translation of selected Chinese words and phrases into English and how the consequent misconceptions have spilled over to the realm of ideological semantics. The translation of two common Chinese terms and phrases will serve to show the fine line between semantics and politics and the perception especially of developed countries on China. These examples relate to the translation of “中国” (*zhongguo*) and “韬光养晦” (*taoguang yanghui*).

Is China the “Middle Kingdom”?

Ideas and concepts are essential to communication and essential keys to the world of knowledge. When translated from one language to another, it is possible that these ideas and concepts may give rise to stereotypes in thoughts and perceptions that may mislead or discriminate. Whether in writing or speaking, one has to be sufficiently critical to avoid the risk of conveying the wrong messages. By way of example, one of the most familiar nouns that is prone to cause misunderstandings and semantic distortions is the word “China” itself. The word is used by the West to describe the country that the Chinese call “Zhongguo”. This foreign description is apparently endorsed by the Chinese in international usage.

There are semantic traps and misunderstandings embedded in the word “China”. Many Western readers understand “China” and its Chinese terminology “Zhongguo” to imply the “central nation” or the “centre of the world”, thanks to an alternative popular rendering of the term as the “Middle Kingdom”. Many Chinese readers have taken this translation for granted and the *China Daily* website itself asserts that:

Middle Kingdom is another name for China, a literal translation from *zhong guo*. Ancient China flattered itself by believing that it was the center of the world.

The accuracy of this description is questionable on many counts. Firstly, the failure to capitalize “z” in a proper noun does not meet the requirements of English grammar. Secondly, the ancient Chinese people did not have a concept of the “world” for which there was no corresponding word in the ancient Chinese language.

China Daily is an official website of China and apparently maintains the most authoritative foreign publication website in the country. Its English translators are graduates from famous Chinese universities and many have international exposure. Many native speakers and specialists are hired to take care of translations and related chores. If the translation by this authoritative institution is questionable, that of non-authoritative translators could be equally doubtful.

The closest equivalent to the concept of the “world” in Chinese is probably the word “*tianxia*” (天下). But its scope is smaller. The opening sentence of the classical novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* begins thus:

Tianxia is in chaos. A long period of unity leads inevitably to disintegration;
and a long period of disintegration leads inevitably to unity.

The “Three Kingdom” period occurred during the second century AD. “Tianxia” refers to the known geographical limits of the Chinese realm. Chinese civilization had developed and flourished for three millennia. Many sovereign states had come and gone and boundaries waxed and wane. The least that the ancient Chinese could visualize was a “world” in which their own territory was located in the centre. It was simply illogical to imagine that the people of an ancient state believed that their state was the grandest of all and occupied the centre of the world whose existence they were ignorant of.

China or Zhongguo?

In fact, the Chinese characters “中国” (China) probably has only one appropriate English translation, that is, “Zhongguo” which is the Chinese pronunciation of the Chinese characters, rather than “China” or “Middle Kingdom”. The term is made up of two distinct characters. “Zhong” is a locational marker specifying a middle or intermediate position and “guo”, in ancient usage, connotes an autonomous principality formed around a walled city. These principalities were far from being the sovereign states or “countries” that the character “guo” is now assigned. Semantically, “zhongguo” refers to a principality in relation to other principalities. Before the Qin Dynasty (221-206 BC), many principalities were dispersed over a vast region between the Yellow and Yangtze rivers. Hence to translate “Zhongguo” as the “Middle Kingdom” and, worse still, to infuse it with a misleading connotation as the “centre of the world”, is a serious indictment of translation as an intellectual exercise.

In fact, the characters “中国” can be traced back eight centuries before China was unified by the first emperor of the Qin Dynasty. According to textual research, the characters first appeared in the inscriptions of a bronze ware called “Hezun” of the period during the reign of King Cheng of Zhou (1055 BC-1021 BC). It was unearthed in Baoji town in Shaanxi province in 1963, and on which the characters “中国” were inscribed (Plate 1).¹



Plate 1. The Hezun Bronze

Source: <http://www.chinavalue.net/General/Article/2006-3-22/24106.html>

According to the statistics compiled by Taiwan's famous historian Wang Erh-min (1973), the term “中国” (Zhongguo) appeared for a total of 178 times in 25 classical documents written in the period before the Qin Dynasty. It referred to a capital city nine times, to a national territory 17 times, the territory of vassal states 145 times, and on one occasion each as a medium-sized country or as a central country (central country of vassal states instead of the world). Surprisingly, the “Middle Kingdom”, an idea that was artificially spawned by “ingenious” translation, is seen to be linked to the most uncommon usage (one out of the 178 times) of the term. This deviation from the most common original meaning is extreme. It was impossible that the Chinese evolved the concepts of the “world” or “centre of the world” three thousand years ago.

Feng Youlan (1985: 222), a famous philosopher, observed that “Zhongguo” has a long history of usage as a concept of the Chinese cultural space rather than as a sovereign state. It is thus surprising that the Chinese could endorse and be flattered by a subjective interpretation and superficial translation by those who knew little about the cultural implications of many Chinese words and phrases.

That “Zhongguo” does not mean the centre of the world is obvious from the use of this term in Japan. Following a tradition in the spatial organization of ancient Japan, the state was demarcated into zones and named according to the distance from the imperial capital. The capital and its immediate environs were known as Kinai (畿内) or the imperial domain. The next zone was Kingoku (近国) or “nearby countries”, followed by the next outer zone known as Chugoku (中国) or the “intermediate countries”, and finally the outermost zone of Engoku (远国) or “faraway countries”. The character “国” (*goku* in Japanese), whether in China or Japan, referred to political and/or administrative entities more like principalities rather than “countries”. Hence the numerous “goku” dispersed within the known limits of the Japanese civilizational state were demarcated into four zones. The term “Chugoku” is still in use today and no one has argued that Japan symbolizes or sees itself as the centre of the world.

It is obvious that the translation of “Zhongguo” has failed to take into consideration the basic meaning of the term as it was used in its historical context three thousand years ago, or ahas shown awareness of its usage in Japan to connote an intermediate belt of land. Hence to liken “Zhongguo” to a “central country” or “centre of the world” is absurd and even ill-intentioned. With translators as ignorant as they were of Chinese history and culture, it is no wonder that many people today, not least the politicians, still look at China, a country with world's largest population and most rapid development in recent decades, as seeking military expansion and, with its “long-existing sense of the center of the world”, is deemed to be a threatening power.

What is rarely realized is that the translation of “Zhongguo” as “China” is meant for the convenience of non-Chinese readers; the most appropriate and correct English translation of the term is “Zhongguo”.

Keeping A Low Profile or Cooking Up A Plot?

The Chinese proverb, *taoguang yanghui* (韬光养晦) is another victim of mistranslation that has triggered widespread misunderstanding. The term is defined as “hiding one’s capabilities and biding one’s time” by the *New Century Chinese-English Dictionary*.² This definition sounds so similar to that of the *China Force Report* published by the Department of Defense of the United States in 2002 that one wonders if the publisher of the dictionary had obtained permission to use U.S. version. Although arousing misunderstanding, the mistranslation is introduced back to China as authoritative interpretation while its original meaning is forgotten and the imported translation has prevailed.

In a meeting in September 1989, Deng Xiaoping mentioned an idiom to mean “observe and respond calmly, hold your ground, keep a low profile, never become a leader and make a difference”. He also used a number of qualifiers and related words to remind all to “keep a low profile and never become a leader”, to be modest and prudent, and never to become a leader of others. However, his words were later summarized as “*taoguang yanghui*” though he did not use the phrase himself. But it was sufficiently misinterpreted to raise an alarm and outcry in the Western world that was already too ready to distrust the fast-developing country. It remains a mystery as to who was responsible for coining the term.³ Despite China’s low profile in the international arena, its policy is the subject of suspicion. One of the views is that the U.S. has been “cheated and seduced” into helping China overtake the U.S. as the world’s superpower (see Pillsbury, 2015).⁴

We have to understand China’s recent political history to understand fully the words of Deng Xiaoping. Some extreme left or unrealistic slogans on foreign affairs were put on show specifically during the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976. Some slogans had painted the United States and the United Kingdom as western imperialists, the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe as revisionists, and Japan, Germany and other developed countries as reactionaries. This diplomatic behaviour was understandable in a country that had suffered from the aggression and bullies of imperialists, colonialists, as well as the Cold War containment and international isolation after the founding of the Chinese republic. It was in the context of this background that Deng felt it necessary and reasonable to keep a low profile and to refrain from seeking a leadership role in international diplomacy.

There are people who question this need to keep a low profile. They claim that China has become the world’s second largest economy, and it should project rather than hide its success. This attitude reflects the thoughts of “upstarts” who are impatient to parade the achievements and power of China. They do not really understand the connotations of “*taoguang yanghui*”. In the area of diplomacy, it calls for the need to remain modest and prudent, refrain from being swollen-headed or showing off great pride. During the period of rapid growth, the modest and prudent seek truths from facts, while the arrogant and domineering make enemies everywhere. The idea of “*taoguang yanghui*” ensures that China follows the road of peaceful, open and co-operative development. Without opening to the outside world and international co-operation, China cannot develop into what it is today. The development of China is to serve the interests of its own people as well as those of the world at large, and to broaden its scope of development and deepen its reform. At the same time, “*taoguang yanghui*” implies the call to abandon actions that reflect great-nation chauvinism, and to

treat all countries equally. Sentiments of great-nation chauvinism are seen to produce negative effects on the conduct of China's diplomacy.

Mao Zedong himself had admitted frankly in 1970, when he met with the U.S. President Richard Nixon, saying that many of the slogans were just "talking big". On the praise of American guests that Mao Zedong Thought had changed the world, Mao was modest and remarked that "I just changed Beijing and a few surrounding places." He did not even use such terms as "China" and "Tianxia".

Chinese leaders have clearly recognized since the end of the Cultural Revolution and the introduction of reform and opening up that China is and will be a developing country for a long time. This new understanding of China's status and role has become the foundation of the long-term pragmatic foreign policy proposed by Deng Xiaoping. This is not an expedient or double dealing machination of the villain as some might like to think. It is a manifestation of the Confucian saying: "The gentleman is slow of speech but prompt in action" which means "talking less and doing more". During the 1930s, Mao Zedong had advocated the importance of "Seeking truth from facts and never indulging in empty talks". The sayings of Confucius and Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping's advice are apparently linked and Deng's utterances should be understood in the context of the broader sweep of Chinese history. In actual fact, similar enlightening words and advice have been widely promoted and accepted by the Chinese for ages.

Conclusion

Chinese is one of the most difficult languages in the world and many misunderstandings and misconceptions arise from unqualified or unsuitable translations and interpretations. Such misunderstandings and misconceptions have perpetuated ingrained prejudices and cultural ignorance. The purpose of citing the two examples above is not to criticize the ideas that translation and the understanding of translators and others at home and abroad are too literal or wrong, or to belittle the contribution they have made to mutual exchange and understanding between China and foreign countries. These misunderstandings possibly arise from the semantics of languages and the problems of translation and cultural communications. With time these problems gradually transform ideologically into irreconcilable issues of principle. One of the root causes of conflict between China and foreign countries resides in the divergence of understandings and viewpoints long existing in political and academic circles in China itself.

China or Chinese scholars may be helpless to argue with the author and the commentators if they cite examples such as the meaning of China (Zhongguo) by *China Daily*, or the explanation of "taoguang yanghui" by the *New Century Chinese-English Dictionary*. Some Chinese colleagues and media too believe that such translations are true and have been "exported" or "re-exported" to foreign readers, and have subsequently become the "conventional wisdom" on China's intentions.

In this sense, the history of communication between China and the rest of the world is frequently been one of misunderstandings arising from faulty translations. It is advisable to rethink and refine



translations especially of concepts that are likely to be politically-charged so as to minimize semantic confusions and misunderstandings. These efforts will benefit not only the translation profession but also to promote cross-cultural understandings. In this respect, it is important to involve foreign and Chinese experts and scholars to work together to ensure that the quality of translation of documents on China's history, culture, politics and various disciplines is as accurate and objective as possible.

Notes

- 1 The vessel is 38.8cm tall, 28.8cm in diameter and weights 14.6kg. It is inscribed with 122 Chinese characters, including the characters “中国”, see http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/language_tips/trans/2009-08/27/content_8622822.htm.
- 2 The *New Century Chinese-English Dictionary* (《新世纪汉英大词典》) was published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press of Beijing in 2006 after eight years of work by several dozen scholars and the supervision of an American scholar and a Chinese linguistic expert.
- 3 Interview with a Chinese scholar, see <http://www.nanzao.com/sc/china/36674/zhuan-fang-qing-hua-chu-shu-long-deng-he-zhong-guo-ling-dao-ren-cong-mei-shuo-guo-tao>.
- 4 Mainstream comments on Pillsbury's book include the following:

The Wall Street Journal:

“China's ambition to become the world's dominant power has been there all along, virtually burned into the country's cultural DNA and hiding, as [Pillsbury] says, in plain sight...The author is correct to assert that China constitutes, by far, the biggest national challenge to America's position in the world today.”

Newsweek:

“Provocative...detailed and rigorous. [Pillsbury is] right that for Washington, assessing the nature of China's ambition, and responding to it effectively, may be the central foreign policy challenge of our time.”

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