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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Translating Chinese Proverbs in Diplomatic Discourse: A Political Equivalence Approach

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the challenges of translating proverbs in the diplomatic discourse, with a focus on Chinese proverbs. In diplomatic discourse, proverbs play an important role in conveying messages and cultural nuances. Understanding and translating these proverbs is therefore crucial in international relations and diplomacy. Using the proverb "Let he who tied the bell [on the tiger's neck] take it off" (解铃还须系铃人, Jiě líng hái xū xì líng rén) as a case study, the paper analyzes how President Xi Jinping and other Chinese officials use the saying in high level context and how it is rendered in official English readout and international media, alongside translation in other languages. The study codes observed rendering into four forms (T1-T4), ranging from minimal literal to full imagery and paraphrase, and evaluates them through Political Equivalence (political orientation, equilibrium and dynamics). The analysis shows that full imagery version what include "on the tiger's neck" often improves cross-cultural intelligibility while retaining the proverbs responsibility logic, whereas paraphrase maximizes immediacy at the cost of rhetorical projection. These findings suggest that proverb translation in diplomatic discourse should align with communicative purpose and political sensitivity.

## KEYWORDS

Diplomatic Discourse, Translation, Proverbs, "Jiě líng hái xū xì líng rén", Political Equivalence, China.

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## 1. Introduction

The impact that China's rise has had on world affairs has long been the focus of many scholars all over the world. But while most of them used to focus on the hard power (hard power is generally linked to the possession of robust economic and military capabilities), nowadays it appears that the focus has shifted to the soft power (soft power is rather more difficult to define) (Nowacki, 2021; Yakubu, 2022). Soft power is a concept that was first introduced by Joseph Nye, which refers to a nation's ability to influence and persuade others without resorting to military or economic coercion (Nye, 1990). It is the ability to allure and integrate rather than employ aggression, using cultural and ideological values, policies, institutions, and diplomacy to shape the preferences of others. In diplomatic discourse, soft power is projected through a variety of channels, including public diplomacy, cultural exchanges or what Xu (2015) calls discursive power. Soft power can also be projected through the diffusion of popular culture, language, and education, as well as through discourse translation, interpretation and communication.

Soft power is often seen as a complementary tool to hard power, as it can help nations in realizing their foreign policy objectives without resorting to the use of force or coercion. However, it is not without its limitations, as the effectiveness of soft power, especially in diplomatic relations, largely depends on a nation's credibility, legitimacy, and reputation, as well as on the translation and understanding of its discourse in the international scene.

As such, culture is important in understanding the Chinese diplomatic discourse system and is of great importance since Chinese leaders and diplomats seem to place great value on it. Given that China, as a major power, needs to project its discursive power (Xu, 2015) in the international arena, and given the linguistic and cultural uniqueness of the country, its relationship with other countries and major powers is determined by the way it expresses itself and by how other cultures translate and understand those expressions. As many have argued, Chinese diplomatic discourse is quite different from that of the rest of the world

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because it is embedded with Chinese cultural and philosophical characteristics (Tungkeunkunt and Phuphakdi 2020). Through its diplomatic discourse, China wants to show its characteristics, its traditions, its wisdom and its principles to the international community. Therefore, translation plays a vital part in how it is understood and accepted outside the country.

Diplomatic Discourse translation is an effective tool for introducing China's policies, culture and expressing its national position to other countries. Based on this, the translator is supposed to comprehend both the literal and implicit meanings of the phrases, which serves as a precondition to a correct translation (Qiu, 2018). As such, from this sense, Fu and Lan claim that when a translation of Chinese discourse, unfortunately, fails to deliver the actual political viewpoints in the source texts (ST) but frames China with some incorrect translation as warmonger or other negative impressions, it might mislead the global audiences into considering China as a belligerent country (Fu & Lan, 2019). Such inaccuracy in translating diplomatic discourse not only affects the desired soft power projection effect on the target audience (TA) but also the national image and discourse power of the country in the global arena (Zhang, 2016; Li & Pan, 2021; Jiuding & Leilei, 2023). This is why proverbs should be seen as a crucial feature and criteria for translating and interpreting diplomatic discourse. Furthermore, some researchers have gone a step further to emphasize that since language yields an incomplete sense of the speaker's meaning and intent, not only are translators employed to interpret communication between the different parties, they also need to help listeners understand the original meaning of the speaker's statement (Qiu, 2018).

Likewise, translators should take into account the cultural reality of the TA (Target Audience) and their way of thinking, and the sensitivity of the diplomatic language used by speakers (Nida & Taber, 2001; Li & Pan, 2021). In other words, instead of prioritizing grammatical correspondence, the focus of the translated and interpreted text should be on whether the target audience could be informed correctly and convinced by it. TA's acceptance of the translated and interpreted text is the primary consideration in global communication (Qiu, 2018). Hence, putting the international audience at the center is a vital feature of the translation and interpretation of the diplomatic discourse.

Proverbs are commonly perceived as expressions of conventional wisdom, and when used they often attract acceptance, appreciation, and identification within a community. The interpretation of proverbs lacks a concrete and tangible significance when taken out of their original context, and the semantic weight they bear is inherently linked to the circumstances in which they are employed (Bellis, 2022; Orwenjo, 2009). Proverbs possess a high degree of adaptability and lack any inherent semantic significance. Their interpretation can vary depending on the specific circumstances, contextual usage, and the proficiency of the translator, allowing them to cover a wide range of meanings. Due to these factors, diplomatic discourses often rely on them as a crucial tool for persuasion. Against this background, proverb translation becomes a sensitive site where linguistic choice can reshape responsibility framing in diplomatic communication.

China's diplomatic discourse presents the nation as a reliable participant in global affairs. Moreover, Chinese cultural and philosophical characteristics heavily influence this discourse, as ancient philosophies and cultural values often feature prominently in President Xi's speeches. As such, this paper therefore focuses on a specific proverb cited by President Xi Jinping to explore its translation in different languages. The article highlights the necessity of immersing oneself in the associated culture as culture is undeniably vital in translation, especially in translating Chinese diplomatic discourse. The proverb *Jiě líng hái xū xì líng rén* (解铃还须系铃人) which is loosely translated into: "let him who tied the bell [on the tiger's neck] remove it". The selection of this proverb was based on criteria such as its frequency of use, significance, and practical application. Drawing on the theoretical framework of political equivalence, proposed by Yang (2008), the paper justifies its choice of this theory for analysis. This paper contributes a focused case study of one high salience proverb in Chinese diplomatic discourse and shows how translation choices shift between retaining proverb imagery and explicating meaning directly for target audiences unfamiliar with the source narrative. It also operationalizes Political Equivalence by applying a simple coding scheme (T1-T4) to classify translations and evaluate how each version preserves responsibility framing while remaining intelligible in time pressured diplomatic and media contexts.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

Type Translation has always played a significant role in human society as a means of communication, trade, and exchange between different communities. While it is relatively easy to translate words from one language to another, the challenge lies in capturing and conveying the true meaning behind those words. When translating from SL to TL, the choices made by the translator can evoke different emotions in the TL audience. For example, the sentences: "he was taken into the meeting," "he was ushered into the meeting," and "he was welcomed into the meeting" all convey the information that someone attended a meeting, but the choice of words can elicit different effects. Thus, it is crucial for the translator to carefully consider the context as it affects the type of information they are translating, the translation strategy and the impact it will have on the audience (Suo 2015).

While the debate on achieving an adequate translation strategy remains ongoing, one significant development in this field is the introduction of Equivalence Theory by Nida Eugene (Nida, 1957, 1964, 1969, 1979; Nida & Taber, 1982; Jan & Nida, 1986). Nida (1982) asserts there are two fundamental types: (1) Formal equivalence and (2) dynamic equivalence. According to Nida, the principle of formal equivalence entails that the TT bears a striking similarity to the ST in terms of both structure and meaning. In contrast, in dynamic equivalence, the goal is to convey the intended meaning of the ST in the target language while maintaining

the same impact on the target audience that the original text had on its original readers. To achieve this, the translator must have a comprehensive understanding of both cultures, not just the languages as fluency in both languages alone is insufficient (Yang, 2008); it is essential for the translator to grasp the idioms, political and cultural references that accompany them. Equivalence theory provides a powerful tool for achieving this goal, but its effectiveness relies on the translator's in-depth understanding of the translation process (Yang, 2012). Many researchers have taken unique perspectives to investigate equivalence in connection to the process of translation (Baker, 1992; Catford, 1965; Gorjian, 2006; Toury, 1995). For instance, the research of Roman Jakobson, who pioneered the concept of "equivalence in difference," further contributed to the theoretical development of translation studies (Jakobson, 1959). Jakobson proposed three distinct methods of translation: intralingual (within one language), interlingual (between two languages), and intersemiotic (between different sign systems) (Jakobson, 1959:233). In response to the challenges of achieving an equivalence in some instances, Jakobson argues that despite recognizing the cultural and grammatical differences between the SL and TL, achieving an equivalence in translation was still possible (Jakobson 1959). However, Mollanazar (2001) argues that due to the lack of direct metaphorical equivalents in the target language translating proverbs literally may not always be possible. Instead, he suggests two approaches: finding proverbs in both languages with similar form, vocabulary, and meaning, or identifying numerous proverbs in two languages that possess comparable connotations and can be applied in similar situations, despite their distinct structures and lexicons (Mollanazar, 2001).

Nonetheless, the current study adopts the political approach to equivalence theory known as Political Equivalence proposed by Yang (2008). According to Yang diplomatic discourse encompasses official oral or written reports, such as statements, speeches, communiqués, treaties, and letters, delivered by official authorities during diplomatic occasions (Yang, 2012). The author contends that discourse translation is highly relevant and significant for diplomatic discourse due to the linguistic and cultural nuances, as well as the political sensitivity involved in such exchanges (Yang, 2012; Yang & Yan, 2016). Some have argued that errors in translation often occur due to poor understanding or limited comprehension of the original language's cultural context. Translating from one language to another, especially when conveying ethnic and cultural nuances, is a complex task as such special care must be taken when translating diplomatic discourse, as even the smallest error can jeopardize diplomatic relationships between nations (Yang, 2012). Therefore, diplomatic translators play a crucial role in fostering diplomatic relations, as their proficiency prevents misunderstandings during the translation process (Yang, 2012).

Therefore, the relevance of political equivalence in translating diplomatic discourse cannot be overemphasized. Political equivalence aims to identify corresponding elements between a source text and a target text while taking into account the underlying political foundations. The translation of diplomatic language involves three main steps: understanding the political context of the source language, translating the text to ensure readers' comprehension and maintaining the intended effect, and analyzing the efficiency of the translated version in conveying the political connotation and contextual meaning. This complex task demands a high level of linguistic proficiency, but in diplomatic discourse, the political undertone is also crucial. Translating proverbs presents a particular challenge, as the cultural history of a community is deeply embedded in these sayings. The adoption of the political equivalence theory for interpreting proverbs is justified due to its attention to political sensitivity. This article is significant because it highlights the tendency to take translated proverbs for granted without considering their accuracy or significance.

### **2.1 Data and method**

This case study collects publicly available instances in which president Xi Jinping and other Chinese officials used the proverb *Jiě líng hái xū xì líng rén* (解铃还须系铃人) in high level diplomatic settings, with attention to the widely reported uses in 2014, 2022 and 2025. For each instance, the study extracts corresponding translations from (i) official transcripts/readout (e.g., MoFA and the White House) and (ii) international media reports that quote or translate the proverb. The study also records translations in Italian, Spanish, French, Albanian, Arabic and Ukrainian. The analysis proceeds in two steps: First each translation is coded by observable form (T1-T4). Second, each coded form is evaluated using Political Equivalence (political orientation, equilibrium, and dynamics) to examine how well the rendering preserves intended responsibility framing while remaining accessible to a target audience that lacks familiarity with the proverb's origin story.

### **3. Proverbs as a tool in China's Diplomatic Discourse: Xi Jinping's speeches**

President Xi Jinping as well as other Chinese diplomats and officials more often than not use proverbs in their speeches, whether they are addressing the Chinese people or the international community. This is also practiced by many politicians and diplomats around the world that use proverbs as a tool for intercultural exchange and a form of soft power projection. The frequent use of proverbs by the Chinese president has often received a lot of attention not only from translators, politicians or foreign media, but also from the Chinese people and individuals from other nations. China's ancient civilization, spanning over five millennia, boasts a rich collection of proverbs that offer valuable insights and guidance for a wide range of circumstances. These proverbs also serve as a means to establish clear boundaries and provide moral and practical guidance in various situations for the country.

In addition to using Chinese proverbs, President Xi Jinping frequently incorporates proverbs and idioms from various countries into his speeches. Once again, reinforcing the importance of language and culture as a form of soft power. By quoting a proverb from other countries, he is showing respect to their culture while also reinstating his point by using their own words, which makes it more relatable and acceptable. When a country's official authority incorporates proverbs into his speeches, they are able to reach a more significant number of people because proverbs are easily comprehended by many people. Therefore, when officials from one country adopt a proverb or saying from another country, they are attempting to demonstrate that they are familiar with their culture while also speaking to a bigger audience.

Therefore, official authorities, diplomats, ambassadors will frequently use different proverbs that deal with the same issue in order to make a connection across cultures and to highlight that even though they speak in different languages and maybe exhibit different cultures or beliefs, they think the same or that the goal is the same. For example; during the inauguration of the Belt and Road Forum (BRF) for International Cooperation in Beijing on May 14, 2017 (Yamei, 2017), President Xi Jinping quoted in his keynote speech three different proverbs, all of which were essentially saying the same thing:

- "A long journey can be covered only by taking one step at a time" (ancient Chinese).
- "Pyramid was built by piling one stone on another" (Arab).
- "Rome wasn't built in a day." (commonly used in Europe)

This is a classic example of official authorities attempting to bridge the gap between different cultures and speaking to a larger audience by using proverbs. Given that proverbs are commonly perceived as expressions of conventional wisdom, their utilization often garners widespread acceptance, appreciation, and identification within a community and in other cases within different communities.

One of the first things that has been noticed about Chinese President Xi Jinping is that he is much more active on the global stage compared to his predecessors. The current administration under Xi has displayed an proactive engagement strategy aimed at safeguarding and promoting their nation's interests, while concurrently endeavoring to shape a global landscape that is beneficial to China's aspirations (Zhang, 2015). Within the broader strategy, the frequent use of idioms and proverbs constitute a distinctive rhetorical feature. A key aspect of Xi Jinping's diplomatic strategy is to ensure that China's perspective is communicated appropriately to the global audience. Thus, the incorporation of proverbs in his statements would demonstrate to the global community that the Chinese cultural values have its roots in ancient times and continue to be upheld in contemporary times. This might be the most effective means of transmitting Chinese culture and wisdom. President Xi Jinping's diplomatic efforts appear to be aimed at influencing the global community that China's rise does not pose any threat to the existing global order, as well as that China is committed to maintaining peaceful relations.

Below are a few examples of the Chinese proverbs that he has quoted in several keynote speeches all around the world:

- "Neighbors wish each other well, just as loved ones do to each other" - Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference 2013 (Xinhua, 2013)
- "When big rivers have water, the small ones are filled; and when small rivers have water, the big ones are filled". - annual conference of the Boao Forum for Asia 2015 (Xinhua, 2015)
- "Without achieving the good of one hundred various schools, the uniqueness of one individual cannot be achieved." - at the Conference Marking the 50th Anniversary of the Restoration of the Lawful Seat of the People's Republic of China in the United Nations 25 October 2021 (China Daily, 2021).
- "A journey of one thousand miles begins with the first step." - At the Meeting Marking the 60th Anniversary Of the Initiation of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence 28 June 2014 (MoFA., 2014a)
- "When you reap fruits, you should remember the tree; when you drink water, you should remember its source". keynote speech at the United Nations Office in Geneva, Switzerland, Jan. 18, 2017 (Xinhua, 2017).
- "Do not do to others what you do not want others to do to you", - keynote speech at the United Nations Office in Geneva, Switzerland, Jan. 18, 2017 (Xinhua, 2017).
- "A single flower does not make spring, while one hundred flowers in full blossom bring spring to the garden." - keynote speech at UNESCO Headquarters (MoFA., 2014b).
- "The ocean is vast because it rejects no rivers." - keynote speech at the opening ceremony of the 2018 Beijing Summit of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) (Xinhua, 2018).

#### 4. Discourse Translation of “解铃还须系铃人 Jiě líng hái xū xì líng rén”

The author's selection of this proverb was based on several factors. Firstly, it was employed by President Xi on multiple occasions (Landler, 2014; GOV.cn, 2014; MoFA., 2022), most notably in 2014 and 2022. Secondly, the initial employment of the proverb by the president in an international context was perceived as enigmatic, as it was mistakenly identified as an idiom with an entirely distinct connotation (explanation below). Lastly, the proverb has been translated variously in English and other languages (Italian, Spanish, French, Albanian, Arabic, Ukrainian).

This particular Chinese proverb has been frequently employed in various contexts within Chinese diplomatic discourse, not solely by President Xi (for instance, MoFA., 2021a; MoFA., 2022; Xinhua, 2019). The first time President Xi used this proverb can be traced back to 2014 in a meeting with the then American president, Barack Obama. Following the wrap-up of the meeting, a

joint news conference was held at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing. During this event, when asked about the visa process for international correspondents by an American journalist, President Xi Jinping provided a succinct reply with this proverb (Landler, 2014). Foreign journalists and the media at the time mistook the saying for another well-known Western adage (Lyons 2014). They misinterpreted the president's reference to "Belling the cat", a proverb which refers to overcoming problems as a group. (A group of mice held a meeting to plot their eventual escape from the Cat. In order to protect themselves from the cat in the future, they decide to place a bell around its neck.) Confused by that response and the Chinese president's enigmatic message (Jiě líng hái xū xì líng rén), they eventually realized he was quoting a Chinese proverb with a different connotation (Landler, 2014).

It is significant to note that various foreign media outlets present different translations of this proverb (see, Borger, 2022; Ferro, 2022; Gracie, 2014; Landler, 2014; Lemaître & Smolar, 2022; Respublica, 2022; Abu al-Saud, 2022, Santevecchi, 2022; Zamorano 2022; Wilkie, 2022, Pini, 2022; Biz, 2022; Di Matteo, 2022, Top Channel, 2022, UATV, 2022). It is therefore important to have a clear understanding of the literal translation of the characters. We look into the Chinese original saying's '解铃还须系铃人 (Jiě líng hái xū xì líng rén)' literal translation in Table 1.

Table 1: Proverb Literal Translation

Chinese Character	Pinyin	English	Examples
解	jiě	to untie; to undo; to solve; to separate	jiě xiédài (解鞋带) undo/untie shoelaces
铃	líng	bell; bell-shaped	líng er xiǎng dīngdāng (铃儿响叮当) The bell is jingling.
还	hái	still; yet; even more; in addition; to express emphasis or realization	zhè běn shū wǒ hái xiǎng kàn yī biàn (这本书我还想看一遍) I want to read the book once more (again).
须	xū	to need; have to; require; must	wǒmen xū zuò chū hěn dà nǔlì. (我们须作出很大努力)。 We will have to make a great effort.
系	xì/jì	to tie; to fasten; to button up	xì ānquándài (系安全带) to fasten the safety belts
人	rén	person; human; one who...	yǒu hěn duō rén. (有很多人) There were a lot of people.

Sources: Author's illustration

**4.1 Historical context: Origin of the Proverb**

The origin of the aforementioned proverb can be traced back to a narrative in Zhiyue lu (Record of Pointing to the Moon), a literary work authored by Qu Ruji (1548–1610), an official in the Ming dynasty. According to the story in the anthology there was an abbot named Fayan. Fayan Wenyi (885–958), according to Ferguson (2000) came from the ancient Yuhang (near the city of Hangzhou) in Zhejiang province, China. At the age of seven, he entered a monastery, became well educated and erudite and

studied the Confucian classics. He eventually received ordination at the age of twenty at Kaiyuan Temple in Yuezhou (now the city of Shaoxing in Zhejiang Province) (for more detail, see, Ferguson 2000). Fayan was said to be a man of great wisdom and he became the abbot of Qingliang Temple, he would usually pose random questions to the monks. One day while he was giving a sermon, he asked them: "A tiger has a bell tied to its neck. Who do you think would be able to untie it?" As the group were caught by surprise and failed to give an answer, a young monk named Fadeng who was usually looked down by the other monks, came by at that moment and promptly responded "the person who tied it" (Ashlesha, 2012; Qu, 1602) Observing Fadeng's astute response, Abbot Fayan turned to his fellow monks and admonished them saying this is precisely why they should never underestimate someone. Ever since, this proverb has been used as a tool to convey the notion that the individual who initiates a challenging circumstance or a problem is responsible for its resolution (Lyons, 2014; Methven, 2022; Wilkie, 2022).

#### **4.2 Missing in Translation: The absence of "(tiger's) Neck" in the translation**

Upon examining the original sentence, it becomes apparent that the term 'neck' is absent from the brief statement (解铃还须系铃人 - Jiě líng hái xū xì líng rén). The saying commonly uttered is merely the response of the monk "he who tied it" while missing both the words neck and tiger. This pertains to cultural practices, as the Chinese culture does not place emphasis on explicitly conveying all information, as the significance of the bell on the tiger's neck is already understood to those familiar with the cultural origin of the proverb. Proverbs are typically brief and transmitted across successive cohorts, thereby rendering the monk's concise response sufficient for communicating the intended message to the Chinese population who are acquainted with the narrative. However, the translation of this proverb into a foreign language for an audience unfamiliar with the underlying narrative results in a distinct outcome. The phrase "he who tied it" may lack significance for people from diverse cultural backgrounds who encounter it for the first time. Translation often requires adaptation, because there is no equivalent in another language. Due to the aforementioned reasons, a literal word-for-word translation may not be effective in this context, as such a more dynamic approach is vital.

According to the translation into English, there appear to be many different versions of it which can be divided into 4 main groups. The sources may be attributed to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China (MoFA., 2022), some international media outlets, such as The Guardian, NYT, BBC, etc., and even from the White House (2014). To compare translations systematically, this study codes each rendering by observable form (T1-T4). For analytical clarity, the translations are coded by form: (T1) minimal literal (no tiger and no neck), (T2) partial imagery (tiger present, neck absent), (T3) full imagery (tiger and neck present), (T4) paraphrase (imagery omitted, meaning stated directly). This coding enables a systematic evaluation of how each rendering aligns with the three principles of Political Equivalence (political orientation, equilibrium, and dynamics).

T1- minimal literal (no tiger, no neck).

In a 2025 Reuters report, the proverb was rendered in minimal form, omitting both the tiger and neck (Zhang et al., 2025)

1. "The person who tied the bell must untie it"

T2- partial imagery (tiger present, neck absent).

The majority of international media outlets used the translation available by the official website of Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA., 2022). We can observe that while there are various versions they have the tendency to omit the term 'neck' which is key element of this proverb. (Landler, 2014; Lyons, 2014; Wilkie, 2022; Madhani, 2022; Financial Times, 2025)

1. "Let he who tied the bell on the tiger take it off"
2. "Let the person who tied the bell on the tiger untie it."
3. "He who tied the bell [on the tiger] should be the one to untie it"
4. "He who tied the bell to the tiger must take it off"

T3- Full imagery (tiger and neck present).

While others such as The Guardian have chosen to include the terms 'tiger's neck' in their translation (Borger, 2022; Varma, 2025)

1. "Let he who tied the bell on the tiger's neck take it off"
2. "The bell on a tiger's neck can only be untied by the person who tied it"

T4- paraphrase (imagery omitted, responsibility stated directly).

In contrast, the fourth group has taken a different approach completely, by choosing to translate and adapt its figurative meaning. (White House, 2014, MoFA., 2021b)

1. "The party which has created a problem should be the one to help resolve it."
2. "The one who created the trouble shall resolve it."

The Italian media, on the other hand, have always included the word 'neck' in their translations into Italian (Ferro, 2022; Santevecchi, 2022; Pini, 2022; Biz, 2022; Di Matteo, 2022).

Italian:

- "Spetta a chi ha legato il sonaglio al collo della tigre il compito di toglierlo"
- "Spetta a chi ha messo il campanello al collo della tigre il compito di toglierglielo"

Similarly, the occurrence of the term 'neck' is observed in the Spanish translation of the aforementioned proverb (Zamorano, 2022; Valladares, 2022; NA, 2025).

Spanish:

- "Quien le puso el cascabel en el cuello al tigre, es quien debe quitárselo"
- "Que quien ató el cascabel al cuello del tigre es quien debe quitárselo."

In addition we notice that the word 'neck' is also used in the Arabic translation of the proverb (Abu al-Saud 2022)

Arabic

- المن ربط الجرس في عنق النمر وحده يستطيع إعادة فكه

The inclusion of the term 'neck' is observed in the translation of this proverb even in the Albanian language (Top Channel, 2022; Respublica, 2022).

Albanian:

- "Le t'ia heqë zilen tigrin, ai që ia vari në qafë."
- 'Atij që e vuri zilen në qafën e tigrin, i takon detyra ta heqë'

Furthermore, the French translation is noted to have incorporated the term 'neck' as well. (Lemaître F. & Smolar P., 2022)

French:

- "Que celui qui a attaché la cloche au cou du tigre l'enlève lui-même."

However in the Ukrainian translation of the proverb the word 'neck' is not used (UATV 2022)

Ukrainian:

- хто на тигра дзвіночок повісив, той його і має зняти.

While we notice that the Italian, Spanish, French, Albanian and Arabic translations retain the lexical equivalent of 'neck' in their translation, in English, the most common translation omits the word 'neck'. It was included in one translation in the Guardian (Borger, 2022), but on the Chinese Foreign Ministry website, where they published a summary of the call between Chinese President Xi Jinping and American President Joe Biden (MoFA., 2022), it was not included ("He who tied the bell to the tiger must take it off."). To fully comprehend and accurately interpret this proverb, it is imperative that one have a thorough understanding of its underlying narrative. The process of translation should ensure that the intended message or moral lesson is effectively conveyed to the target audience in a manner that is consistent with the original source audience's understanding, even if they are unfamiliar with the story.

This can be seen in, for instance, the official White House press release documenting the statements made during the Joint Press Conference of President Obama and President Xi Jinping in Beijing in 2014. The White House transcript uses a sense-for-sense rendering rather than a word-for-word quotation of the proverb. That is, rather than translate it as "He who tied the bell on the tiger ('s neck) must take it off," it was written as "The party which has created a problem should be the one to help resolve it." (White House, 2014). The translators' approach to President Xi's response to the reporter's question appears to opt for an explanation that could easily be understood by the target audience who may not be conversant with the ancient Chinese story rather than striving for a word-for-word interpretation in an English equivalent which may render the proverb incomprehensible. This indicates that the translators in this instance place a priority on effectively conveying the message to the targeted audience rather than directly translating the proverb.

### **4.3 The significance of the "Tiger's neck" through the lens of Political Equivalence Theory**

The proverb 解铃还须系铃人(jiě líng hái xū xì líng rén) has many different translation options when used in Diplomatic Discourse. Using the coding scheme introduced above (T1-T4), this section evaluates how each form performs under the three key principles of Political Equivalence: political orientation, equilibrium, and dynamics.

For this dataset, political orientation is evaluated as the clarity and tone of responsibility attribution, that is, whether the translation preserves the assignment of accountability to the actor who created the situation (who is framed as accountable). Equilibrium refers to intelligibility for a target audience that may not be familiar with the proverb's historical origin. Dynamics refers to the translation's robustness across contexts (press Q&A, official readout, and media quotation) where context may be limited.

T1 (minimal literal, no tiger, no neck) preserves responsibility attribution in a compressed form. It usually performs well on political orientation because it keeps the "cause and resolve" logic. However, it often weakens equilibrium because it removes the proverb scene and can read as generic instruction rather than a recognizable proverb. In dynamic terms, T1 circulates easily but it loses the cultural style that speakers may intend to project.

T2 (partial imagery, tiger present, neck absent) generally preserves political orientation because it retains the structure 'who tied it should untie it' which clearly assigns responsibility. However, equilibrium may weaken in this form. Without specifying the position of the bell, the scene remains incomplete, and readers who are unfamiliar with the source narrative may perceive the expression as confusing. In dynamic terms, T2 works when surrounding context explains the point, but it can appear as a puzzling quotation when media extracts the line without explanation.

T3 (full imagery, tiger and neck present) reconstructs a fuller scene by specifying that the bell is "on the tiger's neck". This detail typically strengthens equilibrium because a complete image helps readers infer the proverb's intended meaning, the seriousness of the situation and the logic of responsibility, even without cultural background. Political orientation remains clear because the agent who created the problem still carries responsibility. In dynamic terms, T3 proves more stable across contexts because it carries more context within the wording itself, so it depends less on extra explanation.

T4 (paraphrase, imagery omitted, responsibility stated directly) maximizes equilibrium in a different way. By rendering the proverb as "the party which created the problem should resolve it," it removes potential ambiguity and ensures immediate intelligibility. Political orientation is preserved and responsibility attribution becomes explicit however this form eliminates the stylistic and cultural dimension of the original saying. When diplomatic communication aims not only to assign responsibility but also to project Chinese rhetorical style, this reduction may narrow the communicative effect. In dynamic terms, T4 circulates efficiently in international media contexts because it minimizes interpretive uncertainty.

Overall, T3 offers the strongest alignment with Political Equivalence when a diplomatic actor intends to preserve Chinese rhetorical style while keeping the responsibility message interpretable for non-specialist audiences. T4 remains preferable when the primary communicative goal is immediate clarity and when the surrounding context does not support further interpretation. This pattern also helps explain why official readouts may prefer shorter versions, while some media translations expand the scene. The inclusion of "tiger's neck" therefore does not merely add detail. It enhances cross-cultural intelligibility while retaining the structural logic of responsibility that defines the proverb's diplomatic function.

## 5. Discussion

This study addresses the gap in the literature surrounding China's diplomatic communication by taking a functional approach that considers the implications of literal translation of proverbs as well as emphasizes the complexity of translating Chinese diplomatic discourse particularly the proverbs due to the cultural and historical characteristics embodied in them. Translating proverbs is already a challenging task that requires proficiency in both cultures, but becomes even more complex when employed in diplomatic discourse.

This study examined how different translation forms of the proverb function in diplomatic discourse. By coding publicly available translations into four types (T1-T4) and evaluating them through the Political Equivalence (political orientation, equilibrium, and dynamics), the analysis showed that translation choices directly shape how responsibility is framed and how intelligible the proverb remains to international audiences.

The findings show that T1 preserves responsibility attribution but removes most of the scene, which can weaken rhetorical force and leave the sentence sounding generic. Partial and full imagery versions (T2 and T3) preserve the structural logic of responsibility embedded in the original saying, while paraphrase (T4) maximizes clarity by stating responsibility clearly. The inclusion of "on the tiger's neck" (T3) strengthens cross-cultural understanding by reconstructing a complete scene, thereby reducing the interpretive burden on readers unfamiliar with the proverb's origin. At the same time, paraphrase remains effective in time pressured diplomatic and media context where immediate clarity takes priority over stylistic projections.

This study does not seek to determine one universally correct translation. Instead, it argues that the translation strategy should align with communicative purpose. When diplomatic discourse seeks to project Chinese rhetorical style alongside responsibility attribution, a full imagery rendering such as "Let he who tied the bell on the tiger's neck take it off" better supports Political Equivalence. When the primary goal is clarity and immediate comprehension, a paraphrased version may serve the purpose more effectively. This case study highlights how seemingly minor lexical decisions influence political meaning in international communication. These findings suggest that a careful approach and comprehensive understanding of cultural and political nuances in both the source and target languages are essential. Future research may extend this framework to additional proverbs in Chinese and other countries diplomatic discourse, as well as empirically examine audience reception, to better understand how translation form affects interpretation across linguistic and cultural contexts.

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