
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Analysis of the Translation Problems of Words with Chinese Characteristics: Taking Chinese-English Translation as an Example

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| ABSTRACT

As a bridge and linkage of external communication, translation undertakes an important task for international communication. With the enhancement of China's soft power, the diffusion of culture has become increasingly important. That makes translation an essential stage. However, in the process of translation, many mistranslations cause the international community to misunderstand the original meaning and even misinterpret its culture. Starting from real situations and texts in Chinese to English translation, this study focuses on the problems of three phrases: "Taiwan question", "The Communist Party of China", and "People's democratic dictatorship" in Chinese to English translation by case analysis. As supplementary data, the researchers also conducted interviews with a Ph.D. in political science. It found that the problems may be created by the English meaning of the words, China's history and culture, and the translator's comprehension of the original language. Some suggestions for improving translation quality were also put forward from the perspectives of the country, the translation industry, and individuals.

| KEYWORDS

Translation Problems, Words with Chinese Characteristics, Chinese-English Translation

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

Telling China's stories, spreading China's national voice, and comprehensively presenting an authentic, multi-dimensional China are important tasks in order to strengthen the international community's understanding of China during its communication with China. One such way of accomplishing these above tasks is to increasingly focus on the Chinese meaning during the translation of Chinese to English; that is, rather than 'translating the world', the translation process should focus on 'translating China'. More so, during the translation of all varieties of Chinese into English, the development of a standard target translation would assist in the translation process as it would facilitate the comprehension of the Chinese language and culture, thus increasing foreigners' understanding of authentic elements of China. In the absence of this standard translation in the target language English, those outside of China will have a limited understanding of Chinese culture and the Chinese spirit. Recently, for example, the translation of '台湾问题 (tái wān wèn tí)' has been changed from 'Taiwan Issue' to 'Taiwan Question.'

This research will select a number of phrases that are specific to China and will observe their traditional translation into English, which has been significantly inexact, suggesting factors that influence these inexact translations. It will categorize these phrases while attempting to cluster these phrases and words semantically and will then attempt to translate these words into English. In addition to that, the research adopts an interview to find out the reasons that the mistranslation situations occur and what influence the translations have. Lastly, this study will give some suggestions for improving Chinese translation to English and strengthening translators' skills and experiences.

2. Literature Review

The following Literature Review contains different relative studies on the topic of the translation of words with Chinese characteristics. It mainly focuses on two aspects: the current situation of translating words with Chinese characteristics and the international communication capacity with translation.

2.1 Current Situation of Translating Words with Chinese Characteristics

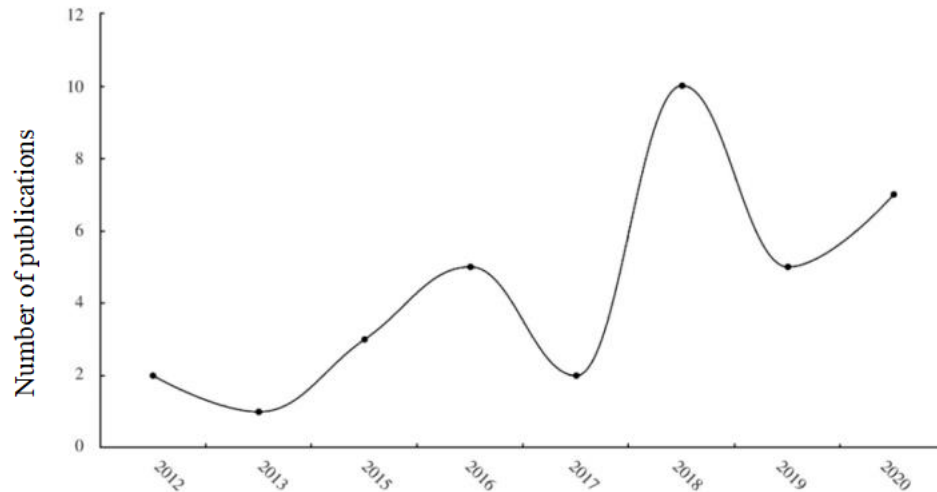


Figure 1. "Red culture" and "external communication" topic words published volume trend (Guo et al., 2022)

2.1.1 Red Culture.

Chinese Red culture is the conglomeration of the revolutionary spirit of the Communist Party of China, as well as the essence of the development path of socialism with Chinese characteristics. However, the translation of Chinese Red culture has great deficiencies and defects. Figure 1 (Wu et al., 2022) shows the release trend of papers on red culture and external communication from 2012 to 2022. The number is uneven and very rare. In addition to that, there are many phenomena in the translation of red cultures, such as mistranslations and irregular terms. One important example of that is the translation of 中共中央 (zhōng gòng zhōng yāng) mentioned in Wu et al.'s research (2022). The standardized translation should be the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee. But the original meaning was expanded to translate to the CPC. The CPC Central Committee is the core authority of the CPC. This mistranslation is due to the misunderstanding of Chinese text because 中共中央 is the shortened expression in Chinese of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee, which is easily confused with the Communist Party of China.

2.1.2 Multimodal Pragmatic Translation.

Wu et al.'s (2022), Hong et al.'s (2022) and Wu's (2022) researches refer to the study of multimodal pragmatics translation. However, the study of multimodal pragmatic translation still faces a large number of problems, such as insufficient theoretical research, weak corpus construction, insufficient integration of values, and poor matching with the development of national hard power (Hong et al., 2022). Therefore, it is necessary to strengthen the research on multimodal pragmatic translation, optimize the input of pragmatic content, and create a multimodal corpus so as to better achieve the relevant translation fieldwork.

2.2 International Communication Capacity and Translation

According to Wu (2022), the high degree of integration of foreign communication and foreign translation requires excellent foreign discourse and communication ability, i.e., it requires active interpretation and communication of the basic characteristics of national social systems, historical traditions, and cultural concepts in the process of cross-border and cross-cultural, as well as positive effects and influences on other countries and other cultures, so as to realize its mission of enhancing national soft power and international discourse power. The world is undergoing profound changes; the international political ecology is becoming more and more complex, the frequency of collision and cooperation between different civilization systems is increasing, and the fields of information and cultural communication are becoming more and more complex and diverse due to revolutionary changes in technology. All these make the building of international communication capacity an important means to enhance national soft power and national image and also make the study of this proposition more complex and challenging. In this transformative context, international communication activities provide rich research resources and various research tools for academic exploration; strengthening international communication capacity building makes it inevitable for foreign communication and foreign translation to become highly integrated.

3. Methodical Framework

For the framework of this study, first located, problems when translating words with Chinese characteristics into English. It employed a case analysis framework, which included a description of the cultural and historical facets of these words and word clusters. This study then discussed the adaptability of the translation process of the cultural characteristics of these words. Specifically, it analyzed the translation of the three phrases, "Taiwan issue", "the Communist Party of China", and "People's democratic dictatorship", all three of which appear in the official documents of the Chinese government. It also interacted with a scholar of political science to supplement the data with a three-question structured interview to discuss the relationship between translation and political influence.

4. Case Analysis and Interview

The data comprises a sample set of mistranslation examples that the researcher collected over two years from the English version of Chinese texts. As presented below, this includes mistranslation examples, an analysis of three mistranslation phrases, and an interview. As such, it presents the data, after which it will expand on analysis in alignment with the framework, which is the core findings of this research.

4.1 A list of mistranslation examples

The mistranslation examples below include six phrases from the English versions of Chinese texts in a decade. They come from official Chinese documents, government reports, and other books that talk about Chinese history and wars.

Table 1 is a list of the mistranslation of words and phrases with Chinese characteristics. Translation version I is the inexact version that has existed for the past ten years or more due to several reasons such as transliteration, lack of relevant knowledge, and machine translation. Translation version II is now widely used, but not all of them are absolutely accurate.

Table 1. A list of mistranslation examples with two versions

Chinese text	Translation version I	Translation version II
I. 国民党 (guó mín dǎng)	Guomindang	Kuomintang (KMT)
II. 中国共产党苏维埃区域中央局 (zhōng guó gòng chǎn dǎng sū wéi āi qū yù zhōng yāng jú)	The Central Bureau of the Communist Party of China in the Soviet Area	The Central Bureau of the Soviet Area of the Chinese Communist Party
III. 战法 (zhàn fǎ)	Ways of fighting	Battle tactics
IV. 中共中央 (zhōng gòng zhōng yāng)	The The Communist Party of China (CPC)	The (CPC) Central Committee
V. 台湾问题 (tái wān wèn tí)	Taiwan issue	Taiwan question
VI. 中国共产党 (zhōng guó gòng chǎn dǎng)	The Chinese Communist Party	The Communist Party of China

4.2 Case Analysis

This part will focus on three phrases: "Taiwan question", "The Communist Party of China", and "People's democratic dictatorship". It will analyze the problems that occur in the translation of these phrases and find out the reasons cause them. In addition to that, it will give suggestions on how to amend the translation of these phrases.

4.2.1 "Taiwan question."

Table 2 shows the two versions of the translation of the "Taiwan question", and below is the analysis of the translation problems and amendments.

Table 2. Translation of "Taiwan question."

Chinese text	解决台湾问题、实现祖国完全统一，是不可能阻挡的历史进程。(Hu, 2012)
Primary English Translation	Resolving the <u>Taiwan issue</u> and achieving the complete reunification of China is an irresistible historical process. (Hu, 2012)
Amendment	"Taiwan issue" is amended to "Taiwan question" [台湾问题(tái wān wèn tí)]

The reason why the translation was amended here is traced back to the definition of the word "issue" and the word "question". According to Collins Dictionary (2022), "a question is something that you say or write in order to ask a person about something" (Entry 1). There is always an answer to a question or an expectation of an answer. "An issue is an important subject that people are

arguing about or discussing” (Collins Dictionary, 2022, Entry 1). That means the issue is exited with controversy and difficult decisions. And there is no doubt that there is only one China in the world, and Taiwan is an inalienable part of China. The Taiwan question belongs to China’s internal affairs and is not a controversial international issue. For the Taiwan question to be resolved, the two sides of the Taiwan Strait must be reunified. This point is clear. It is not negotiable, let alone controversial. Hence, "Taiwan question" is the expression that accords with our country's principled position.

4.2.2 “The Communist Party of China.”

Table 3 shows the two versions of the translation of “The Communist Party of China”, and below are the analysis of the translation differences and suggestion.

Table 3. Translation of “The Communist Party of China”

Chinese text	中国共产党 (zhōng guó gòng chǎn dǎng)
Official English translation version	The Communist Party of China
Another English translation version	The Chinese Communist Party (Maizland & Albert, 2022)

In fact, there is not much difference between the above two versions of the translation, while the official version is more in line with the Chinese situation and reflects the sense of the national subject. According to Zhong (2022), the expert has explained the reason. In the early days of the Party, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was relatively weak in terms of power, and the CCP was chosen as the Chinese-English translation at that time, indicating that the party was not founded in another country but in China as a communist party. Later, as the party continued to develop and grow in strength, the CCP changed its English name to CPC (the Communist Party of China), which mainly reflected the independence of the party. From a historical point of view, the issue is clearer. "The Chinese Communist Party" emphasizes that the party was founded by the Chinese in China, but its focus is still on the "Communist Party". The key to "the Communist Party of China" is the part "of China", which means that this party is a party belonging to China, a party fighting for China. With the development of history, "the Communist Party of China" can better reflect the nature and mission of the Communist Party of China. China uses CPC in official documents and media reports, while some foreign media use CCP all the time. This inconsistency is not in line with practice. There is only one Chinese Communist Party in the world. The name, whether in Chinese, English or various foreign languages, should follow the practice and rule of "the name follows the master". The Communist Party of China should determine which name to use so as to conform to international practice.

4.2.3 “People’s democratic dictatorship.”

Table 4 shows the official version of the translation of “People’s democratic dictatorship”, and below is the analysis of the translation problem.

Table 4. Translation of “People’s democratic dictatorship.”

Chinese text	中华人民共和国是工人阶级领导的、以工农联盟为基础的、人民民主专政的社会主义国家。(Laws and regulations of the People’s Republic of China Governing Foreign-related Matters, 1991)
Official English translation version	The People’s Republic of China is a socialist state under the people’s democratic dictatorship led by the working class and based on the alliance of workers and peasants. (Laws and regulations of the People’s Republic of China Governing Foreign-related Matters, 1991)

According to Collins Dictionary (2022), “a dictatorship is a country which is ruled by a dictator or by a very strict and harsh government” (Entry 2). This is surely against democracy. But what it wants to express is a polity led by the working class and based on the alliance of workers and peasants, which exercises democracy over the people and dictatorship over the enemies. However, the official translation of “People’s democratic dictatorship” will make foreigners confused and give some politicians a chance to stigmatize China because of the “dictatorship”. Hence, a better translation would be to explain the concept clearly, for example, a political system that is a dictatorship of lawbreakers and a democracy of the alliance and citizens in that country.

4.3 Interview

This research adopts a three-question structured interview. The interviewee is a scholar who got her Ph.D. in Political Science. She is Chinese, but she has used English as her teaching and living language for more than thirty years. The following is a verbatim transcript of the interview.

4.3.1 Interview Question I

How do you think those mistranslation situations occur?

Interviewee: Mistranslation occurs for many reasons: The translator does not understand the target language, he or she does not understand the cross-culture communication and kind of problems might occur. Also, because the translator does not have experience in the target language environment, he or she may not have spent time in an English-speaking country to understand the country's culture, politics, and ways of expression. That is why such translations are often considered to be problematic because they do not necessarily understand what the situation is; they may have used improper words or improper ideas without knowing how they will be perceived in the English environment.

4.3.2 Interview Question II

In the views of Political science, what will influence the translation with Chinese characteristics? And what impact will they have?

Interviewee: In political science, it requires the translator to know a lot about political philosophy. For example, many people, when they are translating “宣传部 (xuān chuán bù)” in Chinese, they translate it as “Propaganda Department”. And when foreigners take that, they start to laugh. They said: “Well, this department already described themselves because they do not even know the word's meaning is so negative; how can we read their publications and think that they will tell us the truth? Because the word “propaganda” already tells you that they are not telling the truth. So, that is why many of the words are originally from China, very much discounted by the English or other readers from other countries. Because of these words, when they see “宣传部” as “Propaganda Department”, when they see the Chinese system as a dictatorship. Because you already said that you are a dictatorship, which means you are a horrible system, and people do not have any right to participate in this. That is why the interpreter or translator does not understand how these words will be perceived by the receivers of the language or translation. So my suggestion for this is that people who are translating political science-related terms must know something about political philosophy and how the West learn because many of these words, like a dictatorship, are simply translated into Chinese in a very narrow situation. And then, when they are translating into bad English, they mean so many different ideas. I suggest whoever translates these study them and try to understand what these terms mean before they actually take on the role. Try to understand it!

4.3.3 Interview Question III

How can we make the world understand China better through translation?

Interviewee: As I said, many foreigners actually love China. They like the country, the rich culture, and its thousands of years of history. But there is a lot of misunderstanding, I think; it is based on dynastic history and the Cold War or other factors. All these issues have affected cross-culture communication. Hence, to improve China's translation work, I think one way is to train whoever is translating Chinese political terms, especially to be aware of the connotations I just mentioned. Also, I would suggest that the training of interpreters is so crucial. There is also another reason why there is so much misunderstanding. Take me as an example; I am learning French. When I started to learn French, I already took 40-50% percent of the English language that I had gained to my French language, so it is much easier for an English speaker to learn French and vice versa, or even learn German. When I am looking at German publications, even though I have not studied them, I can get something and know what it talks about. But for them to understand Chinese, it is a totally different thing. And that is also our language is quite different. That is for them to understand I think one is their passion. And two is to train our translator. Three is to live in other countries for some time and really get in your language skills. Another thing is to include foreign experts in your translation team. Chinese translators can explain what they want to express. And foreign experts can be the sounding board. It can greatly increase the quality of your publication. And for foreigners who know China, who has been to China and also studied the country and history. Including them in the translation team is actually a win-win situation.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Summary and Conclusion

This paper mainly analyzed problems that exist in the translation of words with Chinese characteristics of the three phrases: “Taiwan question”, “The Communist Party of China”, and “People's democratic dictatorship”. It provides better insights into mistranslation issues that lead to foreigners misunderstanding China's cultural customs and political system. It concludes that those problems are caused by different variables, such as: the English definition of the words: the history and culture of China and the translator's understanding and perspective of the original text.

5.2 Recommendation

In addition to that, this study also offers approaches to improve the quality of translation from Chinese to English: (1) Adequately train translators and include foreign experts in the translation team. (2) The government and scholars need to set up and develop a corpus for those words with Chinese characteristics to model the concepts as well. (3) The most vital thing for the translators is that they need to have a strong sense of conviction and confidence in the culture, path and system of China and maintain great enthusiasm to take their translation work seriously and tell the Chinese story well to the world.

The researcher suggests that a further study could be conducted on similar variables with more Chinese translation cases and additional participants of the study representing the political party in China.

5.3 Limitations of Study

The limitations of this study are two aspects. First, the case analyzed by this paper is limited, and most are mainly focused on the areas of politics and its related culture. Second, it is still difficult to determine and provide more accurate translations of words with Chinese characteristics.

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