

# Cultural Transfer in Political Publicity Interpreting

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**Abstract**—Chinese Premier’s Press Conference (CPPC), as an epitome of China’s publicity interpreting practice, deserves probes into its cultural transfers using descriptive corpus-based methods. Based on an English-Chinese parallel corpus for the 2018 CPPC, such typical cultural forms as idioms, proverbs, colloquial, historical and political terms and their interpretations are compared and analyzed, with the main finding that literal translation is used the most frequently, followed by the clarifying strategy. In other words, core Chinese values have been maximally promoted in publicity translation on the premise that the political information be delivered accurately and completely. In this way, China’s cultural confidence can be greatly boosted if the related diction is translated literally, with appropriate explanations. By contrast, it is rare for such expressions to be interpreted using an English equivalent. So the key argument is that in diplomatic interpreting, accuracy has the top priority, followed by the desire to promote China’s culture and the need to consider the target audience’s comprehension ability. This research is significant as the interpreting strategies and norms generated will benefit both interpreting practitioners and researchers.

**Keywords:** *political publicity interpreting, Chinese Premier’s Press Conference, interpreting strategies, cultural transfer*

## I. INTRODUCTION: CPPC AS A KEY FORM OF POLITICAL PUBLICITY INTERPRETING

Chinese Premier’s Press Conference (CPPC) in this research refers to the press conference hosted by China’s State Council on the same day when its annual National People’s Congress closes. It is an important occasion for government leaders to meet journalists from both home and abroad, answering their questions concerning China’s politics, economy, diplomatic and military policies, culture, education, environmental conservation and many other riveting issues. Since its debut broadcast by China’s Central Television Station in 1991, it has been gaining popularity and capturing a growing number of worldwide press professionals. In 2018 alone, over 1,200 journalists came to Beijing to cover it, with its global impact booming thanks to the Internet and smart phones.

As a 120-minute question and answer session between the leaders and journalists, “each such session has a senior Chinese-English interpreter sitting next to the Premier, specially designated for the task by China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA)” [1]. With Chinese and English as the

two working languages, the interpreter is supposed to mitigate the linguistic gap on such a significant showcase event for China’s national image, latest policies and core values. In this sense, the role of the CPPC interpreter has spilled over merely an information conduit to a builder of China’s national image as well as an intercultural ambassador, “with the interpreting quality to a great extent determining the country’s publicity efforts” [2]. Next how Chinese culture is transferred in the CPPC context, or in other words, how such Chinese cultural terms are interpreted will be analyzed based on the 2018 CPPC corpus specially sorted out for this study, which is a contrastive parallel one with typical Chinese culture-expressions and their interpretations categorized, coded and analyzed.

## II. IDIOMS AND APHORISMS: THE CLARIFYING STRATEGY

The four-character Chinese idioms, despite their linguistic trajectories over the past few millenniums, “embody the Chinese people’s aesthetics of their mother tongue” [3]. Their metaphorical connotations are culturally ingrained albeit their departure from modern Chinese linguistic forms and usages. Even the natives would unconsciously overlook the ancient aphorisms concerning those terms when using them. It is the separation in terms of form, image and meaning that makes it possible to use the clarifying strategy: conveying only the meaning while avoiding those baffling linguistic forms. Therefore, when interpreting such idioms, the interpreter would extract meaning from the original linguistic and cultural forms and convey it straightforward to the audience, enabling them to quickly figure out what the speaker intends to. Additionally, the time for interpreting is usually pressing, so the interpretation is expected to take as little conference time as possible. Were much ado done for explaining the peripheral cultural notes of the idioms, it would be time-consuming and might even backfire on the translation effects. So in this sense, the interpreter often opts to circumvent the original cultural image, “replacing those ancient four-character phrases with concise and pointing modern diction” [4].

Ancient Chinese poetic lines, idioms and aphorisms are frequently quoted in CPPC, but actually “many of them sound unfamiliar to both the foreign and Chinese audience, making it extremely difficult to deliver the original style immediately on the spot” [5] Therefore, direct translation is used if both the Chinese image and meaning can be understood by the audience; but if the strategy would cause confusion given the cultural differences, clarifying should be prioritized. If those quotes appear in a written text, a translator may explain their cultural images and the stories behind them using supplementary notes.

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However, such quotes are hardly elaborated on by the Premier, so it would be saliently time-confusing and ado-making if they were explained extensively. Also taking into account the requirement for spontaneity, interpreters usually prefer transferring the general meaning directly to the audience.

### III. FOLK SAYINGS AND COLLOQUIAL LANGUAGE: DIRECT TRANSLATION PLUS CLARIFYING

Given the dramatic departure between Chinese and English, interpreters usually find it difficult to locate equivalent target expressions for Chinese folk sayings and colloquial language, resulting cultural gaps in translation which refer to the phenomenon that “a certain expression in culture A does not have its counterpart in culture B” [6]. For example, the Premier once used the reference of “the iron rice bowl”, which means “a stable and decent job” in China. But if literally interpreted, the notion may baffle the Western audience who on one hand do not take rice as a staple food and on the other hand do not have a relationship established between a bowl and a job. To avoid misunderstanding, the literal meaning was interpreted plus a concise explanation: a permanent well-paid job. In this way, both the original cultural flavour and the implicit meaning are successfully delivered to the audience. And when again “a golden rice bowl” was mentioned by the Premier, it was not explained but directly interpreted as the audience were assumed to appreciate that a golden bowl should be better than an iron one. Therefore, “cultural differences should be considered so as to ensure that the interpretation caters to the audience’s recognition both stylistically and in meaning” [7]. Certainly, the best possible effect is that the target audience can not only figure out the original speech but also appreciate why the Chinese people express them in a particular way.

In order to make the Government approachable to the public, the Premier tends to use colloquial language from time to time when addressing questions. For example, if someone is so rich that he arbitrarily wastes a lot of money, we use “arbitrarily” to describe his use of wealth. Likewise, when it comes to the Government’s use of power, the Premier often emphasizes that power not be used arbitrarily. Honestly, such diction sounds not sufficiently serious for the formal conference situations because it may be interpreted differently in accordance with the varying situations. And imaginably it is enormously stressful to interpret at CPPC, for if the interpretation turns out faulty, it would affect the accuracy of the message the Government intends to convey. But admittedly, such colloquial language with its easy access to ordinary people, helps assert China’s cultural confidence on those remarkable occasions. When interpreting colloquial language, it is imperative to grasp the true meaning and intention of the speaker, putting the accurate delivery of meaning on the first place. Besides, the interpretations for those special expressions have been sorted out by the translation and interpreting section of MFA, so the interpreters are expected to remember them and use them accurately and flexibly.

### IV. HISTORICAL EXPRESSIONS AND POLITICAL CONCEPTS: LITERAL TRANSLATION WITH EXPLANATIONS

With regard to historical expressions, most of them are explained rather than literally translated by the interpreter because even modern Chinese people would per se stress the connotation, the context and the purpose of using such phrases instead of being obsessed with their superficial meaning. For example, the Premier once pointed out that Hong Kong stands to be the first to benefit from some favourable policies related to securities purchasing thanks to its unique strength. But actually he used a historical expression to describe it which literally means you will get the moon first if you are on a terrace closer to the pond. Honestly, such historical expressions albeit their poetic beauty, are sometimes superstitious and illogical. Here “the moon” refers to its reflection on water surface. And even if one is next to a pond, he cannot get either the moon or its shadow. It would be totally confusing if only the original cultural image and portrayal were interpreted at scene. After all, “the first priority of political publicity translation is its supreme accuracy of message delivery” [8].

In fact, when it comes to translation, the first thing to consider is whether a historical expression has an English equivalent. If so, the original phrase can be replaced flexibly. For example, the expression “one will succeed if he has perseverance” can be translated into English as “where there is a will, there is a way”. Consequently, the translation will be easier to be accepted by the English readership apart from its stylistic equivalence. Admittedly, the clarifying strategy makes more sense as a choice for the interpreter given limited time and the difficulties to find an English equivalent.

Typically Chinese political terms constitute a series of terms covering such areas as politics, economy, rule of law, military strength, science and technology, diplomacy, culture and environmental conservation. As an integral part of the Chinese discourse system for effective international communication, such terms as “Chinese dream”, “belt and road initiative”, “Socialist core values”, “new normal”, “new major-country relationship” and their translations are being standardized by Chinese Government, as evidenced by the establishment of a specialized corpus for those terms by China Academy of Translation. However, even with such state-sponsored database, it is not uncommon to find a CPPC interpreter deviate from the standard recommended versions. This is essentially because language usage is variable; the same message can be articulated and interpreted in manifold ways. Therefore, a senior government interpreter is expected to make decisions in line with the real-time situations rather than sticking rigidly to ready-made translations, no matter how authoritative they may sound.

### V. PROVERBS: DIRECT TRANSLATION WITH FLEXIBLE ADAPTATIONS

Direct translation is principally used for interpreting proverbs, with two reasons. Firstly, proverbs are normally long with complete and logic information, which makes it possible to interpret literally. By contrast, idioms, sayings and other historical terms are shorter and more obscure, so it would be confusing if they were interpreted word by word. Secondly,

proverbs unlike idioms are usually renowned adages from notable people, so direct translation can help disseminate the very essence of the Chinese culture to the audience in addition to facilitating comprehension. For example, a famous quote of Mencius reads that the same river can carry and capsize boats, alluding to the fact that governments should be careful with citizens because they can send you to the throne if you work for their interests or dethrone you if you work against their interests. As a vivid proverb, it is more often than not interpreted literally. Alternatively, it is also practical to interpret it using the English equivalent that the same knife can cut bread and fingers. In this way, the audience will figure out the idea more quickly but may also wonder if the Chinese describe things as they do because they do not know that the original river-boat image has been replaced by the target knife-bread-finger metaphor.

#### VI. CONCLUSIONS: SPREADING CHINA'S CORE VALUES PREMISED ON THE ACCURATE DELIVERY OF MESSAGES

To sum up, based on an English-Chinese parallel corpus for the 2018 CPPC, such typical cultural forms as idioms, proverbs, colloquial, historical and political terms and their interpretations have been compared and analyzed, with a main finding that literal translation is used the most frequently, followed by the clarifying strategy. In other words, core Chinese values have been maximally promoted in publicity translation on the premise that the political information be delivered accurately and completely. In this way, China's cultural confidence can be greatly boosted if the related diction is translated literally, with appropriate explanations. By

contrast, it is rare for such expressions to be interpreted using an English equivalent. So the key argument is that in diplomatic interpreting, accuracy has the top priority, followed by the desire to promote China's culture and the need to consider the target audience's comprehension ability. In prospect, CPPC as an epitome of China's political interpreting practice, deserves further explorations into its manifold phenomena using descriptive corpus-based studies. In this way interpreting strategies and norms can be generated to the benefit of both interpreting practice and research.

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