

# Case Studies of Relay Translation in Ancient China

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## ABSTRACT

The existence of many different languages in the world is a barrier to communication among different peoples. In ancient times, different ethnic groups had more language barriers compared with modern people. As with adjacent groups, with regular contact, some people with language talent were able to master the languages of neighbouring ethnic groups, so as to play the role of interpreters and translators in their mutual communication. However, for different ethnic groups far away from each other, communication was really a serious problem. Fortunately, the ancients were full of wisdom. By using different translation strategies, the users of different languages could finally communicate, even between distant countries and Chinese civilization. "Relay translation" was one of the translation strategies often used by the Chinese ancients, which not only made great contributions to the exchange and inheritance of ancient civilization, but also has inspired the exchanges between peoples today.

**Keywords:** Ancient times, Translation wisdom, Relay translation, Modern inspiration.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Language is the most important tool for human communication. There are thousands of languages in the world, and according to German linguists, and in 1979, there were 5,651 languages already identified in the world[1]. China has been a multi-ethnic country since ancient times, and the languages in China are also various. According to statistics, the current number of languages in China is as many as 120.[2]

So many languages have caused communication difficulties among peoples of different languages. With the integration of different nationalities in human society, many languages have disappeared in the long river of history. In ancient times, however, there were many more human languages than today. Restricted by objective factors such as natural conditions, the ancient scope of communication was very small. Moreover, due to the lack of translation education in ancient times, there were many more language barriers in the communication of different ethnic groups in ancient times. As with adjacent groups, with regular contact, some of them with language talent were able to master the language of neighbouring ethnic groups, so as to play the role of translation in mutual communication. However, for different ethnic

groups far away, communication was really a serious problem. Fortunately, the ancients were full of wisdom and the users of different languages were able to communicate by using different translation strategies such as relay translation, which was a kind of indirect translation, and one of the translation strategies often used by the ancients.

Relay translation means communication between different peoples and involves no less than two translators at the same time, each of the translator acts as a relay in the race, and with their cooperative translation, information from the source language can finally be translated into the target language.

Direct translation, the simplest translation method, can be found almost everywhere in international communication in our daily life, where translators can speak both the source language and the target language and acts as a bridge through which both sides manage to understand each other with the help of translators.

However, if Party A and Party B speak different languages, the translator C understands Party A's language and another language W, but does not understand Party B's language. Translator D understands the language of Party B and W but does not understand A's language. Under such

circumstance, translation process is like a relay race. First A's information was translated into W by Party C, and then Party D can translate from W into the language of Party B. Through the efforts of the two translators, Party A's meaning was successfully understood by Party B. In turn, Party B's meaning may also be accepted by Party A through opposite procedures. This involves two translators and is the simplest form of relay translation.

## **2. RELAY TRANSLATION IN ANCIENT CHINA**

With the employment of relay translation, bilateral communication could be carried out smoothly, while without the use of this technique, neither side could understand each other in history.

### **2.1 Successful Use of Relay Translation**

The earliest relay translation recorded in Chinese literature took place during the Wuding period of the Shang Dynasty. Wu Ding (?-1192 BC), was the 23rd king of the Shang Dynasty. During the reign of Wuding, the Shang Dynasty was once again powerful, which was called "Wuding Resurgence" in history. By the end of Wuding, the Shang Dynasty had become a great country stretching from Gansu in the west to the seaside in the east, from the desert in the north to Jiangnan Plains in the south, which actually laid the foundation of Chinese territory before Emperor Qin Shihuang. In "Shangshu Dazhuan", a story goes like this:

*Wuding reflected on himself and learned from ancient famous politicians in order to rejuvenate his country, and very soon, his country took on a new look and was widely admired by neighbouring countries, even as many as six distant countries where people wore braids took the trouble of relay translation to come to pay respects to China[3].*

Another famous story of relay translation took place in the reign of the Duke of Zhou (Zhougong) in the Zhou Dynasty after Wuding. Wang Qinruo and Yang Yi in the Song Dynasty compiled the deeds of ancient well-known people into the famous book "Cefuyuangui", which recorded a story:

*Zhougong acted as regent for three years and the state of Yueshang sent messengers to China and offered some white pheasants as a tribute via relay translation of three interpreters.[4]*

There are also similar records of the exchanges between Yueshang State and China in the history books of later generations, for example, in the *History of Later Han*:

*Zhougong acted as regent for six years, and by making etiquette and music, the world became peaceful. To the south of Jiaozhi( part of ancient China, now in the north of Viet Nam), there was a state call Yueshang, which sent messengers to China and presented the white pheasant as a state gift to China, with the help of three interpreters, saying, "we Yueshang and China are far away from each other, with high mountains and deep rivers between us, and no one here knows Chinese, so we have to employ three interpreters to do the translation job for us by way of relay translation."[5]*

Based upon this record, later generations thought highly of this relay translation event. Gao Huali, a Chinese scholar on translation history, thinks:

*The History of Later Han contains the story of foreign messengers and Zhougong, the Duke of Zhou. They could exchange ideas through three translators, which was perhaps the earliest translation record in China.[6]*

*The Complete Translation of the Twenty-Four Histories expresses a similar story in modern Chinese:*

*There was a country to the south of Jiaozhi called Yueshang. After six years of regency, the Duke of Zhou concluded etiquette and made music. The world was peaceful. The messengers of Yueshang rode three elephants with translators to offer white pheasants, and said, "The road is far away, the mountains and rivers are blocked, so there has been no communication or messengers from us in the past and now we have to rely on relay translation to come to China to offer our respect to China."[7]*

In the aforementioned relay translation, three interpreters were involved to make the Chinese people and Yueshang People communicate with each other: the first interpreter translated the source language into language A, and then the second interpreter translated language A into language B, and the third interpreter translated language B into the target language. Although the process was quite complicated, fortunately communication between Yueshang and China was made possible with relay translation. Relay translation, in spite of its long and complex process, is a clever means of

communication. In ancient times, there were three translations, and even more nine translations. According to the *Shangshu Dazhuan*: "At the period of King Chengwang of Zhou Dynasty, Yueshang made use of nine translations in order to pay tribute to Zhou Dynasty with white pheasant as a gift." [8]

In theory, the number of interpreters involved in relay translation is at least two and at most nine, according to Chinese history classics.

The ancient Chinese people like to use the figure nine to express a great quantity, therefore, it is not clear whether the relay translation really involved nine interpretations or more or less. However, the legend of nine translations directly led to the Han Dynasty to name the official responsible for translation Jiuyiling, whose literary meaning is the officer in charge of nine translations.

*The Treaty of Nerchinsk* between China and Russia is a well-known treaty to Chinese people, but few people know that the translation process of the treaty was also via relay translation. At that time, although in China there existed an institution called Siyiguan, which specialized in translating the languages of border ethnic groups and neighboring countries, as well as the training of interpreters in the Qing Dynasty. However, the interpreters trained there mainly met the communication needs of domestic ethnic minorities and neighboring traditional tributary countries. No one understood the Russian language, because Russia, traditionally a European country, did not initially border with China. After the mid-17th century, Russia continued to expand to the east and gradually became China's neighbor. In the late Ming Dynasty, Russia began its exchanges with China. At the beginning of the Emperor Kangxi in the Qing Dynasty, border issues between China and Russia occurred more frequently, such as the exchange of personnel and official documents. However, no one in China understood Russian, and no one in Russia could communicate in Chinese. Therefore, during the negotiations in *Nerchinsk* in 1689, China and Russia had to communicate through relay translation, and the two sides agreed to negotiate in Latin used in Europe at that time. At that time, no Chinese could speak Latin in China. Fortunately, two European missionaries lived in China for many years and knew the Manchu language (the then official language in China) and Latin. The two missionaries were French missionary (Jean Francois Gerbillon, 1654-1707) and the Portuguese missionary Thomas Pereira(1645-1708). During the

negotiations, they acted as the official interpreters for the Chinese government, responsible for translating from the Manchu language into Latin. Fyodor Alexeyevich Golovin, the Russian plenipotentiary representative, was able to skillfully use Latin, but the other Russian envoys did not understand Latin. So the Chinese messages, after being translated from the Manchu language into Latin, still had to be translated from Latin into Russian so that the Russian delegation could understand. Similarly, the Russian messages first was translated into Latin by a Russian translator and then translated from Latin into the Manchu language by the two missionaries. It was through the relay translation of the two missionaries and Russian translators that China and Russia finally reached the first treaty between them, *The Treaty of Nerchinsk*. The official text of the treaty was in three versions, Latin, Russian and Manchu texts.

In the Qing Dynasty, from Emperor Shunzhi to the Opium War, there was always a lack of translators who understood the languages of European countries during the communication between the Qing government and the Western diplomatic missions. Therefore, the translation work basically relied on Russian missionaries or Western missionaries. The translation work is basically through relay translation. The Qing government took a balanced way to employing foreign interpreters for their translation: when the Qing government communicated with Russia, it tried to use European missionaries, but when receiving missions from European countries, it tried to use Russian Orthodox missionaries. These translators usually translated between Manchu Chinese and Latin or Russian or some other western languages.

Although there were some disadvantages in using foreigners as translators for Chinese diplomatic activities, the then Chinese government had no other choice due to the lack of translators. Through indirect translation, communication between the Qing China and European countries was conducted, and communication between China and Russia went on relatively smoothly, and a number of relatively equal treaties such as *The Treaty of Nerchinsk* were reached. Therefore, the effect of indirect translation was obvious.

## **2.2 Failure Caused by Lack of Relay Translation**

Relay translation played an important role in the history of Sino-foreign exchanges, making the

communication of different languages possible. However, in the exchanges between China and Russia, there were not only successful stories of bilateral exchanges with the help of relay translation, but also failures without using this translation technique because of translation barriers.

The initial exchanges between China and Russia were delayed due to language barriers. In 1618, the late Ming Dynasty, Tsar Mikhail Fyodorovich Romanov sent a Russian delegation with Ivan Petlin as his envoy and Andreadov as his deputy to Beijing. Judging from the habits of exploration and diplomatic practice at that time, the delegation was estimated to consist of twelve people. They started from Tomsk on Nicholas Sacrifice Day (9 May) and arrived in Beijing in September of the same year. The cities that the Russians successively passed through in the Ming Dynasty were Zhangjiakou, Xuanhua, Huailai, Nankou and Changping. Their party arrived at what they called the Great China City of Beijing on September 1, 1618. Since Tsarist Russia had involved in Mongolia and northwest China, the Ming government was vigilant against Petlin and his delegation. Nevertheless, they were properly treated in Beijing and placed by Ming officials in the grand state guesthouse. Later, they took a letter of the Emperor Wanli back to the Russian Tsar. In this way, in the late 1710s, Tsar Russia began to communicate with the Ming Empire, marking the beginning of the diplomacy between China and Russia.[9]

Emperor Wanli's letter to the Tsar contained such information: "China is a great country, and China is not small", obviously not showing weakness to Russia, but also expressed his willingness to have equal exchanges between the two countries.[10]

From the late Ming and to the early Qing Dynasty (1676), all together the Chinese emperors such as Wanli of the Ming and Shunzhi of the Qing wrote four letters to the Russian tsars. However, because in Russia no one knew Chinese or Manchu language, and Russians did not make use of relay translation, these four Chinese imperial letters had been sleeping in Russia with no one understanding them. It was relay translated into Russian in 1676 when the Tsar sent Nikolai Gavrilovich Milescu to China. Nan Huairen (Ferdinand Verbiest), who served as an official translator for the Chinese Qing government, relay translated those four letters to the Tsars from Chinese and Manchu into Latin respectively, and then the Russian translators

translated the letters from Latin into Russian. The letter from Emperor Wanli to the Tsar was written in 1618, but after nearly 60 years of sleeping, his letter was finally understood by the Russian side through indirect translation in the Qing Dynasty.

Relay translation enabled the China-Russia exchanges to move forward. Compared with Emperor Wanli, Emperor Shunzhi in the early Qing Dynasty was much luckier in that his letter was translated into Russian very quickly, only after less than 20 years. In 1660, two Russian envoys arrived in Beijing and were received by Shunzhi, who also wrote a letter for them to bring to the Tsar. Since no one in China understood the Russian language and no one understood Chinese, the letter was also sleeping in Russia. After sleeping for almost 20 years, the letter was finally relayed translated from Manchu into Latin, and from Latin into Russian by at least two translators with Nan Huairen translating it from Manchu Chinese into Latin. After decades, the imperial letters between the two countries' top leaders, were finally translated, which may be unimaginable now. However, this is the helplessness of the ancient translation.

### **3. RELAY TRANSLATION IN TODAY'S WORLD**

The initial poor communication between China and Russia proved from the contrary that it is indeed wise to use relay translation when overcoming the translation difficulties. This practice showed the wisdom of the ancients, and still has its practical significance at present.

Today the world has become a global village, and international exchanges are becoming increasingly frequent. To facilitate the development of international organizations or international activities, many international organizations choose one or two or more from the languages of many Member States as the official or working language of the organization. The United Nations with as many as 193 sovereign nations, is the world's largest international organization today, which chooses six working languages: Chinese, English, French, Russian, Arabic and Spanish. All conferences of the United Nations have documents translated into these six languages. The official language of the IOC is French and English. FIFA (International Federation of Association Football) currently has 213 member associations, with French, English, Spanish and German as its official languages. The official languages of the International Wushu Federation are Chinese and

English. According to WTO regulations, its official languages are English, French and Spanish, and the texts of these three languages are formal and with legal effect.

The EU is only a European alliance of countries, but the EU has the largest translation workload in the world as a result of the EU language dilemma. The EU stipulates that the official languages of every EU member state shall also be the official languages of the EU. As Irish gained the status of the EU official language, and Bulgaria and Romania gained formal membership of the EU on 1 January 2007, the EU official languages have increased to 23. The EU has paid a huge price for its equal linguistic policy. According to statistics, at least 33 translators are required per formal EU meeting. In 2000, the EC alone translated 1.3 million pages. In 2003, the EU document translations totaled 1.48 million pages. It was estimated that on average every EU citizen spent 2 to 3 euros on translation in 2008. Currently, the EU employs about 500 full-time translators and about 1,500 temporary translators. Translation costs account for about 10% of EU fiscal spending and about half of the total administrative budget. According to the so-called linguistic equality principle, if the nation-states under the EU use the  $n$  languages, the  $n(n-1)$  translation combination should appear.[11]

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Relay translation is still a useful technique now used both in the United Nations and in the EU or other international exchanges. For example, at an EU meeting, if no interpreter can translate Latvian into Spanish, EU institutions will find someone to translate the relevant content from Latvian into English, and then from English into Spanish. Therefore, relay translation, an ancient translation strategy, still plays an important role in communicating among different linguistic ethnic groups today.

#### AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

This paper is independently completed by Quanmin Xin.

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