

On the Research of English Translation of Chinese Public Signs from the Perspective of Polysystem Theory: A Case Study of a Chinese Enterprise's Name in its Website

WANG Shaoci*

The National University of Malaysia, Bangi, 43600, Selangor, Malaysia
p119235@siswa.ukm.edu.my

Abstract: Despite the upsurge of interest in English translation of Chinese public signs, the relevant research has long been limited to the prescriptive study. Translation error analysis and correction are the centre of inquiry of translated public signs. Few researches put translated public signs in a broader social context and probe into the root of translation problems. Inspired by the polysystem theory, this paper otherwise attempts to make a descriptive study on English translation of Chinese public sign. The English translation of a Chinese enterprise's name in its website will be given a case study. Based on the three subdivided systems in the framework of the polysystem theory, this author will analyze how the multiple factors influences the generation and effectiveness of the translation of public signs.

Keywords: English Translation of Chinese Public Signs; Polysystem Theory; Cultural Planning; Repertoire; Consumer Market

1. Background of Study

The Chinese government has been committed to promoting the exposure of China in the international community for almost 70 years. The introduction of Chinese literary works towards the world started at the early time of the foundation of the People's Republic of China.¹ After the reform and opening up, the world-oriented publicity of Chinese culture in various fields conducted by Chinese government and civil organizations gained momentum.²⁻⁷ Those efforts helped spark a storm of revitalization of Chinese national culture after China weathered a flood of western culture for almost two centuries.

Nowadays, as China increasingly receive visits from the international friends, there is a growing trend in introducing Chinese culture by both of Chinese and English domestically. The acceleration of globalization and economic integration especially prompts an increase in use of the English public signs everywhere in China. However, the English translation of public signs in China are deluged with all kinds of problems so far. This phenomenon has aroused wide concern from the field of translation studies. Instead of focusing on the analysis of translation errors, the study takes an interest in the exploration of causes of translation problems. Based on the framework of the polysystem theory, this study attempts to probe into in what way the multiple factors influence the generation and effectiveness of the English translation of Chinese public signs.

2. Literature Review

The related research has started in China since the 1980s, but the terminology "public signs" was not formally adopted at that time. The first field explored was the geographical names, represented by two researches from the late cartographer Zeng Shiyong.⁸⁻⁹ With a very rigorous attitude, he discussed the international standardization of geographical names and stressed the seriousness of the translation of geographical names. This study could be regarded as the trailblazer of research of the English translation of public signs in China. Since then, the study of English translation of public signs in other fields have been carried out gradually. Ding appealed to the public attention to English translation of Chinese enterprise's name.¹⁰ Duan focused on the translation of hotel signs and instructions in many scenic spots.¹¹ Xiang took the lead in inspecting the English translation of street names in China.¹² Strictly speaking, the large-scale, organized and formal research on translation of public signs in China began from the first National Public Sign Translation Seminar in Beijing in 2005.¹³

Searching "public signs" in CNKI shows that the number of papers on the translation of Chinese

* Corresponding Author

public signs are increasing in the recent decade. Those researches cover almost all of familiar fields, such as tourism,¹⁴⁻¹⁶ transportation,¹⁷⁻¹⁸ medical industry,¹⁹⁻²¹ etc. In terms of perspective, a great deal of new research theories and tools have been deployed to look into this topic, including Skopos Theory,¹⁶ Semiotics,²² Intertextuality Theory,²³ Communicative Translation Theory,²⁴ Ecological Translation Theory,²⁰ etc. Generally speaking, researches on translated public signs so far can be mainly sorted into two aspects: the analysis of errors in translated public signs and the exploration of translation strategy of public signs.

In spite of the intensive academic efforts put in the investigation of translated public signs, there seems no distinct decrease in mistranslation in reality. The problem is that the past studies are heavily stuck in the prescriptive research path. Few of them give an inexhaustible inquiry into the reasons behind those problems in translated public signs. It is undoubted that translation of public signs is not simply a translation activity, but a complicated social phenomenon. Hence, it might be hard to root out the errors in translated public signs by merely having them under the linguistic scrutiny. On the contrary, the errors will be otherwise more likely to be nipped in the bud if the main culprits are identified before the problems emerge. Thus the descriptive study on the English translation of public signs may turn around the situation. The introduction of the Polysystem theory conduces to observe the translation of public sign in the broader social system. The three subdivided systems of this theoretical framework will help disclose the multiple factors influence the generation and effectiveness of translation of public signs. Borrowing this theoretical framework, this paper thus attempts to make a descriptive study on the English translation of a Chinese enterprise's name in its website. The exploration of causes behind the problem in translation of public signs hopefully sheds a little light on the efficient ways to keep errors at bay.

3. Methodology

Zhongyan Qinghai Kunlun Alkali Industry Co., Ltd. is a large-scale state-owned enterprise in China. The enterprise's English name "Salt in the Kunlun Mountains in Qinghai JianYe co., Ltd."[#] could be found in the first page of its website. Obviously, the English translation makes little sense and causes much confusion. The study, instead of concerning the error of this translation on the linguistic level, tries to adopt a descriptive approach to dig out the deep and complex reasons hidden behind this mistranslation. To carry out the analysis, Evan Zohar's polysystem theory and refined theoretical framework later constructed by Chang Nam Fung will be applied.

Evan Zohar, the initiator of the Polysystem theory, argues that if "the researchers failed to see the connection between the position of texts and models within the structured whole (to which they belong)", then "local explanations ('mistakes', 'misunderstandings', 'bad imitation', etc., for instance in the study of translation) became their only possible refuge".²⁵ For having a better understanding of the production of the given mistranslation, this study, thus will research into the context where it is produced. A comprehensive survey will be conducted to look into the impact of political factors, discursive norm and repertoire, readers and markets on the formation of the mistranslation.

In order to make it easier to perform this analysis, a theoretical framework reconstructed by Chang Nam Fung, a Hong Kong scholar will be used in this paper. He gives a further interpretation of the Polysystem Theory by subdividing the polysystem into three ones, including political and ideological polysystem, language and translated literature polysystem, economic polysystem.²⁶ This study will examine the English name of the enterprise based on this refined framework, to delve into how the multiple factors affect the generation and function of translated public sign from the following three levels.

4. Analysis

4.1 Political Factor and Cultural Planning

Evan Zohar notes that the reason why rulers determine on cultural planning is that they find that it is difficult to maintain the dominance by force alone.²⁵ It holds true for the survival of subsystem in any larger cultural polysystem. For the internal development of a subsystem, constantly absorbing other forms of culture is a necessary condition for creating internal cohesion and external differences to maintain stability. While for its external development, the continuous output of its own culture and the expansion of its influence help the system seize a broader living space and advantageous position.²⁵ Faced with the trend of multi-polarization worldwide, nearly all the countries have waked up to the significance of cultural planning

and engaged in positive cultural promotion. A compelling instance is the setting of Today World Press in Hong Kong by the United States in the 1950s.²⁷ Despite its military and economic strength has been far ahead, the United States is by no means slack in building its cultural dominance by penetrating the Chinese world with the American literature. This strategy could be regarded as a typically compulsory cultural planning to enhance its impact in the global cultural polysystem.

The Chinese government has also taken a series of actions to popularize the Chinese literature overseas since the establishment of the People's Republic of China.¹ With the implementation of the “one belt and one road” policy, the promotion of translated public signs has become another intended cultural planning after the export of Chinese literary works since the 1950s. In the recent decade, the proposal of “building the confidence in Chinese culture” displays the determination of cultural planning of Chinese government once again. This call, to some degree, accelerates the popularization of translated public signs in China and turns the translation of public signs into a national movement from top to bottom. Going with such a tide, mounting state-owned or civic organizations start packaging themselves with English publicity material online and offline. Zhongyan Qinghai Kunlun Alkali Industry Co. Ltd, the given enterprise is the epitome of those who label themselves with English name in the website. Yet since the confusion of “Salt in the Kunlun Mountains in Qinghai JianYe co., Ltd.” in its website has long been neglected by the company, the practice seems not so much a way of building its international image as echoing the policy. This example proves cultural planning does not necessarily play a positive role in the promotion of translation of public signs. If the will and need of the individual company are not taken into consideration, pushing blindly for a certain policy will be counterproductive. On closer inspection of the translated name in the political system, it will be easier to understand why such a mistranslation could be condoned in a short time though it hardly plays any active role in publicity.

4.2 Discursive Norm and the Invention of Repertoire

Given translation is multidimensional in nature, the norms it follows must be far more complex.²⁸ In order to break through the limitations of traditional perspectives in translation studies (such as functional equivalence, domestication and foreignization, etc.), Evan Zohar introduces the hypothesis of position and behavior in the literary polysystem. According to him, any discussion of “author-oriented”, “reader-oriented” or “purpose-oriented” translation strategies entails referring to the situation of the literary polysystem which initiates the translation activities, as well as its relative position and that of the target literary polysystem in the literary meta-system. In the following three cases, translated literature may occupy the central position of literary polysystem: first, the literary polysystem is still young; second, the literary polysystem is marginal or weak in the literary meta system; third, there is a turning point, crisis or vacuum in the literary polysystem.²⁹ Chang Nam Fung puts the three situations into a category of “possible general lack of self-sufficiency”,²⁶ and lays bare the relation between the self-image of literary polysystem initiating translation activities and the selection of translation strategy. According to him, when the polysystem which exports its culture is in the situation of “possible general lack of self-sufficiency”, translation activities tend to use the strategy of “acceptability” in terms of the target polysystem; if not, the strategy of “adequacy” will be taken into account.²⁶

Since the 21st century, the world has seen the rapid rise of China. Yet since its overall national strength has not been on a par with the western world, it is earlier to say the literary polysystem of China has already gotten rid of the state of “possible general lack of self-sufficiency”. When Chinese public signs seek to be accepted by the English literary polysystem, the strategy of “acceptability” is believed a better choice. In order to win more chances to be approved, the common practice is to borrow the similar repertoire in the target culture. If there are no ready-made forms could be used or imitated, however, the translator may face a choice: adopting the one from translation software or the one in Pinyin. The author has translated “中盐青海昆仑碱业有限公司 (Zhong Yan Qing Hai Kun Lun Jian Ye You Xian Gong Si)” through three translation software: Youdao, Baidu and Google. The results show as followed respectively: “Salt in the Kunlun Mountains in Qinghai Jianye Co., Ltd”, “Qinghai Kunlun Salt Alkali Industry Co. Ltd” and “Zhongyan Qinghai Kunlun Alkali Industry Co., Ltd.”. All of three translations mix the English words with Pinyin, but the one by Youdao seems relatively most readable for the English readers. Actually, “中盐青海昆仑 (Zhong Yan Qing Hai Kun Lun)” is a proper noun, and the translator is under no obligation to explain the literal meaning of it. However, among the three English translations from software and pure

Pinyin translation, the translator ends up selecting the one by Youdao which elaborates the proper noun. This practice implies that the translator might deliberately seek a translation that is acceptable to the English readers.

The motive behind this choice is assumed to be the translator's reference to the relatively weak "self-image" of China nowadays. However, this situation probably changes in near future with the great advance of national power in China. When China has a greater voice in the international society, its literary polysystem will be freed from the circumstance of "possible general lack of self-sufficiency". The strategy of "adequacy" is likely to be given a priority in the English translation of Chinese public signs, so as to keep the heterogeneity of Chinese culture. This presumption could be revealed in the replacement of English translation on Chinese street signs with Pinyin in Beijing recently. Although this move has caused considerable controversy, the application of Pinyin translation is reckoned to reduce the abuse of mistranslation in translated public signs instead.

Another possibility explains this mistranslation is the translator's dependence on translation software in the decision-making process. Except for common indicative public signs, most public signs are the proper none. If the translators are lack of awareness to imitate the repertoire in the target language, or there is no existing repertoire there, the translation software may be reduced to be the source of poor English translations of public signs in a short time. "Innovation may be due to lack of ability or great ability. If it is because of lack of ability, 'errors' may occur. If there is an appropriate market, new similar projects will be replicated from these errors".²⁶ In this case, due to no similar repertoire in the target culture to refer to, it had a great chance that the translator resorted to Youdao software directly and adopted the mistranslation without any suspicion.

Chinglish, another common type of mistranslation in public signs, is a product that does not conform to the discursive norm of English but is acquiesced during the long-term circulation. As a form of mistranslation, Chinglish is gradually known and recognized instead by western culture through various channels. A convincing example is that the play *Chinglish* by Chinese-American playwright Henry Wong has appeared on Broadway and performed in various countries around the world.³⁰ As China has a greater say in the communication with the English world, Chinglish, just like the Pinyin translation, is more than likely to become a stable repertoire to output translated public signs in the future. What lends credence to it is that some popular Chinglish words have been already included in the Oxford Dictionary, such as "hutong" (lane in Beijing), "fengshui" (geomancy), "Dai Pai Dong" (food stalls), "add oil" (root for sb), "hukou" (ID of Chinese residents), etc.³¹

4.3 Reader Group and Consumer Market

The default reader groups and consumer markets interpret why the prescriptive approach is so popular in research of translated public signs. The previous researches get used to taking it for granted that the consumption purpose of the translated public signs is merely "obtaining correct instructions and information", which provides a "benchmark" against which translated public signs usually come under strict scrutiny. However, when consumer market is restricted to such a type, other possible functions and target readers thus will be completely ignored. In fact, the consumption of literature is like production, which is not necessarily limited to "reading" or "listening" of "text", and sometimes even has nothing to do with both. "Like producers, consumers may participate in literary activities at various levels".²⁶ This is particularly true to translated public signs. Far more than "the target language reader's access to information", translated public signs probably perform different "social and cultural functions".²⁶

Different from other translation products that often circulate in the market overseas, the translated public signs function domestically. This particularity makes its consumption objects more complex. Then, what kind of uses may the example in this case have in terms of different reader groups? For instance, for the domestic customers of this enterprise, they may consume it on the economic level. When they notice the English name in the website, it is easy to have an impression of an international enterprise, so as to seek for the establishment of trade relations; Chinese people who do not understand English may consume it on the ideological level. The sight of English name in the website might fills them with pride in "Chinese enterprises in international rank". Perhaps surprisingly, researchers who collect "mistranslation" as research objects could consume it on the academic level. The consumption types provided by translated public signs

in reality possibly far beyond the theoretical supposition.

“All consumers are not simply the sum of individual consumers, but a network of power relationships that can determine the fate of products”.²⁶ If there is a consumer market regarding the translation of public signs as mere “formality”, it is little wonder that such unqualified translation product can be tolerated for so long time. The weight of different consumer markets decides the survival or extinction of a cultural phenomenon. The need of the minority might have to compromise to that of the majority. In the vast consumer markets of translated public signs in reality, when the share of people who worry about their quality are relatively small, then the problems in the translated public signs will not be eliminated. In the given case, the main business object of this enterprise might not care about the meaning of its English name at all. Provided that the mistranslation never threatens the image of the enterprise, it has no reason for the company to make some changes.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, the appearance of the English translation of the enterprise’s name in this case may be attributed to the following possibilities. First, in compliance with policy rather than out of consideration for cultural communication, the translator blindly deploys a translation from translation software. Second, in view of the relatively weak “self-image” of China, the translator deliberately adopts a translation seems more acceptable to English readers. Third, since there is no proper repertoire in the target culture to imitate, it stands a good chance that the translator turns to software directly. Fourth, the main consumers of this enterprise might not attach much importance to its English name, which leads to the translator’s indiscriminate use of repertoire.

According to the analysis from the view of three subdivided systems, policy, repertoire and market may carry positive or passive weight with the translation of public signs. Therefore, the improvement of their quality depends on how to draw the advantages and avoid the disadvantages of each system. On the one hand, the power of policy could be made full use of to strengthen the regulation of repertoire of translated public signs, and expand the consumer markets which have lower tolerance for the mistranslation. On the other hand, the policy makers shall avoid a one-size-fits-all approach when pursue cultural publicity and export. It is obvious that the mandatory policy hardly exerts the positive influence until the translated public signs become an indispensable access for producers and readers to achieve their goals.

Notes:

Last time visit to website of Zhongyan Qinghai Kunlun Alkali Industry Co. Ltd., <http://www.zyqhkljy.cn/>. on December,12th,2022

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