

The English Translation of Chinese Political Discourse from a Materialistic Dialectics Perspective

Guigui Jiang¹ & Xu Zhou²

¹ Associate Professor, School of Law and Humanities, China University of Mining and Technology (Beijing), Beijing 100083, China

² School of Law and Humanities, China University of Mining and Technology (Beijing), Beijing 100083, China

Correspondence: Xu Zhou, School of Law and Humanities, China University of Mining and Technology (Beijing), Beijing 100083, China.

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Abstract

China has witnessed two rounds of large-scale translation activity over the past 40 years of reform and opening-up since 1978. And the focus of the Chinese translation community now has been shifting from “translating the world” to “translating China” after China entered the new era in 2012. Therefore, it is imperative to quicken the pace in China’s “going global” by narrating Chinese stories to the wider world. As an integral part of its global communication, Chinese political discourse represents national attitudes, stances and values. In this regard, how to improve the quality and communication effect of its translation becomes a major problem for China’s translators and global communicators. This paper lends insights into the essential role of material dialectics in its English translation from five aspects, by selecting and analyzing some important official texts and remarks in recent years, so as to provide valuable inspiration for how to better the translation of the field.

Keywords: English translation of Chinese political discourse, translating China, materialistic dialectics, global communication

1. Introduction

There have long been two schools in China’s translation community, namely the school of science and the school of art. The former maintains that translating should reproduce the message of the original by means of the transformation of linguistic equivalence. It puts stress on the study of description of the translation process, and the structures and forms of language, so as to reveal the objective laws inherent in translating. The latter focuses on

recreating a literary work by using expressions of another language, with a view to the effect of translation. Therefore, the controversy between them is the first and foremost to overcome in translating.

Sun (1999:14) believes that each of the contradictory aspects is opposite, but more importantly, should be united. In this regard, the core of all translation theories lies in materialistic dialectics. That means one is set to deviate from the right track in theoretical research and practice,

when he runs counter to the dialectics without judging things from two aspects. Fan (2003:124) holds that, as part of the Marxist philosophy to understand and transform nature, materialistic dialectics is of great importance to guide the development of translatology and translation. It helps to improve the philosophical literacy of translators by upholding the worldview of dialectical materialism, so as to take a right approach to analyzing various questions in translating.

In addition, guided by the systems thinking of the materialistic dialectics, Jia and Zhang recalibrate the nature and features of translation, and then try to form a systemic view of translation that incorporates multiple translation theories (2007:90). According to Yao (2021:75), through integration of the materialistic dialectics into the EC/CE translation in agriculture, good effects can be achieved in translating different aspects of a text, including terminology, preposition, and long sentence. Based on her practices and reflections, Liu introduces the theory of “symbio-translatology” with a “symbio translation system” at its core, which is composed of each element and their relations, e.g. translator, source text author, and target text reader. All this enriches the materialistic dialectics in translation to some degree.

Huang once stated that there have been two upsurges in China’s translation activity over the past 40 years of reform and opening-up since 1978, the first of which is created to introduce the world to China, and the second is to help China “go global” (2018:09-10). In this connection, an emerging trend is called “translating China” — translating Chinese culture, history, economic and political development and others to the world. This is a logical result of China’s growing influence — from “translating the world” to “translating China”. It is also a mission for Chinese translators that is entrusted by the times (2022:158).

This paper is conducted on the basis of previous theoretical studies and practices, by combining materialistic dialectics with the English translation of Chinese political discourse. In doing so, typical cases have been selected to lend insights into how to translate Chinese glossaries and phrases well to make foreign readers understand. Compared with these domestic studies related to other fields, the paper focuses on the integration of the dialectics with the English translation of Chinese political discourse

within the broader context of the current developments. Therefore, the study of this paper is necessary.

2. Materialistic Dialectics and Chinese Political Discourse

As the fruit of adapting Marxism to Chinese contexts, the political discourse is marked by socialism with Chinese characteristics and traces of the times, crystalizing the collective wisdom of national leaders and pointing the way forward in the near future (Deng, 2020:21). For the materialistic dialectics, it is an integral part of the Marxism that uncovers the general laws that the world is universally related and constantly develops (Liu, Hao, Kou, et al., 2023:57). In this regard, materialistic dialectics and Chinese political discourse are closely interconnected in the development logic: the former directs the upgrading of the latter, while the latter indicates and reacts to the former by enriching it.

2.1 Materialistic Dialectics and Translation

When speaking of nature, Engels (1971:54) thinks of it as an all-encompassing whole, also a system, and an interconnected totality of bodies. In the sphere of materialistic dialectics, an object is always seen as a single entity that is universally connected with others and maintains ever-lasting development. This holds true for translation, a complex system that consists of multiple elements in a particular and non-linear manner. For example, literal translation/foreignization, and free translation/domestication are common translation methods or strategies. In terms of translation elements, there are subjects (translators and interpreters), objects (source and target texts), and mediating factors (language structures, contexts and cultural backgrounds), etc. (Jia & Zhang, 2007:92). Translating is conducted in line with timeline, shifting from a symbol, information, culture in a phase to another one in another phase, representing a constant operating process with multiple activities. This process includes symbol conversion, art re-creation, information transfer, aesthetic exchanges, and social contacts.

Accordingly, translators should fully interact with source-text authors in the context of historical backgrounds and the trend of times, so as to have a keen understanding of their language features, information, and aesthetics. For another, translators also need to gain a keen appreciation of target readers’ preferences and traits, with a focus on the equivalent translation of cultural

connotations, stylistic overtone, scale, and so on. Consequently, we can be clear that translation represents a system where a single step has the potential to affect the overall situation. This requires translators have the ability to make an overall design for translating. In other words, they should espouse the worldview of the materialistic dialectics.

2.2 Chinese Political Discourse and Its English Translation

Political discourse is a sort of formal statement for a country or state to declare its policy, and guide the strategic development of internal and diplomatic affairs in a particular period. It also demonstrates a country's stances and attitudes in the international arena (Deng, 2020:21). In this case, how to translate such political texts has great immediate relevance to narrating China's stories to the wider world. It also holds the key to building China's discourse and narrative systems, and raising its voice in the international community (Zhang & Bao, 2019:120).

Having said that, there are opportunities as well as challenges in its global communication. According to the report *A World Divided: Russia, China and the West*, among the 1.2 billion people who inhabit the world's liberal democracies, three-quarters (75%) now hold a negative view of China, while, among the 6.3 billion who live in the world's remaining 136 countries, the opposite is the case — with 70% of people feeling positive towards China.

For one thing, western developed countries now control the global public opinion and leading media. Out of ideological prejudice and hostility, some of them are smearing and discrediting China at will on the international stage. The consequence is that people from other countries may often misunderstand and misinterpret China. Worse still, this may lead to a collective unconscious of anti-China (Gu, 2020:92).

For another, as China continues to rise with the initiation of the Belt and Road Initiative, and the philosophy of "a human community with a shared future", more and more political parties and people from other developing countries have a growing interest in China's path and development model. As shown by the website *WorldData.info*, the population in all developing countries totals about 6.82 billion, accounting for 85.54% of the global total. China can achieve progress in its global communication, only when it gains the endorsement and acceptance of these

countries constituting the vast majority of the world population (Yang, 2021:27).

As the Chinese political discourse features a blend of the fine traditional Chinese culture and Marxist philosophy, a pressing problem must be solved in its public communication: targeted groups often feel perplexed about political wording with Chinese characteristics. Based on the individual practices and conclusions, the author thinks that materialistic dialectics can go a long way towards its English translation and resolve this problem.

3. The Dialectic Unity Contained in C-E Translation of Chinese Political Discourse

As an activity where translators strike a balance between source and target texts, translating is filled with various pairs of contradictions: faithfulness to original texts may lead to non-expressiveness in target texts, and vice versa; the pursuit of foreign styles and tones might cause translationese; and priority given to targeted readers can easily deprive of the original and complete connotations of source texts (Liu & Wen, 2000:71). Sun holds that all these contradictions arising from translating can be categorized into several groups as follows: science and art, literal and free translation, self-control and re-creation consciousness, original author-oriented and targeted reader-oriented, as well as whole and detail, etc.

The author will then delve into those pairs of contradictory aspects above through typical examples from his practice.

3.1 Science and Art

Translation for China's global communication is defined as an activity to introduce or report affairs of a political party, government, army, and public utility to the outside world on certain media or platforms through translation in written or oral form. It is a special sort of translation, with "publicity" and "translation" in nature (Zeng & Chen, 2018:52). In this sense, translators should pay equal attention to "science" and "art" in translating Chinese political discourse, because it is an integral part of China's global communication.

【Source Text 1】中国始终坚持总体国家安全观，统筹发展与安全，统筹开放与安全，统筹传统安全与非传统安全，统筹维护自身安全和共同安全..... (China's Export Controls, published in 2021)

【Target Text 1】China pursues a holistic approach to national security, which takes into

consideration both the need for social and economic development and greater openness and the need for strengthened security, including in traditional and non-traditional areas. This approach focuses not only on China's own security but also on shared security challenges.

[Analysis] This is a typical run-on Chinese sentence with several commas, containing much information. Instead of adopting the approach of "literal translation", the translator gives full play to the subjective initiative based on an accurate understanding of the source text, and then reorganizes phrases and sentences in the target text by dividing the source text in line with the logic. A good point is that the translator puts "social and economic development" and "greater openness" on a par with "security" by using the coordinating conjunction "not only...but also", so as to highlight the key information of the source text.

Furthermore, "统筹传统安全与非传统安全" is a short sentence in the Chinese sentence, but the translator adopts the method of "rank shift" to turn it into a preposition word group in the English sentence. While using a long sentence in the first place, the translator then uses a short sentence with "this approach" as a bridge to connect the preceding. This conforms to the style of English writing: the combination of long and short sentences. A writer (translator) should be good at "adjusting and collocating" words and phrases in line with the context, to form and coordinate long and short sentences. It is an important technique to 'please eyes and ears' in translation (Liu, 2024:10).

【Source Text 2】不敢腐、不能腐、不想腐一体推进, "打虎"、"拍蝇"、"猎狐" 多管齐下。(Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2022)

[Target Text 2] We have taken coordinated steps to see that officials do not have the audacity, opportunity, or desire to be corrupt, and we have used a combination of measures to "take out tigers", "swat flies", and "hunt down foxes", punishing corrupt officials of all types.

[Analysis] There are two parallel structures in the Chinese sentence, namely "不 x 腐" and "single verb + single noun ("打虎", "拍蝇" and "猎狐")", which is full of rhythm. And the second structure contains a metaphor to compare corrupt officials to three different unwelcome animals in the Chinese culture. In terms of the first parallel structure, the translator chooses three nouns

"audacity, opportunity, or desire" with an alliteration "/o:/", making the sentence catchy and readable. In terms of the second one, the translator preserves the images of the source text by three "v + o" structures, coupled with "v-ing" as an adverbial of accompaniment to offer additional information. In addition, the two structures follow the "Rule of Three" in English news writing. This has made the target text more readable and pleasant to eyes by underlining the key points and creating a clear sentence structure (Liu, 2024:31).

The two examples both illustrate how to guarantee "science" while demonstrating "art" in translating. On the one hand, the two target texts convey the complete meaning of the source texts by clipping and reorganizing sentences. On the other, alliteration, metaphor, Rule of Three and other techniques are applied to the translated text to render them more expressive. Translators at a high artistic level can not only achieve faithfulness in translating original texts, but also reproduce their forms and styles in the target texts (Huang, 2001:71).

3.2 Literal and Free Translation

Literal and free translation are two basic translation methods, and also a unity of opposites. All translators should view and embrace them dialectically (Sun, 1999:18). In this sense, translators should elaborate upon the concepts and formulations (set phrases) that are less familiar or strange to foreign readers, by selecting similar and even equivalent expressions in English. To put it another way, free translation should be adopted.

【Source Text 3】说到这里, 我不由想起当年江浙等地发展个体私营经济、发展乡镇企业时创造的 "四千" 精神: 走遍千山万水、说尽千言万语、想尽千方百计、吃尽千辛万苦。(excerpt from the transcript of "Premier Li Qiang Meets the Press")

[Target Text 3] Talking about this, I remember that when Zhejiang Province and Jiangsu Province were developing the private sector and township enterprises, the local entrepreneurs cultivated a strong pioneering spirit. To reach their goals, they were willing to explore all paths, go through all troubles, try all means and endure all hardships.

[Analysis] This sentence has a digital abbreviation term, a distinctive symbol of China's political discourse. "四千精神" represents a four-character structure in Chinese that is succinct, concise and condensed,

containing four Chinese phrases. When this is literally translated as the so-called “four-thousand spirit”, it is easy to perplex readers, especially foreign readers. To avoid that, the translator chooses free translation to manifest the true meaning of the four-character structures, in a bid to convey information well.

【Source Text 4】要求真务实、真抓实干，做工作自觉从人民利益出发，决不能为了树立个人形象，搞华而不实、劳民伤财的“形象工程”、“政绩工程”。(*Selected Readings from the Works of Xi Jinping Volume One*)

[Target Text 4] You must be dedicated to your work in a down-to-earth, realistic and pragmatic manner, and make solid and tangible efforts. You should work in the people’s interests, and never indulge in wasteful showcase projects to prop up your own image.

[Analysis] There are two four-character phrases in the Chinese sentence, i.e., “形象工程” (“image projects”) and “政绩工程” (“projects to showcase political achievements”), which are the typical cases with Chinese features. It can easily misguide readers with inaccurate information as a result of literal translation.

Instead, the translator adopts the methods of combination and free translation. There are overlapped connotations between “形象工程” and “政绩工程” in the Chinese context: the so-called “政绩工程” is used to show someone’s image (“形象”) in the political career. In light of this, the translator chooses to combine the two phrases through “rank shift” — “形象工程” is used from a noun phrase to an adverbial of purpose. Moreover, free translation is employed to convey the core information of the original text. By doing so, the translated text is plain and concise with greater readability.

The above-mentioned two examples have demonstrated that literal translation is usually used when concepts and understanding of things are similar or the same in Chinese and English languages, while free translation has a role to play in presenting something in one language that is hard to directly find equivalent expressions in the other. The quality of a target text hinges on whether a translator can understand the source text properly and then translate it with similar or even equivalent effects for targeted groups (Huang, 2024:104). That means literal and free translation should be combined flexibly when needed in translating Chinese political discourse, rather than “stiff”

translation or word-for-word translation.

3.3 Self-Control and Re-Creation Consciousness

Translation means cultural exchanges. In this connection, the primary responsibility of translators is to assist target-text readers in understanding the culture contained in source texts. They should attach great importance to the readability of targeted texts when source texts feature many abstract concepts, so as not to keep away from readers. They also need to focus attention on the expressions of translated texts, in order to enable them to comprehend strange concepts (Li, 2001:49). As a result, translators should be committed to “faithfulness to original texts” on the one hand, namely “self-control consciousness”, and produce qualified target texts similar or equivalent to the target language in form and style, which is called “re-creation consciousness”.

【Source Text 5】国家根据优化营商环境需要，依照法定权限和程序及时制定或者修改、废止有关法律、法规、规章、行政规范性文件。(*Regulation on Optimizing the Business Environment in 2019*)

[Target Text 5] To improve the business environment, competent government agencies shall develop new laws, regulations, rules and other normative documents, revise existing provisions, and abolish those outdated, as appropriate, on a timely basis in accordance with their legal authorization and established procedures.

[Analysis] The sentence “制定或者修改、废止 xx 法规条例” is acceptable and familiar to Chinese readers, as Chinese is “parataxis” — the arranging of clauses one after the other without connectives showing the relation between them. It has great “inclusiveness” in connecting different phrases and sentences.

This means translationese may be created if translators make target texts feature “parataxis”, which runs counter to the form and style of English. For example, if “制定或者修改、废止 xx 法规条例” is literally translated as “enact, amend or abolish relevant laws and regulations”, foreign readers may feel confused: now that there are “relevant laws and regulations”, how is it possible for them to undergo the three types of actions simultaneously? And such translation is not in line with the common knowledge (Cai, 2023:145).

With a good understanding of the original text, the translator adopts the method of division and

adds necessary information to the target text, including “new laws, regulations, rules and other normative documents” “existing provisions”, and “those outdated”. By doing so, readers can easily understand what the source text means.

【Source Text 6】增强全党全国各族人民的志气、骨气、底气，不信邪、不怕鬼、不怕压，知难而进、迎难而上。(Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2022)

[Target Text 6] We must foster a firmer sense of purpose, fortitude, and self-belief in the whole Party and the Chinese people so that we cannot be swayed by fallacies, deterred by intimidation, or cowed by pressure. We must meet obstacles and difficulties head on.

[Analysis] The two Chinese three-character phrases “不信邪、不怕鬼” (be swayed by fallacies or deterred by intimidation) have a profound historical origin and great immediate relevance. Historically, Chairman Mao led the selection and edition of the book *Stories About Not Being Afraid of Ghosts*, to encourage people to have the courage and capacity to confront difficulties in the 1960s. The word “ghost” here represents a metaphor, referring to something strong and evil at that time, such as imperialism in the Western world. Since then, “不怕鬼” has become one part of the Chinese political discourse. In the 1990s, Deng Xiaoping, the then secretary-general of the Communist Party of China (CPC), added “不信邪” (not believe in fallacies) to “不怕鬼” in analyzing the international landscape (Zou & Zhang, 2023).

After knowing about the history, a qualified translator should not simply translate it as “not believe in heresies, or not be afraid of ghosts”, because the translated text does not conform to the style of political texts, and also confuses readers: the Chinese people have now been afraid of ghosts and will not in the future?

On the contrary, the translator chooses to translate as “be swayed by fallacies or deterred by intimidation” after understanding the deeper meaning and considering the effects of public communication. This can send a positive message to the outside world: in the face of difficulties and challenges, the CPC and the Chinese people will only surmount them head on.

3.4 Original Author-Oriented and Targeted Reader-Oriented

There is never one answer to whether a translator is a “master” or “servant” in translation. That means over-emphasis or over-neglection on

subjectivity can lead nowhere, because, as a go-between for authors and readers, a translator has a direct bearing on the quality of translation, but is also subject to the two parties and their cultures (Yang, 2016:91). Therefore, a translator should take a reader-oriented approach to translating while being loyal to authors.

【Source Text 7】加快形成覆盖党的领导和党的建设各方面的党内法规制度体系。(Xi Jinping: The Governance of China III)

[Target Text 7] We will act more quickly to put in place a system of Party rules and regulations that covers all aspects of Party leadership and Party building.

[Analysis] The official English version of “党的建设” is usually “strengthen the Party”, and its literal translation is “Party building”. The official version seems to be simpler and easier to comprehend, but it does not mean that this can be always used in translating “党的建设”. The original text is a good example to explain. When “strengthen the Party” was used in the target text, it would be like this: we will act more quickly to put in place a system of Party rules and regulations that covers all aspects of Party leadership and strengthens the Party. This leads to a “rank shift”, but is not appropriate because “党的领导和党的建设” are parallel phrases in the Chinese sentence. And it does not highlight the key information in the original text because “strengthen the Party” is juxtaposed with “cover all aspects”. However, the phrase “Party building” can avoid this situation, since it can be understood well in the context: “building” refers to “development”.

“Change” and “keep unchanged” in the formulation (set phrases) represent dual facets of the English translation of Chinese political discourse. Changing formulations is the inherent requirement of translation in nature, while keeping them unchanged represents the choice translators make after having a keen understanding of the features of Chinese political discourse (Liu, 2024:88). In this regard, translators should not take official English versions as a “golden rule” without any change. Instead, they should be versed in substituting simple but right expressions for these official versions hard to understand, while not deviating from original meanings, not affecting the overall style, and not misleading foreign readers. In a word, translators should work to achieve dialectic unity between authors and readers.

3.5 Whole and Detail

“Whole” refers to the authors’ intended purposes, feelings, and writing style, while “detail” includes certain part, plot, word and phrase (Sun, 1999:21).

【Source Text 8】(中美)合作应该是平等的、互惠的，而不是单方面提要求、拉单子……(合作)不是单方面想合作就合作，于我有利的就干，于我不利的就不干。(Excerpt from the transcript of Vice Minister Le Yucheng’s Exclusive Interview with the Associated Press in 2021)

[Target Text 8] (China-US) Cooperation shall always be equal-footed and lead to win-win outcomes. It is not one side drawing up a laundry list of demands to the other side... In cooperation, one should not be selfish and care only about self-interests with little regard for the well-being of the other side.

[Analysis] The key point in translating the sentence lies in how to express China’s feelings, and show values and stance. This can be achieved by using English modal verbs, such as “should” and “shall” in the example. “Shall” is usually used in laws and diplomatic affairs to indicate some “responsibility” and “duty”. Therefore, it is very proper to employ the word to deliver the message: cooperation is naturally based on equality and mutual benefits when it comes to “China-US cooperation”. Likewise, “should” highlights China’s stance — each side in cooperation should not be selfish and violate the cooperative principle, suggesting “objection” and “disapproval” in China’s attitudes. Modal verbs present tones of voice, so they should be selected before use, especially on diplomatic occasions (Liu, 2024:119).

【Source Text 9】如果世界上还有人不明白，请看看 G7 和欧盟外长的声明，这就是现实中万恶无耻的活生生标本。作恶多端，纠集同伙，变本加厉，万恶之尤。助纣为虐，沆瀣一气，指鹿为马，无耻之极。 (Spokesperson of Chinese Mission to the EU Speaks on a Question Concerning the Statement on Taiwan by G7 Foreign Ministers and the EU High Representative in 2022)

[Target Text 9] If anyone out there has no idea of what evil and shamelessness are, just take a look at the statement of foreign ministers of G7 and the European Union, which provides more than enough examples for both in the real world. Such is an act of unparalleled evil to gang up and double down on their wrongdoings. Such is an act of utterly shameless complicity to join the bully in calling white black.

[Analysis] There are eight Chinese four-character idioms in the source text, with similar negative style, strong tone of voice and powerful rhyme. While the Chinese sentence is in the best position to convey China’s attitudes and feelings, it adds much difficulty to translating it into an English sentence with similar or equivalent effects. In response to this, two English structures “such is an act of...” are used to create parallelism, and “such” is put in the front of the two sentences to form conversion to strengthen the tone of voice.

The two phrases “万恶之尤” and “无耻之极” in Chinese both mean someone is extremely impudent and shameless, so the English sentence uses two “adjective + noun” structures, i.e., “unparalleled + evil” and “utterly shameless + complicity”, of which “unparalleled” is an extreme adjective, and the adverb “utterly” also indicates extremity. It is such a wonderful translation that readers can easily feel empathy with China in the context. Also wonderful is the rest, including “gang up”, “double down on wrongdoings” and “join the bully”, all of which reproduce the negative tone contained in their Chinese counterparts. Furthermore, the translator uses “domestication” in translating “指鹿为马” as “call white black”, so as to make it easy to understand.

In the final analysis, the target text produces satisfactory results in displaying China’s attitudes towards the shameless acts and statements on Taiwan question. Much attention is paid to details in translating so as to achieve desirable effects of communication.

4. Conclusion

This paper, through the analysis of several typical examples, expounds on the five pairs of contradictory aspects, i.e., science and art, literal and free translation, self-control and re-creation consciousness, original author-oriented and targeted reader-oriented, as well as whole and detail. Through the paper, it can be believed that materialistic dialectics can better the translation for China’s global communication by inspiring Chinese translators to translate political discourse.

At the moment, translators of China’s translation community are facing a difficult problem: how to achieve accuracy and faithfulness in introducing China’s stance, values and feelings to the international community, while target texts can be readily accepted and even embraced by foreign readers. To this end, materialistic

dialectics is surly a “magic weapon” to help Chinese stories “go global”, make China’s voice more heard, and present a China that is credible, appealing, and respectable.

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