

# A Cross-Cultural Analysis of Mistranslation in Chinese-English Signage Translation

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**Abstract.** As China's global engagement continues to expand, the need for accurate and effective English translations of Chinese signage in public spaces has become increasingly important. Such signage serves as a crucial window for foreigners to engage with Chinese culture, shaping their perceptions of the nation and its people. However, despite efforts to improve Chinese-English translation standards, the problem of mistranslation remains ubiquitous, even in prominent settings. This undermines the objective of bolstering China's soft power and presents a challenge to maintaining the country's image as a bastion of civility and etiquette. Against this backdrop, this study adopts a cross-cultural perspective to analyze the causes of mistranslation in Chinese-English signage, and offers practical solutions to address the problem. By doing so, this research seeks to inform best practices for foreign language translation in the context of China's public diplomacy efforts, ultimately enhancing the nation's reputation on the global stage.

**Keywords:** Cultural differences; Chinese-English signages; Mistranslation.

## 1. Introduction

In an era of unprecedented global interconnectedness, China has emerged as a major destination for cross-border travel, work, and settlement. As the nation continues to actively promote economic globalization, the translation of Chinese-English signs has assumed increasing significance in facilitating international communication and public governance. A sign is not merely a linguistic artifact, but rather a reflection of national cultural identity. Effective signage translation can serve vital functions, including conveying important information, providing warnings or instructions, and projecting a positive image in international encounters. Conversely, signs with poor translations not only fail to accomplish these objectives, but can also provoke ridicule or outrage among foreign observers. Mistranslation in Chinese-English signage is attributable to various factors, with cultural differences exerting the most profound and pervasive influence. To avoid ambiguity or conflict and ensure accurate sign translations, translators must possess a nuanced understanding of the divergent cultural frameworks underpinning Chinese and Western societies.

## 2. Cultural Contrasts between China and the West

Culture is an intricate and multifaceted construct, shaped by the diverse impacts of social, historical, and geographical factors over time (Guo, 2000). As a result, countries and nations develop unique cultural identities that are characterized by considerable variations in their customs, practices, and worldviews. These disparities often engender significant cultural gaps, as well as divergent patterns of thought that can impede effective cross-cultural communication and language translation. In broad terms, the cultural differences between China and the West are reflected in three key domains:

### 2.1 Variations in Cognitive Patterns

The cognitive patterns of Chinese and Western cultures have been shaped by various historical, philosophical, ethical, and value-based factors, crystallizing into a relatively fixed cognitive inertia that characterizes the collective psyche of these nations. Chinese traditional culture, with its profound and extensive lineage, is rooted in the influence of Confucianism, supplemented by

Taoism's natural essence, Mohism's flexibility, Legalism's rational constraint, and Buddhism's spiritual consciousness, guiding individuals to comprehend external phenomena holistically and prioritize moral cultivation and introverted personality development. This represents a macroscopic and perceptual thinking mode. In contrast, Western culture originates from ancient Greece and has been profoundly influenced by it, linked to a tumultuous historical background and resulting in an extroverted thinking mode, which prioritizes micro-analytical thinking aimed at resolving existing contradictions and serves as the root of Western people's penchant for adventurism and heroism. In English-Chinese translation practice, the most salient difference between the two modes of thinking lies in sentence structure where Chinese emphasizes article arrangement and uses deductive methods to demonstrate grandiose concepts, while English favors directness and reasoning-based arguments to demonstrate key ideas. Without careful identification of this contrast, translators risk producing so-called translation gaps that leave audiences confused.

## 2.2 Contrasting Value Orientations

Western values prioritize the individual as the primary unit, extolling the virtues of individualism and heroism and holding that individuals constitute the bedrock of human society. This notion is vividly reflected in works such as Homer's Epic in ancient Greece, Shakespeare's plays in the Renaissance, and contemporary Hollywood blockbusters, where the characters' individualistic traits have transformative impacts on the narrative. This value orientation serves as the main driving force behind the Western world's pursuit of material interests, continuous conquests in various countries, and prominent political extroversion.

In contrast, Chinese traditional values emphasize that collective interests outweigh individual interests, and promote social groups as the standard for evaluating value. Confucianism, which dominates Chinese thought, underscores "benevolence, righteousness, honesty, and harmony," and its adage "do unto others as you would have them do unto you" continues to guide behavior to this day. This value orientation has played a pivotal role in facilitating interpersonal communication and ensuring social stability since ancient times. A minute examination of English words reveals the disparity between the Chinese and Western value systems. For example, while "individualism" in Western culture connotes a positive and enterprising spirit, it is often linked with "utilitarianism" in Chinese education, viewed derogatorily, and rarely celebrated openly.

## 2.3 Regional and Cultural Disparities

The emergence of regional cultural variances between China and the West is closely intertwined with differences in natural settings, geographical locations, and historical contexts, which, in turn, lead to contrasting interpretations of specific references across the two regions. For instance, China's geographical environment is characterized by the Pacific Ocean to the east and an extensive landmass to the west, containing numerous inland mountains and rivers. When portraying nature and expressing aspirations, the towering peaks are often employed to embody grandeur and momentum, such as in phrases like "连峰去天不盈尺," "枯松倒挂倚绝壁," and "会当凌绝顶，一览众山小," and "千山鸟飞绝，万径人踪灭." On the other hand, the majority of the Western region consists of marine geography, and the region thrived early on through navigation. As a result, ideographic sentences predominantly relate to water, such as "be in hot water" (处于水深火热之中), "hold water" (观点站得住脚), "from sea to sea" (全球范围内), and "mail through" (顺利通过). Without acknowledging these cultural disparities, the English-Chinese translation process may be fraught with inaccuracies and misconceptions, ultimately leading to misinterpretations of meaning.

## 3. Factors Behind Mistranslation in Chinese-English Signage: An In-depth Analysis

Eugene Nida, a prominent figure in the field of translation studies, has contended (1945) that "for translations to be deemed effective, a deep understanding of two cultures is crucial, and trumps

mastery over two languages, given that words only acquire meaning within the context of the cultural framework in which they are utilized." In light of diverging cognitive frameworks, value orientations, and regional cultural disparities, factors contributing to the mistranslation of Chinese and English signage encompass variances in thinking patterns, religious convictions, and traditional outlooks (Zhao 2006).

### 3.1 Mistranslation Stemming from Variations in Cognitive Patterns

Divergences in thinking modes represent the main cause of mistranslation in Chinese-English signage, ultimately materializing in pragmatic style misappropriation. In Western society, individual rights reign supreme, with even governments and country-level entities unable to compel or distort personal wishes in service of greater ends. Consequently, signs within English-speaking territories seldom utilize dominating language styles to command, in stark contrast to the Chinese practice of employing terms such as "禁止" "必须" "不得" to signal the compulsory nature of their messages. As a result, translations from Chinese to English frequently employ equivalents such as "must", "should", and "cannot" in the majority of locations. For instance, in libraries, a sign originally stating "请勿大声喧哗" might be rendered as "You Must Not Shout Here" in English; likewise, in amusement parks, "服从工作人员管理" might be translated as "One must obey the management of working staff". Such phrasing comes across as aggressive for native English speakers, failing to fulfill its intended purpose of understated reminder while causing undue pressure for international visitors.

Another factor contributing to mistranslation in Chinese-English signage is divergence in pragmatic styles stemming from disparities in China's predominantly parataxis language as compared to English, which employs hypotaxis. This difference in thinking modes is a primary cause of Chinglish and over-literal translation. Mistranslations arise from subjective thinking processes, as exemplified by translations such as "bird's bedroom" (鸟类栖息地) in zoos, "Currency Recycle System" (现金取款机) in banks, "The grass is smiling at you" (小草微微笑) in parks, and even "A Time Sex Thing" (一次性用品) in shopping malls. Such unorthodox translations serve only to engender laughter among foreign visitors and have a detrimental effect on national education and daily life.

### 3.2 Mistranslation Caused by Religious Belief Differences

The divergence in religious beliefs is closely intertwined with divergent value orientations. There exist considerable disparities in religious beliefs between China and Western countries. Whilst Western faiths glorify and deify God, extricating the divine from human categorization, Chinese religions remain focused on humanity, with Gods and Buddhas possessing a fundamentally human essence. Thus, in China, finding a term completely synonymous with "God" represents an impossibility. Within this framework, it is inherently incorrect to translate "immortal" as "God" directly in numerous tourist attractions relating to "神仙" "仙人", such as translating the name of "仙人桥" as "God Bridge" or that of "土地公" as "The God of the Earth." In translating Buddhist temples, rendering all names of Buddhas as "Gods" would be tantamount to transforming adherents of Buddhism into Christians. Failing to navigate such disparities in religious belief can lead to distortion of original meaning and even direct conflict. Xianyi Yang's translation of *A Dream of Red Mansions* serves as a noteworthy example, deftly substituting "Heaven" for the customary use of "God" to convey the text's religious undertones. "Man proposes, heaven disposes" (谋事在人, 成事在天) thus preserves the original message whilst facilitating comprehension among foreign readers.

Signage serves not only to convey information, but also to promote and uphold the image of a nation. It represents a form of silent communication between nations, reflecting values and attitudes that can facilitate or hinder international relations. In particular, religious signs can play a crucial role in shaping the perceptions of foreign visitors. Mistranslations in such signs can result in the

violation of a foreign guest's bottom line, representing a substantial obstacle to effective engagement and friendly exchanges. As such, ensuring accurate translations in religious signage assumes paramount importance for successful cross-cultural interactions and international diplomacy.

### **3.3 Mistranslation Arising from Traditional Cultural Customs**

The influence of regional culture has resulted in the emergence of Chinese and Western traditional concepts that possess distinctive regional characteristics. Such ideas have given rise to a plethora of words imbued with local significance, which may bear completely different meanings from their commonly used equivalents. The term "dragon" serves as a cogent example. In China, dragons hold a revered status as the nation's ancestors, with Oriental dragons tracing their origins to the Neolithic Age. The development of this cultural emblem stemmed from each tribe branding the most potent animals as totems, thus demonstrating their own strength. Subsequently, dragons possessing divine powers and the ability to control natural phenomena were incorporated into Chinese folklore. In contrast, Western dragons originated in Greek mythology, with a ferocious visage punctuated by a tangled mane and beard. They possess aggressive and oppressive traits and often represent bloodthirsty and savage characters. When attempting to introduce the scenic signs of Liu Yuxi, an esteemed Tang Dynasty poet, to foreign tourists, the related departments endeavored to use the phrase "水不在深，有龙则灵" to convey a poetic atmosphere. However, the English translation of "Waters gains miraculous for residing dragons" is unlikely to be comprehensible to foreign tourists without in-depth knowledge of the nuances of Chinese culture.

The divergence in traditional concepts also arises from variations in living habits, leading to discrepancies in expressions between Chinese and Western cultures. For instance, public places often use "toilet" as a guiding slogan. In Western culture, "toilet" is primarily reserved for small household toilets (excluding washstands), while public facilities include washstands. As a result, Westerners are more likely to encounter "Bathroom" or "Restroom" indications. On the other hand, suggestive signs conveying less mandatory implications witness variances in linguistic expression. While China is renowned for its adept use of euphemisms to express its wishes, the West prefers direct phrasing. For example, if the sign of "迈步留意地下草，弹指莫折枝头花" intended to encourage the care of flowers and plants is translated poetically, the Western audience may find it incomprehensible. Instead, "Keep off the grass" can be directly conveyed to communicate the same message in Western culture. Thus, in the process of translating signs from Chinese into English, a thorough understanding of relevant traditional concepts and cultural commonalities becomes imperative to prevent the transmission of erroneous or indecipherable information.

## **4. Countermeasures**

The challenge of achieving equivalence between English and Chinese translations is intensified by profound cultural distinctions, particularly in the context of sign translation. To ensure the faithful representation of the source language's connotation in a concise and authentic target language, it is essential to apprehend the nuanced disparities between Chinese and Western cultures (Li, 2019; Cao, 2020). Consequently, to address the issue of misinterpretation of Chinese-English signs arising from cultural discrepancies, the following measures should be undertaken:

### **4.1 Enhancing Translators' Cultural Competence through Effective Personnel Training**

The increasing internationalization of China has led to a surge in demand for translators. However, many public administration departments have resorted to assigning the translation of signs to individuals or machines that lack a professional translation background, resulting in numerous instances of mistranslation. To address this issue, educational institutions should prioritize social needs and adopt a culture-oriented approach to cultivate translators with the aim of bolstering exchanges between China and the world. Specifically, efforts should be made to enhance

translators' perception of Chinese and Western cultural thinking modes, value orientations, and regional cultural differences, as well as their cultural aesthetics. Moreover, translators should be trained to view translated works from the perspective of audiences to reduce the incidence of mistranslation caused by cultural disparities. Ultimately, these measures will ensure that translators possess the necessary cultural competence to effectively bridge the communication gap between different regions.

#### **4.2 Standardizing Language Norms and Establishing Uniform Cultural Output Standards**

In order to facilitate effective communication across various fields, it is imperative to adhere to the norms of written Chinese language in each respective domain. Standardizing language paradigms can not only mitigate the confusion and ambiguity surrounding proper nouns, but also facilitate smoother communication between experts from diverse fields. To this end, concerted efforts should be directed towards perfecting methods for the translation of Chinese and English signs. Specifically, efforts should be made to establish unified translation terms for proper nouns pertaining to specific areas and places, and to establish standardized corpora. By doing so, we can avoid the complications associated with a profusion of translated names, which are likely to lead to confusion. A uniform cultural output standard can serve as a catalyst for cultural exchange and understanding, acting as a multiplier of cultural output. Through sustained promotional campaigns, people from both the West and China can gradually form a consensus, thereby promoting greater mutual understanding and exchange.

#### **4.3 Coordinate Public Management and Guiding People Involved in supervision**

The effective standardization of Chinese and English signs is contingent upon public administration departments recognizing their pivotal role in preserving a city or country's image. Such recognition is necessary to enable the formulation of targeted policies intended to effectively resolve issues surrounding mistranslation of signs. Coordination of public sign management and the clarification of responsibilities across subordinate institutions are vital factors in mobilizing people's enthusiasm for this task. Innovative methods, such as the establishment of a supervision hotline and encouraging active engagement in error-checking, can serve to enhance communication between government and citizens, thereby mitigating mistranslation of Chinese and English signs. Moreover, such initiatives have the potential to improve cultural literacy, thereby impacting society beyond merely practical benefits.

### **5. Discussion**

In the present era, the world is undergoing a profound transformation that surpasses anything witnessed over the last century. It is within this context that China finds itself amidst a critical period in realizing the great rejuvenation of its national identity. To advance the aim of augmenting China's international communication capacity building, it is necessary to disseminate Chinese stories successfully while amplifying Chinese narratives to foreign audiences with heterogeneous cultural backgrounds. Achieving this goal requires an authentic and comprehensive representation of China that portrays its true nature in three dimensions. Chinese and English signs function as a form of invitation to the world from China. To ensure the successful promotion, display, and diffusion of authentic Chinese culture, it is vital to recognize and address the cultural dissonances that might manifest between various societies. Furthermore, every translator must possess a strong sense of ownership, constantly expand their reservoir of knowledge, enhance their cultural fluency and cross-cultural awareness, and strive to be a trailblazer in cultural communication during this new epoch.

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