

# Shifts in cultural attitudes toward translation

*Cultural attitudes change over time. What was once deemed acceptable in a past socio-cultural context may no longer be in a contemporary setting. One medium in which this is evident is translation. Dr Mingming Yuan of Shantou University examines the decision-making of English/Chinese translators and how they reflect the cultural attitudes of their societies. She focuses on three different translations of Peter Pan, as well as exploring culture preservation through translation in the city of Shantou, and translational creativity in online discourse.*

It is through language that we obtain our cultural worldview; through language, we come to understand both the worldly phenomena around us and the abstract concepts that shape our lives. For these reasons, we may argue that language is always political and never more so than in the process of translation. When we read works in translation, we are reading texts that have had important decisions made regarding their socio-cultural meaning. What appears to be second nature to a source-language society may be new and alien to those

Dr Yuan analysed three Chinese translations of JM Barrie's 1911 novel *Peter Pan*, which ranged in date from 1929 to 2011.

fluent only in the target language. Therefore, the socio-cultural meaning of a source-language text is at the behest and mercy of the individual translator.

Translations can also change over time. What was once acceptable in a given society may no longer be so and therefore the meaning of a text from one translation to another will reflect wider changes in cultural attitudes during that time. Dr Mingming Yuan of Shantou

University explores these ideas, focusing on the translation of texts between English and Chinese.

## CULTURAL ATTITUDES IN TRANSLATED CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Dr Yuan analyses the sex-related content in three Chinese translations of JM Barrie's 1911 novel *Peter Pan*: Liang Shiqiu's (1929), Yang Jingyuan's (1991) and Ren Rongrong's (2011). Through this process, she makes it apparent that any changes made from the original source text reflect a change in social attitudes, governed by a translation's intended readership. During the century since Barrie's novel was first translated into Chinese by Liang, many social and cultural events have taken place that have prompted further changes in state ideology and social environment and, as a result, have altered the necessity of censorship.

As *Peter Pan* is a text aimed at both children and adults, its sexual themes are often subtextual, but are evident upon close analytical reading. For example, when Wendy is invited by Peter to Neverland, he says:

"What fun it must be!"

"Yes," said cunning Peter, "but we are rather lonely. You see we have no female companionship."

Mingming argues that this notion of 'female companionship' reinforces the air of sexual repression that arises from the novel being read as a fantasy of eternal childhood. We as readers are unsure what Wendy's role will be in Neverland

and therefore the tone of sexual anxiety is emphasised. Liang in 1921 translates 'we have no female companionship' in an identical way to the original. In his translation, the intended readership is exposed to the same theme of repressed sexual fantasy as the original English readership.

However, in 1991, Yang's translation attempts to clear up this vague role ascribed to women. She translates 'we have no female companionship' to 'there are no girls to keep us company'. Then, in 2011, Ren's translation further clarifies this. He instead writes, 'we have no girlfriend.' In these later translations, the sexual fantasy is diminished as Wendy's role on the island is clarified.

The reason for this, Mingming argues, is that censorship laws had taken a more considered stance on sexuality in children's literature in the time between Liang's translation (which was not intended for children) and Yang's and Ren's. Following reviews of protocol in the 1980s and 1990s, platonic relationships between children were no longer considered harmful to their development as they had been earlier in the century. This is why we read the term 'girlfriend' in Ren's translation, a playful term instead of Barrie's somewhat ambiguous phrase.

This is but one example provided by Mingming. She also analyses differences in the translations of Tinkerbell's physical

features and Hook's implied sexual anxiety. As expected, there is far more respect and decorum towards women in Ren's translation than in Liang's, as well as less room for sexual fantasy, in accordance with modern attitudes to sexual content.

## Manipulating the expected linguistic rules of English allows Chinese youth to express their disdain for a worldview which prioritises self-advancement.

Mingming explores the way in which a translator makes decisions over whether to preserve the Anglophone culture in a phrase or word, or to adapt the translation to fit with Chinese cultural values and items. For instance, 'Brussels sprout' is translated in both Liang's 1921 and Yang's 1991 translations to the Chinese term

for 'baby-pea shoot', whereas in Ren's 2011 text, we read '*brassica oleracea*' (the scientific classification for the plant), as well as a Chinese semantic marker for 'vegetables' in general. Clearly, both Liang and Yang decided to stick with a translation that their readership would understand – a baby pea shoot being more familiar than a Brussels sprout – using traditional Chinese cultural language. Ren's translation, however assumes a readership's familiarity with Anglophone culture, following the introduction of Western restaurants in China. Mingming also suggests that it is now easier to become familiarised with Anglophone culture via the internet, and that Chinese society now regularly consumes Western entertainment as well as Western cuisine.

## LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPES IN SHANTOU, CHINA

While instances such as these suggest a conformity to Anglophone culture in China, Mingming argues that there are also attempts to resist the global cultural tide from the Western world. 'Linguistic landscapes' refer to the language of public signs – advertising billboards, private shop signs, road signs, street names, etc. Mingming argues that there is a linguistic function to these signs (to provide information), but also a symbolic function (to reveal power structures and develop local cultural identity). Mingming's research focuses on the linguistic landscape of Chaoshan, an



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Mingming argues that in Chaoshan there is a negotiation between submission and subversion in translation. There is a requirement by law to display Mandarin on public signs, but English is sometimes displayed too, especially on hospitals and other public services. It is on private shop signs where English is more commonly found alongside Mandarin or Chinese, and it is here that the politically resistant act of translation takes place.

While English was once a symbol of social status in China, more recent efforts have been made to subvert this expectation to conform to Anglophone culture. Take for instance, the fact that numerous private shops do not provide a direct translation from Mandarin to English, whereas older, more established modes of translation, such as those on street signs, still do. Instead, establishments such as tea houses and art training centres (e.g. Shenmo Education and Toneba Art Training) attempt to preserve both local and national culture by providing creative translations, rather than direct translations that render the linguistic meaning of Chinese words into English.

In the instance of the Art Training Centre, the name of the centre is *dongba*, which

more or less translates as the English tone (fitting for an establishment of its kind). However, the *ba* character is added in an effort not to give in to providing a purely English-sounding name, thereby retaining local cultural values. Mingming argues that transliteration such as this results in a hybridisation of English and Chinese, which uses resources from both languages for a creative expression of meaning and identity.

#### TRANSLATIONAL CREATIVITY IN ONLINE DISCOURSE

While such resistive attempts are made in the physical world, Mingming argues that more varied attempts are made online, where the role of the individual is made paramount and creative expression is encouraged among many contemporary cultural communities. It is the instant and multitudinous nature of the Internet that allows online users to disseminate

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language and counterbalance the hegemony of English. This is primarily done by breaking the linguistic rules of English and by using language with

a creative mindset to express Chinese culture and challenge modern ideologies.

Take, for instance, the translational creativity of traditional English expressions. Mingming highlights the fact of a growing income inequality in China and the subsequent pressure amongst millennials to succeed. However, she notes that some millennials have embraced a relaxed, laissez-faire subculture that resists social competition and expectations. This subculture (named *foxi*) and its adherents' attitude finds its most eloquent expression on Weibo (a popular micro-blogging site in China). In one post, we find the English expression 'follow your heart' (written in English). However, the Chinese translation found alongside is a play on words. Phonetically, it seems to match 'follow your heart', but the literal translation means 'to act like a coward' (an occasional expression of self-deprecation).

Manipulating the expected linguistic rules of English allows Chinese youth to express their disdain for the social pressures of (a historically Western) worldview which prioritises self-advancement. By using English as a cultural resource – combined with postmodern literary techniques such as sarcasm and irony – resistive efforts against the overwhelming tide of Western capitalism in China can be expressed. Most importantly, these efforts appear to be more relevant and arguably more successful than those made in the physical world, such as in the translation of children's literature and public signage.



A teacher instructs young children in a Chinese language class.



# Behind the Research

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### Research Objectives

Dr Mingming Yuan traces shifts in cultural attitudes through English-Chinese translations.

### Detail

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#### Bio

Mingming Yuan is Associate Professor in translation studies at Shantou University. She received her PhD in Translation and Interpreting from Monash University. Her research interests include translation and identity, linguistic landscape in translation and global Englishes.

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### Personal Response

**Which areas of cultural context might need significant consideration in Chinese-English translation for Western readerships?**

I've recently read Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun*, in which a resident robot, Klara, observes and accompanies a dying human child in a dystopian world. The novel dwells on Klara's estrangement in human society, providing a reading experience not unlike a translation, for translation, too, brings the reader to a culture different from their own. Indeed, many of us read translation for the very experience of novelty and defamiliarization. It is the translator's task to strike a fine balance between the poetics of defamiliarization and the readability of the text.

