



Psst, Want to Expand to China?

by Charles Pau

These days everyone is talking about China using superlatives: the world's fastest growing economy, most populated country, largest foreign reserve, biggest Internet population, most cell phone users, home of four of the world's ten largest banks by market capitalization, etc, etc. Yours may be one of the many companies rushing into China to try to share in the growing prosperity. To paraphrase former German Chancellor Willy Brandt, "If I'm selling to you, I speak your language. If I'm buying, 那您定要说中文."¹ Before you can start selling in China, you need to get a lot of translation done: company name, marketing materials, website, packaging, manuals, etc. Translators will tell you that translating into Chinese is more complex than translating into many other languages (say German). Terms like Cantonese, Mandarin, Simplified Chinese, and Traditional Chinese can be confusing; and since one Chinese character looks pretty much like another, it is hard to tell whether you are really getting good quality for your money.

"If I'm selling to you, I speak your language. If I'm buying, 那您定要说中文."

This article is not going to solve all your translation problems, but it will help you gain a better understanding of the issues involved so that you can at least ask your translators the right questions, and impress your colleagues at the same time.

Background on the Chinese Language

Chinese characters are ideographic, meaning that each character represents an idea (and not its pronunciation as in an English word). No one can say for sure how many characters there are, though one of the modern dictionaries collected over 85,000 characters. Most Chinese can only recognize a few thousand and a thousand characters vocabulary is usually considered sufficient to read a newspaper. A Chinese character is not equivalent to an English word, since most ideas are expressed with a number of characters. For example, 人 is a person, 人类 is mankind, 人民 means people, 男人 is a male person (man), 女人 is a female person (woman), and so on. As a general rule of thumb, a 1,000-word article in English will be translated into approximately 1,800 Chinese characters.

After the Communist Party took over China in 1949, the government undertook a program to simplify the characters by reducing the number of strokes. This resulted in a dramatic increase in the overall literacy rate. These character forms are now known as Simplified Chinese. The Kuomintang (or Nationalist Party) that fled to Taiwan maintained the traditional forms of the characters, now known as Traditional Chinese. For example, China is 中國 in Traditional Chinese and 中国 in Simplified Chinese (only one of the two characters was simplified). Besides China, Simplified Chinese is also used in Singapore while Traditional Chinese is also used in Hong Kong and Macau. The Chinese community in Malaysia uses both Simplified and Traditional Chinese.

Since a character usually does not give any indication of its pronunciation, different parts of China may pronounce the same character differently, giving rise to dialects. The most common dialects are: Mandarin, the official dialect for China and Taiwan; Cantonese, spoken in southern China, Hong Kong, and most Chinatowns around the world; and Fujianese, or Hokkien, spoken in the Fujian province, and parts of

¹ No, Willy Brandt did not speak Chinese; Kevin Rudd of Australia remains the first and only western political leader to speak the language. What Willy Brandt actually said was "If I'm selling to you, I speak your language. If I'm buying, dann müssen Sie Deutsch sprechen."



Singapore, Malaysia, and Taiwan. Each dialect can also have its own unique characters, terms, or sentence structures. Fortunately, these unique characters, terms, and structures are not used in written Chinese (similar to most written English not using Ebonics words). So while someone from Beijing may not understand the speakers at a press conference in Hong Kong, he will have no problem reading the press release. Unless you need to have a transliteration of your company's name, find an interpreter for a business meeting, or produce audio soundtracks for video clips, you really do not need to be too concerned about the dialects.

Branding

If your company is successful and it does not have a Chinese name, one will be made up for you and it may not be how you would want to brand your company.

The first thing you need to decide is the name of your company in Chinese. Chinese companies traditionally pick names that are meaningful and auspicious. If your company is successful and it does not have a Chinese name, one will be made up for you and it may not be how you would want to brand your company. Changing such a name can be difficult and confusing and damage your brand image. Google found that out the hard way. Initially, they did not have an official Chinese name, so someone took the sound of Google and came up with the name 古狗 meaning *Ancient Dog* which hardly conveys the brand of a new, vibrant, and innovative company. Eventually Google tried to brand itself as 谷歌 meaning *Valley Song*. While this is better than *Ancient Dog*, it does nothing to enhance the brand or convey what business the company is in; so many people still ridicule it as being unsuitable.

In general, there are four ways to arrive at a Chinese company name. If the name actually has a meaning (e.g. International Business Machine 国际商业机器, General Electric 通用电气, or even Microsoft 微软), then it can be directly translated.

The second way is to transliterate all or part of the English name. A good advertising agent or translator will help you pick the Chinese characters whose sounds resemble the English name and at the same time convey certain positive image of your company. Proctor & Gamble used the initials P&G and became 宝洁 (Bao Jie, or *Precious Clean*). Mercedes-Benz just took Benz and became 奔驰 (Ben Chi, or *Full Gallop*). But use a less than competent agent and you may end up with something that sounds like your English name but has no meaning – or worse, a negative meaning. Wal-mart thus became 沃尔玛 (Wo Er Ma, which has no meaning as a phrase and, each character on its own, means *Fertilize Thy Agate*). This might have contributed to Wal-mart's failure to catch up with the French giant Carrefour 家乐福 (Jia Le Fu, or *Family Happiness and Fortune*).

If only part of the name is actually meaningful, a company may choose to combine translation and transliteration, translating the meaningful part and transliterate the other. The most notable example is Starbucks 星巴克 where 星 means *Star* and 巴克 (Ba Ke) is the transliteration of *bucks*.

Of course there is the option of selecting a Chinese name that bears little resemblance to the English name altogether. The Chinese name for Citibank is 花旗银行. 银行 is *bank* and 花旗, or *flowery flag*, is an old colloquial term for the Star-Spangled Banner and by extension American.

The two most inspired Chinese names may be that of Coca-Cola and Volkswagen. Coca-Cola is 可口可乐 (Ke Kou Ke Le, *Delicious and Delightful*) which conveys



the benefits of the products which approximating the English pronunciation. Volkswagen is 大众汽车. 汽车 is *car*, and 大众 means the masses (Volks). Nothing special there. But if one turns the top part of the character 众 upside down, and does the same thing with the bottom part, it becomes the Volkswagen logo. Perhaps that is why Volkswagen remains one of the most popular foreign car companies in China.

There is no need to stress here the importance of branding, especially if you are targeting general consumers. On his show Jay Leno often pokes fun at foreign company names that are double entendres or have negative meanings. There is no equivalence of him in China yet, but missteps in naming can still lead to derision by consumers, and changing an established name can be very time consuming and expensive. Regular translators may not be the most appropriate people to name your company. Investing in the service of someone well versed in both American and Chinese culture – for example the Chinese branch of your advertising company, if they have one – is well worth the money.

A cardinal rule of translation is that the translator should be either a native speaker of the target language or has lived in the target country long enough to have acquired an equivalent proficiency.

Translation

As China opens up to the outside world, there are more and more English materials produced in China: newspapers, signs, product packaging, etc. A term that has emerged in the past couple of years is *Chinglish*, referring to English poorly translated from Chinese. The creators of such gems as “No Noising”, “Jumping Umbrella” (meaning skydiving), and “Help Oneself Terminating Machine” (meaning ATM) are all Chinese with a rudimentary education in the English language, and have no idea that word for word translation seldom works.

While Chinglish may seem irrelevant to companies selling in China, it can hurt companies who partner with Chinese companies for other purposes. If your company enters a joint venture with a Chinese company or outsources to a Chinese company, you may depend upon English documents or packaging produced by your Chinese partner. Consider the company that imported food products from a Chinese company who kindly provided English packaging. Translating a common phrase 回味无穷 in Chinese meaning that the memory of the taste will entice the consumer to keep returning, the package boldly proclaimed “Aftertaste without end!”

As more and more American companies enter China to sell, there will be more and more *Engnese* – Chinese poorly translated from English. English is a particularly complex and illogical language. You can easily imagine the difficulty of someone trying to translate *parkway* on which one drives, and *driveway* in which one parks; or a *recital* where one plays the piano, and a *play* where one recites lines.

A cardinal rule (which in itself is not an easy term to translate) of translation is that the translator should be either a native speaker of the target language or has lived in the target country long enough to have acquired an equivalent proficiency. It may be tempting to ask your neighbor’s son who took two years of Chinese in college to do the translation, but you will have to live with the consequences.

Regional Differences

George Bernard Shaw once remarked that England and America are two countries separated by a common language. All living languages evolve, and when they evolve in two separate places, they tend to trot divergent paths. Calling someone *homely* in England is very different from calling someone the same thing in America. Making an *IRA contribution* is a laudable activity in America, but not



quite acceptable in England. A car in England has a bonnet and a boot and runs on petrol. The same car in America has a hood and trunk and runs on gas.

Since Simplified Chinese characters are primarily Traditional Chinese characters with fewer strokes, it may be tempting to save money by translating first into one form and then use a program to convert to the other form – and there are programs that can do just that². Unfortunately, it is not as simple as it sounds. For decades after 1949, there were no exchanges between China and Taiwan except insults and occasional artillery rounds. So the language evolved separately. This is especially true for newly coined terms. Computer is 计算机 (calculating engine) in China and 電腦 (electric brain) in Taiwan. Equity stock is 股票 in China and 證券 in Taiwan. So a character by character conversion will not work, and some editing will still be needed.

It may be tempting to save money by first translating into Simplified Chinese and then use a program to convert the result to Traditional Chinese. But that does not always work and some editing will still be needed.

Colors

Many colors can have special meanings, and different cultures can assign different meanings to the same color. In America, red is the color of caution; in China, it is the color of joy and celebration. Red flags in China are not warning signs but a banner around which to rally (thus the most popular local Linux distribution in China is Red Flag Linux). Yellow in China is the color of royalty. However, yellow also describes pornography. In an interesting coincidence, royalty in the west has blue blood, and a pornographic movie is a blue movie. In western culture, black signifies elegance, and white signifies purity. But in Chinese culture, they are the colors of mourning, though of course black in the west can also signify mourning.

Thus certain phrases such as “raised a red flag” cannot be directly translated into Chinese. But there are other areas such as product packaging, website design, etc where color sensitivity should be taken into consideration.

Conclusions

Sharing in a piece of the rapidly growing China market is very tempting, but getting your company and products launched there is more involved than simply finding a translator or a translation company. Armed with your new-found knowledge, you can now start looking for the right service provider to help you set your company on the right path.

Charles Pau is a Managing Director of C5 English Services (时务英语服务, <http://www.c5english.com>), a consulting firm dedicated to enhancing intercultural communication for business success through more effective English. C5 English Services strengthens the capacity of Chinese companies to produce high-quality English documents through consulting on strategy and organization development, specialized training and on-line services. He was formerly Director of Globalization Architecture and Technology at IBM, where he was responsible for defining the overall software and hardware architecture and selecting the technology components that enable IBM products to support over 50 languages and work in over 150 countries. Besides U.S., he has worked in Hong Kong, Singapore, and Beijing. Charles can be reached at charles@c5english.com.

² One of the many free tools on-line: <http://www.mandarintools.com/dimsum.html>