

Translating Chinese Literature and Culture for Contemporary English Readers: Meaning, Imagology, and Context¹

◎ TAN Zaixi

Hong Kong Baptist University

Abstract: Under the country's initiative to make Chinese literature and culture "go international," the translation of Chinese texts into English and other foreign languages, including texts in the various fields of literature, culture, and academia, has been developing rapidly with government funding support. Its study has in recent years also become a focal point, which seems a fitting response in TS research in China to the problems and interferences brought about by factors in the political and economic world at large. This paper offers a discussion of some of the major issues involving how to handle Chinese mother-tongue to English-language translating. These include issues on the linguistic and cultural politics of interlingual/cross-cultural communication ("inbound" vs. "outbound" translation), the intrinsic relations between outbound translation and national (self) imagology, and the dynamics of institutional outbound translation in the Chinese context. Hopefully, insights from the study may help promote development of outbound translation, as well as research into such translation, by native Chinese scholars of their mother-tongue texts into English or other foreign languages.

Keywords: translator's mother-tongue texts, foreign reception, cultural politics, image reconstruction, institutional translation, Chinese context

CLC: H059 **Document Code:** A **Article ID:** 2096-4374(2026)01-0006-17

DOI: 10.53397/hunnu.jflc.202601002

The study of how best to tell the China story—more specifically, how best to communicate to the world "a true, multi-dimensional and panoramic view of China"² (He 39)—has in recent years become an increasingly interesting research topic for trans-lingual and trans-cultural studies in China. The truth is that past efforts to introduce Chinese literature and culture overseas have not always been as successful as desired, and so work must be undertaken in researching why that is so. Of course there is no denying that, against the background of a rapidly-growing Chinese economy, there may be widespread misunderstanding of the China image resulting from foreign governments' fear of an imagined "China threat." In some countries in the West, the situation is

sometimes reportedly made difficult regarding China's efforts, for example, to develop Confucius institute programs locally, whose aim is merely to help local people better understand Chinese literature and culture. But from the trans-/cross-cultural communication studies perspective, understanding or misunderstanding of the China image in a foreign language-cultural environment is, in the last analysis, due in all respects to how that image is transmitted or communicated for target reception. Therefore, researching the "how best" as well as the "what best" questions in studies such as this one would be of close relevance to helping with the country's initiative for making Chinese literature and culture "go international" effectively. In more specific terms, this paper focuses attention on some of the major issues involving how to handle Chinese mother-tongue to English-language translating, including issues on the linguistic and cultural politics of interlingual communication ("inbound" [a.k.a. "inward"] vs. "outbound" [a.k.a. "outward"] translation), the intrinsic relations between outbound translation and (self) imagology, and the dynamics of institutional outbound translation in the Chinese context. The aim of the discussion is to draw insights not only on how to help with disseminating Chinese literature and culture overseas, but also on the development of TS research with particular regard to the dynamics and the cultural politics of "outbound" translation in the Chinese context.

1. The Linguistics and Cultural Politics of Interlingual Communication (“Inbound” vs. “Outbound” Translation)

As broadly understood, translation is a bi-directional activity: it can move from the foreign language to the mother tongue, or, vice versa, from the mother tongue to the foreign language; or from one to another foreign language, i.e., from L2 to L3, or even from L3 to L4; and so on. In general, however, one would expect the movement of translation to be from a foreign language to the translator's mother tongue. So, it may be rightly said that the "unmarked" meaning of the translational direction is movement into the mother tongue, in the sense that when one mentions "translation" it is normally understood to refer to "translating from a foreign language into the mother tongue" and not the other way round. For example, in talking about the translation activities in ancient Rome or in the Tudor era of England, we would first and foremost be referring to translation into Latin (from Greek) or into English (from the classical or non-classical languages) rather than from Latin into Greek by Roman translators or from English into other European languages by native English translators respectively. Similarly, in talking about the important role played by translation in the Chinese context, for example, in the New Culture Movement of the early 20th century, or during the contemporary period since China opened up to the outside world in the late 1970s and early 1980s, we would also be primarily referring to translating *into* rather than *from* the Chinese language. There are, of course, various terms in Chinese to refer to this inbound or inward flow of the translation act, including “译入母语” (literally: “translating into the mother tongue”), “对内翻译”/“内向翻译” (literally: “inbound/inward translation”), and “顺向翻译” (literally: “natural-direction translation”), but the use of such descriptors is usually not necessary, unless in particular contrast with a “marked,” “inverse” meaning of “译出母语” (literally: “translating out of the mother tongue”) or “对外翻译”/“外向翻译”/“外译” (all meaning literally: “translating outwardly”/“outward/outbound translation”).

This “unmarked” feature of the meaning of “translation” then entails a translational principle over the direction in which the translator acts, involving any given language-pair in the translation process, i.e.: “a translator should, as far as possible, translate into his own mother tongue or into a language of which he or she has a mastery equal to that of his or her mother tongue.” This is known as the mother tongue/native speaker principle following the UNESCO Recommendation made at the 19th session of its General Conference meeting in Nairobi (22 November 1976). One of the most immediate implications of this mother-tongue translation principle is that when employing translators/interpreters to work for the UN, potential candidates are required to be persons who translate/interpret into their “own mother tongue” (UNESCO 42; see also discussion in Picken 245).

Obviously, such a requirement is based on a consideration of how best to guarantee the linguistic quality of the target text in the translation act. As is widely agreed upon in the linguistics field, compared with non-native speakers of a given language, native speakers would be in a linguistically more authoritative position “because of their greater facility in demonstrating fluent, idiomatically appropriate language, and in appreciating the cultural aspects of a language” (Chomsky qtd. in Lai Ping Florence Ma 2). Indeed, this native speaker capacity is also true in the case of the translator/interpreter. For we know for sure that only when one translates/interprets into one’s own language will one be “a reliable informant of linguistic knowledge” (Widdowson qtd. in Lai Ping Florence Ma 2). In other words, if the target language is not the translator/interpreter’s mother tongue, then they will have difficulty in assuring themselves that the text they produce read or sound as adequate, natural, and idiomatic as authentic native-speaker writing would read or sound, especially in terms of the linguistic, rhetorical, and cultural subtleties and nuances of expression.

Of course, it is also important to note that the actual practices in Chinese translation history have widely underpinned the necessity of following the mother-tongue principle. Except for a few cases where translation into the Chinese language may have involved active participation by non-native Chinese speakers—such as Buddhist scholar Kumārajīva who translated the central texts of Madhyamika Buddhism into Chinese or Italian Jesuit priest Matteo Ricci who rendered the first six books of *Euclid’s Elements* into Chinese, though in close collaboration with native Chinese scholar Xu Guangqi—the vast majority of translations which China has produced, from Buddhist translation through the various periods of the East Han, the East Jin, the Tang, and the Song dynasties, to science and technological translation in the late-Ming and early-Qing period, and further up to literary translation in the modern and contemporary times, have all been made by native Chinese speaking translators. Some of the best-known of these included Dao An, Hui Yuan, Seng Zhao, Hui Jiao, Yan Cong, Dao Xuan, Xuan Zang, Xu Guangqi, Li Zhizao, Yang Tingyun, Li Tianjing, Lin Shu, Yan Fu, Zhu Shenghao, Bian Zhilin, Lu Xun, and Fu Lei. To put it another way, what we can safely say is that, in the Chinese history of translation since antiquity, with particular regard to the translation of secular literature over the last few hundred years, translations in the Chinese language, produced in China, of such great Western authors as Homer, Herodotus, Plato, and Aristotle; Terence, Cicero, Virgil, and Horace; Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio; Shakespeare, Milton, Dryden, Defoe, Austen, Dickens, Thackeray, Brontë, and Hardy; Cervantes; Voltaire, Hugo, Dumas, and Balzac; Goethe, Schiller, Hölderlin, Schlegel, Grimm, Humboldt, Nietzsche, and so on, have all been the accomplishments of translators speaking the Chinese language as their mother tongue. In a sense, it would not be possible to imagine how non-native Chinese speakers could comfortably translate into Chinese their mother-tongue source texts, such as by Shakespeare

in English, Rousseau in French, Goethe in German, Cervantes in Spanish, Croce in Italian, or Dostoevsky in Russian; or produce target texts for ready target reception in a Chinese-language environment. Hence, it is only natural to render support to the UNESCO mother-tongue principle and to the basic position of this paper that translating into, *not out of*, the translator's mother tongue should constitute the primary direction of translational movement.

However, a paradox seems to occur if we look at what is currently happening in the Chinese context involving the activities of "translating China." By the mother-tongue principle or by the basic position argued for in this paper, the task of "translating China," i.e., that of "translating Chinese-written texts into foreign languages," should be undertaken by translators who are mother-tongue speakers of the various target languages such as English, French, Spanish, Russian, German, Japanese, and so on. But the real-life translation situation in China presents a rather different picture. Simply put, the large-scale activities of "translating China" that have been going on since the early years of the new millennium seem to basically involve Chinese translators rendering Chinese texts "outwardly" into foreign languages, hence not observing the above-described mother-tongue principle. As the reasons for this are of an interesting and complex nature, and will be looked at further in section 4 when we address the related issue of institutional translation, no detailed discussion of it will be made here. Suffice it to say at this point that, insofar as the current Chinese context is concerned, non-compliance with the so-called mother-tongue principle seems in fact to be the only successful way forward for "translating China" and that it is not quite a linguistically/language-culturally-driven approach. Rather, the approach is based on considerations of the politics or cultural-politics of translation. But before we take up the issue again further below, it is important to first examine the intrinsic relations between translating out of the mother tongue (i.e., outbound translation) and how the national (self) image of the mother-tongue ST is (re-)constructed in a foreign target-language setting.

2. The Intrinsic Relations Between (Outbound) Translation and National (Self) Imagology

In addressing how the act of outbound translation is closely and intrinsically related to the construction/reconstruction of the national (self) image of the mother-tongue ST in a foreign target-language setting, there are a few basic points to be considered first, i.e., points that involve how to understand the meaning of "national (self) image," the concepts of "nation as people" vs. "nation as state," and the notion of "nation (re-)building" or national (self) image (re-)construction.

To begin with, the meaning of the literary "national image" may be approached from two distinctive perspectives. For translating into the mother tongue (inbound translation), the translated national textual image is that of the Other or that of the foreign/alien, where the translator focuses on how to interpret the image that has been constructed in the alien, source text; for translating out of the mother tongue (outbound translation), on the other hand, the translated national textual image is that of the national self, i.e., the literary self-image of the nation of which the translator immerses himself/herself as an integral component, where he/she focuses on how to construct or reconstruct an image of themselves which they would want people of other cultures to see and to understand.

With regard to the concepts of "nation as people" vs. "nation as state" in outbound translation

in the Chinese context, there is also a twofold distinction for understanding or interpreting these concepts. In the case of the former, “nation” is understood as “people” on a biological, anthropological, linguistic, and socio-cultural basis, referring to: (a) a single nation of people where “nation” equals “ethnic group”/“ethnicity”; and (b) a multi-nation of people, or alternatively super-nation, in the sense of “nation composed of diverse ethnic groups.” Examples may include, for (a): the use of the Chinese word *minzu* (民族) in such expressions as “中国少数民族” (minority ethnic groups in China), “汉族”/“汉民族” (the Han ethnic group), “藏族”/“藏民族” (the Tibetan ethnic group), “中国民族报” (*China Ethnic News*) or “中国民族人口调查” (China’s ethnic population census) (Xu); and for (b): use of *minzu* in such expressions as “中华民族” (the Chinese nation), “(中华)民族英雄” ([China’s] national heroes), “中华民族由56个不同民族组成” (the Chinese nation is made of 56 different ethnic groups/the Chinese people are composed of 56 different ethnicities), and so on. In the case of the latter concept, i.e., that of “nation as state,” where “nation” is “state” and “state” is “nation,” there is the distinction between “single-nation state” and “multi-nation state.” This distinction, however, must be approached in relative terms. Though “single-nation states” in the sense of “states that are each inhabited by people of one and only one ethnicity” were not an uncommon phenomenon in history, especially in feudal societies, when there was often serious lack of inter-ethnicity or inter-culture exchanges, they now seem more to be a theoretical possibility than an actual existence. In modern and particularly post-modern society, with so much forever increasing human mobility and communication across territorial and cultural boundaries, there cannot possibly be any states that are strictly inhabited by “one and only one ethnicity.” What is to be actually found, in most if not all cases, must be multi-nation or super-nation states that consist of diverse ethnicities. Some of the more familiar of such multi-ethnicity states are, for example, China, Russia, Nigeria, Indonesia, India, the Philippines, Vietnam, Britain, America, Canada, and Brazil. Besides, as noted above, even those which were traditionally known as single-nation states or ethnostates such as Japan, Korea (both South and North), Mongolia, Germany, France, Finland, and Iceland have in fact a certain proportion of their population—and sometimes quite a big proportion at that—comprised of other ethnicities.

As for the notion of “nation (re-)building” or national (self) image (re-)construction, my position on how to interpret it has to do with how we approach the key concept of “construction.” Over the last few decades, what has prevailed in Western academia is obviously the “constructionist” view on “nation building,” which in turn is based on Benedict Anderson’s idea of “Imagined Community.” According to this view, nations are but communities or entities “imagined” or “invented” under given social, cultural, and political conditions (Eley and Suny 6–7). Such narratives as “imagined communities” and “invented entities” are then found to be among the many typical mainstream constructionist beliefs, such as in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, Homi Bhabha, Stuart Hall (*Modernity*), and Harald Bauder, on how national images or national self-images are “constructed.”

It must, of course, be recognized that the idea of “constructedness” in the construction of the national (self) image does make sense because, whether in literary creation or translation, images are indeed “constructed”/“re-constructed.” However, from our point of view, it would be a fallacious and groundless argument to say that our national (self) image is “constructed” out of sheer “imagination,” and we as a nation are in the end but an “imagined community.” What we believe makes better sense, especially with respect to translation (out of the mother tongue in particular), is that the “constructedness” of the national (self) image must be based on what exists

in the real world, not on what is unreal, imagined or even invented/fabricated.

This argument is what I would call a “dialectic-materialistic positioning” on nation- or national (self) image (re-)building. In translating a Chinese source text out of the mother tongue, national image-building means national image self-building/self-construction in a changed language-cultural environment, involving a three-faceted differentiation of the actual reference to the Chinese notion of *minzu*:

- Facet 1: *Minzu* is “a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture” (Stalin 294);
- Facet 2: *Minzu*, in terms of its concrete, biological and anthropological constitution, is a case of ethnicity. For example, in the Chinese context, it is any one of the country’s 56 ethnic groups, such as Han (汉族), Mongol (蒙古族), Hui (回族), Tibetan (藏族), Uygur (维吾尔族), Zhuang (壮族), Miao (苗族), Yi (彝族) and Tujia (土家族);
- Facet 3: Given an understanding of the meaning of Facets 1 and 2, the notion of “the Chinese nation” (*Zhonghua minzu*; “中华民族”) is thus to be defined as “a community of diverse ethnic groups of people inhabiting the Chinese land, who have become what they are through the historical process of the formation of a jointly created nation-state of multi-ethnicity with a common national identity of China, an identity that has been immersed in several thousand years of Chinese civilization and formulated through long years of mutual exchange, communication, and interaction”/“中华民族是中华大地各类人群浸润数千年中华文明，经历长期交往交流交融，在共同缔造统一多民族国家历史进程中形成的、具有中华民族共同体认同的人们共同体” (ICNC Writing Team 2).

To follow up from this above line of argument, “*minzu*” in the Chinese context, especially when concerning the idea of the “nation-state” (民族国家), equals “multi-nation”/“super-nation,” because the *minzu* here means “nation” consisting of a diverse range of ethnic groups that inhabit the land of China. The implications of this for translating out of the Chinese language are that: (a) special care must be taken in handling the Chinese “*minzu*” and its various translational equivalents; and (b) it would not be appropriate to automatically translate every “*minzu*” that one may encounter in the translation process into “nation”/“national” in English, for instance. For sometimes it would be a serious mistake to translate it that way, especially from a political or cultural-political point of view. Take for example how the Chinese ST below should be rendered:

- ST: 古代藏族雄狮国王格萨尔是民族英雄.
- TT1: Gesar, the legendary Tibetan Lion King in the ancient times, is a national hero of Tibet. (*Politically incorrect*)
- TT2: Gesar, the legendary Lion King in ancient Tibet, is a hero of the Tibetan nation. (*Politically incorrect*)
- TT3: Gesar, the legendary Lion King in ancient Tibet, is a hero of the Tibetan people. (*Politically correct*)

TT4: Gesar, the legendary Tibetan Lion King in the ancient times, is an ethnical hero of Tibet. (*Politically correct*)

Out of context, the Chinese terms “民族” (*minzu*) and “民族英雄” (*minzu yingxiong*) can be safely translated into English as “nation/national” and “national hero” respectively. However, in context, as indicated by the bracketed words in the above example, only TT3 and TT4 are politically correct renderings whereas TT1 and TT2 are not, because in the context of the Chinese nation-state the country is the one “super-nation”/“multi-nation” that comprises 56 different ethnic groups, of which the Tibetans are but a component part in the same way as other ethnic groups are, such as the Hans, Mongols, Huis, Uygurs, Zhuangs, Miaos, Yis, Tujias, and so on. The point being made here, as indeed will be re-emphasized in discussions of the next section, is that translating in the Chinese context, especially when involving potentially sensitive material, is much more than an act of linguistic or linguistic-cultural dealings, but very often is an act of politics or cultural politics at that.

There is no doubt that, in the development of human civilization, translation has played an essential and indispensable role. It has helped introduce new paradigms of literature from foreign lands and advance local literature for it to eventually become the national literature of the local people. It has also helped the formulation and development of national languages, fostered the national awareness of peoples, and promoted the construction of their national identities (Delisle and Woodsworth; Brisset; Pym). However, past TS research on nation-/image-building has mostly been focused on translating into the translator’s mother tongue (i.e., inbound translation), and on how foreign literatures have participated through translation in helping shape the national image and identity of the recipient culture (see, for example, the research contributions from Venuti, Bermann and Wood, Ellis and Oakley-Brown, and so on). What has been lacking in the past, sometimes quite conspicuously so, is research attention on translating out of the translator’s mother tongue (i.e., outbound translation), for example, on “the kind of translation activity that is both initiated and performed by source language society in (re-)building and presenting its own image for the benefit of the receptor audiences” (Ni 26).³ The situation has gradually improved especially with respect to the Chinese context. Some of the recent efforts made by Chinese scholars in researching how the translator’s mother-tongue image is (re-)constructed and received in outbound translation have surely proved meaningful to the promotion of research interest in translation and national (self) imagology and reception amidst China’s ongoing initiative to make Chinese literature and culture “go international.” These efforts include research by Ma Shikui (“On the English Translation,” “Constructing the Cultural Self-Image”); Ma Shikui and Ni Xiuhua on “the shaping of the cultural self-image through translating out of the mother tongue,” with case studies of the translation of Chinese literature by native Chinese translators during the “Seventeen Years” period; and by Huang Youyi (“Translation,” “Belt and Road,” “Enhance State”) on how China’s “Belt and Road” initiative can be effectively advanced through enhanced “Translating China” activities.

Of course, general TS research, even when focused on the “inbound” type of translation, can significantly contribute in its own ways to the study of how national (self) image and (self) identities can be reconstructed through translation. But, after all, outbound and inbound translation are not the same as they operate in reverse directions and may lead to different translation expectations. Whilst in inbound translation the translator works to reproduce in the TL what

they believe to be the image of the other, in outbound translation they reconstruct in the TL what they are sure is the image of their own. In more concrete terms, the differences in image reconstruction between the two involve a different degree of operational difficulty in the three familiar dimensions of the translation process, i.e., comprehension, representation, and reception. For comprehension, as people would generally agree, it is in outbound translation that the greatest problems occur; for representation, the greatest problems occur in inbound translation; and for reception, i.e., how the target text may be received in the target language-culture, the greatest challenges are of a different nature with regard to inbound and outbound translation: reception for the former is reception that they actually see and feel in the receptor language-culture of which they are themselves a component part, whereas reception for the latter is something the translator normally does not have a chance to physically see or feel but only generally imagines or assumes to occur in the receptor language-culture of which they are but foreign “outsiders.” Admittedly, though, for many people target text reception is so important for target text production that the two should not be separated. However, for this study, which is focused on outbound rather than inbound translation, it is also exactly because of the crucial role that target text reception plays in the whole process of translating—i.e., not only before and during but also after the translation act is completed—that reception should be given a separate translational status as important as comprehension of the ST and TT representation/encoding of the ST message.

More specifically, while translators *into* their mother tongue would be able to naturally and directly feel how their translated foreign-language image may be “received” by their target mother-tongue audience, those *out of* their mother tongue would normally not have the kind of linguistic-cultural background knowledge about the foreign language they translate into which its native speakers would have. Therefore, unless the outbound translator has got sufficient resources to sustain themselves to live or carry out full-scale field research in the target foreign country to obtain first-hand authentic data about target text reception, it would be difficult and sometimes even impossible for the translator to find out whether their translated mother-tongue image may be correctly received. Under normal circumstances, what the outbound translator does is “imagine” or “assume” how their “reconstructed” mother-tongue image can be received, so that they may think up how best to word their initial translation or how best to adjust/revise their finished product as follow-up action contingent on reception.

But how, in discussing the relations between (outbound) translation and the shaping/construction or reconstruction of the translator’s mother-tongue national (self) image, do we understand the concept of “reception,” which in turn relates itself to our understanding of the meaning of the text we translate? According to Cultural Studies theorist Stuart Hall, the meaning of a text—be it a book, a journal article, or a movie or television program—is not inherent in the text itself, but created in the relationship between the text and the reader. This is to say that the meaning of a text or a discourse consists in how the text or discourse is received/decoded by the reader, and in the process of the reader’s reception/decoding of the text they do not passively take what is given/encoded in the text, but actively interpret it based on their own cultural and ideological background and life experience (Hall, *Modernity*; “Encoding and Decoding”). So, whatever “correspondence” (and “non-correspondence” as well, in this author’s understanding) there may be between encoding and decoding is “not given but constructed,” but how this “construction,” or “reconstruction” (in the case of translation), takes place depends on how the reader approaches the text. Hall proposed three hypothetical positions in this connection:

dominant-hegemonic, negotiated and oppositional.

Specifically, as discussed in Hall (“Encoding and Decoding” 171–173; *Modernity* 272–274), a “dominant-hegemonic” position is a position where the reader/viewer of a text receives/decodes the meaning of the text exactly the way it was encoded or intended by the author. A “negotiated” position is one from which the reader’s decoding “contains a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements: it acknowledges the legitimacy of the hegemonic definitions to make the grand significations (abstract), while, at a more restricted, situational (situated) level, it makes its own ground rules—it operates with exceptions to the rule.” An “oppositional” position is where the text decoder perfectly understands both the literal and the connotative meaning of the text but purposely decodes the message “in a globally contrary way” in order to safeguard or serve their own interest.

Although initially proposed as part of Hall’s model of “encoding/decoding in the television discourse” and not as a model of communication across different languages and cultures, the three different positions which Hall hypothesized on text decoding based on reception theory can nevertheless be applied not only to text/discourse reception in the general Cultural Studies sense, but also to the explanation of how outbound translation is correlated with the reconstruction of the mother-tongue image in a target, alien language-cultural environment. Of course, the reader reception concept concerning the mother-tongue image reconstruction in a non-native cultural setting does not mean what is required is producing a translation that guarantees the receptor’s total or “unquestioning” acceptance of the source text or image in terms of its content or the author’s ideology. What is important is that the (outbound) translator should do everything possible to ensure that their target audience does not misunderstand the translator’s mother-tongue image in the target language-culture, by taking whatever position the translator considers fitting, whether dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, or oppositional; or by using whatever translation methods or strategies available to them, i.e., literal vs. free translation, foreignization vs. domestication, and so on.

3. The Dynamics of Institutional (Outbound) Translation in the Chinese Context

The reason discussion in this section is devoted to the issue of “institutional translation” is that this special form of the agency of translation plays a uniquely important role in the activities of “translating China.” These activities have been ardently unfolding in China since the country first outlined its “strategic plan to make Chinese literature and culture go international” in 2002. As generally understood in the field, “institutional translation” refers to translation that is performed by institutions such as “corporations, churches, governments, [and] newspapers [...] which directly or indirectly use the services of translators” (Mossop 65). In the Chinese context, translational institutions refer not only to the many translation companies and language service providers in the country, but to various state sectors and government or government-led offices and agencies involved in the work of translation either “directly or indirectly.” Some of the well-known such organs are the Party Literature Research Office of the CPC Central Committee (中央文献研究室), the Compilation and Translation Bureau of the CPC Central Committee (中央编译局),⁴ the China Foreign Languages Publishing Administration (中国外文出版发行事业局), the China Ethnic Languages Translation Center (中国民族语文翻译中心[局]), and the translation

departments of newspapers and other forms of the media, among others.

Note, though, that an “institution” may be regarded as an organization, i.e., a “collectivity,” but the concept of “institutional translation” is not the same as “collective translation.” In essence, a translational institution is more an agency than a collective group of people, whereas a translational collectivity basically refers to a group of two or more than two translators fulfilling a translation task together. In terms of the authorship of a translation product, whilst a collective translation would bear the names on the title page of the product of all participating translators, the outcome of an institutionally performed translation piece would often only name the agency/institution as the performer of the translation project. For example, in the case of the English versions of the *Selective Works of Mao Zedong* (毛泽东选集) and *Xi Jinping: The Governance of China* (习近平谈治国理政), the authorship of the translations goes by the institutional names respectively of the PLRO of the CPC (中央文献研究室) and the CTB of CPC (中央编译局). Similarly, the jointly prepared Chinese-English bi-text published in 2020 (whose English text is in fact a translation of the Chinese) of the report on *China’s Fight Against COVID-19* is authored not by the name of individual translators but by that of the Joint Research Group of the China Watch Institute (*China Daily*), the Institute of Contemporary China Studies (Tsinghua University), and the School of Health Policy and Management (Peking Union Medical College).

Institutional translation and its operational agent, i.e., the “Translating Institution,” have been in existence since antiquity in the world, including both China and the West, for instance, the translation work by the Buddhist Sutras Translating Center (佛经译场) under the leadership of Xuan Zang; the translation of the Greek *Septuagint* made by a whole team of 72 translators at the request of Ptolemy II; the translation of *The King James Bible* by a team of 47 translators in 1611; and the various modern forms of other English Biblical translating, including the *American Standard Version* published in 1901, the *Revised Standard Version* published in 1952, the *Good News Translation* published in 1976, the *New International Version* published in 1978, the *New King James Version* published in 1982, the *New Revised Standard Version* published in 1989, the *English Standard Version* published in 2001, and so on.

However, in spite of the fact that institutional translation has been an old translational phenomenon, it did not catch the researcher’s attention until quite recently. In 1988, Brian Mossop published the above-cited article “Translating Institutions: A Missing Factor in Translation Theory,” in which he discussed the important role and function of translating institutions in the process of translation and the necessity of including them for scholarly investigation by contemporary “models of translation.” Drawing on the example of Canada’s Federal Translation Bureau as a typical translating institution, Mossop placed importance on the role of institutionality in translation as “distinguished from two factors commonly mentioned in translation studies: the ‘customer’ factor and the ‘cultural’ factor” (66). According to Mossop, the fact that the Canadian Federal Translation Bureau (where he [Mossop] has served as translator and translation reviser/trainer for some 40 years) tends to use “communicative” translation in fulfilling its translation tasks, but it is “not because this is inherently the right mode for the type of text it translates, or because readers would otherwise have difficulty understanding. The Bureau’s translators take this approach because of the institution’s translating goals—goals which are in some sense attributable to the federal government, since the Bureau carries out certain statutory responsibilities and policies of the federal government in the area of official languages” (67). Thus, for Mossop, institutionality in translation means holding on to the government’s translating goals related to its

language policies.

Apparently, the contribution of Mossop's paper lies not only in its being the first major scholarly effort to regard institutional translation as an important area of study for translation theory, but also in the fact that it tries to bring a sociological dimension to it by emphasizing the government's role in institutions both in the "concrete" sense of "particular organizations" and the "abstract" sense of "social structures." By contrast, inquiry into institutional translation in China seems to concern much more of the "sociological" aspect of what Mossop calls "Institutional Translation."

In the current Chinese context, as viewed from a social or sociological perspective, institutional translation is quite evidently playing a crucial role in implementing the country's strategic plan to make Chinese literature and culture "go international." Two pertinent features of this situation can be identified. Firstly, in 2010 a national sponsorship and incentive scheme (i.e., the Chinese Academic Translation Project/ 中华学术外译项目, CATP for short) was launched whose main feature it has been to support native Chinese speakers of English (or other major foreign languages) to translate Chinese works of distinctive cultural and academic value into English (or other foreign languages) for dissemination on the world arena. Secondly, because most, if not all, of the translations into English or other foreign languages are made by native Chinese-speaking rather than native English/ other foreign language-speaking translators, there is bound to be the practice of not following the widely-recommended mother-tongue principle in translation. Such a practice, in the view of this author, is not linguistically desirable but is nevertheless a politically or cultural-politically justifiable and feasible practice of translation, especially in contexts such as the Chinese one.

To have a more comprehensive understanding of why this is the case, it might help to revert to the background situation slightly. Apparently, the previously mentioned strategic plan for China to make Chinese literature and culture "go international" and to "tell a good China story" to a world audience would entail a need for important Chinese works to be translated, and translated in massive quantities, into major international languages. However, at the present time, there do not seem to be a great many native speakers of English (or other major foreign languages) who have learned Chinese and are able to translate from the Chinese language. Moreover, even if there are capable native foreign language-speaking (such as native English-speaking) translators, there may not be enough personal interest or incentive (e.g., attractive translation fees or royalties, widespread reader demand, etc.) to engage them in large-scale activities of "inwardly" translating from Chinese. With regard to the rather limited number of sinologists in various countries, many of them may be accomplished researchers but may not be quite as skillful and experienced in the practical work of translating. As Huang sees it, the inadequate presence of translated Chinese literature on the world arena is to some extent "due to there not being enough native foreign language (such as English) speaking translators to perform the massive task of translating China," which "is a realistic reflection of the fact that at present China's influence in promoting its cultural values internationally is not as powerful as that of Western countries in promoting theirs" ("Belt and Road" 2). Consequently, there is the awkward situation in which there seems to be more "demand" (or "assumed demand," as the Chinese themselves see and feel about it) than there is "supply" (i.e., "supply" in the sense of translations produced by native foreign language translators in compliance with the mother-tongue principle). On the other hand, it may not seem a good idea on the part of the Chinese, especially from the perspective of how to implement the country's plan of making Chinese literature and culture "go international," to just sit and wait for native foreign-language translators to appear and take the initiative of "translating China."

All these clearly constitute the main reason for the fact that the large-scale activities of “translating China” since the early years of the new millennium, have involved Chinese translators rendering Chinese texts “outwardly” into foreign languages, instead of foreign translators rendering “inwardly” from Chinese, and why, in particular, there was the launching in 2010 of the aforementioned China National Social Science Fund scheme to sponsor the large-scale “outbound” translation project of the CATP.

As we know, it was against the backdrop of China’s fast-growing economy in recent years, accompanied by a commensurate desire for the country to develop its cultural soft power, that the scheme was established. The aim and objectives of the scheme are to “translate original Chinese-written cutting-edge works that are considered to represent top-quality research in Chinese academia and best reflect the essence of Chinese literature and culture, so that they are in the end published in their foreign-language editions by major international publishers for exchanges and mutual learning among civilizations.”⁵

The following table presents some of the important statistics on how this sponsorship scheme has been working from when it was first launched in 2010 to the latest funded year of 2023–2024:

Table 1. Statistics on the CATP Project

China National Social Science Fund Chinese Academic Translation Project (Recent 5 Years: 2019/20–2023/24)			
Year	Items supported	Increase/Decrease by year	Increase/Decrease percentage by year
2010–2018	13 [2010–2011]+40 [2011–2012]+39 [2012–2013]+67 [2013–2014]+86 [2014–2015]+113 [2015–2016]+130 [2016–2017]+165 [2017–2018]+185 [2018–2019]=838	—	—
2019–2020	154	–31	–17%
2020–2021	195	+41	+27%
2021–2022	237	+42	+22%
2022–2023	234	–3	–1%
2023–2024	260	+26	+11%
Recent 5 years:	1,080 items	Previous 9 years:	838 items
Total (14 years):	1,918 items		

To make better sense of the above statistics, it may help to take particular note of the following factual points:

- a) **Features of development:** The year-by-year large increase in terms of the number of funded items, from 13 in the starting year of 2010–2011 to 260 in the latest round of 2023–2024, is an impressive 20 times increase by yearly comparison, and there is hope for the current yearly grant volume to keep on growing or remain at a stable high level of growth. This in a way embodies the fruitful and encouraging development of China’s efforts to make Chinese literature and culture “go international.”
- b) **What is translated under the scheme:** The scheme has so far covered major translation projects in 26 academic fields, including Chinese history, Chinese or Chinese-related literary theory, philosophy, religion, economics, sociology, law, politics, linguistics, cultural studies, population studies, ethnic studies, etc. Of course, the figure only refers to the number of fields that have been covered so far. In reality, there is no fixing of the number of academic

fields from which to choose projects to be translated. Nor indeed is there any arbitrary limitation to the topics to be chosen for translation. The primary principle for deciding what to translate under the scheme is seen in the above-mentioned “Aim and Objects” of the scheme. In other words, as long as the proposed projects in the application are “original Chinese-written cutting-edge works that are considered to represent top-quality research in Chinese academia and best reflect the essence of Chinese literature and culture,” they would be eligible candidates for the award of support from the scheme, and eventually be translated and published in their foreign language editions.

- c) **The languages texts are translated into:** The scheme initially started with translating into English, French, Spanish, Russian, and German, and then expanded to cover a total of some 20 languages (with Arabic, Turkish, Japanese, Korean, etc. included). But again, in principle, any major language in the world can become the target language for the translations to be made into.
- d) **Who undertakes the work of translating:** As described in the above-mentioned homepage of the China National Office of Philosophy and Social Science, the CATP scheme clearly specifies that eligible applicants for grant support from the scheme are “Chinese scholars who have both a high level of expertise in their own field of research and a good capacity of bilingual writing.” This means that the scheme has complete recourse to native Chinese speakers of English or other foreign languages to form the task force for translating Chinese mother-tongue texts to non-mother-tongue languages, hence “not complying with” the general mother-tongue principle in the translation act.
- e) **The culturality and politicality of institutional sponsorship:** The special form of institutional (government) sponsorship for outbound translation projects, as materialized in the CATP scheme, upgrades the ordinary individual or collective type of translation to the status of institutional translation, thus resulting in the addition of a political or cultural-political dimension to CATP, because winning such a grant in China carries with it not only high credit in the academic and professional sense but also brings honor to its recipients for being able to contribute to the great undertaking of helping Chinese literature and culture go international. All this, in turn, adds together to show that the solution that China has adopted to the problem of there not being enough native foreign-language (such as English) speakers to translate Chinese literature and culture, by making use of the country’s powerful institutional mechanism in setting up the national CATP support scheme to perform such a gigantic translation task, is definitely a practical and viable solution under the current circumstances. The successful implementation of the CATP scheme since its onset in 2010 has helped prove the solution meaningful and effective because the increasingly large number of translated Chinese works, made available as the outcomes of the increasing number of CATP-funded projects over the last 14 years, signals Chinese literature and culture being on the move for international “consumption,” however linguistically or idiomatically “unfulfilling” the resultant CATP type of translations might seem to their target English or other foreign-language audiences.

This last point merits particular emphasis. As pointed out at the beginning of the section, “institutional translation” as a special form of the agency of translation plays a pivotal role in the undertakings of “translating China,” and as such it is far more culturally and politically important than in the purely linguistic or translational sense. In fact, this cultural-political dimension of

translational institutionality has for long been a research concern in the Cultural as well as the Sociological Turn of Translation Studies. For instance, the discussions in André Lefevere's *Translation, Rewriting, and the Manipulation of Literary Fame* on the topic of "Poetics, Patronage and Ideology" are in essence discussions of a socio-cultural and political nature. As Lefevere sees it, patronage means the action of individuals or organizations/institutions that offer financial support and therefore have the power to influence the activity of translating or rewriting; what is fundamentally more important for the execution of the given activity, in this instance, is the ideology (i.e., the culture-political considerations) behind the translation project rather than the poetics (or the linguistic or the literary norms) of translation. Typical examples of how such patronage has operated in history would be Gaius Maecenas, the wealthy and powerful patron of Roman art and literature; the wealthy and powerful Italian Medici family that sponsored and supported Italian Renaissance art development during most of the period from 1434 to 1737; King Louis XIV of France, who institutionalized a system of state sponsorship in France to support the development of French literature and art; and organizations or institutions in political parties, religious bodies, social classes, publishers, news agencies, and film and television companies (Lefevere 12). All these show that the study of institutional translation can be closely associated with that of patronage as a driving force behind translating. Also, it is important to recognize that, because of the participant role of patronage, especially in the sense of institutional (government) sponsorship in the Chinese context, there is bound to be a political or cultural-political aspect about the significance of institutional (outbound) translation. The various institutionally accomplished translation projects mentioned or discussed in this study, including the *Selective Works of Mao Zedong*, *Xi Jinping: The Governance of China*, *China's Fight Against COVID-19*, and, in particular, the entire range of 1918 projects funded thus far by the CATP scheme, must seem to also significantly contribute to the solidity of our argument.

Though translation is by nature a bi-directional activity, the preferred direction of movement is that of translating into, rather than out of, the mother tongue. But this mother-tongue principle does not seem to quite fit the current Chinese context, where fulfilment of the massive-scale tasks of "translating (and interpreting) China" is only made possible by depending on native Chinese translators working out of their mother tongue, especially through such institutional (government) support efforts as the CATP scheme. This is because there are presently not enough native English (or other major foreign language) speaking translators to perform the massive task of translating Chinese literature and culture "inwardly" into their own languages, and because, under such circumstances, it would not be in keeping with the country's ongoing strategic plan to make Chinese literature and culture "go international" for Chinese translators to just sit idly without actively participating in the undertakings of "translating China."

It would, then, make sense to argue that non-compliance with the mother-tongue principle is thus primarily based on cultural-political rather than on linguistic or linguistic-cultural considerations. However, this non-compliance should be regarded as but a transient strategy, as it may change with the times or with the conditions under which translations are made, whether inwardly from foreign languages into the mother tongue or outwardly from the mother tongue into foreign languages. For instance, as we see it, if one day China has truly become a world-ranking power in all respects and has truly joined those countries at the center stage of the world, then Chinese-language texts would have commensurately become source texts to be enthusiastically

sought after by native target language-speaking translators, very much like the way in which English-language source texts have today been sought after and rendered inwardly by Chinese translators. By then there would be no need for China to draw any strategic plans such as it has currently done for Chinese literature and culture to “go international” through large-scale activities of institutionally sponsored outbound translation. For in that case non-compliance would have given way to compliance with the mother-tongue principle in the translation of Chinese-language source materials. But until that happens, outbound translation will remain important and even indispensable in the implementation of China’s ongoing plan for the outbound development of Chinese literature and culture. Such is indeed the big political or cultural-political issue for translation in the China of today.

In sum, the current Chinese context of depending on native Chinese translators to translate into foreign languages and the meaningful and effective reconstruction of the translator’s mother-tongue images in the target language-cultural environment both depend on the guidance of pertinent principles of translation and determine the translation strategies and methods to be adopted in the translation process. In terms of what guiding principles to observe, the translator will have three basic choices: Following the original image as closely as necessary; appealing to the receptor audience as much as possible, or striving to both follow the original and appeal to the receptor as best as one can. Likewise, with regard to translation strategies and methods, there are also multiple choices, including those strategies and methods associated with either dominant-hegemonic, oppositional or negotiated translatorial positions, or those described as the more traditional types of translation, i.e., literal vs. free, foreignizing vs. domesticating, and so forth.

No doubt, this way of presenting translation principles may seem to be mere commonplace talk to some people, but then what is wrong with such commonplaceness? Isn’t this true of the principles that we should follow in translation? That is, as long as it is still translation we are talking about and not any form of non-translation such as pseudo-translation, fake translation, or ungrounded original creation. Of course, it is also important to bear in mind that what principles we follow and what strategies and methods we adopt will have to do with what purpose we have to serve. Take for example our current endeavor of outbound translating. As our purpose is to truthfully tell the China story and communicate to the world “a true, multi-dimensional and panoramic view of China,” we will need to translate our Chinese mother-tongue images in such a way that they may be correctly understood, at least not misunderstood, and appropriately “received,” if not politically and/or ideologically “accepted.” Under the current circumstances, where it remains no easy task to observe the mother-tongue principle in translating Chinese literature and culture into English or other major foreign languages for dissemination on the world arena, the institutional outbound type of translation by native Chinese translators supported by such national support schemes as the CATP proves quite a feasible and fruitful approach to the fulfilment of the country’s goal to make Chinese literature and culture “go international.”

Notes

1. The author wishes to acknowledge support from the National Social Science Fund of China (Major Project No. 20&ZD287: “Compilation and Research of Documents on the Overseas Dissemination of Contemporary Chinese Literature [1949–2019]”) and the Ministry of Education of China’s Major Research Project of Philosophy and Social Sciences (Project No. 21JZD051: “Research on Chinese Discourse and Image in Overseas Chinese Literary Criticism since the 20th Century”) in the writing of this paper, which in turn is

based on an invited presentation at the International Conference on Translating and Interpreting China held at Hong Kong Baptist University, 31 May–1 June 2024. A reworked Chinese version of the presentation was published in the *Journal of Translation Studies*, no. 1, 2024, pp. 3–20.

2. All translations of citations from the Chinese are made by this author, unless otherwise specified. The original of this citation reads: “[让世界人民]认识一个真实、立体、全面的中国。”
3. The Chinese original reads: “源语社会主动发起并从事的外译活动在对外建构本民族国家，再现和塑造民族国家形象与民族国家主体上所发挥的作用。”
4. The Party Literature Research Office of the CPC Central Committee, the Compilation and Translation Bureau of the CPC Central Committee, along with the Party History Research Center of the CPC Central Committee were integrated to the Research Institute of Party History and Literature of the CPC Central Committee in 2018.
5. See detailed description of these in Chinese on the homepage of the China National Office of Philosophy and Social Science: www.nopss.gov.cn/n1/2023/1201/c431031-40130009.html.

Works Cited

- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso, 1983.
- Bauder, Harald. *Immigration Dialectic: Imagining Community, Economy, and Nation*. U of Toronto P, 2011.
- Bermann, Sandra, and Michael Wood, editors. *Nation, Language and the Ethics of Translation*. Princeton UP, 2005.
- Bhabha, Homi K., editor. *Nation and Narration*. Routledge, 1990.
- Brisset, Annie. *A Sociocritique of Translation: Theatre and Alterity in Québec, 1968–1988*. Translated by Rosalind Gill and Roger Gannon, U of Toronto P, 1996.
- Delisle, Jean, and Judith Woodsworth, editors. *Translators through History*. John Benjamins, 1995.
- Eley, Geoff, and Ronald Grigo Suny, editors. *Becoming National: A Reader*. Oxford UP, 1996.
- Ellis, Roger, and Liz Oakley-Brown, editors. *Translation and Nation: Towards a Cultural Politics of Englishness*. Channel View Publications, 2001.
- Hall, Stuart. “Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse.” *Essential Essays, Volume 1: Foundations of Cultural Studies*, edited by David Morley, Duke UP, 2018, pp. 257–276.
- . “Encoding/Decoding.” *Media and Cultural Studies: KeyWorks (Revised Edition)*, edited by Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner, Blackwell, 2006, pp. 163–173.
- . *Modernity: An Introduction to Modern Societies*. Blackwell, 1996.
- He, Wei. “Speeding up the Construction of a Chinese Narrative System in International Communication” [加快构建国际传播的中国叙事体系]. *Hongqi Wengao* [红旗文稿], no. 18, 2022, pp. 39–42.
- Hobsbawm, Eric, and Terence Ranger, editors. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge UP, 1984.
- Huang, Youyi. “Enhance State Translation Mechanism for Improving China’s Capacity for Engaging in International Communication” [强化国家对外翻译机制，助力国际传播能力提升]. *English Studies* [英语研究], no. 1, 2022, pp. 12–19.
- . “On Translation Gearing up to ‘The Belt and Road Initiative’” [“一带一路”和中国翻译——变革指向应用的方向]. *Shanghai Journal of Translators* [上海翻译], no. 3, 2017, pp. 1–3.
- . “Translation from Chinese into Foreign Languages: Characteristics, Challenges and Suggestions” [中国特色中译外及其面临的挑战与对策建议——在第二届中译外高层论坛上的主旨发言]. *Chinese Translators*

- Journal* [中国翻译], no. 6, 2011, pp. 5–6.
- ICNC Writing Team. 中华民族共同体概论 [*Introducing the Chinese Nation Community*]. Higher Education Press and The Ethnic Publishing House, 2023.
- Lefevere, André. *Translation, Rewriting, and the Manipulation of Literary Fame*. Routledge, [1992] 2017.
- Ma, Lai Ping Florence. “Strengths and Weaknesses of NESTs and NNESTs: Perceptions of NNESTs in Hong Kong.” *Linguistics and Education*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2012, pp. 1–15.
- Ma, Shikui. “Shaping a Distinct Cultural Identity: A Tentative Study on Translating Chinese Literature into Other Languages and Cultures” [塑造自我文化形象——中国对外翻译现象研究]. *Minority Translators Journal* [民族翻译], no. 3, 2009, pp. 20–25.
- . “On the English Translation of Mao Tse-tung’s Poems during the ‘Cultural Revolution’” [文学输出和意识形态输出——“文革”时期毛泽东诗词的对外翻译]. *Chinese Translators Journal* [中国翻译], no. 6, 2006, pp. 17–23.
- Ma, Shikui, and Xiuhua Ni. *A Study on the Tradition of “Outward” Literary Translation in China: From Late Qing Dynasty to the First Thirty Years of the PRC* [塑造自我文化形象——中国对外文学翻译研究]. China Remin UP, 2017.
- Mossop, Brian. “Translating Institutions: A Missing Factor in Translation Theory.” *TTR*, no. 2, 1988, pp. 65–67.
- Ni, Xiuhua. *A Study on Outward Translation of Chinese Literature (1949–1966)* [1949—1966年中国文学对外翻译研究]. Guangzhou Press, 2021.
- Picken, Catriona, editor. *The Translator’s Handbook*. Aslib, 1989.
- Pym, Anthony. “Spanish Translation.” *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*, edited by Mona Baker, Routledge, 1998, pp. 552–563.
- Stalin, Joseph. “Marxism and Ethnic Issues” [马克思主义和民族问题]. *Complete Works of Joseph Stalin*. Vol. 2 [斯大林全集. 第2卷], People’s Publishing House, 1953, pp. 289–358.
- UNESCO. “Recommendation on the Legal Protection of Translators and Translations and the Practical Means to Improve the Status of Translators.” *Records of the General Conference, 19th session, Nairobi, 26 October to 30 November 1976, v. 1: Resolutions. Annex I*, 1977, pp. 39–43. unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000114038. page=155.
- Venuti, Lawrence. “Local Contingencies: Translation and National Identities.” *Nation, Language and the Ethics of Translation*, edited by Sandra Bermann and Michael Wood, Princeton UP, 2005, pp. 177–202.
- Widdowson, Henry G. “ELT and EL Teachers: Matters Arising.” *ELT Journal*, vol. 46, no. 4, 1992, pp. 333–339.
- Xu, Xun. “Nation, Nation-state, Nationalism” [民族、民族国家和民族主义]. *The Positioning of Intellectuals: Nationalism and Chinese Destiny During the Transition Period* [知识分子立场：民族主义与转型期中国的命运], edited by Shitao Li, Times Literature and Art Publishing House, 1999, pp. 18–33.