

# On Translation of Chinese Four-character Idioms in Public Speeches

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**Abstract:** Chinese idioms, mostly originated from ancient China's myths and historical facts, are quite good embodiment of Chinese culture and have been widely used in public speeches. The proper translation of them play an essential role in broadcasting Chinese culture abroad. This article takes two public speeches delivered by China President Xi Jinping as examples to study and appreciate the way of Chinese four-character idioms translation.

**Keywords:** domestication, foreignization, literal translation, liberal translation, four-character idioms

Chinese idioms mostly originate from classic expressions of ancient Chinese literary, which usually have closely relation with Chinese myths, stories or historical facts. Chinese idioms containing four characters take the majority. They are definitely concise, but meanwhile pretty incisive and profound. They own highly compact and synthetic form, without always obeying the rules of modern Chinese grammar or syntax, but embody the extensive and profound nature of Chinese culture. They play an essential role in inheriting and broadcasting ancient Chinese culture generation by generation, and they are representative carriers of the essence of Chinese culture and civilization.

Chinese idioms have been widely used in daily dialogues as well as in published books, and even in officials' public speeches. China' President Xi Jinping is such a great master of Chinese idioms. He is fond of using Chinese four-character idioms to express his attitudes, thoughts, as well as political strategies. The purpose of using Chinese Four-Character idioms in President Xi's public speeches varies from simply spreading and popularizing the essence of Chinese ancient culture to mainly expressing China's political intention, by obeying or putting away their original cultural meanings. Besides the literary meaning, the moral value behind Chinese idioms is more significant. Consequently, comprehensive difficulty of Chinese idioms is caused to non-native Chinese speakers due to their lack of knowledge of Chinese culture. Therefore, to make the target-language audiences understand the exact meaning of Chinese idioms, different strategies should be properly used in translation.

Domestication, foreignization, literal and liberal translation are such commonly used strategies. Domesticating translation "entails translating in a transparent, fluent, 'invisible' style in order to minimize the foreignness of the target text" and "covers adherence to domestic literary canons by carefully selecting the texts that are likely to lend themselves to such a translation strategy"(Venuti,1995:241) Foreignization "entails choosing a foreign text and developing a translation method along lines which are excludes by dominant cultural values in the target language" (Venuti,1995:242). They are compatibly opposed to each other, and they are complementary to each other. Literal translation means to be faithful to both the content and the form of the original text. It is required to keep the words order, to represent the sentence structure, and to match the voice of the original. That is, the translation version should obey the principle of closing to the original one in every level of words, syntax structure and style. While liberal translation is required to be faithful to the content, without

pursuing strict equivalence to the form of the original. The foreignizing and literal translation are close to the culture of the original text, while the domesticating and liberal translation are close to the target language audiences' reading habits and aesthetic psychology. The proper choice of strategies in translation mainly depends on the purpose of translation, the linguistic habits and the receptive environment of the target language. Besides the widely accepted translation principles of faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance, the priority taken into consideration in translation should conclude how to broadcast Chinese culture and set Chinese image into the whole world properly and effectively, which needs translators' effort to learn more about the target-language audiences.

This article focuses on the English-Chinese translation of Chinese four-character idiom in President Xi' two public speeches whose target audiences are respectively Chinese and English speakers: *Always Put the People First* and *Build an Innovative, and Invigorated, Interconnected, and Inclusive World Economy*.

Different strategies in idiom translation have been taken in order to make the target audiences exactly understand the meaning.

*Always Put the People First* was delivered on March, 20, 2018 and it is part of the speech at the First Session of the 13<sup>th</sup> National People's Congress. This speech expresses President Xi's sincere thanks to Chinese people for their trust and shows his determination and promise to act as a servant of the people and accept scrutiny by the people. This speech also emphasizes that the public is the People's Republic of China and that the people must be always put first. The people are the creators of history. They are true heroes; they are people with high creativity; they are people with a great spirit of endeavor, unity and dreams. In this speeches, foreignizing translation is taken into priority when misinterpretation in translation has little space to exist.

*Build an Innovative, Invigorated, Interconnected, and Inclusive World Economy* was delivered as the opening speech at the G20 Hangzhou Summit on September, 4, 2016 in Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province. It conveys China's hope that the Hangzhou Summit will provide a holistic solution to the global economic problems and suggests several duties the G20 should take to help achieve strong, sustainable, balanced and inclusive global growth. The speech aims to call for the G20 to become a platform of cooperation, built through joint efforts that deliver benefits to all and lead the way forward. In this speeches, domesticating translation is more often used in order to achieve the purpose of this speech, that is, the same vision for achieving common development under different national conditions and stages of development.

### I. Liberal and Domesticating Translation

Liberal and Domesticating translation are good strategies which can get close to the target English readers' reading habit in case target audiences' misinterpretation was caused, but it makes its effort to remain the Chinese idioms' original expression and meaning. They have the characteristics of smooth, simplicity, clarity and convention, and have great value in broadcasting Chinese idioms' original style and their cultural origins. Nida (2001:28) states that "for truly successful translation, biculturalism is even more important than bilingualism, since words only have meaning in terms of the cultures in which they function."

In *Always Put the People First*, *Tongzhougongji* (同舟共济), which means "cross river in the same boat; pull together in times of trouble" (Hui Yu,2014: 1615), is translated into "to stick together through thick and thin"(Xi Jinping, 2020: 167) in the context of describing the Chinese people are people with a great spirit of unity. While the same idiom is translated into "in a spirit of partnership and joint action" (Xi Jinping, 2017: 514) and "the partnership spirit of going through thick and thin together" (Xi Jinping, 2017: 518), both with the meaning to stick together as partners while meeting challenges in the context of communication and cooperation on the global development in President Xi's opening speech at the G20 Summit.

There are other idioms translated in such way in *Always Put the People First*. *Tianxiaweigong* (天下为公), is translated liberally into "aspire for the common good"(Xi Jinping, 2020: 167). It originates from *Liji*·*Liyun* (礼记·礼运) and extracted from the sentence: *dadaozhixingye, tianxiaweigong* (大道之行也, 天下为公), meaning "When the Great Way rules, the land under Heaven belongs to the people"(Xi Jinping, 2017: 525), contains the derived meaning to share the country with the people, or that a public spirit will rule all under the heaven when the great way prevails. Here, "aspire for the common good" is a more appropriate translation in the

context of expressing Chinese people's determination in dauntlessly pursuing and realizing the Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation. Zuoxiangqicheng (坐享其成), whose original meaning is translated into a complete sentence: "We cannot sit idle and enjoy the fruits of others' work" (Xi Jinping, 2020: 166) This translation is very simple and vivid, and it is similar to but much better than its literal meaning with the domesticating translation "reap where one has not sown", since the context is to show Chinese people's endeavor to fulfill the goal of creating a better life. Kejinzhishou (恪尽职守), originally from *Sun Tzu's Art of War*, meaning to do one's own work carefully and conscientiously, is translated liberally into "perform my duties scrupulously" (Xi Jinping, 2020: 165). Xingluomibu (星罗密布) is into "extensive and productive" (Xi Jinping, 2020: 166); wujianbucui (无坚不摧) is translated into a single word "invincible" (Xi Jinping, 2020: 167), while ziqiangbuxi (自强不息), whose original meaning is to exert and strive hard without any let-up, is translated into a complete sentence: "Our pursuit of progress has never paused" (Xi Jinping, 2020: 166) in the context of expressing that Chinese people are people with endeavor spirit and that what the Chinese people have achieved stems from ingenuity and expertise, hard work and enormous sacrifice.

Jiejinqianli (竭尽全力) is translated liberally into "do my best". It was first published in *The Biography of The Three Kingdoms · Wei Zhi · JiaKui* in the Western Jin Dynasty by Pei Songzhi. It means to exert all one's strength.

To avoid the target English audiences feeling confused, in *Build an Innovative, Invigorated, Interconnected, and Inclusive World Economy*, the Chinese traditional medicine term biaobenjianzhi (标本兼治), whose original meaning is "to treat both the outward symptoms and root causes of an illness; a disease at the same time-strike at the root of a problem as well as its harmful effect; seek both temporary and permanent solutions" (Hui Yu, 2014: 92), is translated into "a prescription that can treat both the symptoms and root causes of the problems" (Xi Jinping, 2017: 515), to express China's expectation to propel the global economy onto a path of robust, sustainable, balanced and inclusive growth, and to express China's calling for a complete solution for economic growth.

In this opening speech, zhixingheyi (知行合一) is translated into a complete sentence "Words should be matched with actions." (Xi Jinping, 2017: 517), literally meaning that the G20 should fully commit its commitment and take practical actions, aiming to make the G20 an action team instead of a talk shop in President Xi's opening speech at the G20 Hangzhou Summit. Such translation takes full consideration of the target English audiences' lack of information about ancient Chinese culture. Meanwhile, it successfully expresses China's sincere hope that the G20 should fully honor its commitment to keep the world economy on the track of prosperity and stability, just as a Chinese saying puts it, one thousand promises do not count as much as one real action. In that case, zhi (知) is translated into "commitment or promises", abandoning its cultural meaning relevant to the moral level. Zhixingheyi was first proposed by Wang Shouren in 1508 during the Reign of Emperor Wu of the Ming Dynasty. "Zhi" mainly refers to people's moral consciousness and thoughts. "Xing" mainly refers to people's moral practice and practical action. It is not a general relationship between knowledge and practice, but the relationship between moral consciousness and moral practice, and that between some thoughts and practical actions. It hints that moral knowledge and moral consciousness must be shown as moral behavior, and that morality is the guiding ideology of human behavior. Nowadays, it is commonly accepted as referring to the unity of conscience and action.

Yilinweihe (以邻为壑), whose original meaning contains derogatory sense, is translated into "adopt beggar-thy-neighbor policies" (Xi Jinping, 2017: 516) in the context of warning the G20 not to care about only their own profits at the price of causing other countries' problems or disasters. Instead, the G20 should give full play to help developing countries as well as small and medium-sized companies to become valuable chains of the global economy. This domesticating translation abandons its original literal meaning, that is, to treat neighbors like a big puddle and pour flood water into them, but remains its connotation.

## II. Literal and Foreignizing Translation

Translation is a bridge between the source language and the target language. It helps to achieve the various

purposes of different public speeches, that is, either to publicize nation policies and guidelines or to make China known to the whole world. Translation strategies serve such purpose and are selectively used based on it.

In President Xi's speeches, literal and foreignizing Translation are commonly used in the translation of idioms mainly aimed to express the intention of China. Foreignization "deliberately breaks target convention by retaining something of foreignness of the original (Shuttleworth & Cowie, 1977: 59)", but remains Chinese idioms' original style and makes Chinese culture better broadcast abroad. Here are the examples:

In *Always Put the People First*, tongxintongde (同心同德) is translated liberally into "with all ethnic group with one heart" (Xi Jinping, 2020: 167) in the context of expressing that China's extraordinary achievement has been achieved by every human being of Chinese. Tongxintongde (同心同德) originates from *Shangshu·Taishizhong* (尚书·泰誓中). It was said by King Wu of Zhou dynasty to enhance troop morale on the way to crusade against King Zhou of Shang dynasty, who is a tyrant and anyone who dared to oppose him would be cut out of his heart or burned with fire. King Wu of Zhou held a meeting of vows in the place called Mengjin and encourage soldiers by saying "We are of one mind. God will surely see the wishes of the people and hear their voices." King Wu's army defeated the mighty Shang army in Muye. King Zhou committed suicide and the Shang dynasty fell. Nowadays, this idiom means to be of one heart and one mind. The target English audiences may not be well informed of the above-mentioned history of ancient China. The Domesticating translation strategy vividly expresses the hinted significance by using quite simple words and it helps remove the potential understanding barriers of the target-source audiences by getting rid of the introduction of its origin. While the idiom hezhonggongji (和衷共济), which means to "work together with one heart in times of difficulties; pull together for a common cause; make concerted efforts to overcome difficulties" (Hui Yu, 2014: 647) and has the similar meaning to tongxintongde, is translated liberally into "to seek harmony and coexistence" in President Xi's G20 Summit opening speech. This translation throws away its original cultural meaning, but confirms China's commitment to the path of peaceful development. And it convinces the whole world that China seeks harmony rather than hegemony in development.

Xiaozhizhishi, dazhizhizhi (小智治事, 大智治制) is translated literally into "people with petty shrewdness attend to trivial matters while those with greater wisdom attend to governance of institutions", in President Xi's G20 Summit opening speech. This translation is well fit for the context of justifying the necessity of the global economic governance to remain relevant and adaptive to the changing times, as the world economic situation changes. It reflects China's attitude towards global economic governance by smooth and simple language the target-language audiences are familiar with. Meanwhile, it expresses its original meaning exactly: people of great wisdom make rules to achieve their ends, and make everyone follow the rules; People with small wisdom are good at getting things done, and they get their own benefits by handling a matter well. Qitongcunyi, jutonghuayi (求同存异、聚同化异) is translated into to seek common ground while shelving and narrowing differences in the context of building a new type of international relations featuring win-win cooperation. Qitongcunyi was first proposed by Zhou Enlai at the Asian-Africa Conference to promote the economic and cultural communication among countries. In this speech, Qitongcunyi, jutonghuayi is used to express China's attitude towards the international relations. This translation corresponds with Chinese way of composing sentence and expresses the same cultural connotation.

More examples are listed as the followed: Gegudingxin (革故鼎新) is translated liberally into "discard the outdated and bring the new" (Xi Jinping, 2020: 166); baizhebunao, jianrenbuba (百折不挠、坚忍不拔) is into "never yield to reverse, stand firm and indomitable" (Xi Jinping, 2020: 168).

### III. Conclusion

Literal and foreignizing translation can mostly express idioms' original meaning and broadcast China's culture and civilization. In Xi's speeches, they tend to be adopted as the main translation strategy in handling with information which does not tend to arouse confusion. However, since the translation by liberal and domesticating strategy is more readable, smoother, and easier to the target English audiences to follow, when the rich cultural connotations cannot be inferred from the context, liberal and domesticating translation may become

the priority to help the target English audiences draw the expected contextual interpretation. Whatever translation strategy is taken, it must serve the purpose of public speeches and set up a bridge between the source and target languages.

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### **Notes on contributor**

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