

## Construction of China's National Image through Translation: Problems and Solutions

Li Li

Macao Polytechnic Institute, Macao S.A.R., China

**Abstract:** Alongside China's booming economic development, the Chinese government has started to promote its culture to the outside world in various ways, aiming to help construct a positive national image. Publishing translated Chinese works can be considered a significant strategy for the construction of such an image; however, this endeavor itself is problematic in many aspects. There are thorny issues such as what is to be translated, how it is to be translated, and the unpredictable question of how the translated works are received, disseminated and accepted. Based on data from four large-scale nationwide translation projects, namely the "Promotion Project of Chinese Books to Overseas Markets" (China Book International, 中國圖書對外推廣計劃, 2006), "Publication Project of Translated Chinese Classics" (經典中國國際出版工程, 2009), "Publication Project of Translated Chinese Cultural Works" (中國文化著作對外翻譯出版工程, 2009) and "Translation Project of Chinese Academic Works" (國家社科基金中華學術外譯項目, 2010), this paper analyses the processes involved in these translation projects and some of the problems that result from the translations themselves. It is concluded that the construction of China's national image in another country can only be realized through successful intercultural communication, in this case, the production of translated works and their reception, so what really matters is quality rather than quantity, and what really matters is what the outside world is interested in rather than what China is interested to promote.

**Keywords:** Intercultural communication, translation, national image, translation projects

### 1. Introduction

An image is "a human construct imposed on an array of perceived attributes projected by an object, event, or person" (Nimmo & Savage, 1976) and a national image is "the cognitive representation that a person holds of a given country, what a person believes to be true about a nation and its people" (Kunczik, 1997, p. 47). Of course there are different definitions of national image from different perspectives. The study of national images is multidisciplinary and multidimensional, involving at least international relations, political studies, communications, cultural studies, economics, and certainly translation studies. What concerns us here is how national projects involving translation seek to contribute to outsiders' 'cognitive presentation' of the 'perceived attributes' projected by a nation, in this case China, and its citizens.

## 2. Four Large-scale Nationwide Translation Projects

This paper singles out four large-scale nationwide translation projects launched by the Chinese government in recent years that aim to enhance China's national image in foreign countries to analyze the problems of the image construction involved.

### 2.1. Introduction to Four Large-scale Nation-wide Translation Projects

#### 2.1.1. “Promotion Project of Chinese Books to Overseas Markets” (China Book International<sup>1</sup>, 中國圖書對外推廣計劃, 2006)

Being a large-scale project in China to promote Chinese books to overseas markets, China Book International aims to “promote the socialist cultural prosperity, transmit the excellent Chinese culture, enhance the soft power of China and create its positive national image”.<sup>2</sup> Here the construction of a positive national image is one of the explicitly stated purposes of this project, though in the English version of this official website, the statement of intent focuses on the idea that through the translated publications “people all over the world could better understand China.”<sup>3</sup>

Up to August, 2015<sup>4</sup>, 1,345 funded agreements have been signed with 544 publishing presses from 68 countries, involving 2616 categories of books and 43 versions under the “China Book International Project”.<sup>5</sup>

#### 2.1.2. “Publication Project of Translated Chinese Classics” (經典中國國際出版工程, 2009)

This project focuses on publishing famous academic works (《中國學術名著系列》) and famous translations by famous translators (《名家名譯系列》). Up to August, 2015, 919 projects from 367 publishing presses have been funded.

#### 2.1.3. “Publication Project of Translated Chinese Cultural Works” (中國文化著作對外翻譯出版工程, 2009)

Up to August, 2015, 92 funded agreements have been signed with 57 publishing presses from

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://219.142.85.78/wisework/content/10005.html>.

<sup>2</sup> The purposes of this project, which are clearly stated in the *Working Charter for The Office Of China Book International* on the Chinese website, are as follows: 為了推動社會主義文化大繁榮大發展，對外傳播中華優秀文化，提高中國的文化軟實力，樹立良好國家形象The English version was translated by the writer of this paper based on the Chinese version (see: <http://www.cbi.gov.cn/wisework/content/84371.html>).

<sup>3</sup> <http://219.142.85.78/wisework/content/18122.html>

<sup>4</sup> The news was released on the official website of China Book International on Aug. 25, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> <http://219.142.85.78/wisework/content/155329.html>.

23 countries, involving 945 categories of books and 14 versions under this Project.<sup>6</sup>

#### 2.1.4. “Translation Project of Chinese Academic Works in Humanities and Social Sciences” (國家社科基金中華學術外譯項目, 2010)

Up to August, 2015, 354 items have been funded under this project.

Year	Number of Funded Items		Total
	1 <sup>st</sup> Round	2 <sup>nd</sup> Round	
2015	75	0	75
2014	41	45	86
2013	29	38	67
2012	34	39	73
2011	13	27	40
2010	13		13
			354

#### 2.2. A Brief Summary of the Four Translation Projects

The following table shows the total numbers of the funded items under these projects. It can be seen from the table that in the past few years, 4,834 items have been funded, translated and published. We have to say that the number is astonishing. Except for the “academic works” project, which is commissioned twice a year, all the other three are commissioned on a yearly basis. Once a book succeeds in being chosen for a certain project, usually the translated version has to be published within one or two years.

Starting Year	Name of Project	Number of Funded Items	Total Number of Funded Items
2006	China Book International	2,616	4,834
2009	Classics	919	
2009	Cultural works	945	
2010	Academic works	354	

In addition to the limited time given to translation, from the numbers alone, it would seem that positive images of China would be flooding the Western market. However, there are issues with the quality of the translations, and more generally with the effectiveness of a policy that assumes that intercultural communication can be effected simply by making texts available in

<sup>6</sup> <http://219.142.85.78/wisework/content/155329.html>.

translation.

Little or no research has been done to find out what the potential foreign readers are interested in; normally, a committee consisting of several experts from different fields in China will decide what is to be included and translated. However, the priorities of a small group of Chinese experts may not align with the interests of foreign readers.

Since the translated works aim to enhance China's national image and make the rest of the world better understand China, the quality of the translations, or in other words, how the translation is done, is absolutely crucial, yet the lack of qualified translators is an indisputable fact in China at present. The project of publishing so many translated works within such a short period of time with few qualified translators is at best problematic, at worst doomed to failure. Furthermore, there are few quality control criteria and monitoring systems to be found in these translation projects.

Though there is a tendency to cooperate with some mainstream foreign publishers when disseminating the translated texts, some of the books that result from these projects are printed in China and not made more widely available either online or in foreign markets. Little has been done to investigate the reception — or indeed if there is any reception! — of these translated works in any foreign country.

It seems that the authorities are more content to see how many books have been translated and how many agreements reached; however, what we need to pay more attention to is how many copies have been sold and how these books are read and received — and cited — in the target cultures and whether the translated books have effectively contributed to the construction of the national image of China.

### **3. Issues Regarding Translation Process**

Translation projects can be used to help construct China's national image, however, translation has its own nature and characteristics that should be respected during the whole translational process, such as the purposes of translation, the choices of what to translate, the strategies to be adopted in translation, and the reception of the translated works. Therefore, it is necessary to take the following factors regarding translation into consideration before the translation projects start.

#### **3.1. Pre-translation Period**

It is broadly agreed that translation is a decision making and communicative process involving a series of players such as initiator, commissioner, ST (source text) producer, TT (target text) producer, TT user and TT recipient (see Munday, 2001/2012; Nord, 2001). Before starting a translation project, the following questions need to be considered:

##### **3.1.1. Why to Translate**

Skopos, a Greek word meaning 'purpose' or 'aim', was introduced to Translation Studies by Hans J. Vermeer in the 1970s to refer to 'the purpose of a translation and the purpose of the

action of translating' (Munday, 2012, p. 122). Skopos theory 'focuses above all on the purpose of translation, which determines the translation methods and strategies that are to be employed in order to produce a functionally adequate result' (Munday, 2001, p. 79).

The clearly stated purposes of these translation projects should therefore determine the corresponding strategies to be adopted in the translations. Furthermore, only if the translated books are indeed read and received in a positive way can the purpose of enhancing the national image of China through translating be successfully achieved. If the target readers are not interested in the content of a translated book, even if they start reading it, they may drop it at any minute, and even if the book itself is interesting, but poorly translated, the national image of China may end up being perceived in a very negative way.

### 3.1.2. What to Translate

Care should be taken in choosing what to translate and promote to the outside world. Since these translation projects aim to enhance the national image of China and contribute to better understanding of foreign people on China, it is necessary to know something about what the foreign readers would be eager to know about China. However, a committee consisting of several experts in China chooses what is to be translated out of the lists submitted by different publishers. There has been no serious attempt to discover what books about China the foreign readers may be more interested in reading. China has a long history stretching back 5,000 years and there are so many different categories of Chinese cultural life, many of them little known outside China. There needs to be a systematic strategy for educating foreign readers, responding to and shaping their interests.

Before a project is started, it is necessary to conduct some market survey and analyses to see what kinds of texts are of particular interest to the potential readers in different countries. At the same time, it is also important to note that different kinds of readers in different countries may have quite different interests in China. Based on the results of the survey and analyses, the authorities in charge of these projects can then provide the information concerned to the applicants and decide finally what is to be included and translated. In fact, in the "International Publishers Dialogue" held in August 2010, *Ronald Dunn*, CEO of Cengage Learning introduced their publishing practice for a global market, "we have a global perspective for our product development. We pay more attention to the international market and the needs of our clients when designing our products... Our staff on an international market will first of all study the local market and then make use of the information in the process of product development so that we could benefit from this practice at the very beginning rather than form an idea about the local market afterwards."<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.scio.gov.cn/xwfbh/qyxwfbh/Document/748623/748623.htm>. The English version is a back translation by the writer of this paper based on the following text from the above Chinese website: 現在我們的產品開發有一個全球化的視角，在開發產品的時候更多考慮國際市場和客戶的需求，在一開始開發產品的時候要考慮到這一點，包括在電子數字技術開發方面我們都會更多考慮到國際市場的需求……我們國際員工在最開始的時候會瞭解當地的市場，並且在我們開發產品的過程中把它們體現在其中，如果這樣我們就可以從一開始從這個過程中受益，而不是作為後來的想法才能夠形成。

There exist, then, ways of studying local markets in order to increase the chances of higher impact. Rather than commissioning translations purely on expert advice, market research can play a more prominent role in product development. Agreements with international partners might in future draw more fully on their expertise in marketing in order to build publication lists that generate active readerships.

### **3.2. During Translation**

#### **3.2.1. How to Translate**

Since Chinese cultural characteristics are quite prominent in the books selected for translation, how to deal with them thus becomes a crucial concern. The quality of the translated books determines, so to speak, the life of the books. As the major stated purpose of the translation projects is to enhance the national image of China, a translator needs to keep a balance between transmitting specific Chinese cultural elements while reducing any obstacles to foreign readers' understanding. In talking about culture in translation, Lawrence Venuti (1995) proposed the key notions of foreignization and domestication. In a later part of this paper, I will use some examples to show how a translator can manage to achieve a balance between these two somewhat contrary strategies.

### **3.3. Post-translation Period**

Once the translations are completed and books published, it seems that the translation activities have been successfully accomplished. The news reports about these projects in China have highlighted the concrete numbers of how many books have been published, how many projects have been subsidized and how many agreements have been reached. The publishers are happy, since they have not only received subsidies, but also found themselves in the media spotlight. The authorities in charge are happy, since there are so many eye-catching numbers to present. As to how many copies are sold and read and how they are read, and whether the translated books contribute to a better national image of China remains — all this remains more or less a mystery. It doesn't need to be so.

#### **3.3.1. How do Readers React**

Issues of cultural reception, such as how many copies of translated books are sold and how they are read in the target cultures and what the readers think of these books, are very significant from the perspective of intercultural communication. What is translated and how translations are read in target cultures can never be unilateral. Stuart Hall (2002) described three reader positions in mass communication.

- The dominant/hegemonic position (in which readers accept the message given by a text, and reproduce the preferred reading)
- The negotiated position (in which readers understand the dominant position but

choose to apply it to their own social context)

- The oppositional/counter-hegemonic position (in which while understanding the dominant coding, readers reject the values it puts forward)

Though his discussion focuses on readers from the perspective of mass communication, Hall's study has shown that individuals are national image makers as well. "Every public image begins in the mind of some single individual and only becomes public as it is transmitted and shared." (Boulding, 1956, p. 64) In a certain sense, the reading experience of those individual readers will in the long run help shape the national image of China. Only if these books are read and received in a positive way, is it possible to achieve the purpose of creating a positive national image of China and make foreign readers better understand China through translations.

Since these four large-scale translation projects aim to enhance the national image of China in foreign countries, it is necessary to pay attention to and make a study of the potential readers of these translated works to achieve the desired results. To sum up the argument so far, then, at present little research has been done on the market strategy for promoting Chinese translations abroad, and there are few mechanisms for guaranteeing quality control of the translated products. The remainder of this paper looks at a case study of the translation of Chinese children's literature from the perspective of these two challenges: quality control and developing a genuine market for Chinese literature.

#### **4. The Translator's Role in Construction of China's National Image: A Case Study (*The Hotline of Mr. Wolf*)**

Translation is never an easy task, since each translation crosses both linguistic and cultural boundaries. In the remainder of this paper, I will take one of my translated books entitled *The Hotline of Mr. Wolf* as an example to show what a translator can do to contribute to the construction of a positive national image of China in the course of translation. Anhui Children's Publishing Press, which ranks among the 100 top publishers in mainland China, launched in 2012 a translation project as part of China Book International. The project aimed to introduce award winning children's works written by Chinese writers to the American market in cooperation with ABC Garden LLC, a publishing house specializing in children's works, located in Maryland, USA. Twenty-one books were initially singled out for this project. *The Hotline of Mr. Wolf*, a book comprising 47 Chinese children's stories written by a contemporary Chinese writer, Wang Yizhen (born in 1946), is one of the series.

The following examples are some of the culturally loaded concepts and images chosen from the book to demonstrate how a translator needs to negotiate between the source text and the target culture in order to achieve the desired effect of a positive cultural image of China.

##### Example 1

Story title: 《畫家的畫》 [*A Painting by Adi*]

ST: 畫家又講了一個阿凡提的故事，火狐狸才罷休。(Wang, 2012, p. 127)

*TT*: So Adi told a story of Apandi, a very clever and legendary man in Xinjiang, China, who always rode on his donkey and symbolized wisdom and happiness. And then the foxes felt satisfied. (Li, 2012, p. 150)

‘Apandi’ in the ST is a very popular legendary figure in Chinese culture. This image has repeatedly appeared in comic strips, children’s stories, and TV programs in China. So in my translation, I hope to convey this popular image to the American child readers as well. With this purpose in mind, I have added some information, such as indicating the significance of this figure, introducing his famous donkey and explaining the symbolic meanings attached to this image, all in order to help the readers form a clearer picture of this prominent character in Chinese culture. My hope is that the added information will support the efforts of overseas readers in understanding the significance of this cultural image, which will be familiar only to Chinese readers. Whether or not this strategy was successful, I do not know — the only point I can make here is that I attempted to align a text that assumes certain forms of cultural knowledge with an audience for whom such knowledge cannot be assumed.

#### Example 2

Story title: 《小狼藍肚肚》 [*A Little Wolf with a Blue Belly-band*]

ST: 有知情不報者，將把你們全家殺掉。(Wang, 2012, p. 121)

TT1: Anyone who intentionally withholds any information about this rabbit shall be killed together with all of his family members.

TT2: Anyone who intentionally withholds any information about this rabbit shall be sentenced to jail. (*Tututu, King of the Rabbit Kingdom*) (Li, 2012, p. 143)

This story is about a little wolf who wanted to make friends and play with baby rabbits. In order not to be excluded by the Rabbit Kingdom, he disguised himself with a blue belly-band, yet his presence was still reported to the king of the Rabbit Kingdom. The ST here was taken from a proclamation given by the king and TT1 is the literal translation of the ST. Here we can consider the application of Skopos theory: in a politically correct world should the purpose of a Chinese children’s tale be to imply that failure to be an informant might result in death? One might also argue that the idea of killing a rabbit and his whole family is simply too cruel for a child reader and also illegal in terms of the law, not to mention the fact that a rabbit, both in Chinese and Western cultures, is usually a positive and popular image for children. So in the end, I have adapted the idea of ‘killing the whole family’ into ‘the guilty being sentenced to jail’ in order to make the degree of punishment more acceptable for the target readers.

#### Example 3

Story title: 《麵包樹》 [*The Bread Tree*]

ST: 那棵麵包樹呢？它又回到了窮苦人那裏。任何富人想佔有它，都不可能做到，因為世界上的財富本身就是勞動人民創造的，它是屬於勞動人民的。(Wang, 2012, p. 187)

TT1: How about the bread tree? It came back to the poor people. It's impossible for any rich man to have it, because the wealth was created by the working people and hence the wealth only belonged to its creators.

TT2: How about the bread tree? It came back to the poor people. (Li, 2012, p. 220)

This text is the ending of the story and the writer makes a brief comment on the relationship between the rich and wealth. According to his logic, a rich man is excluded from being a creator of wealth, which is obviously not the case. But looking back to some thirty years ago, before China adopted the open door policy and a market-oriented economy, this kind of idea regarding the relationship between the rich and wealth was not rare at all, which was of course a partial result of the confrontation between socialism and capitalism. During this period, published writing for children was shaped by the political climate, whether or not the author agreed with official ideology. Capitalism used to be a regular target of negative propaganda and the image of the market economy was related in China to exploitation and hedonism. Wang Yizhen, the writer of the stories who was born in the 1940s, was of course influenced by this political environment and, so in a certain sense, the apparent adoption of such an ideological position in his writing is also understandable. However, for American readers or even for those Chinese readers with an understanding of the pressures that writers of this period were subject to, the statement is overtly didactic and ideologically dated. Today, it stands as an obstacle between the source text and the target readers. Here TT1 is a literal translation of the ST, whereas TT2 is the final version, where the last sentence of the ST is deleted.

As can be seen from the above cited examples in dealing with the Chinese images /concepts, I have adopted different strategies, such as addition, adaptation and deletion, in order to make them more comprehensible and acceptable to my target American readers while attempting to bridge between Chinese culture and my non-Chinese readers. I have effectively adopted the strategy of domestication for the American market.

There are of course well-attested objections to the domestication strategy. It is true that foreignization can help present the Chinese characteristics, as it is a method that seeks to apply an “ethnodeviant pressure on [target-language cultural] values to register the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text, sending the reader abroad”. (Venuti, 1995, p. 20). But at the same time, an overly foreignized text may also stop target text readers from reading. Though domestication makes the text transparent and fluent, it also minimizes the foreignness of the source text. So as a translator, it is always important to achieve a balance between foreignization and domestication for more successful intercultural communication. It might also be argued that in some senses I have ‘sanitized’ aspects of the original story for overseas readers. This may be true, but it is not unusual, even in the target culture, for popular children’s stories that have regressive attitudes to topics such as race, sexuality and gender need to be updated for modern audiences. Translations may have to rewrite aspects of the source text too.

## 5. Suggestions for Constructing China's National Image through Translation Projects

The construction of a national image is a complicated, time-consuming and dynamic process involving many dimensions. If translation is intended to be one of the means to help construct the national image of China, it is necessary to understand and respect the nature of translation itself and take into consideration the various elements concerning translational activity. It is high time we stopped being narcissistic and self-deceiving in thinking that the mere availability of a large quantity of translated texts will promote China to the world. The following items are suggested for the better creation of the national image of China through the media of translation projects.

Spend some time (possibly in partnership with overseas publishers) making a survey of foreign markets to see what the potential foreign readers may actually be interested in and use the data as a deciding factor when choosing what to translate. The projects discussed here claim that a marketing model is being adopted; however, they appear just to be launching new products on a foreign market without doing any survey of the needs, expectations or desires of the potential consumers. And because of different cultures and situations, different translational strategies should be adopted for different readerships to ensure greater impact.

Slow down the process of these projects. China is now eager to construct a positive national image in foreign countries; however, translation itself is a time-consuming and creative job. Translators need to be given more time and professional development to work on the books in order to guarantee the translation quality. At the same time, in the process of translation, translators need to be aware of the translation strategies to ensure a more successful intercultural communication between a target text and its readers.

Commission some research on the reception of the translated works. Since the ultimate success of constructing the positive national image of China through translated works is actually determined by how these books are read and received, it is necessary to do some surveys to collect the feedback of some Western readers. The results of the surveys can be further adopted as a guide to choose what to translate and how to translate so that a virtuous circle can be created to achieve the desired purposes.

The national image of China can be created through various means and channels. Translation is surely one of the very significant ways, yet the successful creation of a national image through translation depends on many factors, such as what the potential readers are keen to know about China, what to translate, how to translate, and how the translated books are read and received. Neglecting any of these factors may result in the failure of intercultural communication.

## References

- Boulding, Kenneth E. (1956). *The Image: Knowledge in life and society*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Hall, Stuart. (2002). The television discourse: Encoding and decoding. In D. McQuail (Ed.) *Reader in mass communication theory*. London: Sage.
- Kunczik, Michael. (1997). *Images of nations and international public relations*. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Li, Li. (2012). *The Hotline of Mr. Wolf*. Rockville: ABC Garden LLC.
- Munday, Jeremy. (2001/2012). *Introducing translation studies: theories and applications*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Nimmo, Dan & Savage, Robert L. (1976). *Candidates and their images: Concepts, methods and findings*. Pacific Palisades: Goodyear.
- Nord, Christiane. (2001). *Translation as a purposeful activity: Functionalist approaches explained*. Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- Venuti, Lawrence. (1995/2006). *The translator's invisibility: A history of translation*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Wang, Yizhen. (2012). 大灰狼的熱線電話 [The Hotline of Mr. Wolf]. Hefei: Anhui Children's Publishing Press.
- Li, Xiufang & Chitty, Naren. (2009). Reframing national image: A methodological framework. *Conflict and Communication Online*, 8(2), 1-11.

## Author note

Li Li (Ph.D.) is Professor of Translation Studies at Macao Polytechnic Institute. Her major academic interests center on Translation Studies and children's literature. She has authored the monograph entitled "Production and Reception: A Study of Translated Children's Literature in China 1898-1949" (2010). She has translated several books such as "Introducing Translation Studies: Theories and Applications" (English-Chinese, 2007), "Waking Sleeping Beauty: Feminist Voices in Children's Novels" (English-Chinese, 2010), "Mr. Wolf's Hotline" (Chinese-English, 2012), and "The Last Battle" (English-Chinese, 2014). Her articles have been published in refereed academic journals at home and abroad.