Exploring Intercultural Communication Challenges: A Case Study on Chinese-English Interpreting

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Abstract: As China embraces globalization, the number of international conferences continues to grow. Professional interpreters are in great demand for facilitating the communication between China and countries with different languages and cultures. This is an exploratory case study focusing on the analysis of conference interpreting from Chinese to English to examine the importance of the transformation process from linguistic interpreters to intercultural mediators, and the factors involved in the transformation process. Based on the theories developed by Hall (1959), Hofstede (1980), and Kim (2001, 2012), this study employs qualitative methods to analyze five recent recordings of China’s top leader speeches during international conferences. The data reveals four major challenges to Chinese-English interpreting. They are: 1) high-context/low-context cultures; 2) power distance; 3) reproducing the value system and the tone of the speaker; and 4) culture-specific words and expressions. This study demonstrates the importance of cultural factors involved in interpreting and provides information to enhance the training of interpreters.

Keywords: Chinese-English interpreting, Cross-cultural adaptation, Intercultural communication, Intercultural mediator, Interpreter, Language,

China has been embracing globalization since China joined World Trade Organization in 2001. China’s GDP has increased significantly from $1.453 trillion to $5.926 trillion from 2002 to 2010 (World Bank, 2012). According to Chinese General Customs Administration (2012), the total amount of foreign trade imports and exports value has soared from 620.77 billion US dollars in 2002 to 3,642.06 billion US dollars in 2011, an average increase of 21.77% per year. As a result, the number of intercultural encounters between China and the outside world increases significantly.

Against this background, there is a fast growing number of international conferences held in China, and more and more Chinese delegations go abroad to attend international conference. Well-trained interpreters are needed to mediate and facilitate such encounters. However, the majority of studies in the field of interpreting are concerned about the skills of interpreting (e.g., De Laet, 2010; Sawyer 2004). Only a few discuss briefly intercultural and cross-cultural communication (e.g., Hale, 2007; Kelly, 2000).

This is an exploratory case study that focuses on the analysis of conference interpreting from Chinese to English, to examine the importance of the transformation from linguistic communicators and interpreters to intercultural mediators, and the factors involved in the transformation process which would be critical to an interpreter’s work.

I will firstly provide a brief introduction about the conference industry and the Master in Translation and Interpreting (MTI) program in China. Secondly, I will explain some definitions and models in interpreting. Thirdly, I will discuss the importance of intercultural communication and intercultural competence in interpreting, and introduce an Integrative Model of Cross-Cultural Adaptation and Transformation, as well as elaborate on some particular Chinese cultural characteristics. Finally, I will present a case study that examines the cultural challenges in Chinese-English interpreting context. It is hoped that this study can raise the awareness of the important role of culture in interpreting and inspire more research on interpreter training from the perspectives of intercultural communication.

Conference Industry and MTI Program in China

ICCA, the International Congress and Convention Association, was founded in 1963 at a time when the meetings industry began to expand rapidly. Now, ICCA has over 900 member companies and organizations in 87 countries worldwide, making it the largest global association within the meetings industry and one of the most prominent organizations in the world of international events. In 2011, ICCA issued a statistics report named the International Association Meetings Market 2002-2011 that gives an indication on ten-year trends of meetings organized by international associations and includes comprehensive rankings for all major countries and cities. According to this report, the most popular subject in international meetings is Medical Science and there has been a continuous increase in the number of meetings organized on this subject over the past ten years. Technology comes second and its popularity is still going up. This report
also counts the number of international meetings held in each country. Take China for example, in 2011, China held 302 international meetings, ranked 8th after U.S., Germany, Spain, United Kingdom, France, Italy, and Brazil. This report further breaks down this number by cities. Beijing came first with 111 international meetings held in 2011. Shanghai took the second place with 72 international meetings, Hangzhou and Xi’an came third together with 15 international meetings, and Chengdu hosted 10 international meetings.

These statistics from ICCA report are found to be even more interesting when compared with the domestic figures released at the Fourth China Meeting Economy and Meeting Hotels Development Conference that took place in Jinan in November 2011. According to 2011 China Meeting Statistical Analysis Report (Wu, 2011), there were altogether 8,270 meetings held in China in 2011, in which about 1.3% were international meetings.

It is thought that with China’s continuous fast development, there will be a growing number of international meetings held in China. Therefore, the demand for interpreters will be greater. In order to cope with the growing need of professional and qualified interpreters, Academic Degrees Committee of the State Council of China approved the establishment of the degree program of Master in Translation and Interpreting (MTI) in 15 top universities across China in 2007. In 2008, this committee further approved another 25 higher education institutions to offer MTI programs (China National Committee for MTI Education, 2013). The number of applicants for National Accreditation Examinations for Translators and Interpreters has reached 50,000 in 2013 (Ying, 2013).

According to the guidance provided by the Academic Degrees Committee of the State Council (Zhong, 2006) the MTI curriculum should include three types of courses: Common Courses, Compulsory Courses, and Optional Courses. While all the three types of the courses emphasize interpreting and translation theories and skills, the optional category offers an intercultural communication course. However, the guidance also points out that all the common courses should be offered by all higher education institutions, whereas the contents of the compulsory and optional courses can be decided at each institution’ own judgment. It means that the MTI students have the least opportunity to gain knowledge and skills of intercultural communication.

**Basics of Interpreting: Definitions and Models**

To define interpreting, it is crucial to firstly distinguish interpreting from translation. Translation converts a written text into another written text while interpreting converts an oral message into another oral message (Seleskovich, 1998). More specifically, interpreting is defined as “a form of translation in which a first and final rendition in another language is produced on the basis of a one-time-presentation of an utterance in a source language” (Pöchhacker, 2003, p. 11). “One-time-presentation” is key because of the “immediacy” nature of interpreting activities (Pöchhacker, 2003). In interpreting, service is performed on the spot to facilitate people overcoming barriers of language and culture. In contrast, translation does not need to be done immediately. Translators enjoy the luxury of time to resort to dictionaries or other resources to deliver a refined version at a later time (Pöchhacker, 2003). This particular study is focused on the intercultural challenges in the interpreting process where interpreters need to deliver the meanings from one language and cultural context to another language and cultural context immediately.

Traditionally, interpreters are expected to be the language experts. As a result, interpreting training programs mainly focus on how to improve the language skills of the interpreters. Researchers point out that 25 years ago, an interpreting curriculum emphasized heavily on skills training, such as memory training, note-taking, sight translation, consecutive and simultaneous interpreting (De Laet, 2010; Sawyer, 2004). However, other researchers argue that interpreters should also possess intercultural communication competence to mediate cultural differences. Gavioli & Baraldi (2011) claim that interpreters should be seen as intercultural mediators because they promote and coordinate linguistic communication and in so doing become coordinators/facilitator of intercultural relations.

In interpreting, at least three parties are involved: the speaker, the interpreter and the audience. The interpreter’s primary concern is to make sense of the speaker’s meaning and then convey that same meaning to the audience. Therefore, as Berk-Seligson (1990) said, the interpreter is not always “just” interpreting. He/she is actually negotiating the way messages are understood by the audience and the messages can only be understood when taken into consideration the relationship between all participants involved and their intentions, goals as well as elements of discourse.

Generally speaking, the activities of interpreting are studied under two modes: conference and community modes. Conference interpreting refers to the use of simultaneous or consecutive interpreting in a meeting or a conference. **Simultaneous interpreting** (SI) refers to the kind of interpreting that allows the listeners to hear the interpretation at the same time as the speech is made (Phelan, 2001). It means that the interpreter hears the speech through the headphones and interprets simultaneously into the target language. **Consecutive interpreting** (CI) is “listening to what someone has to say and then, when they have finished, reproducing the same message in another language” (Gillies, 2005, p. 3).
Community interpreting happens between a service provider and a client who do not master each other’s language. It is widely used in healthcare, legal, business and social services (Niska, 2000). In community interpreting, the interpreter and the clients often sit around a table in the same room and there is no strict time limitation to which the interpreter must finish the interpretation.

Intercultural Communication and Its Importance in Interpreting

Interpreting can be significantly affected by the verbal and nonverbal communication styles of interlocutors, and the degree to which individuals rely on contextual factors rather than explicit speech to convey meaning in verbal messages. This idea is closely related to the concept of high-context and low-context in intercultural communication that was proposed by Edward T. Hall (1959). According to Hall (1959), in low-context cultures, people communicate directly, explicitly, and rely on verbal communication to explain and discuss everything. On the contrary, in high-context cultures, information lies in the context and is not always verbalized. As a result, discussion goes around the points like a circle and main issues may only be inferred to or not discussed at all. Hall (1989) also pointed out that in high-context communication cultures, the receiver of a message is supposed to perceive the hidden or contextual meanings of the message. Therefore, when talking about something in one’s mind, a high-context speaker would expect the listeners understand what the problem is without providing very specific information. Whereas in low-context culture, the speaker is expected to be responsible for constructing a clear, direct, and unambiguous message that the listeners can decode easily. It is generally thought that people in the United States prefer to use low-context communication while people in China always use high-context communication style. Therefore, it is easy to imagine that some misunderstanding and frustration will occur when the interpreter tries to interpret a high-context speech to audiences from low-context cultures. If the interpreter simply does a word-for-word faithful interpretation, audiences from the low-context culture might not be able to get the implied meaning imbedded in the source speech. Worse still, the audiences might think the problem is caused by the incompetence of the interpreter and thus, blame the interpreter for not conveying the meaning across successfully.

Hofstede (1980) is another important figure in the development of cross-cultural communication with a different approach. Based on a country-level factor analysis of IBM employees in 40 countries Hofstede (1980) developed four cultural value dimensions: Individualism/Collectivism, Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance, and Masculinity/Femininity. Later, Hofstede and Bond (1988) developed a fifth dimension, Confucian Dynamism.

Hofstede’s first dimension is individualism (IND)–collectivism (COL), with IND defined as “a loosely knit social framework in which people are supposed to take care of themselves and of their immediate families only”, while COL “is characterized by a tight social framework in which people distinguish between in-groups and out-groups, they expect their in-group to look after them, and in exchange for that they feel they owe absolute loyalty to it” (Hofstede, 1980, p. 45). In interpreting, this dimension is closely related to the professional and loyalty dilemma faced by the interpreter. The interpreter is expected to work in an impartial and neutral way, but people from collectivistic cultures often tend to include the interpreter as an in-group member. As a result, the interpreter needs to learn how to handle such dilemmas properly and professionally.

Hofstede’s second dimension is power distance (PD), which is defined as “the extent to which a society accepts the fact that power in institutions and organizations is distributed unequally” (Hofstede, 1980, p. 45). The sense of power distance can be imbedded in the speeches given by speakers. If the interpreter interprets faithfully, the target audience from another culture who hold different attitude towards power distance may receive the message negatively, thus leading to unpleasant consequences. Therefore, when faced with words and expressions that strongly suggest power distance, the interpreter needs to make the decision whether to interpret it or not.

Hofstede’s third dimension is uncertainty avoidance (UA), defined as “the extent to which a society feels threatened by uncertain and ambiguous situations and tries to avoid these situations by providing greater career stability, establishing more formal rules, not tolerating deviant ideas and behaviors, and believing in absolute truths and the attainment of expertise” (Hofstede, 1980, p. 45). This dimension also applies in interpreting when the interpreter gets stuck in-between a party who stresses on rules, formality and punctuality and the other party who takes business casually. Under such circumstances, the interpreter needs to decide to what extent he/she could and should mediate the situation to avoid mistrust and even confrontation between the two parties.

Hofstede’s fourth dimension is masculinity (MAS)–femininity (FEM), with MAS defined as “the extent to which the dominant values in society are ‘masculine’ – that is, assertiveness, the acquisition of money and things, and not caring for others, the quality of life, or people” (Hofstede, 1980, p. 46) and FEM defined as the preference for cooperation, modesty, caring for the weak and quality of life (Hofstede, 1980). In
interpreting, this dimension can determine the language style and word choice of the interlocutors. Speakers from masculine cultures may be very competitive in the negotiation style and assertive in their word choices. If the interpreter interpreted faithfully, their counterparts from the feminine cultures take it personally. In that situation, should the interpreter intervene or not and if the interpreter decides to intervene, what should the interpreter do? This is a hard-to-reconcile issue, but the interpreter should be aware about this cultural difference and be prepared to handle such situations properly.

The fifth dimension Confucian dynamism is also known as long-term vs. short-term orientation. Long-term orientation refers to future-oriented values such as persistence, thrift, and hierarchical relationship, whereas short-term orientation refers to past- and present-oriented values such as stability, respect for tradition and fulfilling social obligations (Hofstede & Bond, 1988). This dimension can potentially cause argument and distrust in a conversation unintentionally by the interlocutors who have different time agendas in their minds.

After reviewing the important theories in intercultural and cross-cultural communication and their influence on interpreting process, it is critical to enhance the interpreter’s intercultural competence. Intercultural competence is defined as “a complex of abilities needed to perform effectively and appropriately when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself” (Fantini, 2006, p. 12). To develop intercultural competence, the nature of an interpreter’s job is to step beyond his/her own culture and interact with people from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

As a professional interpreter, to better perform linguistic communication between two languages resides in the process of developing intercultural mediation knowledge and skills. However, a beginner interpreter would not be a competent intercultural mediator. It takes time to develop the skills through self-learning and practices. Yet, the learning process is not linear. Instead, it is a dynamic process. It is a process of cross-cultural adaptation and transformation. Kim’s (2001; 2012) Integrative Model of Cross-Cultural Adaptation and Transformation vividly illustrated this process.

Kim’s model starts with host communication competence, which is defined as “the overall internal capacity of a stranger to decode and encode information in accordance with the host cultural communication practices” (Kim, 2012, P. 236). It has three subcategories: cognitive, affective and operational. Cognitive competence refers to a stranger’s knowledge of the host language and culture. A cognitively competent stranger will know how to communicate appropriately with people from the host culture (Kim, 2012). Affective competence refers to a stranger’s “emotional and motivational capacity” to deal with the challenges and to establish “a meaningful psychological connection” with the host environment (Kim, 2012, p. 236). Operational competence refers to the stranger’s capacity to take verbal and nonverbal actions that are appropriate for the host culture (Kim, 2012).

Host communication competence is achieved through interpersonal and mass communication activities. Host interpersonal communication activities involve cultural native people showing the non-natives the appropriate verbal and nonverbal codes. Host mass communication activities refer to the non-natives being exposed to a wide range of mediated communication systems such as radio, television, newspaper, magazine, movie, that are produced by the host culture (Kim, 2012). In addition, engaging in ethnic interpersonal and mass communication enables the strangers to access host culture resources at the initial phase of the cross-cultural adaptation process (Kim, 2012).

As different societies present different environments for cross-cultural adaptation, Environment helps define the “relative degrees of push-and-pull” of a given host environment to the stranger (Kim, 2012, p. 237). Three key factors within environment are: (1) host receptivity; (2) host conformity pressure; and (3) ethnic group strength (Kim, 2012, p. 237). Host receptivity refers to “the degree to which the receiving environment welcomes and accepts strangers into its interpersonal networks and offers them various forms of informational, technical, material and emotional support” (Kim, 2012, p. 237). Host conformity pressure refers to the extent to which the host environment challenges the strangers to conform to the normative patterns of the host culture implicitly or explicitly (Kim, 2012). Ethnic group strength refers to the relative status of a particular ethnic group in the context of the surrounding host society. Strong ethnic groups are likely to provide a more vibrant subculture and practical services to their members (Kim, 2012).

Predisposition is reflected in three characteristics: (1) preparedness; (2) ethnic proximity/distance; and (3) personality predisposition. Together, these characteristics help define the degree of a stranger’s adaptive potential (Kim, 2012, p. 237). Preparedness indicates the “level of readiness” to develop host communication competence and participate in host social communication activities. Ethnic proximity/distance addresses the extent to which the stranger’s ethnicity plays a role in the cross-cultural adaptation process. According to Kim (2012), individual features like height, skin color, and facial features could potentially influence the native people’s willingness to accept strangers into their interpersonal networks. Adaptive personality refers to the enduring traits of
sensibilities that facilitates the stranger’s own adaptation process.

Through the interactions of host communication competence, the environment and the predisposition, intercultural transformation evolves (Kim, 2012). As a consequence, a stranger in the host culture can have: (1) increased functional fitness in carrying out daily transactions; (2) improved psychological health in dealing with the environment; and (3) emergence of an intercultural identity orientation (Kim, 2012, p. 238).

Although this model is mainly designed to address immigrants’ cross-cultural adaption process, it sheds light to an interpreter’s work. It is important for interpreters to realize that the intercultural competence cultivation process is not linear. Instead, it is dynamic and interactive. Differences in host communication competence, environment, and predisposition pose challenges to interpreters. Being aware of this model will help interpreters sorting through various types of intercultural challenges and address them accordingly.

**Particulars Characteristics in Chinese Culture**

In addition to the intercultural communication frameworks reviewed above, some specific characteristics in Chinese culture also could pose challenges to an interpreter’s work verbally and non-verbally.

**Different value systems.** Each culture has its own unique set of consistent ethic and cultural values that distinguish one culture from another. In China, Confucianism and Taoism have been in existence for over 2,000 years and have enormous influence in interpersonal communication among Chinese people (Li, 2012).

Confucianism can be used to explain “the design of political, education, and economic systems, behavioral regularities, and though patterns of Chinese people” (Sheer & Chen, 2003, p. 52). In Confucianism, harmony is one of the core values (Shenar & Ronen, 1990). Chinese people endeavor to establish and maintain a harmonious relationship with in-group and out-group members (Sheer & Chen, 2003). As a result, an indirect communication style is preferred as a means of offering and receiving respect. In a Chinese-American meeting, the Chinese party rarely dismisses an idea or a business proposal directly because it would be deemed as disrespectful. On the contrary, American culture regards being straight-forward as a smart business tactic (Seligman, 1999). Confucianism also teaches people to be humble when being praised.

Taoism also has huge influences on Chinese culture. According to Taoism philosophy, “individuals should not interfere with the harmony of the universe, which in its own way, functions harmoniously” (Lin, Zhao & Zhao, 2010, p. 86). One of the most important doctrines in Taoism is “without action” (无为), which means to avoid all hostile and aggressive actions. According to Welch (1996, p.33), “without action” even suggests that one’s non-aggressiveness can make others feel inferior, thus achieving the effect of aggressiveness. This doctrine of “without action” and non-aggressiveness has been observed by Chinese people in dealing with interpersonal relationship.

**Differences in perception.** Same items can be associated with different meanings in different cultures. There is an American saying: “you are a lucky dog.” Dogs are considered as family members in America. However, dogs have negative association in Chinese culture. If the American says this sentence to a Chinese person and the interpreter interprets faithfully, this Chinese person would be insulted.

**Differences in organizations of thinking.** Things and ideas are organized in difference ways in different cultures. When a Chinese person saves the door for another person, he/she would say: “you go first.” However, the English expression would be: “‘after you.” Also, Chinese and English have the opposite way in writing down address. In English addresses, lower level address goes first, that is from street to city to state to country, whereas Chinese will spell out country name first and then state, city, and street. The interpreter should adapt accordingly to the organization preference in respective cultures.

After reviewing the basics in interpreting, the important theories in intercultural communication, as well as some particular Chinese cultural characteristics, I am going to introduce an exploratory case study to identify the various types of culture-related challenges encountered by interpreters when interpreting from Chinese to English. I will provide examples on how those challenges are addressed, and also comment on how well they are addressed. My research question is: What are the culture-related challenges faced by interpreters when interpreting from Chinese to English and how do those interpreters manage those challenges?

**Method**

I selected five recordings that total approximately 450 minutes as my database. I used a qualitative content analysis approach because it represents a systematic and objective means of describing and quantifying phenomena (Elo, Kääriäinen, Kanste, Pölkkö, Utriainen, Kyngäs, 2014; Schreier, 2012). I followed the three phases in qualitative content analysis: preparation, organization, and reporting of result. I relied on the literature review and my expertise to collect the most suitable data, to make sense of the data, and to select the unit of analysis (Elo et al., 2014).

I strived for trustworthiness throughout the data collection, analysis, and result presentation phases, which is a crucial criteria for conducting and evaluating qualitative content analysis (Elo et al., 2014; Lincoln &
Guba, 1985). My goal was to make sure that my findings are “worth paying attention to” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

At the data collection phase, I put a lot of thought into how to collect the most suitable data and where to find the best data for my content analysis. I chose purposive sampling because it is suitable when the researcher is interested in the group of people who possess the best knowledge concerning the topic under research (Elo et al., 2014). I selected five recordings: 2013 Chinese President Xi Jinping’s speech at the opening ceremony of Boao Asia Forum (21:08 min; at Hainan, China; addressing to forum participants); 2012 Remarks by President Obama and former Chinese Vice President Xi (13:37 min; at Washington DC; addressing to the media); 2012 former Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao’s press conference (182:49 min; at Beijing; addressing to the media); 2011 former Chinese Premier Wen Jiaobao’s Press Conference (161:22 min; at Beijing; addressing to the media); and 2011 joint press conference by President Obama and former Chinese President Hu Jintao (67:51 min; at Washington DC; addressing to the media).

Those five recordings for data analysis contain many culture-related issues, in particular Premier Wen Jiabao is famous for quoting ancient Chinese poems and expressions in his speeches. Also, those consecutive interpreting tasks are performed by the top interpreters in China and the US, and often recorded in high quality and easily accessible from the internet. Most of their interpreted versions can serve as examples for training interpreters.

At the data analysis phase, I transcribed all the recordings. I took the deductive approach and did several levels of coding and analysis (Polit & Beck, 2012). First, I watched the recordings and read through the transcripts again and again to get myself familiar with the data. Second, I developed my initial coding list based on the literature mentioned above, including factors like high-context/low-context cultures, cultural value dimensions, and the particular Chinese culture characteristics. I also integrated inductive approach to including other emerging themes and concepts that are not covered in the two theoretical frameworks (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Richards, 2009). After the initial coding, I conducted a second round of coding. I revised, re-categorized or replaced codes to more accurately reflect the concepts, roles, and themes. A good qualitative researcher needs to do this time-consuming work.

Findings and Discussions

The analysis of the data reveals four major challenges in Chinese-English interpreting, which are: 1) high-context/low-context cultures; 2) power distance; 3) reproduce the value system and the tone of the speaker; and 4) culture-specific words and expressions.

High-Context vs. Low-Context Cultures

This challenge is manifested in two aspects: incomplete information and condensed information. In order to effectively interpret the meaning of the speech in Chinese language and expressed in Chinese cultural context to the audiences in English language and from Western cultural background, interpreters need to possess not only sufficient knowledge of Chinese culture and society, including language, literature, political and social issues, law and policy, economic development and so on, but also fully understand the cultural and social differences and diplomatic relationships between China and other countries, and the receptivity of Chinese culture and society by other countries (Kim, 2001).

Incomplete information. In high-context Chinese culture, information lies in the context and is not always verbalized. The interpreter should reveal the hidden or contextual meanings to audience from low-context cultures when appropriate. For example, when a journalist asked Premier Wen about Hong Kong’s future, he mentioned:

现在有人说香港已经逐渐在消失它的传统优势，已经没有独立的能力应对区域竞争，所以迫使中央这次要出手。[Word-for-word translation: Now some people say that Hong Kong is losing its traditional advantage, has lost independent ability to cope with regional competition, so compels the central government to act.]

Interpreted version: Some people argue that Hong Kong is losing its traditional advantage and is also unable to cope with regional competition on its own. And that is why the central government felt compelled to draw up the plan for Hong Kong’s development.

In the source text, the sentence stops at “出手”, which means “act”. However, it does not make it clear what specifically the central government should act on. Whereas in the interpreted version, this missing information is completed by adding that the central government acts on “draw up the plan for Hong Kong’s development”.

As another example, Premiere Wen expressed his concerns about the future of Hong Kong. Wen said,金融危机和欧债危机的影响和压力还存在。[Word-for-word translation: The financial crisis and the European debt crisis still have impact and pressure.]

Interpreted version: The financial crisis in the world and the European debt crisis still have
impact, adverse impact on Hong Kong and the pressure is still there.

By comparing the word-for-word translation with the actual interpreted version, we can find two main differences. First, the interpreter added “adverse impact” to make it clear that the impact is a negative one. Second, the interpreter pointed out that the impact and the pressure are on “Hong Kong” based on previous context though the source text does not mention the word “Hong Kong” at all. This is because the speaker expects the audience to infer complete message based on context and logic.

Condensed information. Chinese language prefers to use condensed four-character idioms and expressions to convey sophisticated meanings because they sound rhythmic and are easy to remember. Moreover, being able to quote idioms and expressions make a person look more knowledgeable and respected. Therefore, when commenting on the relationship between mainland China and Taiwan, Premier Wen said:

骨肉之亲，析而不殊。[Word-for-word translation: Bone and flesh's closeness, separated but not disconnected.]

Interpreted version: We are compatriots and I believe brothers, though geographically apart will always be bound by their blood ties.

Premier Wen quoted this sentence from the Book of Former Han that was written in 89 A.D. by scholar Ban Gu. The original story talks about how an ancient emperor spared his brother who betrayed him. Wen applied that story here to illustrate the relations between Mainland China and Taiwan. Wen meant that even the mainland and Taiwan is separated by the Taiwan Strait and have some frictions, they are still family. The interpreter managed to convey the deep underlining meanings in the source text. However, in my opinion, there is still room for improvement in the interpretation. It would be even better if an English saying can be used here to achieve a certain level of equivalence. I suggest the following interpretation:

Blood is thicker than water and even though we are geographically apart, we will always be bound by our blood ties.

Power Distance

In China, the power relations are more autocratic. That subordinates acknowledge the power of others is simply based on certain formal and hierarchical positions where they are situated (Hofstede, 1980). Whereas in the US, power relations are more consultative, and people relate to one another more as equals regardless of formal positions (Hofstede, 1980). Therefore, interpreters need to be cautious when interpreting power-distance associated words and expressions. For example, the moderator of Premier Wen’s press conference, Chinese Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing, explained the reason for extending the conference time, for more journalists more opportunities to ask questions, I have solemnly consent to the Premier to extend the press conference by about 10 minutes.

In Chinese language, using the term “请示” suggests strongly that Chinese foreign minister was inferior to the Premier and was showing his great respect for the Premier. The interpreter conveyed this implied meaning faithfully by interpreting it as “I have solemnly consent to the Premier.” However, it is not necessary to convey the implied meaning of “请示” because the English-speaking audience from low power distance cultural background may feel uncomfortable by noticing the formal and hierarchical political system in China. While Wen was trying to portray himself as a caring Chinese Premier in front of the international media, this interpretation may make foreign media feel the distance. Therefore, I suggest getting rid of the associated high power distance meaning and simply interpreting as:

To give more journalists more opportunities to ask questions, the Premier would like extend the press conference by about 10 minutes.

It should be noted that Wen’s press conference was held in Beijing, China. It could be possible that the interpreter considered the environment factor (Kim, 2001, 2012) and decided to interpret the hierarchy faithfully. As a matter of fact, when Xi was giving a speech in Washington DC, the interpreter removed the sense of high power distance implied in Xi’s speech because most of the media presented were from the west. For example, when Xi expressed his appreciation for the hospitality from the US government, he said:

我受到了美方的热情的，高规格的接待。[Word-for-word translation: I have received the US side’s warm and high-level welcome.]

Interpreted version: We have received the warm and extraordinary hospitality from our hosts.

If we compare the word-for-word version with the actual interpreted version, we will notice that the word “high-level” suggesting high power distance has been replaced by “extraordinary hospitality.” It was handled in such a way to adapt to the audience who are from low power distance culture because “high-level treatment” and “extraordinary hospitality” have different associated meanings. High-level treatment suggests that the host honors the guest by offering the standard of treatment that matches the guest’s social status. Whereas extraordinary hospitality indicates that the host
welcomes the guest sincerely and endeavors to make the guest feel at home. In Chinese culture, high-level treatment is preferred over extraordinary hospitality to emphasize that the guest feels being valued and treated seriously and that is what Xi intended to express. However, the interpreter evaluated the environment and chose the expression “extraordinary hospitality” which confirms better with the values in American culture (Kim, 2001).

Reproduce the Value System and the Tone of the Speaker

Each culture has its own unique set of consistent ethic and cultural values. Chinese culture is highly influenced by Confucianism and Taoism that emphasize humbleness and self-reflection. Therefore, the interpreter needs to convey the tone of the message in addition to the content. For example, when asked to evaluate his work as Premier of China, Premier Wen answered:

我担任总理已经9年了，这些年过得不易，也不平凡。但我总觉得还有许多工作没有做完，许多事情没有办好，有不少遗憾...在最后一年，我将像一匹负轭的老马，不到最后一刻绝不松套，努力以新的成绩弥补我工作上的缺憾，以得到人民的谅解和宽恕。

The interpreted version: I have served as the Premier for nine years. They have been nine difficult but momentous years. I often feel that much work remains to be finished, many things have yet to be properly addressed. And there are many regrets. In my last year in office, I'll be as committed as ever as an old steed. I'll continue to make my utmost effort to serve the people to make up for the short fall in my work with new achievement and to win people's understanding and forgiveness.

Premier Wen’s self-evaluation of his work has touched the majority of Chinese people. His speech about being humble, self-critical and not conceited is in line with the traditional values in Chinese culture. It is the interpreter’s responsibility to arouse the same emotions among the audience who rely on the message interpreted in English to understand Wen. Wen continued to say:

我真诚希望，我，连同我这一生，给人民做的有益的事情，人民都把他忘记，并随着我日后的长眠地下而湮没无闻。

Interpreted Version: I sincerely hope that the people will forget me and all the concrete things that I have done for them. And they will fall into oblivion as one day I shall go to my eternal rest.

This is also a reflection of Chinese cultural value of humbleness and is very touching. The interpreter does a wonderful job in conveying the content and the tone.

Culture-Specific Words and Expressions. There are some words and expressions that are deeply rooted in Chinese culture and have specific meanings. For example, when stressing the importance of international collaboration, Xi said:

不能这边拆台、那边拆台，而应该相互补台、好戏连台。[Word-for-word translation: Countries can’t set up stage on this side, destroy stage on the other side. Instead, they should complement stage of each other and jointly perform a good show.]

Interpreted version: Rather than undercutting each other’s efforts, countries should complement each other and work.

The words such as “stage” and “show” are completely ignored in the actual interpretation. This is a clever strategy because in China, people used to watching Beijing operas a lot and it is naturally for the Chinese people to create some analogies such as “stage” and “opera” to emphasize “collaborations.” However, the term “stage” may be used to imply “social performance” in American culture (Burke, 1968). Therefore, it is a wise decision to interpret the meanings to the audiences instead of those terms. In addition, some words and expressions may exist uniquely in one language but not in another language. For example, a Chinese word “拍砖,” which literally means “hit you with a brick,” is mentioned in a question to Premier Wen:

我们知道您常常会上网，在网络上您可以看到网民对政府工作、对您本人的肯定和赞扬，但是也会有“拍砖”的，您怎么看待这些批评的声音？[Word-for-word translation: We know that you often log on to the internet and from there, you can see Chinese netizens’ comments on the government’s work and on yourself. Some are positive, but some hit you with a brick. How do you see the criticism?]

Interpreted version: You have known that you often log on to the internet and there have been a lot of comments among the netizens of Chinese on your work, of the government and you yourself. There are both positive ones and some critical comments. How do you see the criticism about you and your work on the internet?

As we can see, the expression “hit you with a brick” is ignored in the interpreted version. It is actually a newly created Chinese internet slang that means criticizing somebody. It as a new term does not exist in Chinese-English dictionary, and a literal translation may cause confusion. Therefore, it is appropriate for the
interpreter to replace the original expression with its explanation “critical comments.”

As another example, “米袋子” and “菜篮子”, which literally means “rice bag” and “vegetable basket,” are mentioned in the following sentence:

“米袋子”省长负责制，“菜篮子”市长负责制 。 [Word-for-word translation: The governors will take responsibility for “rice bag” and the mayors will be responsible for “vegetable basket”.]

Interpreted version: The governors will take responsibility for the supply of stable foods and the mayors will be responsible for the supply of vegetables.

Rice bag and vegetable basket are closely associated with the daily lives in China because Chinese people use bags to buy rice and basket to carry vegetables. These words are chosen to visualize the ordinary life experience of Chinese people in traditional China. However, if interpreting them literally, the English speaking audience may be distracted by those units “bag” and “basket.” Therefore, it is effective that the interpreter decided to achieve functional equivalence in meaning.

Conclusion

This case study aims to understand what culture-related challenges are there in Chinese-English interpreting and how the top-level interpreters manage those challenges. This case study examines the transcripts of five press conferences and speeches given by top China’s leaders in both China and the US. This study indicates four major culture-related challenges in the interpreting process: 1) high-context/low-context cultures; 2) power distance; 3) reproduce the value system and the tone of the speaker; and 4) culture-specific words and expressions.

There are significant theoretical implications. It identifies the specific intercultural factors that present challenges in Chinese-English interpreting. It also demonstrates that interpreters need to develop cultural communication competence between source and target cultures and evaluate the environment of interpreting contexts through which to achieve successful cross-cultural adaptation and transformation. A cognitively and operationally competent interpreter needs to have a good mastery of both the source culture and the target culture and be able to choose words and expressions that are appropriate for the target audience from different cultural background. A professional interpreter should develop affective competence to establish connection with the audience and gain their confidence. Culturally competent interpreters should take the environment into consideration to evaluate the receptivity and the pressure of conformity in the target culture.

This case study has methodological implications. By employing a qualitative content analysis approach, this case study is able to offer a rich and in-depth picture of the culture-related challenges to interpreters, and identifies the strategies top-level interpreters use in specific environments to manage those challenges. By systematically collecting, analyzing, and presenting the data, this case study endeavors to enhance its trustworthiness.

This case study would contribute to interpreter training programs. It demonstrates that culture-related challenges do exist in Chinese-English interpreting and need to be addressed to help interpreters achieve intercultural adaptation and transformation, i.e., becoming competent intercultural mediators. Therefore, intercultural communication course should be offered as a compulsory course rather than simply an optional one in MTI programs in China.

To conclude, intercultural communication is an unavoidable part in the interpreting process. More research should be done to apply intercultural communication frameworks to examining the Chinese-English interpreting process. Chinese-English interpreters are on the forefront to facilitate the communication between China and the outside world, and it is hopeful that more research in this area can be done to provide informed guidance to interpreting work.

Although this case study provides rich information for better understanding the culture-related challenges in Chinese-English interpreting and the top-level interpreters’ solutions, there are several limitations. First, it is hard to find high-quality and open access interpreting recordings. This case study has to focus on consecutive interpreting mainly because of the data accessibility. The findings and suggestions of this study may not be applicable to other contexts. Second, I was only able to transcribe and analyze five recordings. My data could have been richer to offer additional insights if I had time to analyze more recordings. Third, I was not able to find much personal information on the interpreters (predisposition) or the participating audiences (cultural proximity, environment), which could potentially increase the trustworthiness of my data analysis.

For future research, it is necessary to conduct in-depth interview with top-level conference interpreters and professional conference interpreters. It would provide rich information about their experiences with examples, shared stories, and explanation of their strategies. Those first-hand accounts will help further understand interpreters’ cultural adaptation and transformation process and enhance young interpreter’s training program.
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