Constructive ambiguity in foreign-affairs translation. The case of "One China"

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On January 14 2017, President-Elect Donald Trump declared that "everything is under negotiation, including One China." Soon thereafter he nevertheless affirmed support for the "One China" position in a phone conversation with Chinese President Xi Jinping. And a little later in 2017, when Secretary of State Rex Tillerson was to visit China, Washington insisted that the "One China" position had been consistent for decades, going all the way back to Henry Kissinger (Thornton 2017). The question is, who knew exactly what the policy was? Did anyone really believe the question had been resolved? And who, in the United States or China, understood how much the position depended on a series of textual ambiguities and slippery translations?

Here we analyze the linguistic means by which the United States' "one China" position has managed to remain technically unresolved on the issue of Taiwan; as Trump quite correctly said, it is still technically on the table, open to potential negotiation, after so many decades. Our starting text is the deceptively simple 1972 Sino-US Shanghai Communiqué that established the United States' "One China" position. We will investigate the way translational and non-translational ambiguities work both in that text and in subsequent communiqués. We place these alongside similar "constructive ambiguities" in foreign affairs discourse: feigned apologies and non-withdrawal from occupied territories have all been parts of similar international understandings. We will offer three ways of analyzing the role of translation in such ambiguity: linguistically, politically, and in terms of risk management. We hope to show that a risk-management approach to translation can offer a simple comprehensive explanation of the cunning and hazards of constructive ambiguity.

The diplomatic origins of "One China"

A common belief is that a translation reproduces a start text: both texts are held to say the same thing, more or less, and that thing is supposed to be clear and understandable to all. This view of translation is based on a supposition of equivalence, which in turn is based on the idea that there is a clear meaning or value to which a translation can be equivalent. However, when the meaning of a text is far from clear or universally understandable, translational equivalence sometimes becomes a convenient illusion beneath which rather more devious things can be done. The "One China" position is a case in point.

The term "One China" was first formulated in the 1972 Shanghai Joint Communiqué, elaborated during President Richard Nixon's visit to China that year. The then National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger had conducted secret diplomatic missions to Beijing and had helped work out the groundwork for the communiqué. In it, the United States recognized the People's Republic of China as the sole legal government of China, without actually saying that it was the legal government of Taiwan. This significant diplomatic balancing act effectively ended some two decades of diplomatic estrangement and marked the beginning of normalized relations between the two powers, laying the foundation for a peaceful and prosperous Asia. No matter

how murky its origins, the understanding itself has proved to be tremendously successful over the years.

Although the communiqué satisfied Beijing, it was deliberately couched in such a way as not to overtly offend Taiwan. In his memoirs (1979, 923-924, 1270-1271), Kissinger recalls that although Taiwan was the most pressing issue in the formal negotiation sessions, the United States mission found that China was more anxious to negotiate matters other than Taiwan. Kissinger saw that the other issues could come first, and that both sides could make concessions so that this could happen – most notably, Nixon promised to withdraw all US troops from Taiwan within five years and not to allow Japanese troops on Taiwan (National Security Archives 1972).

On this basis, Zhou En'lai actively sought a communiqué that would leave what both he and Nixon termed "some running room and no time limit" and would "have it so both sides understand some obligation but not make it so people know exactly" (Zhou En'lai in National Security Archive 1972: 6):

> […] in the formulation of the Taiwan question we are going to work out, each side states its own position, but if one has profound understanding one can see that there is common ground between our two countries toward this question. But if one looks at it in a general or superficial way one may not see that common ground. (Zhou En'lai in National Security Archive 1972: 9)

This would require diplomatic language near the level of poetry. Zhou further insisted that the language should *not* allow the United States to appear to be conceding Taiwan to Beijing, since that would amount to "interfering in internal affairs." At the same time, Zhou suggests that the diplomatic language could make some use of *Chiang Kai-shek's* "idea is that there is only one China" (National Security Archive 1972: 6-7). As long as the result sounded like an agreement that Taiwan belonged to Beijing, Zhou was confident that the Chinese people would accept it, thanks to the huge prestige of Chairman Mao – which meant that the understanding had to be formulated while Mao was still alive and Nixon was still in office. Those then were the job specifications given to the technical writers. And Kissinger was keen to oblige.

Looking back on the communiqués now, readers in the West are inclined to attribute the ruse of slippery language to Kissinger, who certainly exploited similar ambiguities in other situations (Isaacson 2013, 556-7). However, the released confidential documents tell a rather different story. In the meeting of February 24 1972, Zhou En'lai notes that it "is a matter for Dr. Kissinger and the Vice Foreign Minister [Ch'iao Kuan-hua] to rack their brains as to what should be the proposed formulation" (National Security Archive 1972, 6). So the document was worked on by a Chinese and an American, together, with Zhou remaining aloof from the actual drafting. We see signs of a similar relationship at work in Kissinger's account of his previous secret visit that to China. Zhou is recognized as a master statesman (he was 25 years older than Kissinger) who, says Kissinger, "ranks with Charles De Gaulle as the most impressive foreign statesman I have met" (Kissinger 1971, 7). As in the 1972 communiqué, Zhou paints with a broad brush what the communiqué of this earlier meeting should be like, then Kissinger sets to work on the "complicated, occasionally painful minuet of communiqué drafting" (Kissinger 1971, 5) alongside Huang Hua (then the Chinese ambassador to Ottawa) and Chang Wen-chin (head of the West-European and American Department of the Chinese Foreign Ministry). And then, "Chou, who had been waiting nearby – so as to avoid a confrontation over language – suddenly appeared after the announcement was agreed" (Kissinger 1971, 5). In short, Zhou assumed the role of *client* in the formulation of the communiqué, remaining aloof while Kissinger, Huang,

and Chang worked on the English and Chinese texts. This relationship seems to have been repeated for the 1972 communiqué. In an interview with Chinese journalist Yang Lan in 2008, Kissinger was asked, "Do you still remember the immediate action of the Chinese side when they read [the 1972 Shanghai Communiqué]?" He replied, "I came with the draft of the communiqué and Zhou En'lai read it and said, 'Nobody could believe this. It gives me an impression that after thirty years… twenty years not talking to each other, suddenly we make agreements on all matters.'" The client's specifications had been fulfilled. Indeed, this "impression" was so effective that the matter of Taiwan was effectively laid aside and other business could be done for decades to come.

So how was this breakthrough possible? The English version of the Joint Communiqué of 1972 reads:

> The United States acknowledges that all Chinese on either side of the Taiwan Strait maintain there is but one China and that Taiwan is a part of China. (In Phillips and Keefer 2006: 815)

The Chinese version is as follows:

> 美国认识到，在台湾海峡两边的所有中国人都认为只有一个中国，台湾是中国的一部分。(Peoples Republic of China Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2000)

This is the basic text that we will be analyzing here. There are two points of possible contention in the text: the verb "acknowledge" and the function of "either side." Both of these points allow for "constructive ambiguity" – a term credited to Kissinger (Isaacson 2013: 556) – in the sense that the text invites different but non-antagonistic interpretations.

We shall deal with the linguistics of the first problem (which is translational) before moving to the politics of the second (which is not).

First problem: "Acknowledge" or "recognize"?

In the 1972 Communiqué, the English verb "acknowledge" is not ambiguous in any strict sense. It would normally be read as a performative ("We hereby acknowledge that…"), as a use of language that is also the action it describes (after Austin 1955/1975). Any act of legal recognition would require precisely such a performative, which is basically why the text does indeed look like an act of recognition. The performative verb nevertheless does *not directly* recognize "One China." It says the United States recognizes that *some people maintain* there is "One China," without voicing any opinion or adopting any position with respect to *what* those people are saying. As one commentator puts it, the text merely says, "we hear you; we understand this is what you claim" (Feldman 2007, 3).

At the same time, however, a quick interested reading, or perhaps strategic editing out of the clause "that all Chinese on either side of the Taiwan Straits maintain that there is," would give the impression that the People's Republic of China's sovereignty over Taiwan had effectively been recognized in the direct sense. Even though no such recognition was stated, the seed of ambiguity had been planted; a door had been opened to a slightly different Chinese interpretation in which, as Zhou had put it, the text did "not make it so people know exactly."

This is where translation comes in, since it is in translation that one can modulate the message that reaches the wider public. The invitation to a clear double reading was not taken up immediately, though. In the Chinese version of the 1972

Communiqué, the word "acknowledge" corresponds to 认识到 (ren shi dao), which broadly means "to understand" and as such would not necessarily function as a performative (it does not say "we hereby understand…"). This does not change the sense of the text in any significant way. The adventures of the performative nevertheless continued.

The later 1979 Communiqué, which unambiguously switched US diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing (we will return to this below), also used the same linguistic strategy as the 1972 Communiqué:

> The Government of the United States of America *acknowledges* the Chinese position that there is but one China and Taiwan is part of China. (American Institute in Taiwan, 1979; italics ours)

The Chinese version this time is:

> 美利坚合众国政府承认中国的立场，即只有一个中国，台湾是中国的一部分。

Here "acknowledge" corresponds not to 认识到 (ren shi dao, "to understand") but to 承认 (cheng ren), which can mean both "to recognize" and "to *agree with*." As such, it allows a reading as an effective performative ("We hereby agree…"), similar to the English "acknowledge" but with a wider extension: it enacts a concatenation, governing not just the "Chinese position" but also, logically, all the contents of that position. The status of this second performative is thus fundamentally different from the first. This can be presented graphically as follows:

> *Acknowledge/recognize* 认识到 (ren shi dao) → Chinese position ⊠ One China
> *Agree with* 承认 (cheng ren) → Chinese position → One China

The use of 认识到 (ren shi dao, "to understand") does not imply agreement with the One China policy; the use of 承认 (cheng ren, "to agree with") can. On the particularly Chinese reading invested in this second version, this time the United States had aligned itself with the One China position. The important point, for us here, is that the functional ambiguity is not in the English but in the semantic extensions of the Chinese verbs, which allow for two different interpretations. The constructive ambiguity here *requires* translation.

Still later, in the Joint Communiqué of 1982, the English version again states that the United States "acknowledges the Chinese position," while the official Chinese version once again has "acknowledge" corresponding to 承认 (cheng ren), suggesting that Washington has both recognized *and agreed* with Beijing's position.

Linguistic analyses of the performative ambiguity

Through the slippage of these successive versions, 承认 (cheng ren) has been established as an *equivalent* of what "to acknowledge" means in these texts. This should not be considered abnormal: translations actively produce equivalence, rather than reproduce any original cutting up of the world; this is how translational equivalence comes into being, over time, with persistence, and through plays of competing interests and potential cooperation. And once this kind of equivalence is established, readers on

one side are invited to proceed down a certain path of interpretation, while those on the other side pursue a rather different path.

This use of 承认 (cheng ren) thus cannot be seen as an out-and-out mistranslation: the semantic extension overlaps sufficiently with "acknowledge" for equivalence to be claimed and manipulated. The linguistic interest of the verb lies elsewhere.

In something like a normal practice of translation, it might be supposed that a translated performative cannot perform (in the sense of Austin 1955/1975). If, for example, the speaker says, "I hereby declare the meeting open," then the simultaneous interpreter says, "Je déclare ouverte la réunion," only the first utterance, the speaker's, can claim to be fully performative. The second utterance came a bit late (the interpreting is not really simultaneous); the meeting was already open; the second utterance is thus necessarily constative, in the sense that it describes and reproduces the form of the first utterance but cannot fully perform its function. This can be seen with virtually any performative you like: in principle, a translation cannot be a full performative in the narrow sense (Pym 1993).

Or can it? In the case of the various communiqués (and they are all the same on this point), the verb "to acknowledge" looks like the only possible performative because, first, it is in the language of the United States, which is the only subject that could be performing the performative, and second, because it is assumed that the various Chinese translations came later. There is a certain pragmatic logic that suggests that only the *first* utterance can perform, and that it should thus do so in the *first language* of the speaker. So how is it that the second Chinese version here, this cunning 承认 (cheng ren), can enter the game rather late in the day, can speak in a language that is not that of the United States, and can yet remain an effective performative?

The answer on this point might be surprising: the Chinese text is *not a translation* in the technical sense. The pragmatics of a "joint communiqué" require that neither language version has precedence over the other; both are equally valid; these are to be interpreted as two versions of the same text.[1]

The logic of this kind of multilingual text similarly informs United Nations resolutions, the whole European Union *acquis*, and laws in numerous bilingual and multilingual countries such as Canada and South Africa. When discrepancies between the various language versions are the result of poor drafting, the principle of equal validity may be open to legal dispute. In cases of constructive ambiguity, however, the slippage is assumed to be intentional, actively constructing a circumstance in which some kind of accord can be signed.

There are several similar cases of where translational ambiguity has operated successfully in foreign-affairs discourse. The best known is undoubtedly United Nations Resolution 242 of 1967, which demands of Israel a "withdrawal from occupied territories" in English and a "retrait des territoires occupés" in French. For most readers, the English version does not specify that *all* the occupied territories are concerned (withdrawal from just a few will do), whereas the French does. Since both language

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[1] This is one way to solve the problem of a translated performative. Another way, equally cunning, is to remove the start text from historical record by making it purely oral or otherwise unofficial. This was done with the "Six Assurances" that the United States gave Taiwan in July 1982. James Lilley, then director of America's nominally unofficial representative agency in Taiwan, contacted Taiwan leader Chiang Ching-kuo and delivered President Reagan's assurances orally, not in written form (see Feldman 2007, 2). The verb "to assure" can be a full performative, but the written Chinese notes of the meeting could not. At the same time, the Chinese notes cannot claim to be a full translation of a text whose existence was at the time unofficial, on the same level as an associated later "non-paper" saying that the United States had no plan to "set a date for termination of arms sales" (Feldman 2001, 78).

versions are equally valid in principle, the Israeli government has consistently complied with the English version and has not entertained the French. Like Taiwan, the status of Palestine hangs in limbo thanks to divergent versions.

A somewhat similar case concerns China once again. In 2001 the United States expressed regret for the loss of a Chinese fighter pilot who collided with a US spy plane that had entered Chinese air space:

> Both President Bush and Secretary of State Powell have expressed their *sincere regret* over your missing pilot and aircraft. Please convey to the Chinese people and to the family of pilot Wang Wei that *we are very sorry* for their loss.
> *We are very sorry* the entering of China's airspace and the landing did not have verbal clearance, but very pleased the crew landed safely. (Prueher 2001; italics ours)

The first part of this statement is clearly non-performative since it is in the third-person present perfect (a performative in English, in the narrow sense, must be in the first-person simple present). The second part, however, beginning "We are very sorry…", comes close to the well-formed performative "We apologize…". Close, but not quite, since the English text recognizes no responsibility on the American side for the death of the Chinese pilot. They are sorry *about* the external fact, but they are not sorry *for* their own actions. The phrase "very sorry" was nevertheless translated by the Chinese government as "深表歉意 (shen biao qian yi)," meaning "a deep expression of apology or regret." Here the semantic range of the Chinese version allows Chinese readers to believe Bush and Powell were indeed apologizing for a wrongful act. So technically the English text did not apologize, but the Chinese text allowed Chinese readers to accept an apology.

In both these cases, as in the One China policy, constructive ambiguity has allowed a contentious issue to be sidelined while more important issues can be dealt with. Of course, the status of the Occupied Territories remains unresolved, as indeed does the status of Taiwan.

Second problem: Where is "China"?

Let us return to the Joint Communiqué of 1972, in either language:

> The United States acknowledges that all Chinese on either side of the Taiwan Strait maintain there is but one China and that Taiwan is a part of China.

> 美国认识到，在台湾海峡两边的所有中国人都认为只有一个中国，台湾是中国的一部分。

There is a rather more obvious problem encoded here in the reference to "either side," although many readers fail to see it, as Zhou envisaged and indeed sought. Here is one way of decoding that reference:

> The United States acknowledges that the People's Republic of China maintains there is but one China and that Taiwan belongs to it (i.e. to Beijing).

Here is another way:

The United States acknowledges that Taiwan (which calls itself the "Republic of China") maintains there is but one China and that the People's Republic of China belongs to it (i.e. to Taipei).

So both sides would thus agree on the same thing; they would simply disagree on who runs the show.

That this ambiguity was intentional can be inferred not just from Zhou En'lai's statements given above, bit also from released documents where Nixon is cited as saying, "there is one China, and Taiwan is a part of China. There will be no more statements made—if I can control our bureaucracy—to the effect that the status of Taiwan is undetermined" (cit. Kan 2011: 8). John Holdridge, who was at that time a senior staff member under Kissinger, recalls the strategy as follows:

> It was helpful that both the CCP [Chinese Communist Party] and the Kuomintang [(KMT) or Nationalist Party] regarded Taiwan as part of China, for by accepting this point and affirming our interest in the settlement of the sovereignty question "by the Chinese themselves" we would affront neither side. (1997: 89)

In this, the formulation picked up on Zhou En'lai's note that the Taiwanese also believed that there was One China, and that this kind of formulation would align with that belief. The statement could thus allow the Kuomintang to save face and avoid the United States' embarrassment at abandoning Taiwan. So could Nixon's policy effectively control the bureaucracy over the future decades? Even in the 1979 Communiqué, when the United States finally shifted diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing, a remnant of the same linguistic strategy persisted:

> The United States of America recognizes the Government of the People's Republic of China as the sole legal Government of China.

Although this formulation effectively annuls any implicit recognition that Taipei is the legal government of the whole of China (if Beijing is the "sole legal government," there logically cannot be any other), it does *not* recognize that Beijing has sovereignty over Taiwan. Everything depends on what the word "China" is taken to mean here, and the document is simply not saying anything about that meaning.

This tussle of possible interpretations exists in both language versions, symbolically allowing Taiwan to save some face. It is a problem of vision, however, rather than of translation. Any translation, probably into any language, could and should repeat the ambiguity. And the Chinese translations do indeed reproduce the ambiguity, although whether anyone sees the fact is quite another question.

It is in this sense, perhaps more than in the slippage of "承认 (cheng ren)," that the United States' position has remained without resolution.

Political analysis of the referential ambiguity

What kind of ambiguity sets up such a situation? Ambiguity can be minimally defined as the possibility of different, incompatible construals of the one piece of language. The problem with such a definition is that it posits non-ambiguity or axiomatic clarity as a default condition, which is far from the case. What we have here is not of the "Flying planes can be dangerous" kind, where two readings are perfectly possible and neither necessarily contradicts the other (if planes that fly are dangerous, then it could be

dangerous to fly them). Here we are really talking about interpretative positions that involve quite different beliefs about the same piece of language, and about pieces of language that invite different beliefs but rely on degrees of slippage to get there. As is increasingly appreciated, ambiguity can be found in all genres and is perhaps an inevitable feature of all language (Sole and Seoane 2015). As the hermeneutic tradition reminds us, texts have to be interpreted, and it is quite normal for the same text to support quite different interpretations. Given this perspective, we prefer to see ambiguity in terms of vectors, without assuming axiomatic non-ambiguity. On this view, all seems to go well for as long as the language allows readers to construe the meaning in one general direction rather than the other, without asking about the other interpretative vectors that are theoretically possible. In the case of the One-China communiqués, we would assume that both sides have played in this game, and that the relative mutual opacity of the two languages has further *allowed* the game to be played: for as long as the English text is deceptively clear to Americans, they have little interest in questioning what the Chinese text is saying to the Chinese, and vice versa. The game might be called "look the other way." One might nevertheless question the apparent symmetry involved.

Pehar (2001, 2005) interestingly interrogates cases of such diplomatic ambiguity through a story recounted in Book 1 of Herodotus's *Histories* or *Inquiries*. The powerful leader Croesus asks the oracles what action he should take:

> "And now he asks you whether he is to send an army against the Persians, and whether he is to add an army of allies." Such was their inquiry; and the judgment given to Croesus by each of the two oracles was the same: namely, that if he should send an army against the Persians he would destroy a great empire.

Xerxes interprets this as a positive omen, attacks, and is defeated. He thus pays the price of hubris, of interpreting the prophecy as a reference to his own victory because he is essentially unable to contemplate anyone else's victory. The outcome of the ambiguity in this case is not construction but clear destruction. So there can be such a thing as destructive ambiguity (cf. Elgindy 2014), operating as a counterweight to Kissinger's constructive ambiguity.

The story is Croesus actually one of the classical cases of ambiguity, cited for this reason by Aristotle in his *Rhetoric* (Book 3, Section 5). Aristotle's analysis, however, does not go into Croesus' wrong interpretation but is concerned more with the oracle's use of vague language in order to not be wrong – whatever the outcome of the conflict, the prediction was bound to be right. Pehar (2005) interestingly delves into the intricacies of the oracle's other possible intentions, suggesting a kind of ethical virtue in both the constructive possibilities of ambiguity and the way self-centered pride in interpretation can lead to destruction – the oracle was ultimately right to lay the trap; Croesus walked into his downfall thanks to his own excessive egoism, the defect of hubris. It is this pride, this restriction to just one vector of vision, that allows the ambiguity to remain hidden until after the fact of destruction.

When distributing these moral virtues and shortcomings, it is important to distinguish between the drafting of the ambiguity and the possible long-term effects. In the case that concerns us here, the bilingual communiqué would seem to have been constructed by mutual accord – good or bad intentions are not really at stake, and the trick could scarcely have been played on one side only. After all, the ambiguity is in English *and* in Chinese, and it has remained constructive for a long time.

The invitation to hubris is nevertheless implied in Zhou En'lai's mention of Chiang Kai-shek's rhetorical claim to himself as the leader of One China – he will be

invited to read this communiqué as being in accord with his position, and will thus perhaps not take offense. More generally, though, the one-sided interpretation is projected onto the Chinese selling of this accord to their own people, where Zhou En'lai bets that they will only see one of the two possible readings. No one will be the wiser, and normalized relations can develop.

However, who can say that the past decades have not been a long moment before battle? What happens when later generations, at the highest levels, forget how the text was drafted and only see the reading that suits their side?

Risk analysis of the performative and referential ambiguities

We have seen that the initial 1972 Communiqué contains two kinds of ambiguity: one requiring translation as part of its working (so the later Chinese verb can be performative), the other merely requiring that translation reproduce the ambiguity. The first kind of ambiguity is well suited to the kind of linguistic analysis that might be traditional in translation studies; the second kind is more susceptible to a more purely political analysis. We would now like to propose that these two kinds of analysis can be brought together by borrowing some basic terms from risk management, and that this third approach can help us distinguish between constructive and destructive ambiguity.

Let us posit that the main aim of mediated multilingual communication, from the perspective of the mediator, is the establishment of trust between participants. The two parties have to trust each other, and they both have to trust whoever is producing the different language versions of their texts. If that three-way trust is lost, then the communication act is doomed to failure.

What is to be calculated here is then the relative risk of losing trust. Borrowing from basic risk management, there are three main strategies that a mediator can adopt (see Pym 2015):

- Risk aversion: Mediators play it safe, especially by using strategic omission and generalization.
- Risk transfer: Mediators avoid making decision themselves, relaying instead on literalism, established equivalents, or approval from authorities and/or clients;
- Risk acceptance: Mediators knowingly run risks in the hope of generating corresponding rewards.

Our analysis so far has come across several examples of these strategies. For example, the United States has been risk averse in its reluctance to make direct pronouncements on the status of Taiwan, and uses risk transfer in referring instead to the positions of "Chinese on either side." One might nevertheless argue that considerable risk acceptance is involved, at least with respect to future generations and relations with Taiwan, in allowing Beijing to believe that its sovereignty over Taiwan has been recognized.

A more sophisticated kind of analysis is nevertheless possible in terms of a more specific concept of "risk mitigation," by which the mediator accepts one risk in order to offset a greater risk (Pym and Matsushita 2018). A model for this would be the water sprinklers fitted inside a building in order to reduce the risk of fire damage while incurring the risk of water damage. If we assume that the damage from fire is likely to be more than the damage from water, then it makes sense to adopt this kind of mixed strategy.

In this case, risk mitigation could work as follows when seen from the perspective of the United States:

Major risk: Disagreement over One China will block trade agreements.
Minor risk 1: The Chinese will act on their own independent reading and liberate Taiwan.
Minor risk 2: Taiwanese will have access to the Chinese reading and accuse the United States of abandoning them.

Seen in these terms, the ambiguity remains constructive for as long as the probability and consequences of the minor risks remain less than those of the major risk. Trade thus proceeds; Taiwan hangs in limbo; and trust bridges over the slippages of language.

If, however, the probability and consequences of the two minor risks (and there are certainly more that can be added) add up to more than those of the major risk, then the ambiguity could become destructive. For example, if there is a major reduction in the benefits of mutual trade (at the time of writing there is a looming trade war between China and the United States), then the costs of the major risk diminishes for the Chinese side and it may become rational for them to engage in cross-Straits liberation. Like Croesus invading Persia, they may choose to believe in a one-sided reading of a fundamentally ambiguous text, especially if alternative readings have become invisible with the passing of generations.

On not seeing the other side

What lessons might this analysis have for translators working on more mundane tasks? Any lesson must concern the interpretative capacity to understand the other side, since that is surely one of the tasks of translation, if not of diplomacy in general. It is one thing consciously to look the other way, and quite another to not want to understand the other at all. There are troubling signs that the capacity to convey uncomfortable messages through translation may be waning, as cultural hubris creeps into translators' interpretations. We close with a practical example of what might be happening on a more general level.

In a *New York Times* article criticizing China's growing status as a regional power we read the following:

China has challenged American military superiority with forays into the East and South China Seas and by *bullying* American allies in the region. […] China has become more *assertive* politically. (White 2017; italics ours)

The words "bullying" and "assertive" are overtly critical of China. When the article was given to Masters-level Chinese students to translate, many of the students' renditions initially toned down these critical words or gave them rather more extensive meanings. For instance, "assertive" became "自信 (zìxìn)," broadly meaning "confident," which would allow a back-translation as "China has become more confident politically." As for "bullying," in one eloquent version it became "施威 (shīwēi)," meaning "show severity" or "display one's power," such that China has been "showing its power to American allies," without this assuming the negative dimension of "bullying." Perhaps the most worrying rendition was the conversion of "bullying" into "震慑 (zhènshè)" in the sense of "deterrence," justified by the student translator as follows:

Because I am a Chinese, I tended to use commendatory terms when translating words and sentences related to China. For instance, I translated the word "bully"

in "(China has been) bullying American allies in the region" as "震慑 [zhènshè]." The Chinese word used here means that American allies are willing to be controlled by China because of its great power in the region.

This, of course, indicates that another level of risk management is operative. Novice translators instinctively sense that the conveyance of critical messages can enter into conflict with their loyalties as citizens, and so they are wont to modify meanings in search of the kind messages best suited to their national culture. To do otherwise could have negative consequence for their professional development. This is quite understandable and has been formulated in now classical translation theory. The Russian scholar Fedorov's first principle of translation was as follows:

> The translator has ideological responsibility for the quality of the translation, hence the requirement that the translation be truthful, in order to give the Soviet reader the full picture of the translated materials. (Fedorov 1953: 98, trans. Nune Ayvazyan)

When the translator's "truth" is that of the receiving culture only, many professional risks are avoided. The more severe risk, however, is when translations are done in such a way that the perspective of the other side is not seen, constructive ambiguities are removed, and destruction of some kind might ensue.

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