

# CHALLENGES IN RENDERING THE VAGUENESS AND “TWISTED” MEANINGS OF SOME CHINESE PHRASES AND SENTENCES INTO ENGLISH

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Abstract: Certain Chinese phrases or expressions are vague in meaning and liable to various explanations. For example, in his speech made in December 2008 on the occasion of celebrating the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the opening up of the country to the outside world and setting off the reform policies, Hu Jintao, President of the People’s Republic, mentioned three “Don’t-phrases,” which are vague in meaning and have led to multiple interpretations, namely, 不动摇, 不懈怠, 不折腾 (tentatively we use one of the translations, perhaps the most literal one: “Don’t waver; don’t relax your efforts; and don’t overturn the status quo”). (Ref. 1) The last phrase, especially, has sent many translators searching their brain to find an appropriate translation. Discussions on the various translations of this phrase provided based on a number of different interpretations reveal the disparity in its understanding due to differences in historical, political, cultural and ideological background. This presentation attempts to use this phrase 不折腾 and other similar examples and then expand on the “twisted” meanings of some present-day buzzwords to discuss with the audience how we shall tackle such challenges in our translation work.

## 1. VAGUENESS AND/OR TOO MUCH IMPLICATION?

### A CASE STUDY: TRANSLATION OF THE CHINESE PHRASE *BU ZHE TENG*

For the translation of this phrase *bu zhe teng*, there has already been a great deal of discussions, research, comments, and articles mostly on the internet expounding on the topic domestically and internationally. It has become “a hard nut to crack,” according to many.

This section of the paper takes the phrase as an example to discuss the difficulties in translation, especially from Chinese into English, when a certain phrase or sentence in the source language is vague, very general, or equivocal. The translator has to rely on the context and very often on the historical background to figure out its real meaning or implication, thus, compelling him/her to “zhe teng” him/herself (take the trouble) to find and produce an appropriate translation. And sometimes, one may not get the “real” sense of the phrase or sentence at all, as it may convey different meanings from different perspectives, depending on how a person sees and interprets it. The phrase *bu zhe teng* used in Hu Jintao’s speech is not only a good example,

but also an interesting case leading to issues worthy of exploring.

## 1.1 The Context

This is of course nothing new, a translator has to analyze the context in the first place in order to understand and then translate a given word, phrase, or sentence correctly. In this instance, it seems the context (in its broader sense) is somewhat complex. *Bu zhe teng* is a colloquial phrase in China's northern dialect. Why should Hu Jintao suddenly broke out with a colloquial term in such a serious speech? For want of a better term? Or deliberately using a vague and hard-to-pin-down phrase? Quite a number of people appreciate his use of the phrase saying it is "subtle and appropriate" (微妙贴切). (Ref. 2) Why so?

1.1.1 The immediate context of the phrase is that it is the third of the three "don'ts" mentioned in Hu Jintao's speech made in December 18, 2008 at the celebration of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of setting off China's economic reform and opening up of the country to the outside world.

The three "don'ts" are: 不动摇, 不懈怠, 不折腾; perhaps the most literal translation is: "Don't waver; don't relax your efforts; and don't overturn the status quo." The translation of the official English newspaper *China Daily* is: "Don't sway back and forth, relax our efforts or get sidetracked."

1.1.2 The phrase appears in the paragraph (a larger context) as follows, "[Our great goals are: when our Party reaches its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary, our over 10 billion people will be able to enjoy a moderately well-off life, and when New China reaches its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary, our country has become a rich and strong socialist modernized country enjoying democracy, civilization and harmony [my translation]. As long as we do not sway back and forth, relax our efforts or get sidetracked, but firmly push forward the reform and opening-up as well as adhere to socialism with Chinese characteristics, in that way, we will definitely achieve our grand blueprint and ambitious objectives on realizing modernization in the middle of the 21st century [*China Daily's* translation].

It seems that many people share the views expressed in an article published by Singapore's *Lianhe Zaobao* newspaper (《联合早报》) on January 2, 2009. "The author of the article believes that, since the country was founded by the Communist Party of China, the party has taken various wrong and ineffective paths, due to domestic and international factors. All previous political campaigns, the Anti-Rightist Movement and the Great Leap Forward, ... led to considerable damage to the nation's political and economical development. The Great Cultural Revolution, in particular, was the most harmful. Even the resolution of the reform and opening-up policy suffered a setback after 1989 and was not resumed until Deng Xiaoping's tour of the south of China in 1992. Today, all of the twists and turns as well as the mistakes made, are

referred to as '[bu] zhe teng', referring to the fact that China will not waste time in arguments about development direction and political conflicts, which are irrelevant to the development of the economy and can cause internal frictions." And such is the implication of *bu zhe teng*, as indicated in the article.

To quote an old cadre's words, which actually expresses his understanding of the meaning of *zhe teng*, "... None of the so much *zhe teng* in the past decades was not caused by the *zhe teng* of our Party itself. I feel pained thinking of that. The *zhe teng* of our Party had brought about disasters to our country and to the common people. ... The common people now dread so much any kind of *zhe teng* ..." (from an article on the internet entitled, "The Ruling Party Should Establish Basic Political Ethics—Words from an Old Comrade on the Eve of the 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the People's Republic of China," author anonymous, Ref. 3).

1.1.3 In the context of the whole speech, the section where the three phrases appear is when the whole speech is drawing to a close and Hu Jintao, looking back on the past couple of centuries, is in a way summarizing the experience gained and lessons learned in the journey the Party and country have gone through from a historical perspective and against a background of domestic and international happenings.

1.1.4 The phrase *bu zhe teng* may also be taken along the line where such words as social harmony, unity, cohesion, stability, coordination, cooperation, mutual beneficial, mutual development, and mutual winning situation seem to be used much more often as versus violence, political struggle and scheme, class struggle, etc. For example, now the word is "strata" (阶层) instead of "classes" (阶级) when referring to different categories of people.

## 1.2 Translations Of *bu zhe teng* So Far Offered By Various Sources:

Based on each translator's understanding of the phrase and his/her explanations of the country's historical background, its literal meaning and its implication, the focus of the translation varies. It is said that none of the translations were adequate, since they do not convey the different aspects or ideas the phrase implies, such as the ideas of "chaos" and "self-consumption" associated with the "*zhe teng*." Translations available fall into the following categories (Ref. 4):

1.2.1 Focus on no more political trouble making:

- Avoid self-inflicted setbacks.
- Avoid futile actions.
- Avoid power abused (suggested by someone on the website who thinks without power, no one can *zhe teng*, which really means "power abusing").
- No trouble-making.
- Stop making trouble and wasting time.
- No more political turmoil.

- No engaging in infighting.
- Stop making trouble and wasting time; no self-consuming political movements.

#### 1.2.2 Focus on no more breaking of social stability:

- Don't sway back and forth.
- Don't get sidetracked.
- Don't overturn the status quo.
- Don't rock the boat.
- Don't vacillate and cause instability.
- Don't mess around.
- Don't flip flop.
- No dithering.
- No major changes.
- No Z Turn.
- No zigzags.
- No erratic actions.
- Why reinvent the wheel?

#### 1.2.3 Focus on futility of any movement:

- Don't flail about fruitlessly.
- Do not do something over and over again, and to little effect.
- Don't do much ado about nothing.
- Don't bugger about pointlessly. (a more UK vernacular)
- Don't faff about. (无事奔忙, 小题大做)
- No more hassle.
- Much ado about nothing.
- Don't waste effort retracting from hasty moves.
- Avoid futile actions.
- No self-consuming political movements.
- Do not fight senseless battles or avoid pointless endeavors.
- Bring owls to Athens. (undertake a pointless venture)

#### 1.2.4 Keep the Chinese original:

- [simply] *bu zhe teng*

#### 1.2.5 There are suggestions to express the phrase in a positive, not negative, way (还有反话正说的) :

- Let's focus and continue to do what is the right thing.
- The reform has no room for hesitation, delay or caprice.

#### 1.2.6 There is one lengthy version, the three-character Chinese phrase was turned into a long sentence of 30 words (还有一个加长版); it is actually a paraphrase:

- We will not complicate our development with meaningless disputes, troubles, backtracking, sidetracking and anything that deviates from the priority of development.

Up to this very day, it seems that no translation has come out that satisfies all.

### **1.3 How Do Chinese People Understand and Interpret (*bu zhe teng*) (Not In Terms of Translation)? Many Refer It To:**

- Action or movements with no real purpose; producing no benefits (no real effects); causing physical and mental anguish and pain to those involved, and to the common people and society at large
- Engaging in senseless/pointless enterprise, undertaking, activity, endeavor, venture, battle, etc.
- Launching political movements: such as the anti-rightist movement, great leap forward, si-qing movement, cultural revolution, anti-bourgeois contamination, etc.
- Carrying out internal power struggle—playing politics for personal interest
- Adding burden to the common people

In sum, Celeste Fong's words may be representative of the common people's sentiment, "Among others, responses from many netizens and the public are that 'the *laobaixing* (ordinary people) just want to live a peaceful life with no untoward incident.'" (Ref. 5)

### **1.4 Ways to Tackle the Vagueness or Too Much Implication of Phrases or Sentences in Translation (Mostly from Chinese into English), or Are There Satisfactory Ways at All?**

1.4.1 Just translate the phrase or sentence at its face value, i.e., render the Chinese words into corresponding English with its relevant grammatical structure and vocabulary, and do not bother about the implication, as some think that the responsibility of the translator is to translate, not interpret. How it should be understood should be left to the reader.

1.4.2 Translate the phrase or sentence as it appears with its basic meaning appropriate to the context, and give a translator's note explaining the implication as the translator understands it.

1.4.3 Directly "translate" or rather explaining its implication into English, such as the translation of *bu zhe teng* as, "Avoid self-inflicted setbacks" or "Stop making trouble and wasting time, no self-consuming political movements." These are actually not exactly translation, but explanation or paraphrasing.

1.4.4 Simply keep the Chinese version and put a note to it. It'd be easy if it was just one phrase or sentence like *bu zhe teng*. But what should we do if it is a long sentence? Here is an example (also taken from the same speech by Hu Jintao):  
“要妥善解决这些矛盾和问题、战胜这些困难和风险，就必须善于从千头万绪、纷繁复杂的事物和事物的普遍联系中抓住主要矛盾和矛盾的主要方面，同时又

必须善于统筹协调、把握平衡，在事物的普遍发展中形成有利于突破主要矛盾和矛盾主要方面的合力，不断提高驾驭复杂局面、解决复杂问题能力，不断推动经济社会向前发展。”

This is a long and involved sentence. How we could translate it into decent English, especially the part in bold, which is general, vague, and entangled, would be another ordeal for the translator. This perhaps could be another topic for us to discuss and explore.

## **2. BUZZWORDS**

### **2.1 Introduction**

The opening up of China in the last thirty years also coincided with the extraordinary development in technology and the ever quickening pace of globalization. Through computers and internet, the world has become a much smaller place and people are more connected than ever. The economic and technological growth has also spawned countless new “buzzwords” on a daily basis.

In the interest of time, during my part of the presentation, I will only examine the new Chinese “buzzwords” that are derived from foreign, mostly English words.

### **2.2 Buzzwords and Transliteration**

After many years of isolation, people in China are now bombarded with new information from overseas. These new words are quickly and cleverly morphed into Chinese and entered everyday speech. When translating from a foreign language into Chinese, there is a unique challenge of working with a finite number of existing characters. One needs to find the appropriate combination of characters to best convey the meaning of the word from the source text. It requires thorough understanding of the source language, the target language and its cultural context and restrictions. Also, the translator should not “create” a new translation when a well accepted translation is readily available. Enter the art of transliteration. Transliteration is called yinyi (音译), or translation by sound in Chinese. With the prevalence of English classes in schools, almost all younger Chinese have at least a rudimentary understanding of the English language. As a result, with the aid of transliteration, many new Chinese words are now created with English language in mind. This linguistic phenomenon has permanently altered the makeup of the Chinese language. For Chinese language translators living overseas, this presents a great challenge to keep up with the new terminology and buzzwords from the homeland. For the remainder of this presentation, we will examine some of the new buzzwords that have popped up in recent years.

### **2.3 Transliterated Words Have Long Been a Part of the Chinese Language**

Whether people realize or not, transliterated foreign words have long been part of the Chinese language, dating back to the introduction of Buddhism in Sanskrit language in 1<sup>st</sup> Century B.C. Here are some of the well known and well accepted transliterated words that are used in everyday speech

Blog	博客
Bowling	保齡球
Calorie	卡路里
Cartoon	卡通
Coca-Cola	可口可乐
Gestapo	盖世太保
Golf	高尔夫球
Google	谷歌
Guitar	吉他
Humor	幽默
Jazz	爵士乐
Logic	逻辑
Salad	沙拉
Sauna	桑拿
Utopia	乌托邦
Yahoo	雅虎
Yosemite	优胜美地
Yuppie	雅皮士

#### **2.4 English Acronyms Have Also Made Their Way into the Chinese Language.**

丁克族 (ding1 ke4 zu2)

DINK

Dual Income No Kids – It is pretty self explanatory, usually refers to well off, professional couples who do not have kids.

丁士族 (ding1 shi4 zu2)

DINS

The expression is used mainly in Taiwan where it means families that enjoy a double income but without sex because the husband and wife are too preoccupied with their work to have the mood or time for sex.

天鹅 (tian1 e2)

SWANS

This term stands for “Strong Women Achievers, No Spouse.” It was first used to describe a growing group of high-achieving single women who are often revered for their style and beauty, but sometimes feared for their strength.

亨利一族 (heng1 li4 yi1 zu2)

HENRY

This term stands for “High Earner, Not Rich Yet” and refers to people with substantial income, but little wealth. For instance, people in the United States who earn about US\$250,000 a year, but due to high taxes and other debts, the value of their accumulated assets hasn’t reach US\$3 million yet.

YAWN 族 (yawn zu2)

YAWN clan

The initials stand for young and wealthy but normal, a label given to sensible young people who refrain from overspending or driving a car for environmental reasons.

PK

对决

Penalty Kicks, or Player Killing, mostly referring to a showdown.

公司腐败官(gong1 si1 fu3 bai4 guan1)

CFO

The term means Corporate Fraud Officer here, not chief financial officer. It is another example of borrowing and twisting the meaning of an existing term.

**2.5 Below Are Examples of Chinese Buzzwords that are Created with English Language in Mind, Not Surprisingly Many of These Words Have Something to do With Computers and Technology and Offers Twist to its Meanings.**

硬盘人 (ying4 pan2 ren2)

out-of-towner

The Chinese expression used in online chat rooms refers to those who come from outside a certain city. It literally means a "hard disc person," as the initials for the pinyin of 外地, meaning out-of-town in English, is WD, the same as the initials for Western Digital, a brand of hard disc.

网络庐舍 (wang3 luo4 lu2 she4)

Internet loser

It is a group of people with jobs who spend more than two hours on the Internet for entertainment every day, thus making no progress in their career. “Lu she” imitates the sound of “loser” in English.

语音钓鱼 (yv3 yin1 dia4o yu2)

vishing

This is a portmanteau by blending "voice" and "phishing" and means an attempt to fool a person into submitting personal, financial or password data either by sending an email that includes a scammer-controlled phone number, or by spoofing an automated phone call from a financial institution using VoIP.

M 一代 (M yi1 dai4)

multitasking generation

This is a term created by the US-based Time magazine. It refers to the young people who indulge themselves in Internet games, iTunes, MySpace, MSN and other online activities, sometimes simultaneously.

得体 (de2 ti3)

dirty

This Chinese phrase originally meant appropriate, decent and in good taste. But since it sounds like the English word "dirty," the phrase is now often used by Netizens to describe anyone who keeps an amiable facade but harbors a vicious heart.

谷歌文 (gu3 ge1 wen2)

Googlese text

Scholar Xu Lai coined this term. He uses it to describe written works created by Internet writers who base their text on materials obtained by Googling. Such writers can hardly guarantee the accuracy of their data and frequently risk stepping into plagiarism disputes.

首席忽悠官 (shǒu xī hū you guān)

CHO

The H here is short both for "human resources" and the Chinese pinyin for huyou (or coaxing). Young people playfully call the human resources workers as CHO these days because they believe in many cases the HRs are trying to paint a rosy picture of their companies for job seekers, against the fears of a global economic recession.

博斗 (bo2 dou4)

blog bickering

The term is a homonym of the Chinese word "fight," but it conjoins two Chinese characters that can mean "blog" and "fight," respectively. So, the phrase refers to Netizens tilting at each other on their blogs.

上班蟑螂 (shang4 ban1 zhang1 lang2)

clockroach

A combination of "clock" and "cockroach" Refers to employees who idle their time away by watching the clock.

3F 危机 (san1 Fwei1 ji1)

3F crisis

This new term refers to the financial crisis, fuel crisis and food crisis now plaguing many parts of the world.

百恼汇 (bai3 nao3 hui4)

middle-age crisis

The term has a similar pronunciation to "Buynow," the name of a computer market, in

Chinese. Meaning “a host of worries” it is now used to describe the lifestyle crisis facing many middle-aged people.

养牛族 (yang3niu2zu2)

jeans lover

In Chinese, jeans can be translated literally as Cattle boy pants. Jeans collectors are now called yangniu2zu or Cattle breeders. To get a unique color and style, they seldom wash their jeans and try to wear their pants as long as possible. In their words, they use their body to raise a special pair of jeans.

挨踢人士 (ai1 ti1 ren2 shi4)

IT workers

The expression is a transliteration of IT, the shortened form for information technology.

赧客 (jiu1 ke4)

joke-video clan

The neological Chinese expression refers to people who shoot joke video clips which usually run for a few minutes and post them online for others to share. The Chinese expression is a transliteration of the English word for joke.

米农 (mi3 nong2)

domain traders

People tend to use "corn" to mean "domain" on the Internet since the Chinese term "yuming" (domain) is pronounced similar to "yumi" (corn). Those registrants who hold popular domain names until their values increase are compared to corn farmers taking good care of their crops.

## **2.6 Newly Transliterated Words from English that Take on New Meanings in Chinese.**

Home page 烘焙鸡 (hong1 bei4 ji1)

This term, meaning literally “baked chicken” in Chinese, is a comical transliteration used by Netizens for the English words “home page.” The pronunciation of the Chinese term is quite similar to the English phrase.

Hip hop 嘻哈 (xi1 ha1)

Hip hop is a cultural movement and musical genre first developed in New York City among African Americans and Latinos. Many Chinese youth are also fans of this type of music and mentality. The Chinese transliteration 嘻哈 simulates its pronunciation and conveys its care-free and cool attitude.

Fans 粉丝 (fen3 si1)

There original word for “fan” (迷) had all but disappeared in casual conversation

among young people. Instead it is replaced with the transliterated word 粉丝 (vermicelli). More colorful words have been derived from it, such as 铁丝 (iron wire) or 钢丝 (steel wire), and specific words describing fans of certain celebrities.

## **2.7 Words Associated with Pop Culture that Are Cleverly Translated into Chinese and Take on New Meanings**

Elvis Presley          猫王

Elvis Presley is a popular American singer, actor, and cultural icon. Since one of his monikers is “Hillbilly Cat”, the Chinese took the cue and gave him the nickname “The King of Cats”. During my Chinese classes, when I tell my students that Elvis is known as “The King of Cats” to Chinese, they always seem to be baffled.

Shaquille O’Neill      大鲨鱼

Shaquille O’Neill, or simply known as “Shaq”, is a famous basketball player with great size and strength. The word 大鲨鱼 (the big shark) sounds like the name “Shaq” and is also very descriptive of his physique and on court dominance. During his recent trip to China, Shaq apparently became very fond of his Chinese version “action figure” in which his forearms are transformed into two sharks.

Beatles                  披頭四

Popular British rock group from the 1960’s. The transliterated words 披頭四 not only simulates the sound “Beatles” but also becomes somewhat descriptive. Since 披頭 describes their “mop top” appearance and 四 means there are four members in the band.

After seeing all these examples, one must wonder, where is the Chinese language going? Is it slowly being replaced by transliterated words? On the other hand, the vast influx of new words means that a language is alive with vitality. The new words born out of the ever changing economic and technology landscape quickly find their place and breathe new life into an ancient language such as Chinese. The overseas Chinese translators should embrace the challenge of keeping with new buzzwords from the homeland in order to stay competent. Many of these examples are taken from the website <http://www.shanghaidaily.com/buzzword/> (Ref. 6).

References:

1. China's President Hu Jintao's speech made in December 2008 on the occasion of celebrating the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the economic reform of the country and its opening to the outside world.
2. An article on the website Zhongguo Xinwen Wang entitled, "*Bu Zhe Teng*, subtle and appropriate, Chinese people understanding it tacitly; but daunting international media" ( “不折腾” 微妙贴切，国人心领神会，却难倒国际媒体).
3. An article on the internet entitled, "The Ruling Party Should Establish Basic Political Ethics—Words from an Old Comrade on the Eve of the 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the People's Republic of China," author anonymous.
4. Li Changshuan's blog (<http://gsti.bfsu.edu.cn>), "Discussion on the Translation of "bu zhe teng"".
5. Comments, mostly anonymous, from different websites.
6. Many of the examples of buzzwords are taken from the website: <http://www.shanghaidaily.com/buzzword/>.