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CAPÍTULO 24. PREFERENCES OF BRAND NAMES IN CHINA:  
CHINESE TRANSLATION OF FOREIGN BRAND NAMES

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## SUMMARY

In order to help foreign companies set up a well-known brand in China, this study presents a bridge for foreign linguists or companies attempting to understand the Chinese branding market. Major and common methods—literal translation, transliteration, liberal translation, combination of liberal translation and transliteration are analyzed in this paper. Cultural factors deserve special attention in the translation of brand names. Chinese have their own preferences for the translation of foreign brand names. The Chinese version should retain these four features: (1) clarity and brevity, (2) sonority and distinctness, (3) elegance and aptness, and (4) originality and novelty, all for the purpose of promoting sales and evoking Chinese customers' purchasing desire.

## 1. CRITERIA OF TRANSLATION

As we know, the difficulties of translating are tremendous. How do we judge a good translation? Yan Fu, a Chinese scholar and translator in 19th century, provided us the criteria of “Faithfulness, Expressiveness and Elegance” since his book *Evolution and Ethics* published ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yan\\_Fu](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yan_Fu)). Translating is a complicated and fascinating task. The criteria of a good translation are actually embodied in the process of translating.

What does faithfulness mean in translating foreign brand names? A translation can be hardly considered as “faithful” to the original brand unless a creative rendition gives similar sound and faithful meaning. Nida (1982: 9) tells us,

“Translation is one aspect of communication, and even within a single language absolute equivalence in communication is never possible. The same is true between languages, so that though absolute identity of meaning can never be accomplished whether in intralingual or interlingual communication; nevertheless,

effective equivalence of meaning can be communicated both within a language as well as between languages.”

In the translation of brand names, Nida’s principle of functional equivalence offers us a standard to judge whether a brand name is well translated or not. In a sense it can be considered as Newmark’s “communicative translation” as it focuses on the effect on the receivers as close as possible to that obtained on the readers of the original. “Communicative translation concerned mainly with the receptors, usually in the context of a language and cultural variety” (Newmark, 1998: 43). Both of them stress on trying to obtain the same reaction by the receptors to the original as the receptors of the translated text.

According to the above translation theories, well-translated brand names must meet the following two requirements: (1) it should contain the features of a brand name; (2) it must be able to produce the same or approximate effect as the original does. That is to say, the translated brand names should sound pleasant, capable of helping the process of purchase. According to Nida’s principle of equivalence in translation (1998: 116), translation of brand names should achieve a trinity of beautifulness: the sound, the form and the meaning. At the same time, cultural factors should also be taken into consideration.

## 2. FINDINGS: TRANSLATING METHODS OF FOREIGN BRANDS

The Chinese translation of foreign brand names needs effective means to achieve the aim of brand names. This paper deals with the methods of Chinese translation of foreign brand names in four popular ways in China: (1) literal translation, (2) transliteration, (3) liberal translation, and (4) combination of liberal transliteration and transliteration

### 2.1. LITERAL TRANSLATION

Literal translation means brand names are rendered literally (word to word) or semantically from one language to another. “Literal translation attempts to render, as closely as the semantic and syntactic structures of the second language allow, the exact contextual meaning of the original. (Newmark, 1988: 39)”

It is well known that literal translation is adopted in many cases because these brand names and their translation will offer the same image, connotation

of the original brand names, thus achieving the same effect. For example, Pioneer is put into 先锋 (xian feng, ‘pioneer’) to present advanced technology and functionality. Some cigarettes’ brand names are rendered literally, for instance, Lark is put into 云雀 (yun que, ‘lark’); Camel into 骆驼 (luo tuo, ‘camel’); Viceroy into 总督 (zhong du, ‘viceroy’); Good Companion into 良友 (liang you, ‘good companion’); Three Fives into 三五 (san wu, ‘three fives’). This measure is also adopted by many automobiles’ brand names. Chinese versions have 皇冠 (huang guan, ‘crown’) for Crown, 美洲豹 (mei zhou bao, ‘jaguar’) for Jaguar, 总统 (zhong tong, ‘president’) for President, 帝国 (di guo, ‘imperial’) for Imperial, 陆地巡洋舰 (lu di xun yang jian, ‘land cruiser’) to Land Cruiser. With meaning, these foreign brand names exhibit the images of the products explicitly.

For a brand name with a particular meaning in the original, usually a translator may prefer literal translation, as it is simple and convenient, with the meaning of the original mark preserved. Generally speaking, an adoption of this method can preserve the original cultural message, which should be treated carefully. It is very difficult in translation to retain cultural meaning from the original text. Essentially, every nation has its own social values, beliefs, and attitudes to interpret the cultural meaning from domestic and foreign products.

## 2.2 TRANSLITERATION

The second means that is popularly adopted in China for translating foreign brand names is transliteration that is sound transcription in this paper by Chinese, sometimes even when their original meanings are retained. The most important feature of transliterated brand names is their ability to retain the sonority of the original brand, thereby making it easier to disseminate it orally. Besides, it can keep the exoticism of the original. For example, with regard to the brand name Cadillac, the literal translation 公爵 (gong jue, ‘duke’) was used originally. In so doing, the meaning of the original may be preserved, but the sonority has disappeared completely. The owner of the brand actually used the literal version once in China. However, he discovered later that the transliteration of the brand was even more popular among Chinese consumers, so he switched to the transliteration 凯迪拉克 (ka di la ke). Although devoid of substantial meaning, the transliterated mark is sonorous and forceful. Especially it sounds exotic and unconventional. As a brand name, it is well received in China, thus retaining the sound effect.

The following brand names are good examples of transliteration in Chinese.

Rado 雷达 (lei da)

Omega 奥美加 (ao mei jia)

Hilton 希尔顿 (xi er dun)

Ford 福特 (fu te)

Olympus 奥林帕斯 (ao lin pa si)	Lincoln 林肯 (lin ken)
Iveco 依维柯 (yi wei ke)	Sharp 夏普 (xia pu)
Rolls-Royce 劳斯莱斯 (lao si lai si)	Sassoon 沙宣 (sha xuan)
Maybelline 美宝莲 (mei bao lian)	Motorola 摩托罗拉 (mo tuo luo la)
Yahoo 雅虎 (ya hu)	Intel 英特尔 (ying te er)
Nike 耐克 (nai ke)	Lux 力士 (li shi)
Nokia 诺基亚 (nuo ji ya)	Aiwa 爱华 (ai hua)
Siemens 西门子 (xi men zi)	Adidas 阿迪达斯 (a di da si)
Kodak 柯达 (ke da)	Kiss Me 奇士美 (qi shi mei)
Channel 夏奈尔 (xia nai er)	Diva 狄娃 (di wa)
Kinson 金生 (jin sheng)	Wiseman 怀斯曼 (huai si man)

From the above examples, we can summarize those meaningless proper names and long phrases can be translated by this method. Most of the transliterated versions by Pin Yin (a Chinese official phonetic system, marked by alphabets) have more syllables. These sounds are symbolized by Chinese characters, which is very different from Indo-European languages. It is preferable to have a sonorous and brief Chinese version that is easy to pronounce for Chinese people.

### 2.3 LIBERAL TRANSLATION

According to Chen (1998: 94), “liberal translation refers to the fact that a translator has to seek a close or similar information or functional equivalent to the original while giving up its literal meaning since the cultural differences exist between the target language and the source language”. Liberal translation is a creative way of translating brand names. It conveys the essential thought expressed in a source text (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Translation>), which is contrary to literal translation. “It can add aesthetic enjoyment to the version and imply the function and effect of products. It is to turn the source text into a most proper target text with local cultural color (Cang, 1999:35)”. That is to say, brand name translation needs to be localized. If the cultural integration in transliterating brand names is not very pronounced, such effort in liberal translation of brand names is remarkable. It shows a translator’s strong inclination to his/her native culture. For example, a Japanese brand Canon has a perfect Chinese name 佳能 (jia neng, better function) even though the sounds of the two brands do not match each other. The meaning of two Chinese characters present an impressive image of the product’s good quality.

Liberal translation can provide information that the original brand names fail to do. It has become a popular trend in the rendition of some

medicines and agricultural chemicals because liberal translation brings effective hints for products:

Dalemane 带尔眠 (dai er mian, ‘helping you sleep’)  
 Halcion 酣乐欣 (han le xin, ‘sound and pleased sleeping’)  
 Varemocl 为痔谋 (wei zhi mo, ‘curing your piles’)  
 Legalon 利肝灵 (li gan ling, ‘beneficial to the liver’)  
 Asverin 安漱定 (an shu ding, ‘calming cough’)  
 Beconase 鼻可灵 (bi ke ling, ‘effectiveness for nasitis’)  
 Hismanal 息斯敏 (xi si min, ‘curing the allergy’)  
 Saturn 杀丹 (sha dan, ‘germ-killing pill’)  
 Decis 敌杀死 (di sha si, animal killer)  
 Onecide 稳杀得 (wen sha de, ‘effective insecticide’)  
 Ronstar 农思它 (nong si ta, ‘associated with farming’)  
 Ordram 禾大壮 (he da zhong, ‘strong riceshoot’)  
 Squibb 施贵宝 (shi gui bao, ‘providing precious treasure’)  
 Machete 灭草特 (mie cao te, ‘effective weed-killer’).

If these brand names of medicine and herbicide are transliterated into Chinese, they will make no sense to Chinese customers. Then liberal translation is a good way to introduce their functions and effects. For example, Onecide, rendered into 稳杀得 (wen sha de, ‘effective insecticide’), suggests its effectiveness and farmers understand what it is so that they would like to purchase it.

## 2.4 COMBINATION OF LIBERAL TRANSLATION AND TRANSLITERATION

As a matter of fact, liberal translation or transliteration cannot always do the job separately, especially because brand names are “packages of culture”. The combination of liberal translation and transliteration may achieve a dual purpose: not only reflect the connotation of the original but also be similar to the original sound, as the message of the brand name will be more vividly reflected so that it will be more impressive to consumers.

A stereo brand name McCormack has a beautiful Chinese version 麦歌美 (mai ge mei, ‘beautiful songs from microphone’), which combines the sound and meaning together, indicating the exquisite melody of the product. 宝马 (bao ma, ‘precious horse’) for BMW is also a good model of the combination of liberal translation and transliteration, which connects the high quality of the car and a precious horse.

Today more and more brand names are put into Chinese by this method, such as:

Holsten 好顺 (hao shun, ‘good and smooth’)

Reebok 锐步 (rui bu, 'quick steps')

Tides 汰渍 (tai zi, 'washing off dirt')

Dunhill 登喜路 (deng xi lu, 'stepping on the road of joyness')

Budweiser 百威 (bai wei, 'hundreds of')

Minolta 美能达 (mei neng da, 'achievement of beauty and function')

Pentium 奔腾 (ben teng, 'galloping')

Heuer 豪雅 (hao ya, 'rich and elegant')

Colgate 高露洁 (gao lu jie, 'revealing superior cleanliness')

The above examples are among the many attractive brand names translated by the combination of liberal translation and transliteration. This method achieves an almost complete combination of the sound and meaning of the source and target language, which reaches the highest level in the field of translation. It does not only keep the connotation of the brand name, but also adapts to Chinese culture and aesthetics. Therefore the following principles are found by this method when translating:

- The version's sound is close or similar to the original
- The version needs to contain an attractive meaning and favourable associations.
- The version needs somehow to retain its exoticism.

### 3. CHINESE PREFERENCES OF TRANSLATED FOREIGN NAMES

Translating foreign brand names requires a good understanding of the product and the target consumers and, equally important, a good understanding of the language and, the culture of the consumer society concerned. Common preferences for brand names among Chinese people are commented here. A good Chinese translation of foreign brand names must have the following major features.

#### 3.1. BREVITY

This refers chiefly to the linguistic structure and extrinsic expression of a brand name, which is a morphological requirement. Specifically, there are two aspects to be considered.

Firstly, a brand name should not comprise too many syllables. There are 384 foreign brand names selected for this study. Among them, it is calculated that 155 Chinese versions are no more than two-character/syllable structure (accounting for 40%) and 155 are three-character/syllable's (accounting for 40%). Only 49 of them are four characters/syllables

(accounting for 13%) and 22 are over five characters/syllables (accounting for 6%). The other 3 belong to numbers and alphabetic structure. Two or three-character/syllable structure is easy to be recognized and remembered by Chinese. This shows that most Chinese versions of foreign brand names choose two/three character/syllable structure.

The syllable structure of some Indo-European languages is much more complex than Chinese, as the number of syllables of a word is not restricted and consonant clusters are frequent in those languages such as English (Chan and Huang, 2001: 309-318). Chinese linguists (Shih, 1986; Feng, 1997) have pointed out that a two-syllable foot is the basic and standard foot in Chinese prosodic word formation. This explains why two-syllable names are much more popular than other names. In the case of translating a multisyllable brand, or a brand with consonant clusters, we have to make a decision on how many syllables or which syllables should be selected for the Chinese version.

Brevity has been found essential in brand name Chinese translation. Since practically every Chinese character constitutes a syllable, in transliterating a word spelled in Latin letters, Chinese characters have to be assigned to some of the consonant letters that do not constitute individual syllables in the original, resulting in too many syllables in the Chinese version. In order to avoid this, certain syllables of minor importance are omitted in transliterating longer brand names. For example, if Mercedes-Benz were to be transliterated in its entirety, there would have to be six characters 梅塞得斯奔驰 (mei sai de si-ben chi). However, it is more advisable to render it into an abbreviated version 奔驰 (ben chi, 'galloping'), which consists of only two characters, and is now popular in China. When a brand name is translated semantically, it is better to choose synonyms or analogues with few characters.

Secondly, rarely used Chinese characters are avoided for brand names and the ones chosen should not consist of too many strokes. For example, an American company, Nine West Group Inc. registered a Chinese version 玖熙 (jiu xi, 'long prosperity'), among which “熙” (xi) has 14 strokes and might not be recognized by some Chinese. Taiwan Qiyu Limited Company has a very special trademark 棋宇 (qi yu, “controlling the whole world”) for its products because the character “棋” (qi, can also be written as 碁) is rarely used and it contains an excessive number of strokes as well. These Chinese brand names like 麋鹿 (mi lu, a soda, ‘elk’), 涟漪 (lian yi, a water-purified instrument, ‘wavelet’), 寰宇 (huan yu, an electric appliance, ‘the universe’), 岩焱 (yan yan, a furnace, ‘fire on the rock’), etc., are not popular because they take uncommon characters. A large number of homonyms (same sound but different characters) in Chinese offer a large scope of choices. However, it is not wise that some enterprises use traditional Chinese characters as brand names because the public in China uses simplified Chinese characters instead of traditional

characters. If uncommon characters are used, uneducated consumers will fail to recognize them or will mispronounce them, which will inevitably impair the effectiveness of the brand name in use.

### 3.2. SONORITY AND DISTINCTNESS

Sonority refers to the sound character of brand names that is a phonological requirement, especially “the sound of the transliteration, which means that words chosen for brand names should be sonorous, and the syllables as distinct, as possible (Tang, 1990: 37)”. Brand names like Coca-Cola (可口可乐 ke kou ke le), Pepsi-Cola (百事可乐 bai shi ke le), Avon (雅芳 ya fang), Canon (佳能 jia neng), Marlboro (万宝路 wan bao lu), Adidas (阿迪达斯 a di da si), Kit-Kat (奇巧 qi qiao), etc. set up good models. Not only is the sound of a brand name connected with its distinctness, but also with the diction of a brand name. For example, Kodak is a word created as a brand name. Its click sound makes people at once think of the sound of the camera’s shutter. To be sure, whether the transliteration can attain sonority and distinctness depends, to a large extent, on the original. If transliteration is taken into consideration, it may improve the quality of the Chinese version even creating a more compelling translation.

The sonority of a brand name plays an important role in drawing consumers’ attention; furthermore, some association aroused by the sound of the brand can influence sales. If the Chinese rendition of a brand name is odd, it will fail to be effective. The Hong Kong fashion brand Goldlion successfully upscales its image by pronouncing the name in French in its ad campaigns. However, “at first this brand name was literally turned into ‘金狮 (jin shi, ‘gold lion’), but ‘狮 (shi, ‘lion’) is pronounced similar to ‘死 (si, ‘death’) and ‘蚀 (shi, ‘loss’) in Cantonese. This rendition is inadequate because ‘死 (si, ‘death’) and ‘蚀 (shi, ‘loss’) have negative meanings in Chinese. (He Chuansheng, 1997: 179)” Then a blending of transliteration and liberal translation 金利来 (jin li lai, ‘gold and profits are coming’) for Goldlion was created and well accepted.

### 3.3. ELEGANCE AND APTNESS

“Elegance and aptness refer chiefly to the meaning of brand name or the idea it conveys”, which is a semantic requirement (Tang, 1990: 38). Many foreign brands are just meaningless names. Chinese speakers favour meaningful names. Meaningless names are difficult to memorize for Chinese. Many translated brands in Chinese tend to follow the Chinese branding rules with



two-syllables and positive connotations, where some desired meanings are assigned to the translated names while the original names actually lack such meanings (Chan, 1990). So, the selection of syllables and the selection of meaningful Chinese words suitable to the pronunciation of the original name and the meaning of the product have made the process very challenging.

According to a study (He, 1997: 131),

Chinese prefer the characters with auspicious meanings, especially those suggesting happiness, longevity, good luck, fortune, wealth, etc., such as 顺 (shun, 'smoothness'), 利 (li, 'benefit'), 宏 (hong, 'grandness'), 祥 (xiang, 'auspiciousness'), 金 (jin, 'gold'), 鑫 (xin, 'prosperity'), 福 (fu, 'happiness'), 寿 (shou, 'longevity'), 喜 (xi, 'delight'), 乐 (le, 'pleasure'), 美 (mei, 'beauty'), 吉 (ji, 'luck'), 泰 (tai, 'peaceful'), 瑞 (rui, 'Lucky'), etc.

Some English versions like 福尔 (fu le er, 'making you happy') for Flower, 宝利莱 (bao li lai, 'precious benefit is coming') for Polaroid, 泰福 (tai fu, 'peaceful and happy') for Typhoon are good examples. Characters with favourable meaning are preferable, such as Nikon (尼康 ni kong), Compaq (康柏 kang bai, 'healthy like a cypress'), Whirlpool (惠而浦 hui er pu, 'favour like a river'), Cadbury's (吉百利 ji bai li, 'good luck bringing benefits'), Foster's (富仕达 fu shi da, 'prosperous and flourishing'), etc. These characters with lucky meanings are adopted to help promoting sales because they can evoke Chinese consumers' favorable association.

#### 3.4. ORIGINALITY AND NOVELTY

"A brand name should be as novel and unconventional as possible in wording, pronunciation, meaning and other aspects, so as to arouse the interest of the consumers and leave a deep impression on them (Tang, 1990: 38)". This can be regarded as an aesthetic requirement in the brand naming process. For example, translations of brand names like 7-Up (七喜 qi xi, 'seven happiness'), OMO (奥妙 ao miao, 'mysterious and profound'), Mild Seven (柔和七星 rou he qi xing, 'seven mild stars'), Xerox (施乐 shi le, 'giving happiness'), Poison (百爱神 bai ai shen, 'a god beloved by everyone'), Mickey Mouse (米老鼠 mi lao shu, 'a mouse named Mi'), Pepsi-Cola (百事可乐 bai shi ke le, 'everything fine and happy'), Bud's (八喜 ba xi, 'eight pleasures'), present us with originality and novelty.

The above analysis gives foreign marketers a clear guideline for translating an original brand name in China. The preference of Chinese people for positive

and bi/tri-syllabic brands with a foreign-like sound is a strong trend nowadays. Showing the nature and image of the product is an obvious advertising tool to position brand names in consumers' mind.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The translation of brand names is different from other kinds of translation, and thus it requires more "creativity" from the translator. It is not enough just to possess the methods of translation. Special attention must be paid to the characteristics of brand names. A good translator should comprehensively consider the various related factors and take all possible forms of rhetoric in the target language so as to achieve the optimum promotional effect of a brand. It is possibly as difficult as designing and creating a brand name.

The aim of this study is to find general rules and Chinese preferences to translate foreign brand names into Chinese considered from cultural and linguistic perspectives. Most foreign brand names talked in this paper are English. This thesis provides a platform of discussion on the Chinese translation of foreign brand names. It measures the impact of Chinese culture on branding in China and explores Chinese people's perception of cultural meanings implanted in brands. It is hoped that the study of this subject will be of some practical benefit.

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