

## **Chinese-English Translation of Public Signs for Tourism**

**Leong Ko, The University of Queensland**

### **ABSTRACT**

Bilingual public signs are extensively used in Chinese-speaking regions such as Mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong. This article concentrates on issues relating to Chinese public signs at tourist attractions and their translation into English. Based on examples collected from these three regions, it finds that Chinese public signs in tourist areas constitute a special genre and tend to use a descriptive and/or figurative language style to convey a simple message, which creates challenges for translation. The data analysis indicates that three translation strategies are employed in translating public signs—i.e. literal translation, semi-literal and semi-adaptive translation, and free adaptation—and that literal translation is the most common strategy. It is found that all three strategies have limitations in conveying the message meaningfully and naturally. The article concludes that the unique nature of public signs in tourist areas suggests a need for further investigation of the language styles used in such signs in both languages and the most appropriate strategies for their translation.

### **KEYWORDS**

Public sign, bilingual sign, public sign translation, literal translation, adaptation.

### **1. Introduction**

In Chinese-speaking countries and regions, bilingual Chinese/English public signs are used extensively in public places such as hotels, restaurants, shopping centres, airports, parks, train stations, public amenities and places of tourist interest to convey information to readers of the two languages. Public signs have a number of distinctive features. For instance, they are mostly in the form of a single sheet of board, paper or metal, with clearly written words or drawings in large print for people to read or view from a distance. Due to the constraint of physical space, the expressions used on public signs are usually succinct, conveying essential information in just a few words, such as 'Wet paint' and 'No entry.' The translation of public signs can therefore be considered a special domain that requires appropriate strategies to convey the information from the source language to the target language effectively.

Tourism is a typical field in which public signs need to be translated. Due to some special features of the Chinese language used in tourism, the translation of such public signs presents unique challenges and creates a number of problems for translators. This article will discuss the features of Chinese public signs in tourist areas, examine some problems in their English translation, and explore possible solutions. The study is based on real examples collected from tourist attractions in Mainland China (or China), Taiwan and Hong Kong.

## 2. Definition of public signs

Public signs are mostly referred to as 'signs' in English, and have been defined in different ways. Ashley Montagu defines a sign as a "concrete denoter" possessing an inherent, specific meaning, similar to the sentence "This is it; do something about it!" (*Encyclopaedia Britannica* 2009). From the marketing and advertising perspective, a sign is "a device placed on or before a premise to identify its occupants and the nature of the business done there or to advertise a business or its products" (*ibid.*). It is defined in Wester's New Collegiate Dictionary (1977) as "a posted command, warning, or direction." According to Macquarie Dictionary (1987), a sign is "an inscribed board, space, etc., serving for information, advertisement, warning, etc., on a building, along a street, or the like." The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (1997) defines a sign as "a piece of paper, metal, etc. in a public place, with words or drawings on it that give people information, warn them not to do something, etc." According to these definitions, then, a sign can contain words and/or pictures/drawings. Such signs are often referred to as "public signs" in Chinese based on the understanding that they appear in public places. When discussing public signs, it seems that Chinese scholars tend to refer specifically to the language used in such signs—i.e. public sign language—and the vehicles for such language can range from simple road signs to tourism brochures that carry detailed information. For instance, Ding (2006) suggests that a public sign refers to a kind of language that indicates what the public need to know in public places, including signs, pointers, road signs, slogans, public notices and warnings. He further argues that "There is no corresponding term in English and so we might just translate it as an 'environmental communication notice and sign'" (*ibid.*: 42) (my translation). Luo and Li (2006: 66) point out that a public sign refers to a kind of language displayed in public places, serving a special communicative function and providing information and instructions, and that such language includes road signs, advertisements, product brochures, tourism guides, propaganda materials and public notices. He (2006) suggests that a public sign exhibits a special linguistic style that is designed to be viewed by a specific group of people in order to achieve a special communication purpose, and examples include road signs, advertisement boards, shop signs, warnings, propaganda materials and tourism brochures. Based on the English definitions of signs and the understanding of public sign language by Chinese scholars, a public sign can be considered to be a sign containing words and/or drawings, posted in a public place, which serves the purpose of conveying certain information. This study is based on this definition, and deals with public signs that contain words only.

## 3. An overview of research on Chinese-English public sign translation

Public sign translation is a special domain of translation, as it involves dealing with linguistic, cultural and social features in both languages. There have been problems with Chinese-English public sign translation for some long time. For instance, on a visit to Wuyi Mountains (a tourist attraction) in China in 1983, I noticed that the Chinese for 'toilet' had been translated as 'water place.' However, it was not until 2005, when the first national conference on research on public sign translation was held in China (Huang 2005), that public sign translation began to receive particular attention. This was probably due to international events such as the Olympic Games in Beijing in 2008 and the World Expo in Shanghai in 2010. Since this first conference, many scholars have examined Chinese public signs and their English translations from different perspectives (e.g. Yang 2005; Jin 2008; Luo and Li 2006; Ding 2006; Niu 2007; Qu 2007; Shao 2009). The issues they have explored fall mainly into the following four areas—the functions of public signs, their linguistic features, problems in their translation, and translation strategies.

With regard to the functions of public signs, it is generally believed that they provide information, instruction, reference and warning (e.g. Luo and Li 2006; Ding 2006; Niu 2007; Shao 2009). This is generally in line with the English definitions of signs discussed above. Niu (2007) also argues that problems in public sign translation lie mainly in the failure to properly carry out the functions of public signs.

In terms of linguistic features, many researchers believe that public signs are generally concise, straightforward, clear and easy to understand. For instance, Ding (2006: 42) claims that public signs are "concise, conventional, consistent, conspicuous, convenient," and Luo and Li (2006) believe that language expressions in public signs are concise and standardised. This view is shared by a number of other researchers (e.g. Yang 2005; Jin 2008). The vast majority of public signs, such as road signs, are shorter than or equivalent to a sentence. Their comments about the concise and clear linguistic features of signs mostly apply to this category. However, it should be noted that there are other signs such as the rules for use of a public facility, which can be detailed documents comprising a number of paragraphs.

Many translation problems have been identified in the Chinese-English translation of public signs. Generally speaking, the problems fall into the following categories: spelling errors, grammatical mistakes, mistranslations, and unclear, distorted or lost meaning (e.g. Ding 2006; Public Sign Translation Research Centre of Beijing International Studies University 2007; Luo and Li 2006; Niu 2007; He 2006). For instance, "Wet floor" was translated as "Slip carefully" (Niu 2007) and "Staff only" was translated as "Guest go no further" (He 2006).

In terms of translation strategies, there have been a number of suggestions for resolving these problems, including borrowing or adapting

existing public signs in English, and creating English translations based on the Chinese context (e.g. Ding 2006; Niu 2007; Shao 2009). However, it should be noted that public signs are used in many different contexts to serve a wide range of purposes (e.g. Dai and Lü 2005). In fact, there are no established rules or standard practices for preparing public signs, be they in English or Chinese. As Luo and Li (2006) point out, public sign translation is a practical issue, and researchers need to identify the essential problems in public sign translation and propose practical solutions. Therefore, specific translation strategies are often needed to tackle the problems encountered in translating actual public signs, especially those with unique features, in order to produce meaningful solutions.

A review of the literature has also indicated that the translation of public signs in the tourism area is significantly under-researched. The following discussion will concentrate on issues in this specific field.

#### **4. Public sign translation in places of tourist interest: case studies**

Tourism is a very broad area, and it is difficult to define precisely the kinds of services and facilities that are specifically designed for tourism. Similarly, some of the public signs found in tourist areas can also be found in other contexts. The discussion in this section will only refer to public signs in tourist areas, excluding airports, hotels and restaurants. The examples used as case studies are from a collection of 162 real public signs in tourist areas in Mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong. In the presentation of examples, the English meaning of the Chinese signs is provided for reference wherever necessary by the author, while 'translation' refers to the actual translation that appears on the relevant sign. The source of the sign, including the year, is also given.

An analysis of the data indicates that in terms of translation problems, public signs in tourist areas share some problems with those in other areas, such as spelling errors, grammatical mistakes and unclear or distorted meanings.

##### **Public signs containing spelling mistakes:**

Chinese: 讲究秩序, 注意安全  
 Translation: Keep morder, be careful  
 Sign found: City of Chengdu, China, 2006

##### **Public signs containing grammatical mistakes:**

Chinese: 请勿进入, 钙化地带  
 Meaning: No entry into calcified region  
 Translation: Forbidden away from enter, calcified region  
 Sign found: Huanglong Scenic and Historic Interest Area, Sichuan Province, China, 2006

Chinese: 非工作人员请勿入内  
 Meaning: Staff only

Translation: Not the worker please not into the inside!  
 Sign found: City of Chengdu, China, 2006

Chinese: 靜止設攤，禁止停車，違者取締  
 Meaning: No hawking. No parking. Offenders will be removed.  
 Translation: No peddling, no parking. Crack down on that if you are against the regulation.  
 Sign found: Sun Moon Lake, Taiwan, 2007

**Public signs with unclear or distorted meaning:**

Chinese: 持半票者，出示證件  
 Meaning: Show your ID for concession tickets  
 Translation: Show your certificate for half-ticket  
 Sign found: West Lake Park, City of Hangzhou, China, 2008

Chinese: 小心台階  
 Meaning: Mind the steps  
 Translation: Carefully step  
 Sign found: West Lake Park, City of Hangzhou, China, 2008

It has been found that Chinese public signs in tourist areas exhibit some unique features that are not found in signs in other areas. Public signs in tourist areas tend to adopt a tone of friendship, warmth, passion and affection, and may also incorporate a small talk, in an attempt to create empathy, sympathy, attention, care and so on. For instance:

Chinese: 一花一草皆生命，一枝一叶总关情  
 Meaning: Each flower and grass has life, and each branch and leaf deserves your care.  
 Sign found: A park in the City of Shaoxing, China, 2009

“总关情” broadly entails “showing care, attention or passion,” which is very difficult to translate literally, especially without any further context. The original sign did not have a translation. It has been found that many public signs in tourist areas tend to be gentle, friendly, polite and poetic and incorporate small talk. Of 162 samples of public signs in tourist areas, 42, or 25.9 percent, fall into this category. It is this type of expression that often presents challenges for translators.

An analysis of these 42 signs indicates that there are usually three approaches employed in translating such signs: (1) literal translation, which attempts to translate every word even at the risk of producing an unclear message in English; (2) semi-literal and semi-adaptive translation, which attempts to translate every word where possible and modifies those words or phrases that cannot be translated literally; and (3) free adaptation, which extensively modifies or omits the descriptive and/or figurative or figurative words or phrases. Strictly speaking, the second and third approaches can be classified together, as they belong to the same translation strategy – adaptation. However, because the data collected indicate that the extent of adaptation varies significantly between the two

groups of signs, an additional subcategory was created for the purposes of this research. The following are case studies in these three categories.

#### 4.1 Literal translation

##### Example 1

Chinese: 除了脚印什么都别留下, 除了记忆什么都不要带走。  
 Meaning: Leave nothing but footprints, take nothing but memories.  
 Translation: Nothing left but footprints. Nothing taken away but memory.  
 Sign found: Huanglong Scenic and Historic Interest Area, Sichuan Province, China, 2006

##### Example 2

Chinese: 让您的行为和这风景一样美!  
 Meaning: Let your action be as beautiful as the scenery.  
 Translation: Let your action as nice as the scenery!  
 Sign found: Tibet, China, 2009

In the above examples, the Chinese text uses a descriptive or figurative approach to convey the message in a friendly way. This type of descriptive or figurative wording is uncommon in public signs used elsewhere in both Chinese and English. For instance, "Take rubbish with you. No picking the flowers" conveys a similar message to Example 1. In Example 2, apart from the grammatical error of omitting "be" after "action," the message conveyed is very vague. It is unclear what viewers are expected to do. The message could be generally understood as "no spitting or throwing rubbish," acts that are commonly criticised as "uncivilised" in the Chinese community. However, an English-speaking person who is not in the habit of spitting or throwing rubbish may feel confused about how to act in order to be considered "beautiful." The translation uses a literal approach to convey almost every word of the original sign, despite possible confusion in meaning.

##### Example 3

Chinese: 水的自白: 世界因你而精彩, 黄龙因我而跳动。  
 Meaning: Same as the translation below  
 Translation: Water's confession: The world is wonderful because of you. Huanglong is bouncing because of me.  
 Sign found: Huanglong Scenic and Historic Interest Area, Sichuan Province, China, 2006

##### Example 4

Chinese: 我很美丽, 但我很脆弱, 需要您的呵护!  
 Meaning: Same as the translation below  
 Translation: I'm beautiful but tender, I need your care!  
 Sign found: Huanglong Scenic and Historic Interest Area, Sichuan Province, China, 2006

##### Example 5

Chinese: 亲爱的, 别踩我!  
 Meaning: Darling, don't trample on me!  
 Translation: Dear, don't trample me!  
 Sign found: Tibet, China, 2009

The above are examples of figurative expressions used in Chinese public signs. In Example 3, it seems that the purpose of the Chinese sign is simply to tell visitors that the water in Huanglong is beautiful. However, the Chinese text uses 'you' and 'me' in an attempt to involve tourists in the picture and ask them to take care of the environment, although the message could be conveyed simply as "Huanglong is beautiful. Please take care." Similarly, in examples 4 and 5, instead of using straightforward wording such as "No Entry," "Do Not Touch" or "Keep Off," a figure of speech is used to create a warm, intimate and empathetic effect.

With regard to translation, although such figurative expressions are rarely used on English public signs, the translations employed such expressions. One of the reasons for this may be that it is still considered translatable literally, so the impact of such translated messages in English is neglected or ignored.

#### 4.2 Semi-literal and semi-adaptive translation

In some cases where the Chinese text is more descriptive or figurative and would be difficult to translate literally, certain adaptive methods are used in translation. For instance:

##### Example 6

Chinese:	人间仙境，不食人间“烟火”
Meaning:	This paradise or fairyland on earth does not consume 'smoke or 'fire.'
Translation:	This wonderland will not tolerate fire.
Sign found:	Jiuzhaigou National Park, China, 2006

This public sign aims to warn people against smoking or lighting fires. However, instead of saying "No Smoking," "No Fires" or "Total Fire Ban," it uses a very fanciful expression that compares the environment to a paradise or fairyland, where naturally no one smokes or lights fires. Perhaps believing it would be inappropriate to translate everything literally, the translator uses an adaptive approach to translate "paradise on earth" into "wonderland," while translating other phrases more literally.

##### Example 7

Chinese:	大地之绿与您同在
Meaning:	Keep the earth green for you to live in.
Translation:	Green of earth with you.
Sign found:	A park in Meizhou Bay, Fujian Province, China, 2008

The Chinese sign intends to convey a message about keeping the environment green. The Chinese text is beautifully composed. It is obvious that the translator endeavours to translate the Chinese text literally by making certain adaptations. However, neither the message nor

the beauty of the Chinese text is conveyed in the English translation. The translation thus becomes meaningless.

Other examples of this strategy can be found in the following:

Chinese:	绕行三五步, 留得芳草绿
Meaning:	Make a detour of 3-5 steps to keep the grass green.
Translation:	Save the grass, make a detour.
Sign found:	A park in the City of Shaoxing, China, 2006
Chinese:	小草也在长, 踏入想一想
Meaning:	Grass is also growing, think about it when stepping on it.
Translation:	Grass is growing, no stepping inside!
Sign found:	Huanglong Scenic and Historic Interest Area, Sichuan Province, China, 2006

### 4.3 Free adaptation

In cases where it becomes almost impossible to adopt the semi-literal and semi-adaptive strategy, free adaptation with some omissions is used.

#### Example 8

Chinese:	小草有生命, 足下多留“青”
Meaning:	Grass has life. Please hold your feet to keep it green.
Translation:	Keep your feet off the grass!
Sign found:	City of Chengdu, China, 2006

There is a Chinese idiom “手下留情”, meaning “hold one’s hands to show mercy.” In the above example, the idiom is modified to “足下留情”, meaning “hold one’s feet to show mercy,” but a close homonym “青” (*green*) is used to replace “情” (*mercy*) to reflect the green environment, and “多” (*more*) is added to maintain the balance of the sentence. It is almost impossible to translate such sophisticated content into concise English. The translator therefore abandons the elaborate wording of the Chinese text and uses the common English expression “Keep off the grass”, by making extensive modifications and retaining only “feet” in the English translation.

#### Example 9

Chinese:	请别摸我, 您怕污水, 我怕污染!
Meaning:	Please don’t touch me. You are fearful of polluted water, while I am fearful of pollution!
Translation:	Keep me clean, please don’t pollute.
Sign found:	Jiuzhaigou National Park, China, 2006

The Chinese sign contains three messages, but its exact meaning is unclear. The sign seems to warn tourists against touching something. However, tourists’ fear of polluted water does not seem to be relevant in this context. The reference was included on the Chinese sign to create an empathetic effect, but is not very relevant in terms of the function of the

sign. As a result, the translator omits this phrase and extensively modifies the content when translating the sign into English.

#### Example 10

Chinese:	美景當前留英姿? 請注意安全!
Meaning:	Taking elegant photos before beautiful scenery? Watch out!
Translation:	Be cautious while taking photos!
Sign found:	Sun Moon Lake, Taiwan, 2007

The actual message conveyed by the Chinese sign is very simple and straightforward, as the English translation suggests. However, the Chinese text vividly depicts a person striking an elegant pose in front of a beautiful scene to take a photo, ignoring potential dangers. The translator may have felt that such an elaborate description was unnecessary and therefore simply omitted these irrelevant parts. This example illustrates how elaborately descriptive or figurative a Chinese public sign in a tourist area can be, even when conveying a simple message.

Other examples of free adaptation in sign translation include:

Chinese:	青青小草, 不踩多好
Meaning:	The grass is green. It would be good if you don't step on it.
Translation:	Keep off the grass.
Sign found:	Jiuzhaigou National Park, China, 2006
Chinese:	上車莫匆匆, 最緊要輕鬆
Meaning:	Don't rush when catching the bus. It is most important to relax.
Translation:	Relax—please don't rush!
Sign found:	Hong Kong, 2008

## 5. Discussion

As noted earlier, around a quarter of the Chinese public signs in tourist areas use descriptive and/or figurative expressions. The above examples suggest that signs in this special category exhibit a number of unique features in terms of Chinese language expressions and their English translations.

Rather than using blunt and strong words, Chinese public signs in tourist areas tend to employ soft, friendly, gentle or polite words, and may even incorporate small talk in order to set a warm and friendly tone. The underlying reasons for such linguistic usage are yet to be investigated. There may be an assumption that when people visit scenic places they are in a pleasant and relaxed mood. It may therefore be considered inappropriate or out of tune to use blunt commands or requests such as "No ..." or "... not allowed". Using softer expressions on public signs in tourist areas may be just as effective as using more direct words.

Chinese public signs in tourist areas also tend to use descriptive, figurative or poetic expressions, even for simple and straightforward

messages. In Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and other Chinese-speaking regions, couplets, poems and poetic descriptions can often be found at tourist attractions. This is a common Chinese cultural practice. Chinese couplets and poems place considerable emphasis on antithesis, rhyme, choice of words, balance and beauty. Against this background, Chinese public signs also use figurative or poetic expressions in line with the linguistic environment in such tourist areas.

This use of soft and gentle wording as well as evocative and poetic expressions on Chinese public signs at times blurs the intended meaning and often gives additional meanings to simple messages, creating difficulties in translation. The examples discussed in the previous section indicate that many public signs in tourist areas are translated literally, in an attempt to reproduce all of the meanings contained in the Chinese text regardless of how sophisticated the Chinese expressions are, even at the risk of conveying an unclear message or producing unnatural or nonsensical English translations. Statistically, of the 42 public signs that use descriptive and/or figurative expressions, 27 (64.3%) use literal translation, 9 (21.4%) use semi-literal and semi-adaptive translation, and only 6 (14.3%) tend to ignore or omit the more elaborate aspects of the Chinese text (which are either totally untranslatable or would be meaningless even if translated). It can therefore be concluded that literal translation is the preferred strategy in public sign translation in tourist areas.

As noted in the previous section, the literal translation strategy has created a number of problems. For instance, some translations do not flow well linguistically, others sound strange or irrelevant to English-speaking people, and others do not make much sense in English. On the other hand, the use of adaptation may create another set of problems. Since a public sign is meant to convey the same message to all readers, free adaptation or omission may result in a scenario in which the Chinese sign conveys one message but its English translation conveys a different message.

## **6. Conclusion**

The language style used in Chinese public signs in tourist areas has certain unique features, which present a number of challenges for their translation. Translation strategies such as literal, semi-literal translation and free adaptation all have certain limitations in fulfilling the function of conveying an equal amount of information from Chinese into English meaningfully and naturally. The translator is torn between making the decision to convey messages naturally by disregarding the content of the source Chinese text, and transferring the information literally at the expense of producing unacceptable or unnatural translations or messages that seem strange to English-speaking people. There do not seem to be any solutions that do not involve a certain degree of compromise, such as omitting some information contained in the Chinese text or getting

English-speaking people to accept the Chinese style of expression in public signs in tourist areas. I consider that further investigation in a number of areas is needed before it is possible to determine which strategy or strategies are more appropriate for translating public signs in tourist areas and what types of compromises, if any, should be made in such translations. Such investigations should take into account the features of public signs in both languages. Specifically:

1. Does the descriptive and/or figurative language style of Chinese signs have a better effect than a more straightforward style on Chinese readers, or does it merely have a cosmetic effect? This question is more concerned with the creation of public signs than with their translation. The answer to this question will help the authorities that create bilingual signs decide whether it is necessary to use such descriptive and/or figurative expressions on Chinese signs.
2. Is the descriptive and/or figurative style also used in tourist areas in English-speaking countries? According to another set of data I have collected from English-speaking countries and my long-term observations, such signs are rarely found. However, a systematic survey is needed to confirm this.
3. If descriptive and/or figurative Chinese signs are translated literally, will they convey the same messages to English-speaking people and have the same effect as Chinese signs have on Chinese-speaking people? Of course, the premise of such an approach is that any translations are grammatically correct.
4. Will a free adaptation strategy that is likely to involve omission or alteration of information provide different information to English-speaking readers and have a different impact on them?

Most of these suggested studies are empirical in nature. Their outcomes would be helpful not only in the preparation of Chinese public signs in tourist areas but also in their translation.

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## Biography

Leong Ko is Senior Lecturer in Translation and Interpreting in the School of Languages and Comparative Cultural Studies at the University of Queensland, Australia. He holds a PhD in Translation and Interpreting Studies. He is also a freelance translator and interpreter. His research interests include Translation and Interpreting Studies, translation and



interpreting pedagogies, and distance education.

Email: [l.ko@uq.edu.au](mailto:l.ko@uq.edu.au)