

# Cultural Symbol Conversion Methods in Political Discourse Translation: A Case Study Based on Official Texts from China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs

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## ABSTRACT

The translation of Chinese political discourse into foreign languages constitutes a critical component in the construction of the national image, necessitating a dynamic equilibrium among political stance, communicative efficacy, and cultural acceptability. Grounded in cross-cultural discourse analysis and semiotic frameworks, this study employs official texts from China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs as case studies to propose three core methodologies for cultural symbol conversion: Abstracting, which reduces cognitive load by universalizing political semantics through the removal of culturally specific imagery; Transplantation, which preserves source-text rhetorical potency via cross-cultural allusion alignment and vernacular reconstruction, thereby achieving innovative transformation of cultural symbols; Paraphrase, which ensures ideologically precise transmission while amplifying the cross-cultural penetrative power of discourse. The findings reveal that, these methodologies, through multimodal synergy, not only safeguard the rigidity of political positioning but also align with cross-cultural communicative imperatives, thereby furnishing innovative pathways to dismantle Western discursive hegemony.

**Keywords:** Political discourse translation, Cultural symbols, Transplantation, Paraphrase.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the context of deepening globalization, the significance of international communication has become increasingly prominent. The pivotal status and profound strategic implications of international communication in the new era have charted the course for China to construct an internationally influential communication system. Within this framework, the dissemination of political discourse constitutes a critical arena for competition in national soft power. The Chinese political discourse system, imbued with unique and profound Chinese wisdom, faces dual strategic imperatives: its effective cross-cultural transmission serves both as a strategic requirement for constructing a credible, amiable, and respectable national image, and as a crucial practical proposition for breaking through Western discursive hegemony.

Nevertheless, the international dissemination of Chinese political discourse encounters dual structural barriers. First, systemic incongruence exists between indigenous political-cultural symbols and Western audiences' cognitive frameworks, exemplified by the "semiotic attenuation" phenomenon in international communication. Second, the inherent tension between maintaining national position rigidity and adapting to target culture flexibility becomes particularly pronounced in translating politically sensitive discourses involving sovereignty and security. Therefore, it is imperative to fully leverage "the proactive constructive function of linguistic communication in shaping cognitive schemata". As institutionalized expressions of national will, official texts from China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs play a pivotal role in international communication. This study investigates the translation mechanisms and political-rhetorical

logic of cultural symbols in Chinese diplomatic texts from 2019 to 2024, focusing on three translation strategies: abstracting, transplantation, and paraphrasing. Through multidimensional analysis and systematic theoretical synthesis, this research aims to provide methodological support and novel theoretical perspectives for enhancing the global communication efficacy of Chinese political discourse.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR CROSS-CULTURAL POLITICAL DISCOURSE TRANSLATION

Existing translation theories provide multidimensional support for political discourse translation. Nida's (1964) Dynamic Equivalence Theory emphasizes core objectives of intentional transmission in cross-cultural communication, advocating semantic reconstruction to achieve equivalent comprehension among target audiences. It proposes adjusting culturally conflicting expressions to accommodate target contexts. However, this approach encounters limitations when handling highly sensitive issues due to irreconcilable cultural and ideological differences. Concurrently, Scollon & Scollon's (2001) Discourse Systems Theory underscores the dynamic negotiation between institutional discourse and identity discourse in cross-cultural adaptation, focusing on the interaction of participants' multiple identities (professional, institutional, regional, etc.) to establish cultural equilibrium. While effective in routine diplomatic rhetoric translation, this theory reveals inherent contradictions between its "cultural accommodation priority" principle and rigid political positioning when addressing ideologically charged issues. From a semiotic perspective, Çanakpınar et al. (2024) deconstruct domestic political discourse through Greimas' Actantial Model, revealing the logic of meaning generation in political communication via "subject-object-helper-opponent" interactions. Nevertheless, this model inadequately addresses cultural-semiotic conversion processes in cross-linguistic translation, failing to explain interface mechanisms between disparate cultural symbol systems.

In summary, while existing studies have offered critical theoretical perspectives for political discourse translation, practical challenges persist in cross-cultural symbol conversion — particularly when addressing culture-laden terms (e.g., classical allusions, idiomatic metaphors), highly sensitive

political formulations, and ideologically rigid expressions. There remains an urgent need to refine theoretical frameworks and explore context-specific conversion strategies, thereby strengthening methodological foundations for the global dissemination of Chinese political discourse with distinct ideological characteristics.

## 3. CULTURAL TRANSCODING METHODS IN THE TRANSLATION OF POLITICAL DISCOURSE

The transcoding of Chinese political discourse within global communication contexts fundamentally constitutes a dual dialogue between cultural cognition systems and ideological values. In the cross-linguistic practice of Chinese Foreign Ministry texts, three core approaches—abstracting, transplantation, and paraphrase—form the principal pathways for political-cultural symbol translation, each exhibiting distinct operational logics and functional boundaries. A microanalysis of key samples from 2019 to 2024 reveals a strategic blueprint for cultural symbol conversion mechanisms.

### 3.1 *Abstracting: Universal Purification of Political Semantics*

Abstracting, as a central method in political discourse translation, focuses on semantic purification of cultural imagery and the dissociation from historical contexts. This approach employs "dimensionality reduction" of symbolic systems and "dynamic mapping of conceptual categories" to transform culture-laden source expressions into universally comprehensible concepts for target audiences.

In the 2022 China-Arab Cooperation Forum Statement, the phrase "科技产业创新方兴未艾的新机遇" was translated as "burgeoning technological and industrial innovation." This exemplifies the multifaceted considerations in diplomatic translation: The classical idiom "方兴未艾" (originating from Lu Dian's *Taixue Anwen* of the Song Dynasty) conveys a dialectical Chinese perspective on developmental stages. "Burgeoning" effectively captures the core semantics of "initial growth with sustained expansion," avoiding the redundancy of literal translations like "rising and not declining." The adjectival modifier aligns with diplomatic texts' requirements for conciseness and authority, focusing on objective realities. Similarly,

"玉汝于成" was rendered as "success only comes through hard work," stripping away the moral symbolism of "jade" in Chinese culture and reframing it within Western work ethics. These cases demonstrate how abstracting achieves cultural adaptation while maintaining ideological stances through semantic realignment.

In high-sensitivity contexts, abstracting ensures communicative safety by downplaying historical connotations. For instance, in the January 23, 2024, response to the U.S. withdrawal from the Paris Agreement: "独善其身" (from Mencius, originally meaning "self-cultivation in adversity") was translated as "stay unaffected," transforming its philosophical implications into a pragmatic political principle. "罄竹难书" became "innumerable," replacing the bamboo scroll metaphor with a neutral quantitative descriptor. Such adaptations adhere to the principle of "aligning with audience cognitive habits", strategically avoiding Western sensitivities regarding historical discourse appropriation.

Abstracting reveals the cultural power dynamics inherent in globalization. By divorcing expressions from their cultural roots, it facilitates the integration of Eastern wisdom into Western modern discourse systems. This process navigates a precise equilibrium between cultural attrition and value reconstruction — serving as China's solution to linguistic barriers while exposing irreconcilable civilizational disparities in global governance.

### ***3.2 Transplantation: Discursive Grafting of Cultural Interality***

Transplantation, also termed "adaptive borrowing", involves substituting source-text expressions with idiomatic equivalents from the target language, reconfiguring symbols across cultural systems to retain core semantic essence while adapting to new cultural environments. This approach transcends mechanical symbol substitution by identifying resonant points between heterogeneous cultures, enabling political discourse to be accurately interpreted and effectively disseminated in foreign contexts.

The international communication of political discourse and cross-cultural translation require translators to meticulously consider the cultural backgrounds of foreign audiences, supplementing implicit information to foster empathetic engagement. For example, on June 9, 2023, in response to EU discussions about banning

Huawei's 5G equipment, Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin stated: "美国和一些欧洲国家口口声声说华为存在安全风险……这是典型的有罪推定、睁眼说瞎话 (The U.S. and some European countries claim Huawei poses security risks... This is a classic case of presuming guilt and lying through their teeth)." The Chinese phrase "睁着眼睛说瞎话" (literally "telling lies with eyes wide open") highlights the contradiction between visual clarity and verbal falsehood.

The English idiom "lying through their teeth" draws from medieval European dueling traditions, where knights clenched their teeth while swearing oaths, evoking imagery of strained dishonesty. This translation surpasses a literal rendering like "open-eyed lies," as it activates Western audiences' subconscious association with politicians feigning resolve while deceitful — a culturally resonant metaphor.

Similarly, on June 8, 2021, spokesperson Zhao Lijian addressed inquiries about China's Anti-Foreign Sanctions Law by asserting: "以其人之道还治其人之身 (China should pay them back in their own coin)." The conventional translation "tit for tat," rooted in ancient legal notions of reciprocal harm, risks being misconstrued in Western contexts as irrational, violence-tinged retaliation. "Paying back in one's own coin," however, originates from medieval European commercial practices—specifically the principle of repaying debts with identical currency—which evolved into a metaphor for reciprocal countermeasures emphasizing parity and mutual accountability. Cultural "invisible symbols" (ideologies, values) are often manifested through "visible symbols" (language). By strategically reconstructing semantics, the Foreign Ministry frames China's diplomatic stance within a rational, equitable, and rule-compliant context. This approach balances assertiveness with non-confrontational interpretations, enhancing discourse acceptability and persuasiveness.

Transplantation exemplifies translators' deep comprehension of target-language cultural frameworks and their prioritization of functional equivalence and cultural adaptability in cross-cultural political discourse construction. Through this method, Chinese political discourse is repositioned into contexts more accessible to international audiences, amplifying both its communicative reach and interpretative clarity.

### 3.3 Paraphrasing: Explicit Transcoding of Cultural Metaphors

Paraphrasing, or explanatory translation, adapts source texts to target cultural contexts and audience cognition by restructuring linguistic forms, semantic frameworks, or cultural connotations while preserving core communicative functions. Unlike literal translation, this strategy prioritizes the conversion of culture-laden terms, metaphorical expressions, or implicit meanings to enhance clarity, acceptability, and adaptability in the target language. In diplomatic rhetoric, paraphrasing is frequently deployed to neutralize emotional undertones and reconstruct semantic equivalence.

When addressing culture-specific terms, paraphrasing clarifies metaphorical implications by aligning them with target-language frameworks, thereby preventing misinterpretation. For instance, on August 2, 2024, Chinese Ambassador to the U.S. Xie Feng emphasized China's unique reform approach in an interview with Newsweek: “一些国家选择以邻为壑、内病外治，中国则坚持刀刃向内 (While some nations choose to shift burdens to neighbors or treat internal ailments externally, China insists on ‘reform on all fronts’).” The Chinese metaphor “刀刃向内” (literally “directing the blade inward”) symbolizes self-revolution or systemic self-improvement in political or economic reforms. The paraphrased translation “reform on all fronts” replaces the culturally charged imagery with a neutral, internationally recognized term. “All fronts” underscores comprehensiveness, aligning with global perceptions of reform, while avoiding potential misinterpretations of violence associated with “blade.”

For abstract concepts and classical allusions, paraphrasing reduces cognitive barriers through contextual concretization. On July 27, 2021, Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian remarked: “U.S. politicians should focus on their own democratic issues. As the ancient saying goes, ‘It is the people who know whether the decree is good or not’.” The original phrase “知政失者在草野” (from Wang Chong's Lunheng of the Eastern Han Dynasty) metaphorically equates “草野” (grasslands) with “common people,” stressing that policy efficacy is best judged by grassroots perspectives. The paraphrased translation explicitly renders “草野” as “the people” and transforms the abstract “知政失者” into the concrete “know whether the decree is good or not,” enhancing accessibility for foreign audiences.

Paraphrasing serves as a precision tool for semantic transcoding in cross-cultural translation, particularly in political texts. By converting sensitive metaphors or diplomatic nuances into standardized, neutral expressions, it mitigates cultural friction while preserving strategic ambiguity in international negotiations. Simultaneously, it explicates implicit meanings and recontextualizes logic, enabling translations to resonate with target audiences while advancing national narratives and values.

## 4. CONCLUSION

The international dissemination of Chinese diplomatic discourse relies on the dynamic coordination of translation strategies tailored to contextual demands. Abstracting extracts universal value propositions from culturally specific discourse, transcending differences to forge multilateral consensus. Transplantation identifies symbolic commonalities across civilizations, converting culturally distinct imagery into forms intelligible to target audiences, thereby fostering intercultural dialogue. Paraphrasing facilitates institutional and ideological dialogue by deconstructing and reconstructing core concepts within globally recognized evaluative frameworks, neutralizing ideological divergences.

These strategies collectively establish a multifaceted translation mechanism that supports China's global communication objectives. Their application hinges on both a deep deconstruction of target-cultural cognitive patterns and agile responsiveness to the evolving international public opinion ecosystem). China's practice exemplifies an innovative pathway that transcends binary paradigms of “Westernization” or “civilizational clash”. Instead, through the dialectics of deconstruction and reconstruction, it pioneers a discursive symbiosis of plural modernities, balancing cultural distinctiveness with systemic compatibility. This approach not only reflects China's adaptive evolution in civilizational dialogue but also illuminates the fundamental logic of global discourse power contestation: achieving dynamic equilibrium between cultural authenticity and normative integration. By navigating this balance, China contributes intellectual resources to the reconfiguration of global discourse order, offering a model that harmonizes localized wisdom with universal governance imperatives.

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