

# Text-less Back Translation from the Perspective of Imagology—A Case Study of On China

Yuan Mei

Ocean University of China, Qingdao, Shandong, China  
wuxiancheng@gzxbwhcmxgs.wecom.work

**Abstract:** *The image of China constructed by Henry Kissinger is analyzed from the perspective of imagology, which has both positive and negative or even distorted sides. Some of the latter are unintentional mistakes by Kissinger due to differences in Chinese and Western cultures, but some are deliberate due to his national psychology, social values, and political rights. During the text-less back translation, Hu Liping and other Chinese translators, giving full play to their subjective initiative, adopted methods such as deletion, addition, and adjustment to reconstruct the image of China so that it could pass the review of the publishing house and meet the expectations of Chinese readers. The construction and reconstruction of the image of China in the source text and the target text is explored, which could help the Chinese culture go global.*

**Keywords:** *imagology; non-native language writing; text-less back translation; On China*

## 1. Introduction

Henry Kissinger, the Nobel Peace Prize winner and former US Secretary of State, had in-depth exchanges with many contemporary Chinese leaders and made historic contributions to the establishment of China-US relations. Therefore, he is praised as “the evergreen tree of the US diplomatic community” and “an old friend of the Chinese people”. In the first chapter of *On China*, Kissinger talked about the singularity of China: The Chinese civilization seems to have no beginning; China’s splendid isolation nurtured a particular Chinese self-perception; Values of Chinese culture were essentially secular in nature; China’s concepts of international relations were impartial but unequal featuring using barbarians to check barbarians and, when necessary, using barbarians to attack barbarians; China had distinctive strategic thought and military theory. In the remaining chapters, Kissinger discussed in detail the impact of these singularities on China’s foreign policy and especially on China-US relations since the Ming Dynasty. Finally, in epilogue, he concluded that China-US relations can strive to find and develop complementary interests without becoming a zero-sum game, and the construction of the Pacific Community can ease the possible tensions between China and the United States.

## 2. Non-Native Language Writing and Image Construction

If the description of one culture in its native language is called “native language writing”, the description of this culture in a foreign language can be called “non-native language writing” (Wang, 2009: 173), whose essential feature is the dislocation between language signifier and cultural signified. “The sum of writers’ views on foreign countries in the process of writing and socialization” is called a “literary image” (Meng, 2001: 154). Therefore, when a Western writer describes and expresses views on China and Chinese culture in certain language other than Chinese, the image of China in the eyes of the West is actually constructed.

From the perspective of cross-cultural study, the image of China constructed by the West is an illusion about the cultural other and is a way of self-examination, self-reflection, self-imagination, and self-writing of Western culture, showing its subconscious desire and terror (Zhou, 2008: 71). Such an image of China is essentially opposite to the Western real world, which aims to establish a value and power order centered on Western culture (Liang, 2017: 69). Therefore, the image of China is like a “chameleon”, changing with the demands of the West: from the 13th to the 18th century, it was “the Continent of Great Khan”, “the Great Chinese Empire” and “the China of Confucius”, featuring remote, prosperous and beautiful; in the 19th century it was “the stagnant Empire”, “the autocratic Empire” and

“the barbaric Empire” filled with primitive, impoverished and evil; after the 20th century it is complex and changeable, sometimes utopian and sometimes inferior and evil.

On China, whose cultural content is inconsistent with the language used, belongs to non-native language writing. Based on his own position, cognition, as well as the national interests of the United States, Kissinger constructed the image of China in his mind by using his experience of many visits to China and his conversation records with four generations of Chinese leaders. Although its name is on China, the book is written for the United States. Kissinger believes that China has become an economic superpower and plays an important role in the global political order in the 21st century. Therefore, it is particularly important to “explain the conceptual way the Chinese think about problems of peace and war and international order, and its relationship to the more pragmatic, case-by-case American approach” (Kissinger, 2011: 4). At the same time, he hopes that English readers, including American leaders, can find clues from the endurance, subtlety, family sense, and culture of the Chinese people to interpret China’s contemporary international strategy and foreign policy and reflect on how to build peace. Kissinger constructed a both positive and negative or even distorted China in the book, just like the alternate appearance of utopian and evil China in the 20th century.

### ***2.1. Civilized China***

Kissinger believes that Chinese civilization is a permanent natural phenomenon that we vainly endeavor to discover its commencement. The Yellow Emperor, revered as a founding hero, reestablished rather than created an empire; the principles of harmony that Confucius tried to reinvigorate had once existed in the golden age but had been lost in Confucius’s own era of political chaos; Chinese characters embrace a history of more than 3000 years, and thus, even today, Chinese people can still understand the inscriptions of the Confucius era. No country in the world enjoys such a long and continuous civilization, so China is singularity at least in this aspect.

### ***2.2. Peace-loving China***

China has loved peace since ancient times, which is evident in its culture and traditional strategy. China never espoused the American notion of universalism to spread its values around the world. American exceptionalism is missionary. It holds that the United States has an obligation to spread its values to every part of the world. China’s exceptionalism is cultural. China does not proselytize; it does not claim that its contemporary institutions are relevant outside China (Kissinger, 2011: 4). In other words, it is a cultural universality. China’s traditional strategy focused on defense rather than conquest. As early as the Song Dynasty, China led the world in nautical technology; its fleets could have carried the empire into an era of conquest and exploration. Yet China acquired no overseas colonies and showed relatively little interest in the countries beyond its coast. During the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the expeditions, though technically feasible, were never again attempted. No Chinese leader ever articulated a rationale for why China would want to control the Japanese archipelago. Zheng He’s voyages to the West claimed no colonies or resources for China beyond the metaphysical bounty of extending the limits of All Under Heaven. At most he can be said to spread a kind of early exercise of Chinese—soft power. The objective of China’s governing was a compliant, divided periphery, rather than one directly under Chinese control, that is the so-called “using barbarians to check barbarians” and, when necessary, “using barbarians to attack barbarians”.

### ***2.3. Harmonious China***

In contrast to the Western approach of treating history as a process of modernity achieving a series of absolute victories over evil and backwardness, the traditional Chinese view of history emphasized a cyclical process of decay and rectification, in which nature and the world can be understood but not completely mastered (Kissinger, 2011: 25). The best result is the unity of heaven and man and the harmonious coexistence between man and nature. Therefore, compared with the West, China pays more attention to harmony. Familiar with the cruelty of war, Chinese thinkers, including Sun Tzu, developed strategic thought that placed a premium on victory through psychological advantage and preached the avoidance of direct conflict. It’s better, like China’s ancient Go, to strategically encircle, skillfully use conspiracy and circuitous tactics, patiently accumulate comparative advantages, and gradually wear away the strategic potential of its opponents. The purpose of chess, on the other hand, is checkmate, to put the opposing king into a position where he cannot move without being destroyed.

Kissinger, through the comparison between China and the West, depicted an idealized China both

enjoying a long history of civilization and loving peace and paying attention to harmony, which reflects Americans' denial of themselves and their longing for the East and their yearning for the change of reality.

### 3. Text-Less Back Translation and Image Reconstruction

Works written in a non-native language return to the native language is a kind of text-less back translation (Jiang & Wang, 2021: 133), which is different from the normal back translation in translation processes and texts. The text-less back translation has the culture as its root. Chinese translators, who are deeply influenced by their education and environment, examine the image of China in the eyes of the other. They actively intervene, coordinate, and even subvert the negative sides through the method of addition, deletion, adjustment, and so on. Therefore, the national self-image is reconstructed, and the target text can successfully pass China's cultural and political review and meet the imagination and expectations of Chinese readers. The image of China in the translated version is neither a pure image constructed by the West nor a pure self-image, but a mixture of both (Liang, 2017: 69).

Text-less back translation puts relatively high requirements on translators, which is not a small challenge. They should have an ideal translation, which comes from beautiful native language writing. In addition, they need a special in-depth understanding of Chinese culture, which should be equal to Western culture (Wang, 2016: 1). On China is rich in content, including Chinese culture, China-US diplomacy, and many professional terms related to international relations. Therefore, in addition to basic translator literacy and profound cultural cultivation, Chinese translators had better have professional diplomatic knowledge, relevant diplomatic work experience, and high sensitivity to cultural politics. The four Chinese translators of this book—Hu Liping, Lin Hua, Yang Yunqin, and Zhu Jingwen—are senior translators for the United Nations and have been engaged in translation work on the diplomatic front for a long time. Hu Liping, the presidential drafter of the translation team, had met Kissinger twice as an escort and served as an on-site translator, so he already had a certain understanding of Kissinger's discourse style, which laid the foundation for the image of China to return to the Chinese context smoothly.

The negative and even the distorted image of China constructed by Kissinger and how Chinese translators reconstructed the self-image by adopting translation methods are introduced in the following part.

#### 3.1. *Barbaric China*

[1] ST: CHAPTER 15: Tiananmen (Kissinger, 2011: 244)

TT: Chapter 15: America's Dilemma (Hu, 2015: 404)

BT: American Dilemma (back translation according to TT by author, similarly hereinafter)

[2] ST: There is no dispute about the denouement, however. After hesitating for seven weeks and exhibiting serious divisions within its ranks over the use of force, the Chinese leadership cracked down decisively on June 4. The General Secretary of the Communist Party, Zhao Ziyang, was dismissed. After weeks of internal debates, Deng and a majority of the Politburo ordered the PLA to clear Tiananmen Square. A harsh suppression of the protest followed—all seen on television, broadcast by media that had come from all over the world to record the momentous meeting between Gorbachev and the Chinese leadership. (Kissinger, 2011: 246)

TT: Eventually, after weeks of internal debate, the Politburo quelled the protests. All this was covered by the news media from around the world, which were supposed to cover Gorbachev's momentous meeting with Chinese leaders. (Hu, 2015: 407)

BT: After weeks of internal debates, the Politburo calmed down the protest. All was seen on television, broadcast by media that had come from all over the world to record the momentous meeting between Gorbachev and the Chinese leadership.

These two examples are derived from Chapter 15, which is mainly about China-US diplomacy in 1989. This year, the student unrest occupied the Tiananmen Square peacefully, which put President Bush in a dilemma: whether to move to restore a cooperative relationship with an emerging great power or to seek to isolate China so as to induce it to adopt domestic policies in keeping with American

values. The first section of this chapter introduces the causes, process and results of the student unrest in detail, which paves the way for the development of China-US relations in the second section.

There are 18 chapters in on China, each of which consists of one to four sections, and the title of the first section is equal to that of the chapter. During the text-less back translation, the Chinese translators directly replaced the title of Chapter 15 from Kissinger's original "Tiananmen" to "American Dilemma" which originally is the title of the second section. Thus, in the target text the title of the first section and the second section are the same. However, this is not consistent with Kissinger's writing style in form and far from that section in content. The reason is that the original title of the first section would give readers a more intuitive and profound impression because it is presented in the table of contents page and the header of the chapter. Therefore, it plays a more important role in shaping the image of China. The change of the title shifted the focus, weakened the readers' attention to the Tiananmen Square events and reduced the negative description of Chinese politics to a certain extent. The second example is the last paragraph of the first section of Chapter 15. The source text introduces the dealing process, methods and results of the Tiananmen Square events. The Chinese translators, influenced and restricted by the Chinese culture and political censorship, deleted the relevant negative descriptions in this paragraph at large and summarized in a simple sentence—"the Politburo calmed down the protest" to reconstruct a positive image of China.

### 3.2. Stagnant China

[1] ST: Still, with all its achievements, Mao's insistence on turning the ancient system upside down could not escape the eternal rhythm of Chinese life. Forty years after his death, after a journey violent, dramatic, and searing, his successors again described their now increasingly well-off society as Confucian. In 2011, a statue of Confucius was placed in Tiananmen Square within sight of Mao's mausoleum—the only other personality so honored. Only a people as resilient and patient as the Chinese could emerge unified and dynamic after such a roller coaster ride through history. (Kissinger, 2011: 71)

TT:Mao Zedong's insistence on breaking the old system, though successful, could not transcend the timeless rhythm of Chinese life. Decades after his death, Chinese society has become increasingly affluent through intense, ups and downs and painful times. After a roller-coaster ride through the ups and downs of history, only the resilient Chinese nation can continue to maintain unity and vitality. (Hu, 2016: 103)

BT: Still, with all its achievements, Mao's insistence on turning the ancient system upside down could not escape the eternal rhythm of Chinese life. Several decades after his death, China has become more and more prosperous after a journey violent, dramatic, and searing. Only a people as resilient and patient as the Chinese could emerge unified and dynamic after such a roller coaster ride through history.

In the fourth chapter "Mao's Continuous Revolution", Kissinger believed that Mao Zedong showed a series of self-contradictions. On the one hand, he generated a pervasive assault on traditional Chinese political thought and openly and fiercely opposed Confucianism. On the other hand, he widely dabbled in Chinese historical classics and loved quoting classics. Moreover, Mao's strategy of governing the country is actually the continuation of Confucian traditional thought. In the last paragraph of this chapter, Kissinger quoted the statue of Confucius erected on Tiananmen Square in 2011 within the sight of Chairman Mao Memorial Hall, so as to confirm the influence of history, culture and traditional ideas on Chinese leaders, and highlight the important position of Confucius and his Confucianism in modern China. Now it seems that this quotation is biased. According to China News Network1:

*On the morning of January 11, 2011, a statue of "Confucius" with a total height of 9.5 meters was completed in the north gate square of the National Museum of China, which is located in the east of Tiananmen Square in Beijing. On April 20, the statue of Confucius was moved into the sculpture park of the National Museum. According to the overall design of the reconstruction and expansion project, a sculpture park is set up in the north and south courtyards on the west side of the National Museum, and statues of Chinese cultural celebrities are successively completed. The first one is the statue of Confucius. Because the courtyard construction project was not completed, the statue of Confucius was temporarily placed in the small square outside the north gate of National Museum of China.*

Therefore, the statue of Confucius has nothing to do with Mao, which was only temporarily stored. Here, however, Kissinger imposed a connection between the statue of Confucius and Mao on purpose. He depicted China's leaders as only the continuation of Chinese traditions, leaving room for English

readers to imagine, and creating an image of a stagnant and closed China. The Chinese translators deleted the parts that may cause controversy and are inconsistent with the facts. In addition, they rewrote the original “forty years” into the vague “decades” to avoid cultural misunderstanding and historical disputes, and the image of China was reconstructed.

### 3.3. *Autocratic China*

[1] ST: Truman’s dispatch of the Seventh Fleet to the Taiwan Strait at the outset of the Korean War forced Mao to postpone the planned invasion of Taiwan indefinitely and Beijing’s appeals to Moscow for support in the full “liberation” of Taiwan were met by evasions—a first stage toward the ultimate estrangement. (Kissinger, 2011: 96)

TT: Truman sent the 7th Fleet into the Taiwan Strait after the Korean War, forcing Mao Zedong to postpone his plan to liberate Taiwan indefinitely. China asked the Soviet Union for help to liberate Taiwan completely, only to get prevarication.—From there, the two countries eventually turned against each other. (Hu, 2015: 146)

BT: Truman’s dispatch of the Seventh Fleet to the Taiwan Strait at the outset of the Korean War forced Mao to postpone the planned liberation of Taiwan indefinitely and Beijing’s appeals to Moscow for support in the full “liberation” of Taiwan were met by evasions—a first stage toward the ultimate estrangement.

In the source text, Kissinger, under the influence of American political ideology, used “invasion” to describe China’s liberation of Taiwan, and added double quotation marks to the word “liberation” to stress the irony. This is a typical American discourse that deliberately distorted the truth to mislead English readers and highlight American democracy and freedom through China’s autocracy. During the text-less back translation, the Chinese translators rewrote the “invasion” into “liberation” and deleted the quotation marks according to the education received as well as China’s reality to ensure that the image of China conforms to the Chinese readers’ cognition and can pass the review of the publishing house.

[2] ST: Cadres of the Communist Party were its priesthood, except their task was crusading, not fulfilling a defined program. Under Mao, cadres also led a life at the edge of perdition. For them, there was always the danger—over time the near certainty—of being engulfed in the very upheavals they were incited to promote. The roster of leaders of the second generation (that of Deng Xiaoping) had almost all suffered that fate, returning to power only after periods of great personal trial. Every close associate of Mao during the revolutionary period—including in the end his long-serving Premier and chief diplomat Zhou Enlai—was eventually purged. (Kissinger, 2011: 61)

TT: Complete deletion. (Hu, 2015: 86)

BT: The Chinese translators deleted this part.

Kissinger had many in-depth exchanges with Comrade Mao Zedong, but Kissinger was still deeply influenced by American political ideology and position. In this paragraph, Kissinger wantonly discredited the Communist Party and Comrade Mao Zedong and infinitely magnified his mistakes. Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party since the Founding of the People’s Republic of China adopted at the Sixth Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee pointed out that conclusive facts have proved that the so-called “traitor”, “insider” and “scab” charges imposed on Comrade Liu Shaoqi are completely framed by Lin Biao, Jiang Qing and others. However, Kissinger ignored the facts and still blamed all the responsibility on Comrade Mao Zedong, portraying an image of “harsh, cold-blooded, cruel and autocratic”. It is true that Comrade Mao Zedong bore the responsibility for the comprehensive, long-drawn-out and grave blunder of the Cultural Revolution. But in his whole life, Mao’s contributions to the Chinese revolution far outweighed his mistakes. His achievements are primary and his mistakes secondary. Therefore, when dealing with the source text, the Chinese translators completely deleted this part to maintain the national image.

In the above examples, Kissinger’s savage, stagnant and autocratic China coincides with the civilized, peace-loving and harmonious China, which reflected the desire of the West to consolidate and integrate modern cultural power and maintain a modern order centered on the West. However, Hu Liping and other Chinese translators reconstructed the image of China through adjustment and deletion.

#### 4. Conclusion

In works written in non-Chinese with Chinese culture as the main content, the authors construct the image of China from the demands and interests of the West. There are significant differences between foreign and Chinese culture, so it is difficult for authors to have a comprehensive understanding of Chinese culture. Besides, the authors have long been influenced by western national psychology, social values, political rights, and other environments, which may lead to cultural misreading and the deformation of China's image. As the "direct witness" and "re-disseminator" of the image of China, the Chinese translators take on the responsibility of maintaining the image of China. Therefore, it is necessary for them to reconstruct that image within the framework of the Chinese cultural and political review so as to meet the imagination and expectations of Chinese readers.

Non-governmental diplomacy is an important part of China-US relations. Although in today's networked society, people have many and wide channels to obtain information, their cognition of the outside world is still vulnerable to the influence of elite public opinion. The Western writers who belong to one of the elite classes have a certain right to speak. Their public opinion should tend to be rational and construct an objective image of China, but instead they deliberately vilify China due to social values and their own needs, misleading the people and deepening the bias and misunderstanding towards China. By investigating the deformation of the image of China in works written in non-Chinese and exploring the behind reasons, the strategy of "going out" of the Chinese culture can be more targeted, and the stereotype of Western people towards China can be changed through improving folk diplomacy and helping improve China-US relations.

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