A Study of Inappropriate English Translations of Chinese Signs

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1. Introduction

With the fast pace of China’s integration into the global economy, English is starting to enter people’s daily life in China, and bilingual signs in both English and Chinese have become more common in public in large cities, such as in hotels, restaurants, shopping centers, airports, parks, train stations, public amenities and places of tourist interest.

However, many of these signs have apparently not been translated by professional translators or people who know English very well; inappropriate use of English on such signs can be seen everywhere, which affects communication with international visitors to China. In many situations, the signs may even fail to convey any relevant information at all to English speakers. For example, *Man and Wife lung slice* and *black pepper cowboy bone* on a local restaurant menu may seem bizarre; *cash recycling* signs may be confusing; *use for deformity* and *deformed man toilet* are likely to be insulting. Although the messages on some signs get lost, the results can be amusing. For example, signs saying *anus hospital* and *wash after relief* are overly explicit in nature and therefore funny, unconsciously ignoring euphemisms that have developed for sensitive topics.
This linguistic phenomenon has received attention from different areas of the society. A number of websites have been created to collect photos and examples of such bilingual signs, e.g. CE.com and Funny Chinese Sign Gallery on Micktravels.com. People who have taken pictures of these bilingual signs have started to post photos on flickr.com or their personal blogs and WebPages. Discussions, comments and arguments concerning these signs are everywhere online. However, many simply describe the signs themselves, give the location where the photos were taken, and joke about the signs. Due to two big events, the Olympic Games in Beijing in 2008 and the World Expo in Shanghai in 2010, increasing attention has been given to this linguistic phenomenon in the media. However, little serious discussion about these bilingual signs has occurred in the academic world.

In this paper, a collection of interesting examples of these inappropriate uses of English on Chinese signs will be discussed from the contrastive analysis and error analysis points of view, and sources for the errors will be postulated. In addition, general translation issues related to these signs will be briefly discussed, and recommendations for improving the translation of future signs in China will be given.
2. Prior Research

2.1. Chinglish

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 started to receive particular attention. The Olympic Games in Beijing in 2008 and the World Expo in Shanghai in 2010 brought it to attention of the popular of media, newspapers and the public. Since then, research has been carried out on these bilingual signs from different perspectives (Yang 2005; Yang, 2009; Jin 2008; Luo and Li 2006; Ding 2006; Niu 2007; Qu 2007; Shao 2009). The issues in these studies mainly fall into four areas: the functions of public signs, classification of public signs, their linguistic features, and translation-related issues.

The English used on these bilingual signs are referred as Chinglish, which is defined by Deng Yanchang (1989: 150) as

“A speech or writing in English that shows the interference or influence of Chinese, some sentences being little more than word to word translation of Chinese expressions. Chinglish may be grammatically correct, but the choice of words and phrases and the manner of expression do not conform to standard usage. Although understanding may not be a problem, Chinglish is unacceptable”.

Some examples are: *take care of your slips, advert skidproof*, and *free yourself from the misery of a existence*. Chinglish is considered by some to be deformed language and to create a barrier in international communication and cultural exchange (Li, 1993; Pinkham, 2000). However, Wang (1991), Zhang (2000) and many other scholars feel that Chinglish is a natural occurrence and an unavoidable language phenomenon.

Many people are fighting Chinglish both on an official level and a personal level. According to some media statistics, in preparation for the 2008 Olympic Games, Beijing used an immense amount of manpower to clean up non-standard English on 400,000 street signs, 1,300 restaurant menus, and other inappropriate signs in the capital, and the Chinese government would like to extend this clean up to the rest of the country as well. According to Jacobs (2010), these translations were corrected by the opening of Expo 2010 in Shanghai. Chinese government officials think that “the purpose of signage should be useful not amusing” (Jacob, [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/03/world/asia/03chinglish.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/03/world/asia/03chinglish.html), 2010). David Tool, a retired army colonel from United States and a professor at the city’s International Studies University, is a Chinglish eradication supporter and was awarded the highest honor by the City of Beijing for being a consultant to help correct more than one million mistakes on bilingual signs. He claims that “when foreigners come here, I want them to understand Chinese culture … I don’t want them to make fun of it”.

However, Oliver Lutz Radtke, a former German radio reporter and a doctoral student working on Chinglish at the University of Heidelberg, expresses a different opinion from the Chinese government and David Tool. He thinks that the Chinese government “should change their perception and see Chinglish as a unique product born by the encounter of
an English dictionary with Chinese grammar” and “an effort to communicate with the world outside of China” (Radtke, 2009, p.10). Radtke also states that he wants to fight for the right of Chinglish on signs to continue; he thinks that “it serves an important task of delivering an entertaining but also very thought-revealing window into the Chinese mind” (Radtke, 2009, p10).

Niu (2007) argues that problems in public sign translation lie mainly in the failure to properly carry out the intended functions, which leads to unclear, distorted or lost meaning. In addition to inadequate knowledge of English, many of these problems may also be caused by faulty approaches to the translation process.

Victor H. Mair, a professor of Chinese at the University of Pennsylvania, considers Chinglish one of the most engaging topics for class discussion. He thinks that many Chinglish examples can be “traced to laziness and a flawed but wildly popular translation software” (Jacobs, 2010).

I agree with Radtke that people can notice some unique Chinese cultural characteristics through these signs. For example, some Chinese signs may rarely appear in another country, such as those warning to take care of the elderly in public. In other situations, culturally specific metaphors which might be not easy for English native speakers to understand are used in the translation of the signs. However, many signs do not necessarily reflect how Chinese people think. There are several different reasons for the erroneous English used on these signs. As Mair claims, some of these signs must have been translated by machine, and in other situations, errors on the signs may have been made by the sign makers in copying from the originals. Such translations have no
particular relation to how Chinese people think. Finally, there is no necessary connection between a given grammatical structure and world view.

2.2. Error Analysis and Contrastive Analysis

According to James (1998), there are three “codes” or languages to be described in foreign and second language learning. First is the language to be learned, the FL/SL. This is the one that learners actually want to learn, and a neutral term for it is “target language” or TL. Second is the learner’s version of the TL, which is called by Interlanguage (IL) Selinker (1972, 1992). This is a term suggests the half-way position it holds between knowing and not knowing the TL. Third is the learner’s mother tongue (MT) or L1. This is the totality of the TL learner’s prior linguistic knowledge. Contrastive Analysis (CA) is a subdiscipline of linguistics which studies the similarities and differences of two or more languages or subsystems of languages. It focuses on the comparison MT and IL (as shown in Figure 1). Error analysis (EA) involves independently or “objectively” describing the learner’s IL and TL itself, followed by a comparison of the two, so as to locate mismatches (James, 1998). James’ successive paradigms are illustrated in Figure 1 (p.3)
In recent studies, most linguists working on EA divide the analytical process into three stages: 1) identification of errors, 2) description of errors, and 3) explanation of errors, by tracing errors to their sources. The latter is one of the most important aspects of EA and has pedagogical implications for teachers, syllabus designers and test developers. By finding the sources of students’ errors, educators can identify many difficulties for learners and that needs at a particular stage of language learning and update their teaching strategies to help students achieve better TL performance.

Common English errors of Chinese native speakers found in previous research include problems with spelling, punctuation, collocations, parts of speech, lexical items and especially prepositions, voice, tense and aspect, articles, noun number, and subject-verb agreement, as well as ambiguous pronouns, and gender confusion (Robertson 2000; Chuang 2009, 2006; Sun 2010; Wang 2007; Zhao 2010; Zheng and Huang 2010; Darus and Ching, 2009; Zhang 2004; Nie 2005; Wang, 2008; Hart, Scherz, Apel, and Hodson, 2007; and Yang, 2010). These all basically fall into four categories: 1) word spelling and

![Figure 1. Successive FL Learning Paradigms](image-url)
punctuation errors; 2) lexical errors, 3) grammatical errors; and 4) pragmatic and discourse errors.

However, most of this research has been done in the classroom setting, which means teachers collected, identified, and analyzed the errors made by their own students, and in particular, in writing. Little research has been done on errors in natural settings for social communication purposes, such as to provide information to the public. In addition, some of the studies mentioned previously focus on just one type of error, such as either lexical errors or pragmatic errors, and others lack recommendations and strategies for how to avoid errors.

This paper analyzes errors beyond the classroom, namely in more socially diverse settings on bilingual public signs in places such as hotels, restaurants, shopping centers, airports, parks, train stations, public amenities and places of tourist interest.

2.3. Translation

Public sign translation involves dealing with linguistic, cultural and social features of two or more languages. Not only do the bilingual signs under consideration here display many of the common errors that Chinese native speakers tend to make in classrooms, they also present translation-related issues that are worthy of discussion. Public sign translation involves dealing with linguistic, cultural and social features of two or more languages.

In the past thirty years of translation studies, different approaches to translation have been described. One of the common approaches emphasizes that translation should
reproduce in the reader’s language the closest natural equivalent to the source language in terms of meaning and style (Nida & Taber, 1969; Newmark, 1988; House, 1981). This approach is referred to as “literal translation” (Nida & Taber, 1969) in this paper.

Another common approach is to translate the source text more loosely, focusing more on conveying the intended function of the original text than its linguistic features. The function of the translation in the target culture determines which aspects of the original text can be preserved and which must be adapted (Vermeer, 1984; Nord, 1991 1997). Depending on how many features of a text have been preserved; this approach can be classified as a “semi-adaptive” translation or “free” adaptive translation. None of the above approaches is perfect. In the early 1990s, a new approach was developed (Venuti 1995). Its proponents argue that cultural words and concepts should be utilized in the target text to allow the clear demarcation of each cultural group. The term “resistance” is used by to refer to the strategy of translating a literary text in such a way that it retains a feeling of foreignness. This is also called the “resistive approach” to translation by Wallmach (2000). This approach challenges the assumption that the only valid translation reads fluently and idiomatically in the target language. Rather, a transparent reflection of the source text author’s voice in the target language text.

Problems reminiscent of all three translation approaches can be seen in my data set. I will discuss these and offer recommendations for improving the translation of future signs in China in subsequent sections of the paper.
3. Data Collection and Research Methodology

The data is primarily from Oliver Lutz Radtke’s (2007) book Chinglish, Found in Translation, which is categorized as a humor book. The main content of the book is a photo collection of bilingual public signs in China in places such as hotels, restaurants, shopping centers, airports, parks, train stations, public amenities and places of tourist interest. The book, as stated in the Preface, serves as “an interesting and insightful guide not only for translators, students, and teachers of Chinese but also for anyone involved in the discovery of a foreign language (Stahle, 2007, p.15). There are a total of 100 signs in the book, of which 85 constitute data for this paper; 15 signs were not considered for the following reasons:

1) Some of the signs only have English, without a Chinese source text. Without the latter, it is hard to figure out whether some of the word choices are appropriate and whether the translations themselves faithfully represent the meanings, functions and discourse contexts of the source texts. For example:
2) Some of the signs are not complete, and only show part of the Chinese source text and part of the English translation, which makes it difficult to judge whether the translations are appropriate. For example:
3) Some of the signs have a complete Chinese text and a complete English text, but it is obvious that the English text is merely a summary rather than a translation of the Chinese text. For example:
One translation appears to be the work of a native English speaker, and although there may be cultural issues which caused Radtke to find it noteworthy, linguistically it is unproblematic. For example:
In addition to these, the data was also supplemented by 17 additional examples found online that were posted and discussed by individuals, and from another book by Radtke, *Chinglish Speaking in Tongues* (2009). The total number of signs discussed is 102. The supplemental data was included because that they represent common errors.

Several native English speakers were consulted on the English translations, including error identification and counting.

For all the signs, every error was identified on each sign, counted, and classified into by type. Some of the signs have only one error; others have more. The total number of
items considered to be errors for the purpose of this paper is 307. The following examples illustrate how the errors were counted. A detailed discussion will be given in section 4.

Two errors of two different types are illustrated in example 2.

1) Xi fa ye
   Wash hair liquid
   *Sham Poo
   ‘Shampoo’

   The form of *Sham Poo was counted as one spelling error. Although there are both an incorrect space and incorrect capitalization, these were considered to represent a single error, since the two features can be seen as interdependent.

2) Zhuyi anquan
   Be careful safety
   *Caution Dander
   ‘Caution Danger’

   In example 2, one error is the spelling of *Dander, which should be ‘Danger’. The other is a pragmatic error, involving the visual style of the sign. Public signs have their own conventional formats. On a warning sign in English, *Caution and *Danger would likely be listed in two different lines because they stand for separate utterances. Spacing rather than punctuation is normally used to indicate this in very brief signs in English. In addition, the spacing helps to draw attention to the warning.

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1 All examples are from Oliver Lutz Radke’s (2007) book: Chinglish, Found in Translation unless otherwise noted.
3) Gaoshi Yin weishengjian zai zhuangxiu, zan
Notice because restroom PRG renovation temporary

ting shiyong, ru ce qing wang xi, jingqing lijie
stop use use restroom please to west please understand

*Bulletin Because the toilet is being fitted up, now it can’t be used, please to the
west, please give us for giveness.

‘Notice

‘The WC is under renovation and cannot be used. Please use the WC to the west. Please forgive the inconvenience.’

Five errors of four types can be identified in example 3: one pragmatic error, toilet, from the point of American English; two lexical semantic errors involving the word choices fitted up and bulletin; one grammatical error involving the lack of a verb between please and to (please go to the west); and one spelling error involving spacing in for giveness.

Sometimes one word was counted twice since it represents two different types of errors, as in example 4:

4) Qingqing de cao, pa ni de jiao
Green MOD grass fear you MOD feet

*Green grass dreading your feet.

‘The green grass fears your feet.’

Three errors of two types occur in example 4. Two are grammatical errors. One is the lack of the article the before green; the other is using the participle dreading as main verb. The third error is a lexical semantic error with respect to the choice of dread. Dread tends to imply that the grass actually expects feet to step on it. Fear may be a better
choice in that it doesn’t imply a specific expectation, but rather that it does not want feet to step on it. Thus the word *dreading* was counted twice, once as a grammatical error, and lexical error, respectively.

One shortcoming of my analysis is that it was not possible to trace how all the mistakes were made: were they made by people or via machine translation? Both types of translation are done in China. I will address this issue in the discussion to follow.
4. Error Analysis

The error analysis will follow the commonly accepted three step approach: 1) identification of errors, 2) description of errors, and 3) explanation of errors (tracing errors to their sources). How the errors were identified was briefly introduced in Section 3; error description and explanation will be the main focuses of this section. The 307 errors identified in the research can be categorized into four types: 1) spelling; 2) lexical; 3) grammatical; and 4) pragmatic. A detailed discussion of each of these types of errors will be presented below. Where an example displays more than one error type, only the error relevant to the type in focus in a particular section will be discussed at that point, with other types being taken up in other sections.

4.1 Spelling Errors

Spelling errors are the most easily corrected. There are only 11 spelling errors in my data. They can be classified into the following four types: 1) phonetic alternatives; 2) typographical errors; 3) copying errors; 4) capitalization and division.
4.1.1 Phonetic Alternatives

5) Xishoujian
   Restroom

   *Genitl Emen/Steliot
   ‘Gentlemen’s Restroom’

   In the translation Genitl Emen in example 5, the pronunciation [ˈdʒɛnɪtəl] as suggested by the spelling Genitl is very similar to the pronunciation of its correct form gentle [ˈdʒentl] (irrelevant phonetic details are omitted). This error is possibly due to the translator’s familiarity with the pronunciation of gentlemen but confusion on the actual spelling.

   It is noteworthy that the misspelled form Genitl looks like the word genital, which means ‘being a sexual organ or relating to being a sexual organ’ according to Merriam-Webster’s Online Dictionary, and which would have nearly the same pronunciation. This creates unintended humor for English speaking readers of the sign.

4.1.2 Typographical Errors

   People who are normally good spellers might be poor typists. Their problem is “in automatizing the required temporal and spatial mechanisms that underlie skilled fingering on the typewriter, or keystrokes on the word-processor” (Yang, 2010, p.267). One such error can be found in example 6 in dander, repeated here from example 2 for convenience:
In example 6, it is unlikely for a translator to substitute a d for a g in terms of spelling, because of the lack of phonetic similarity. Therefore, I consider Dander to be a typographical error with an unintended spelling. It is possible; however, that the translator spelled the word correctly, but the sign maker was a different person and introduced the error through lack of sufficient knowledge of English.

Another typographical error is given in example 7, repeated here from example 3.

The typographical error in this example is for giveness. A space is inserted between the letter r and the letter g. Without the additional space, the rest of the spelling of the word for giveness is correct.
4.1.3 Copying Errors

This type of error may be introduced by the sign maker instead of the sign translator, or sustained by the sign maker. Sign makers may know little to no English and possibly not even the alphabet, which can lead to errors in copying from the original.

An example of a possible copying error made by a sign maker is given in example 8:

8) Qing wu kuayue
   Please not cross

   *No Oyossihg
   ‘No crossing’

Example 8 was found in Hukeng, Fujian province. The spelling of the word *crossing* as *oyossihg* is probably not the result of how the translator thinks that *crossing* should be spelled. Most likely, similar-looking letters were substituted for the correct ones: the letter *o* for the letter *c*; the letter *y* for the letter *r*; and the letter *h* for the letter *n*. If these letters are put into the handwritten form (see Figure 2), it is even less easy to distinguish *c* from *o*, *r* from *y* and *n* from *h*, especially when not written clearly.

![Figure 2. Similarities among Letters](image)
If a sign maker who knew no English produced this sign, he/she could have easily confused these letters, resulting in the spelling oyossihg instead of the correct form crossing.

Example 9, which is repeated here from example 5, may be a copying error in the translation of xishoujian as Steliot:

9) Xishoujian
   Restroom
   *Genitl Emen/Steliot
   ‘Gentlemen’s Restroom’

Example 9 was found in Chengde, Hebei province and Yangtze River Cruise respectively. The translation of Steliot is the mirror image of the correct form of the word toilets, i.e. toilets spelled backwards. The person who made this mistake may have had no sense of English letter order (from the left to the right).

4.1.4 Capitalization and Word Division

An example of a capitalization and word division error is given in 10, repeated here from example 1:

10) Xi faye
   Shampoo
   *Sham Poo
   ‘Shampoo’
The $P$ is capitalized erroneously. The capitalized $P$ indicates that Sham and Poo are treated as two separate words, which would probably not occur if the sign maker were familiar with the word, even if the translator originally made the mistake, assuming they are separate individuals. This error is different from the previous ones because an actual substitution of one letter form for another occurs, which would likely have involved a choice, as opposed to a slip of the fingers.

In example 11, repeated here from 5 and 9, another capitalization and word division error is illustrated:

11) Xishoujian
Restroom

*Genitl Emen/Steliot

‘Gentlemen’s Restroom’

Gentlemen is erroneously spelled as Genitl Emen, as discussed above. The error in focus here is that the $E$ is capitalized, likely intentionally, which presents Genitl and Emen as two individual words. This misspelling may be due to lack of English proficiency on the part of the sign maker or translator.

4.2 Lexical Errors

A lexical error, as defined by Llach (2005), is “the wrong use of a lexical item in a particular context by comparison with what a native speaker of similar characteristics as the L2 learner would have produced in the same circumstances” (p. 49). The
characteristics that Llach refers to here include age, educational level, and professional and social status. There are a total of 196 lexical errors in my data, which can be classified into the following three types: 1) inappropriate denotation, 2) collocation problems, and 3) morphological errors.

### 4.2.1 Inappropriate Denotation

Many words have both denotations and connotations. Denotation represents the explicit or referential meaning of a word. It refers to a word’s precise, literal definition that might be found in a dictionary. Connotation refers to the wide array of uses of words in context with additional pragmatic associations, such as positive or negative attributes, beyond the literal reference. In this section, only errors of denotation of words will be discussed. There are a total of 126 denotation errors. Problems with connotations of word will be covered in section 4.4 on pragmatic errors.

A common type of denotation error results from the lack of one-to-one correspondence between lexical items in two languages. In situations where there is more than one English counterpart for a Chinese word, the wrong English word may be chosen, as in example 12:

12) Qing kai deng
   Please turn on light
   *Please open the light
   ‘Please turn on the light’
In Chinese, *turn on* (in the sense of operating a switch or a machine) and *open* are rendered by the same word *kai*. Since English has more than one translation for *kai* (*turn on* and *open*), the native Chinese speaker must learn which one is used in which contexts. The same situation occurs with *turn off* and *close*, which are rendered by the same Chinese word *guan*, as shown in 13 and 14:

13) Qing guan diannao
   Please turn off computer

   *Please close the computer

   ‘Please turn off the computer’

14) Qing guan deng
   Please turn off light

   *Please close the light

   ‘Please turn off the light’

Example 13 was found in a cybercafe in Chengdu, China, and 14 was found on the wall of a restroom in Shanghai. It is difficult for Chinese speakers to choose correctly between words in the same semantic field like *turn off* and *close* if they are not familiar with their range of meanings, because they are all the same, i.e. *guan* to Chinese native speakers. Although, *close* can be used for *turn off* for *light* and *computer* in some English dialects, this is not widespread.

It should be noted here that some may consider the errors in 13 and 14 to represent collocation errors. I chose to classify these as lexical denotation errors, since the verbs are
not actual synonyms in English, and the juxtaposition of the objects and verbs follows from the standard meanings of the verbs in question.

Another example with denotation errors is given in example 15:

15) Su bayou kou ya pu
   Vegetarian abalone button duck breast

   *Plain abalone buttons up the duck
   ‘Vegetarian abalone over duck breast’

   *Plain in this example does not have the meaning required by the translation.

   When the Chinese word *su* is used to describe food, it means that the food is made wholly of vegetables, fruits, grains, nuts, and sometimes eggs or dairy products, but not meat or seafood. However, when *plain* is used to describe a food in English, it refers to simplicity of ingredients, as in the case of plain rice with nothing added or plain spaghetti with no sauce. Thus in this context, *vegetarian* is a better word choice than *plain* for the sign translation.

   *Button up* is the second denotation error in this example. According to the online Oxford English Dictionary, when *button up* is used in the context of garments, it means ‘to be, or be capable of being, fastened (up) with buttons’. In example 15, *button up* is used in a figurative sense. However, this does not fit the context in English, in contrast to the Chinese, where the word *kou* refers metaphorically to the laying of the vegetarian abalone over the duck. The literal preposition *over* better provides a clearer description of the dish for an English speaking reader in this context, since English does not have a conventional metaphor which could be used here.
Two more denotation errors occur in example 16:

16) Laoren, ertong shang futi shi xuyao jiaren peitong.
The elderly children go up hand railing stair when need families accompany

*When old man’s child go up hand ladder temporary need the family to accompany.

‘Please use the hand railing to help the elderly and children ascend the stairs safely.’

The errors involve ‘hand ladder’ for futi and ‘temporary’ for shi. Futi refers to stairs with a hand railing. Ladder is expressed in Chinese by the word tizi. However, stairs and ladder share the character ti in their written forms as compounds with two characters. The online Chinese-English Dictionary Iciba gives two English meanings for the character ti as a noun: 1) ladder and 2) stairs. The translator must know English well enough to distinguish among these two options.

The other denotation error is shi, which in this context means ‘at the time of’ and emphasizes a point in time. However, the translator rendered it as temporary, meaning ‘lasting for a limited time’ (Online Merriam-Webster Dictionary), which emphasizes more a transient period in time. The second layer of lexical error with temporary is its part of speech. Regardless of the correctness of its denotation, the adjective temporary cannot be used to modify the verb need; an adverb would be necessary.

Two more denotation errors are given in 17:

17) Shichu xuanda gaosu
Drive out xuanda expressway

*To put off Xuanda Express
‘Leaving Xuanda Expressway’
Jingru Jingzhang gaosu
Drive in Jingzhang expressway

*To put in Jingzhang Express
‘Entering Jingzhang Expressway’

This example was found at the terminus of Xuanda Freeway by David Deng in January 2006 (http://gallery.totakenoticeofsafe.com/main.php?g2_itemId=64). Two errors occur in this example: put off and put in. In this example, the notions of leaving and off are both included in the single verb chu in Chinese, which means ‘leave or be away from’ in English, while enter and in are rendered by the single verb ru in Chinese, meaning ‘come in or be in’ in English. Although the off in put off and the in in put in partially cover the meanings of chu and ru as mentioned above, put off and put in as two-word verbs refer to locomotion of the understood subject referent.

Example 3 in section 3 is repeated in example 18 as another example of a denotation error.

18) Gaoshi
   Notice

   *Bulletin
   ‘Notice’

   Yin weishengjian zai zhuangxiu, zan
   Notice because restroom PRG renovation, temporary

ting shiyong, ru ce qing wang xi, jingqing lijie
stop use use restroom please to west, please understand
Because the toilet is being fitted up, now it can’t be used, please to the west, please give us for giveness.

‘The WC is under renovation and cannot be used. Please use the WC to the west. Please forgive the inconvenience.’

The denotation error in example 18 is *is being fitted up*. According to the online Oxford English Dictionary, *to fit up* means ‘to supply with necessary fittings, furniture, or stores’, which does not correspond to the denotation of the Chinese word *zhuangxiu*. Based on the context, the meaning that the translator needs to express here is to restore the restroom to a former better state by cleaning, repairing or rebuilding; thus *is under renovation* is a better phrasing for the original Chinese meaning.

### 4.2.2 Collocation Problems

Many researchers who define “collocation” agree that it is a lexical unit consisting of a cluster of two or three words with different parts of speech, (Baker, 1992; Benson, Benson and Ilson, 1997; Williams, 2002). For the purpose of this study, collocations are juxtapositions of words that are very conventional and fairly predictable from context, and where no word in the phrase can easily be substituted for by a synonym or near synonym. 16 collocation errors have been identified in the data. An example is given 19:

19) Xiang zijue weihu gonggong weisheng de youke zhujing
   To consciously protect public hygiene MOD tourist salute

   *Salute to the tourists who keep the public hygiene
‘A salute to tourists who maintain the public hygiene’

The collocation error in example 19 is *keep the public hygience*. Apart from the morphological error in *hygience*, which will be discussed later, the problem with *keep the public hygiene* seems to be one of convention with the term *hygiene*. *Maintain* must be used; for example, in contrast to the collocation of *keep with peace in keep the peace*. There is no clear meaning difference associated with the choice of one or the other verb, which is one reason why this is considered a collocational error.

4.2.3 **Morphological Errors**

Morphological problems in this paper are errors in the bound morphemes of lexical items, both inflectional and derivational. A bound morpheme is a sound or a combination of sounds that cannot stand alone as a word, but has its own meaning or grammatical function. For example, the *-un* in *unhappy* is a bound morpheme. A derivational morpheme changes the meaning of the word or the part of speech or both. Derivational morphemes often create new words. For example, the derivational prefix *-un* added to *invited* changes the meaning of the word to its opposite. In English, inflectional morphemes are all suffixes; they express a grammatical meaning. The *-s* in *cats* is an inflectional morpheme, which expresses the grammatical notion of plurality. There is a total of 6 morphological problems in the data. An example of a derivational error is given in 20:
20) Xiao cao you shengming, qing jiao xia liu qing
Little grass have life please feet under save love.

*I like your smile, but unlike you put your shoes on my face.

‘Grass has life. Please keep off the grass.’

Here, the bound morpheme –un on like is in error. Un can not negate a main verb to simply mean the opposite condition as in the way it negates the adjective happy in unhappy to mean ‘not happy’. With verbs representing actions, it is used to express a meaning of reversal, such as in the words undo, unlock, and unpack, but not with stative verbs such as like and not in the negative sense intended here. Thus, the verb like does not conventionally occur with the bound morpheme –un to meant ‘to not like’.

Another example of a morphological error is given in example 21, repeated here from 16 in section 4.2.1.

21) Laoren, ertong shang futi shi xuyao jiaren peitong.
The elderly children go up hand railing stair when need families accompany

*When old man’s child go up hand ladder temporary need the family to accompany.

‘Please use the hand railing to help the elderly and children ascend the stairs safely’.

The ’s on man’s looks like an inflectional morpheme mistakenly indicating a possessive relationship between man and child. In this sentence, there are two subject NPs, laoren ‘old man’ and ertong ‘child’, according to the Chinese source text. It is unclear what the source of this error could be, unless the possessive ’s was intended to
represent the plural s, which would still be wrong morphologically, but would make sense.

One more example of morphological error is given in 22:

22) Xiang zijue weihu gonggong weisheng de youke zhujing
To consciously protect public hygiene MOD tourist salute

*Salute to the tourists who keep the public hygiene
‘A salute to tourists who maintain the public hygiene’

In example 22, given the fact that many nouns in English have a suffix –ence and –ence can also work as a derivational morpheme to change a verb into a noun (e.g. exist(ence); consist(ence)), hygience could seem like an appropriate form to a Chinese speaker.

4.3 Grammar Errors

There are a total of 74 grammatical errors in my data. These can be classified into the following categories: 1) article errors, 2) tense errors, and 3) others.

4.3.1 Article Errors

The articles the, a and an in English are very special words for Chinese learners of English. Both omission and overgeneralization of articles are easily recognizable mistakes in English texts written by Chinese speakers. There are two main problems that make it difficult for Chinese speakers to master the use of articles: first, the Chinese
language lacks an article system; therefore, Chinese native speakers lack a point of reference for it; second, the rules for using articles are very complex and are difficult to explain to EFL learners. There are a total of 16 article errors.

One article omission error is given in example 23:

23) Huanying laidao changcheng, shijie shang zuichang de qiang
   Welcome arrive at Great Wall world on longest MOD wall

   *Welcome to Great Wall, longest wall in the world
   ‘Welcome to the Great Wall, the longest wall in the world.’

Example 23 shows a sign welcoming visitors to the Great Wall in Beijing. Since the Great Wall is a unique and widely known wall, the must be used to introduce the NP Great Wall. The second clause in example 23 also requires the definite article the before the superlative adjective longest. Again, there is a unique reference and it is general knowledge that a superlative exists as the top of a scale.

An article insertion error is given in example 24:

24) Zhongguo yan jiu
    China smoke wine

   *Chinese smoke wine & The Smoke the Wine
   ‘Chinese Cigarette and Wine Store’

This is from the window of a store in Beijing. The sign on the window does not refer to any specific wine or cigarettes to which they expect the reader to have had prior reference; it just generally refers to wine and cigarettes as wares. Thus the definite article
the cannot be used to introduce the NPs smoke and wine. This is a separate issue from the lexical inappropriateness of smoke.

4.3.2 Tense Errors

The prototypical use of tenses is to indicate the time of an event or state relative to one or more reference points. All languages can express time reference, but its expression is not the same for every language, and this can create difficulty in translating from one language to another. In languages with grammatical tenses, tense can give relative temporal information directly. In languages without tense, temporal information may be inferred from context, aspect marking, or adverbs, among other possibilities. Tense is not a grammatical category in Chinese and temporal information is not indicated via inflection of verb forms. In many contexts, time reference is instead expressed through the use of temporal adverbs: e.g. zuotian ‘yesterday’ indicates past time. As a result, Chinese learners of English usually have difficulty using tenses. Not surprisingly, tense errors are common in the data, with a total of 37. An example is given in 31:

25) Qingqing de cao, pa ni de jiao
    Green MOD grass fear you MOD feet

    *Green grass dreading your feet.

    ‘The green grass fears your feet’

The tense error in example 25 is dreading. Dreading is the participial form of the verb; it cannot be used without an auxiliary as the predicate of the sentence. The simple
present tense in third person singular form, which expresses a habitual sense, is a better choice.

Another tense error is given in example 26:

26) Qi lu shang po qi lu xia mei le zuo ge hao PRF sit CLF good
   ride donkey up slope ride donkey down no che ma car horse
   Rujin jiaotong da bianhua chumen da di zuo xiao ba
   Now transportation big change going out take taxi sit little bus
   *The horse carriage used in ancient time is equivalent to Mercedes Benz today, it ranks very high.
   ‘The horse carriage used in ancient times is equivalent to the Mercedes Benz today; it ranked very high.’

The tense error in example 26 is *it ranks high*, which is present rather than past. Due to the use of the present tense, the reference of the pronoun *it* seems to be the Mercedes Benz, which is not appropriate for the context. The sign compares horse carriages used in ancient times and the Mercedes Benz brand of car, implying that the horse carriage was as important as the Mercedes Benz is today. If *it ranks very high* is changed into the past tense, the pronoun reference confusion is resolved. It is easy for readers to figure out that *it* refers to *horse carriage used in ancient times.*
4.3.3 Others

In my data, there are several other types of grammatical error which either occurred infrequently or were hybrid types and difficult to classify. These errors will be discussed in this section. There are a total of 35 errors of this type.

An example is given in 27:

27) Xian xia hou shang wenming cheng che
    First get off after get on civility take bus

    *After first under on, do riding with civility

    ‘Board the bus only after others get off. Please show civility when riding the bus’.

The grammatical error in example 27 is after first under on, which is a series of adverbs and prepositions without obvious grammatical connections. In my observation, preposition, verb and noun clusters without any conjunction or grammatical relation to each other are common English errors by Chinese native speakers. In addition to the obvious lexical problems in 27, it is not grammatically possible to string these adverbs and prepositions together in this way. As a result, this part of the sign would be completely incoherent to an English speaker.

Example 28 has another grammatical error:

28) Chongzhen huangdi ziyi chu
    Chongzhen emperor hang site

    *Tree where emperor Chongzhen hanged
‘Tree where emperor Chongzhen was hanged’

Here the sentence is missing an auxiliary. *Hanged* is just a past participle, which cannot work as a main verb by itself in the sentence. The copula *be* in the past tense is needed in front of *hanged*. Note that I have not considered the omission of the article *the* before *tree* to be a grammatical error, since this is a possible ellipsis in English in the context of a sign used as a label.

The last grammatical error I will discuss is in example 29:

29) Canji ren zhuanyong
   Handicapped people use
   *Use for Deformity
   ‘Handicap(ped) use only’

In addition to the denotational and pragmatic error in the choice of the word *deformity*, there is a grammatical error in the sentence as well. In the Chinese original, the word for *use* can function as either a noun or a verb in the sentence, but in English, on the verb interpretation, *use* needs a subject instead of the prepositional phrase *for deformity* to refer to the agent. However, it is more conventional to represent this meaning with a noun phrase as a label rather than a VP representing a directive. (Note: “handicap” and “handicapped” are two possible options for the translator, both being variations used in current American English on signs.)
4.4 Pragmatic Errors

Pragmatic errors, as defined by Wang (2007), refer to

“Words, expressions, sentences or even paragraphs that, though grammatically acceptable, do not fit the given situation, fail to express the intended meaning of the writer, or cause misunderstanding or displeasure of the targeted reader (recipient of the letter). They violate certain principles of communication and consequently cause failure or disharmony in intercultural communication.” (p. 40)

There are 16 pragmatic errors in my data, which can be classified into two major categories: 1) pragmatic errors related to word connotation, which refers to the inappropriate use of expressions for a particular context, and 2) discourse-level pragmatic errors, i.e. errors in which words and expressions are impolitely or otherwise inappropriately used in specific social contexts.

4.4.1. Connotational Pragmatic Errors

One noticeable example of a very common inappropriate use of English vocabulary on Chinese signs is “welcome”. In my data, “welcome” is often used appropriately as a direct translation of the Chinese word ‘huanying’ to express a kindly greeting, but in an incorrect grammatical context, thus yielding an inappropriate sense for the particular context, as in examples 30-32:

30) Huanying chengzuo 52 xian  
   Welcome   take   52 line

*Welcome to ride Line 52 Bus!
‘Welcome to the Line 52 Bus’!

31) Huanying shiyong ATM fuwu
   Welcome use ATM service

   *Welcome to use ATM service!

   ‘Welcome to our ATM service!’

32) Huanying ruzhu ben shequ
   Welcome move in this community

   *Welcome to live in our community (see appendix picture 2)

   ‘Welcome to our community!’

In each example above, welcome is incorrectly followed by an infinitive, which wrongly suggests the meaning ‘be free to’ for this context, rather than the intended welcome as a cordial greeting. In the appropriate use as an interjection, “welcome” can be either followed by an adverb such as “home” or “back”, used as an entire utterance, or followed by the preposition “to” + NP indicating a place or event, but not by an infinitive composed of the complementizer “to” + nonfinite verb. For example: Welcome!
Welcome back! Welcome home! Welcome to Beijing.

Another connotational pragmatic error is given in example 33:

33) Hua qian yue xia shi, qing zhuyi ni de kuabao
    Flower front moon below when please pay attention to you MOD bags

   *When you are getting off with your lover, pay attention to your bag!

   ‘Even during a romantic moment, please pay attention to your bags’
Grammatically speaking, the original translation does not have any major error in it. The sign is figuratively intended to remind people not to get distracted and to always pay attention to their personal belongings. However, several word choices are very socially inappropriate for the context. First, *lover* in contemporary English usually means ‘somebody with whom one has sexual relations’. Therefore, the translator’s word choice of *lover* gives the sentence an explicit sexual sense, which is not what is intended here.

Second, *getting off with somebody* as slang indicates ‘to achieve sexual satisfaction’ to experience an orgasm” in American English. Combining *lover* and *getting off* into one sentence makes the situation even worse. Thus the meaning of the translated sign goes far beyond its original intent in a humorous and even embarrassing way.

Another example of a pragmatic error related to connotation is given in example 34:

34) **Bian hou qing chongshui**
   Feces after please flush
   *Wash after relief
   ‘Flush after using’

In example 34, the choice of *relief* is much too explicit for the context. In a public situation, the more general, neutral expression *using* fits the context better. However, it should be noted that the translator did use a euphemism by choosing *relief*, even though it still does not fit in the context appropriately, instead of referring directly to feces, as in the original, which would be completely taboo in English.

35 is another example with pragmatic errors.
The expression in example 35 sounds highly insulting due to the use of the word *deformed* to refer to disabled or handicapped people, and the word choice of *toilet* is more British English style. The sign may be acceptable to a British visitor without the word choice problem of *deformed*. However, the response that I got from three American English native speakers is that they do not feel very comfortable with the word *toilet*, because in American English, according to Merriam-Webster’s Online Dictionary, *toilet* refers to the ‘fixture that consists usually of a water-flushed bowl and seat and is used for defecation and urination’. Therefore, when an American visitor sees the word *toilet*, they will visualize the fixture itself, resulting in an unpleasant feeling. For this reason, *WC* seems the best choice, as it is euphemistic and more international. Although Americans do not use the term *WC* themselves, many Americans travelling abroad would probably recognize it.

One more connotational pragmatic error is given in example 36:

36) Laoren, ertong shang futi shi xuyao jiaren peitong. the elderly children go up hand railing stair when need families accompany

*When old man’s child go up hand ladder temporary need the family to accompany.

‘Please use the hand railing and help the elderly and children ascend the stairs safely.’
The error in example 36 is *old*. *Elderly* is a better word choice for the sign translation, because if not only denotes relatively advanced age, but is also more respectful.

### 4.4.2. Social Pragmatic Errors

Social pragmatic errors involve problems within a specific context due to cultural differences. The Choice to translate a concept in the original sentence or not may be culturally based. Sometimes, even if translators have enough language proficiency to convey the literal meaning of a Chinese expression in English, viewers of a Chinese sign may not understand the culture motivating the sign.

In general, according to Hofstede & Bond (1988) and Thompson (2001), many western cultures, such as those of the U.S.A, Canada and England, place great value on individualism and competitiveness. In contrast, many Asian cultures, such as those of China, Japan and Korea, place more value on collectivism and cooperativeness. For a relatively collectivist and cooperative culture, such as China, the government may take on much stronger macro control of society to tell people how to behave in socially. For example, signs such as in example 36 are widespread in China to notify and educate people to protect and show respect to elderly people and to help those in disadvantaged groups such as children, pregnant women, and the handicapped etc. However, for relatively individualistic and competitive cultures, such as in the United States or England, although people are also naturally expected to help the elderly in public, they do not think that it is the place of the government or other public entities to tell them what to do. For example, many Americans would think that it is the job of a parent to educate
their children in how to behave socially, not the government. Therefore, signs like “Give your seat to the elderly and pregnant women” are relatively more rare in public in America, although special facilities for the handicapped are signaled and parking places are reserved for the handicapped, and sometimes for pregnant women or parents with small children. Thus the focus on public signs in the U.S. seems to be on reserving places for those in need, but not on education per se on how to behave.
5. Translation Issues

Bilingual public signs and restaurant menus usually serve special communicative functions such as providing information, directions or warnings. Due to the constraints of physical space and the special functions of public signs, they constitute a special genre, and expressions used on them are meant to be succinct, straightforward, and easy to understand. This creates special difficulties and challenges for translators.

Two different approaches may be advocated by professionals in translating such signs: 1) literal translation, whereby an attempt is made to stick as close as possible to the original wording while still rendering the source idiomatically in the target language; and 2) semi adaptive /free adaption translation, which involves translation of every word where possible, but modifies or loosely translates or paraphrases those words or phrases that cannot be translated literally. In the cases discussed here, both approaches can be seen, as well as an exaggerated and overgeneralized use of the literal method. The extent of adaptation varies from sign to sign; some are partially adaptive and others are fully adaptive, by which I mean that the translator has extensively modified words and phrases, and the translation may even possibly convey a different meaning as compared to the original expression.
5.1 Literal Translation

Examples 37 and 38 are two signs with very literal translations.

37) Hei jiao niuzai gu
    Black pepper cowboy ribs
    *Black pepper cowboy bones
    ‘Black pepper “cowboy” bones’
    or ‘black pepper beef short-ribs’

38) Fu qi fei pian
    Husband wife lung slice
    *Man and wife lung slice
    ‘“Man and wife” lung slice’

Chinese menus are very difficult to translate, because 1) a figurative approach is commonly used for the names of Chinese dish names, and 2) there is a certain lack of one-to-one correspondence between Chinese and American ingredients and combinations of ingredients. Thus menu items tend to be translated word for word by inexperienced translators. Sometimes the Chinese name for a dish is given in figurative language, as in examples 37 and 38, but it is unlikely that diners will able to figure out exactly what the dishes are in such cases. The dish in example 37 sounds terrible at first glance. Who would like to order cowboy bones to eat? Example 37 also looks off-putting. The translation uses a literal approach to convey almost every word of the original menu, despite possible confusion in meaning. If the translator really wants to keep the original figurative meaning in the dishes’ Chinese names, he/she could use quotation marks on *cowboy* in example 37 and *man and wife* in example 38 to signal the unusual uses of...
these two expressions. Otherwise, the translator can choose to just name the major ingredients and cooking style of the dishes so that the diners can have a better idea about what a dish is made of.

5.2 Semi-Adaptive Translation

An example of a semi-adaptive translation is given in 39:

39) Xiao cao ye zai zhang, ta ru xiang yi xiang
Little grass also PRG grow step in think one think

*Grass is also growing, think about it when stepping on it.

‘The grass is alive and growing. Please do not step on it.’

In example 39, the sign indirectly asks visitors to help take care of the grass by not stepping on it, through a directive to think about the consequences of stepping on it. Significantly, in the original, zhang and xiang rhyme and there is syntactic parallelism and semantic antithesis. These and other literary devices, including poems and couplets are very common in Chinese signs, and present the information in an elegant and friendly way. Here the translator chose to present the basic meaning of the sign in translation indirectly, but without using the rhetorical devices of rhyme and antithesis present in the original. In fact, figurative wording and the use of other literary devices is not very common in the English translations in my data. Sometimes, the Chinese original is simply rendered in a nonfigurative way in English. It is almost impossible to translate the sophisticated devices used in 39 into English appropriate for a sign.
One more semi-adaptive translation example is given in 40:

40) Xiao cao you shengming, qing jiao xia liu qing
Little grass have life, please feet under save love.

*I like your smile, but unlike you put your shoes on my face.
The grass is alive. Please stay off of it.*

In contrast to 39, the translator in example 40 chose to express the original Chinese sentence in a more figurative way. The translation retains the original attribution of life to grass, but the grass is also personified as directly asking for visitors to protect its face. The question arises as to whether translating the sign in a more figurative way is a better approach.

As alluded to above, a figurative translation can help to express a message in a soft, friendly, gentle or polite tone. This is especially relevant at scenic sites, where people are in a pleasant and relaxed mood. A figurative approach to translation could be preferable to bare and direct commands, especially when addressed to international visitors, on whom one might wish to make a good impression. However, in addition to possibly changing the tone of the original, a problem with this tack is that it requires quite advanced English proficiency on the part of the translator. The translator can also paraphrase the Chinese text in a nonfigurative way, simply giving a reminder for visitors to stay off the grass, which is shown as my translation above.
5.3 Free Adaptive Translation

In 41, a free adaptive translation example is given:

41) Sheng li si bie zui shangxin, er nu songzang ku die live leave die away most heartbreaking son daughter send away cry father

niang mother
Nian nian shang en shao zhu xiang, shisu ren qing Year year visit cemetery lighten CLF incense memory people love
wan nian chang ten thousand year long

*Holding funeral rite is an old custom when the people dead. Today, most people enjoy modern custom.

‘It’s heartbreaking when a loved one dies. Sons and daughters grieve when they send their parents off. Every year when you light incense at the cemetery, remember your loved ones who have passed away.’

In example 42, the learner’s translation is rather different from the original wording of the Chinese sentence. The possible reasons that the translator used a free adaptive approach include: first, the free adaptive translation can better express the intended message of the Chinese source text than a literal translation; second, since it is hard to find word-to-word correspondence for culturally related concepts, it may be better to paraphrase them in a way which is easy for English speakers to understand.
6. Implications

The English translations of Chinese signs discussed here have special features, which create challenges for translators. Reactions range from Radtke’s desire to keep bilingual signs the way that they were translated, to teachers’ and researchers’ calls for the errors on these signs to be corrected, and from tourists’ laughter, to embarrassment on the part of Chinese people. Although, further investigation in a number of areas is needed before it is possible to determine the best approaches to dealing with the major issues, I have several suggestions for improving the translation of Chinese public signs:

1. The 21st century is the information age, and computers are widely used in every field. Therefore, a national database or corpus can be created on the internet to provide ready-made translations of commonly used signs in public, with photographs, as well as a dictionary which explains subtle aspects of word meaning, with appropriate definitions and example, based on an analysis of items likely to be confused.

2. Paper dictionaries specifically for sign translation could also be compiled.

3. Sign translation strategy guidelines and an instruction book on how to do sign translation should be written. For example, they should include a discussion of when is it
appropriate to use literal-translation, when is it better to apply semi-adaptive or free adaptive translation, and when to use a figurative vs. descriptive approach to translating signs.

4. Inferior translation software should be identified and avoided.

5. Professional sign translation organizations should be established to provide quality translation services to individuals or businesses that need it, and to publicize common pitfalls.

In short, public sign translation should be done professionally so that signs can introduce international visitors to the richness of Chinese culture without making them stop at the language barrier.
7. Conclusion

In this paper, a set of errors in sign translation from Chinese to English were described in the light of error analysis, contrastive analysis, and translation related issues. and practical implications for English translation of Chinese signs have been discussed. It was shown that the style used on Chinese public signs has special features which present a number of challenges for translators.

Specifically, the English errors in my data were categorized as primarily orthographic, lexical, grammatical and pragmatic in nature. It was shown that translation strategies such as literal, semi-adaptive, and free adaptation all have certain limitations in fulfilling the function of conveying equivalent information in translation from Chinese into English clearly and naturally.

It is hoped that the error analysis portion of this paper can help people identify the causes of errors and find better strategies to learn and use English in their daily work. The discussion of translation-related issues may help translators find a better match in their choice of translation, and the practical implications may provide food for thought on how sign translation in China can be improved. Based on the limitations of my data, further investigation in a number of areas is still needed to see, for example, 1 whether there are
more types of errors; 2 what the possible sources of these additional errors are; and 3 what further suggestions can be given to improve the quality of sign translation.
8. References


Qu, Qianqian. 2007. A study on English translation of public signs from a cross-cultural perspective. MA thesis.


9. Abbreviation

MOD  Modifier Marker
PRG  Present Progressive
PRF  Perfective
CLF  Classifier
10. Appendix

1. Photo for examples 17 from:
   http://gallery.totakenoticeofsafe.com/main.php?g2_itemId=64
2. Photo for example 16 from:

3. Photo for example 22 from:
http://hiphotos.baidu.com/xiazuzhang/pic/item/fad992fbfb2980ab9f514682.jpg