

# The influence of the contemporary social background on the coinage of technical lexicons. The case of the lexicon of political economy in 19<sup>th</sup> century China

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*During the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Chinese scholars created the lexicons of many scientific domains through the translation of Western works. The aim of this article is to describe the impact of the expectations of contemporary readers on the process of coinage of the language of political economy, as an instance of the influence of users of translations on the translator's work. Here I will present the results of a lexicological analysis of the first two Chinese translations of English politico-economic essays, which appeared respectively before and after 1895. This will be followed by an illustration of some historical elements for identifying the general profile of the potential readership. Finally, an analysis of the link between the lexicological choices of the translators and the expectations of their public will help to assess the weight of the reader's profile on the terminological work.*

## 1. Introduction

In the last thirty years, a number of terminologies created for Chinese through the translation of foreign texts have been analysed in order to describe the major patterns of coinage of neologisms in the Chinese language (Li 1971; Heřmanová-Novotná 1974; Masini 1993; Liu 1995; Lackner Amelung & Kurtz 2000).

This contribution emphasizes the importance of the combined interpretation of linguistic data and related historical background. The aim of such a multidisciplinary enquiry is to formulate plausible hypotheses on the influence of social factors on the choice of a peculiar pattern of translation and the coinage of terminology.

Here I present the results of lexicological and historical examinations carried out upon the first two Chinese translations of English politico-economic essays, published respectively in 1881 and in 1902. My aim is to show how to combine linguistic data and historical notes to assess the variable impact of the readers. The texts examined were:

1. *Fuguoce* 富國策 (Strategies for Enriching the Country), published in 1881 and written by Wang Fengzao 汪鳳藻 (1851-1918), translator of the Capital Institute for Foreign Languages of Beijing. The *Fuguoce* is a partial translation of the *Manual of Political Economy* (1874) by the English economist Henry Fawcett (1833-1884). It is the first systematic

and complete introduction to Western political economy ever written in China (Pi 2000: 324).

2. *Yuanfu* 原富 (Original Wealth) by the translator and scholar Yan Fu 嚴復 (1853-1921). This is the complete translation of *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776) by Adam Smith (1723-1790).

## 2. Lexicological inquiry

The first task was to select a *corpus* of lexemes as samples of the specific lexicon for the given texts.

A strict semantic criterion was adopted for admitting the samples into the *corpus*: it was the presence of the semantic seme [+political economy]. Terms coming from other semantic fields, even if related, like sciences, mathematics, or law, were not admitted. Proper names, names of political or civil institutions and names of currency or measurements units were not admitted either. The aim was to collect a manageable but still representative number of lexical units of neologisms.

The collected items were then subsumed into the following categories:

- Phonetic loans and hybrids

A phonetic loan is a loanword that takes on the meaning and the phonetic shape of the foreign word to be translated; most of the time the foreign phonetic features are adjusted to fit the phonetic rules of the target language. It must be remembered in this regard that, at the written level, the Chinese characters usually have a fixed semantic content, while their phonetic content, i.e. their pronunciation, varies from place to place; in the case of phonetic loans, on the contrary, the characters are taken on to express a specific sound and their semantic content must be disregarded.

For instance, *pílè* 毗勒 is a phonetic loan from ‘bill’; *sàbáixīdì* 薩白錫帝 is a phonetic loan from ‘subsidy’; *gēpōlùlèxiàn* 歌頗魯勒憲 is a phonetic loan from ‘corporation’. In all of these phonetic loans the specific meaning of each character is not taken into account in forming the semantic content of the word.

- Graphic loans

Graphic loans are loanwords that directly adopt the meaning and the graphic shape of the foreign word to be translated, regardless of the pronunciation in the foreign language.

As far as Chinese is concerned, graphic loans are imported only from languages that share their orthography with Chinese. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the only language written with Chinese characters was Japanese.

An example of a graphic loan is *zībēn* 資本, the translation of ‘capital’: in this case, the Chinese translator employed the Japanese translation of ‘capital’, 資本 (Japanese pronunciation *shihon*), since it was already quite diffused in the Chinese lexicon (Wei 1852).

- Semantic calques, structural calques and phrasal calques

Semantic calques are native words whose semantic field is enlarged to include a new meaning coming from the foreign language.

*Zhìbì* 制幣, for instance, may be called a semantic calque: in fact, since the third century A.D., it had the meaning of ‘tissue offered in ancient rites to the gods’; usually of a fixed length, its meaning became “fixed medium of payment”; in the writings under examination, it received the specific meaning of “bank note” (Luo 1994: 1021).

Structural calques are lexemes in which the meaning and the morphological or syntactic structure are both taken from the foreign word or phrase. If the lexical item resulting from the process of reproduction is a phrase, then the calque will be called a phrasal calque.

For instance, *guóběn* 國本 can be categorized as a structural calque, because its morphological structure (*guó* 國 is ‘country’ + *běn* 本 which refers to *zībēn* 資本 ‘capital’, i.e. ‘country’s capital’) is modelled on the syntactic structure of ‘capital of the country’. The phrase *jīdì zhī zū* 基地之租, on the other hand, is the phrasal calque for ‘ground rent’ (in fact *jīdì* 基地 is ‘ground’, *zhī* 之 is a particle of nominal modification and *zū* 租 is ‘rent’).

- Semicalques, native neologisms and native words

When the loanword is simply inspired by the foreign term (for instance, if it takes the same morphological structure but different morphemes, or where the same meaning of the foreign term is coupled with a slightly different structure), it is called a semicalque.

For instance, *qíháng* 齊行 ‘trade-unions’ literally is ‘equalized (*qí* 齊) corporations (*háng* 行)’; in this case, the author did not translate the concept ‘union’ but preferred ‘equality’, while the morphological structure is the same.

If the neologism has no relationship at all with the foreign term, save for the meaning, it must be regarded as a native neologism. An example is *mǔcái* 母財 ‘capital’, literally ‘the motherly (*mǔ* 母 ‘mother’) wealth (*cái* 財)’, where the foreign meaning is rendered with a word that has neither semantic nor structural resemblance.

Finally, if the term that translates a foreign word already existed in the native lexicon and did not undergo any substantial change in its field, it must definitely be regarded as a native word. This is the case of *xiànrán* 現錢 ‘ready-money’, which retained the same meaning since its first occurrence (Luo 1994: 2392).

The results of the lexicological inquiry are:

	<i>Fuguoce</i>		<i>Yuanfu</i>	
Number of items	201		220	
Phonetic loans	0	0%	20	9%
Graphic loans	8	4%	4	2%
Semantic calques	50	25%	20	9%
Structural calques	37	18%	61	28%
Phrasal calques	25	12%	45	20%
Semicalques	28	14%	35	16%
Native neologisms	24	12%	20	9%
Native words	34	17%	17	8%

### 3. Historical research

#### 3.1. The historical and social background of Wang Fengzao

During the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the leading class of the Chinese empire promoted translations, mostly of scientific works, as a result of the state crisis, prompted by the military and economic pressures brought about by some Western countries. The purpose was to acquire knowledge through Western science, to modernize the army and the whole economic structure of China and to overcome the technological and military gap with the West.

But until the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was no clear perception of the depth of the institutional, social and economic downturn of China. The leading class still had faith in the traditional organization of the State and of society. Therefore, the translations had to provide no more than the elements of Western science, considered to be tools for strengthening traditional institutions. There was no intention of learning the values and the institutions of the West, let alone to adopt them in China. The slogan that summarizes the mood of that intellectual impetus was “the Chinese learning as the body, the Western learning as the tool” (*Zhōngxué wèi tí, Xīxué wèi yòng* 中學為題，西學為用, De Bary 1964: 82). As a matter of fact, almost all the texts translated were about military industry and military art, and about scientific disciplines (physics, chemistry, mechanics, mathematics, etc.); among human sciences, the only subjects of interest were international commerce and international law.

To boost the prestige of translations, the Chinese government set up the Capital Institute for Foreign Languages in 1862 (*Jingshi Tongwenguan* 京师同文馆). Here Wang Fengzao worked as a translator. The Institute had two main tasks: the first was to teach foreign languages and elements of Western scientific disciplines (among which political economy) to future statesmen, public managers, diplomats, translators and interpreters. The second was to translate Western texts on scientific matters, which were at first employed as schoolbooks, for the lessons of the Institute (Wang 1987: 39-44).

It follows, on these grounds, that the immediate readers of the *Fuguoce* were the students of the Institute. Most of them belonged to families of the state bureaucracy, and since childhood, they had been imbued with traditional values and integrated in the imperial social system. Moreover, they were destined for a high social status, because they were to be employed as officials. This all means that they were very faithful to the establishment and not concerned with new rules and codes of behaviour.

All these factors indicate that the users of the *Fuguoce* did not want to learn the laws and the customs of the West as such, let alone its science; they wanted to get the rudiments of Western languages and culture simply as instruments to pursue wealth and power for the State. Hence they expected a translation of a manual to be clear, understandable and easy to study.

### **3.2. The historical and social background of Yan Fu**

In 1895, China suffered a major military defeat by Japan, in spite of all the efforts to modernize the army and the country. In 1898, a group of Chinese reformists tried to respond to the threat by launching political changes, but some conservative members of the Emperor's court boycotted their attempt. Then, in 1900, social discontent exploded in the Boxer Revolt against the representatives of the foreign countries in China. The severe military reprisals that followed and the heavy monetary sanctions, which placed a further burden on the already weak economic situation, only worsened the general tension.

This sequence of failures forced the Chinese leaders to eventually realize that the social, political and economic system was definitely not able to shield the country against the formidable menaces coming from abroad. The optimism boasted before 1895 was abandoned and the most radical scholars and intellectuals called for major political reforms. This brought about a major change. From that time on, many translations about Western politics, philosophy and sociology started appearing. Moreover, the rendering of a Western text into Chinese now assumed the task of showing the high peaks of Western civilization and of preaching the abolition of the ancient order in favour of the adoption of Western values, laws and ways.

Yan Fu, like Wang Fengzao and the students of the Institute, was born into a family of the bureaucracy and during the first years of his life he assimilated the traditional values. But, unlike the students of the Institute, at thirteen he had to enrol in the Naval Academy, as a consequence of his father's death, and could not pursue his career in the imperial bureaucracy anymore. At the Naval Academy he studied English language and culture; in 1877 he went to England and stayed there for two years. When he returned to China, he was employed in the Naval Academy as a teacher.

Because of the disastrous defeat of China in the war with Japan in 1895, Yan Fu was so shocked and worried that he decided to translate a number of Western essays about politics and philosophy to allow his contemporary statesmen to get acquainted with Western institutions and apply them in China. In fact, Yan Fu had a great influence on the Reformers of 1898 and on all Chinese revolutionaries of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: even Mao Zedong cited Yan Fu as one of the fathers of modern China (Wang 1957: 2; Schwartz 1964: 22-41; Ma 1984: 259).

The profile of the readers of Yan Fu's translations is not so easily definable as that of Wang Fengzao's readership. If Yan Fu's enormous fame among intellectuals, reformists and revolutionaries is taken into account, it can be said that probably the greater part of readers of the *Yuanfu* were a high number of would-be bureaucrats who failed to get employed in imperial bureaucracy, and some young mandarins who simply felt deeply dissatisfied with the Chinese imperial administration, because they were aware of the weakness of the century-old state institutions. Thus, in the new translations of the last years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they sought new ideas to save China from complete collapse. They were not interested in reforming the industry or the army as such, but in changing the whole political and social structure. On these grounds, it follows that Yan Fu's readers wanted to be informed of the deep secrets of Western wealth and power.

#### **4. Analysis of linguistic data and historical data in combination**

This brief sketch of the cultural background and of the characteristics and expectations of the users of Wang Fengzao's and Yan Fu's renderings allows us to attempt some explanation for the linguistic results of the lexicological inquiry.

##### **4.1. Phonetic loans**

The most relevant difference between Wang Fengzao and Yan Fu concerns the phonetic loans. In the *Fuguoce* there are no phonetic loans, save for the transcriptions of proper nouns, while in the *Yuanfu* almost one-tenth of the samples are phonetic loans, not counting proper nouns.

It can be maintained that the motivation for this lies in Wang Fengzao's pursuit of the clearest and most understandable rendering. In comparison with the other categories of words, the phonetic loan is probably the least clear and most difficult to decipher; usually Chinese words are semantically motivated, so the low rate of presence of phonetic loans in the Chinese lexicon is most likely due to the lack of semantic motivation of such loans. Another argument could be found in the comparatively small attraction that the West exerted on Wang Fengzao's readers. Tradition was so imprinted in them that they truly reckoned Chinese tradition still capable of governing the critical situation they were living. Thus, although they were keen on Western culture, they were not fond enough of it to put it before their own culture in their scale of values. So Wang Fengzao, when translating, did not like to employ such strange and exotic loans as the phonetic loans, getting rid of equivalent Chinese words, but would rather apply more familiar terms.

Yan Fu on the contrary, made extensive use of phonetic loans, not only to render proper nouns but also to translate common nouns of things, abstract nouns, collective nouns, etc.

It is likely that the knowledge and the strong passion for the Western world, that he and his readers shared, were the key factor. When translating the *Wealth of Nations*, Yan Fu and his readers knew England's wealth and power, which were even more fascinating if compared with the desperate situation of China. The West therefore had a great influence on Yan Fu and he preferred to import Western terms directly rather than use Chinese or Japanese terms, to create an expressive terminology rather than an easily understandable one.

## 4.2. Graphic loans

The rate of occurrence of graphic loans in the two authors is not very high (*Fuguoce*: 4%; *Yuanfu*: 2%); in fact, the widespread use of graphic loans began around the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when many Chinese went to Japan to study and Japan was taken as a model of modernization.

Wang Fengzao, always seeking to get the clearest word, introduced in his translation some of the Japanese loans already established in the Chinese lexicon at that time, because they were more easily comprehensible.

In the *Yuanfu* some graphic loans occur but they are only half of Wang Fengzao's. This is quite strange. In fact, considering that the general use of graphic loans is reported to be far higher at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century than two decades earlier, the *Yuanfu* should have a higher number of them. The reason probably lies in Yan Fu's style: in fact, it has been reported that Yan Fu was in favour of the usage of native, archaic terms, and strongly against the usage of barbarisms, among which the Japanese

loans. Thus, the few terms employed by Yan Fu must have been so embedded in Chinese lexicon that he could not do without them.

### 4.3. Semantic, structural and phrasal calques

Even if, at first glance, in the *Fuguoce* the main pattern of constructing neologisms is morpho-syntactic imitation (structural calques and phrasal calques: 30%), the two patterns taken alone do not compare with the percentage of semantic calques (18% structural calques, 12% phrasal calques, 25% semantic calques).

It may be concluded accordingly that, in the prospect of the clearest translation, a semantic calque turned out to be clearer than a structural calque, because a semantic calque is a word already existing in the native lexicon.

Structural and phrasal calques are nevertheless identified quite frequently. In this regard, it must be remembered that Wang Fengzao was the first to deal specifically and systematically with political economy; therefore, he had to create the entire economic lexicon; when a term could not be translated using already existing terms, the calque was a very productive pattern of coinage of neologisms.

In the *Yuanfu*, there are only 9% semantic calques, i.e. already existing words, but 28% structural calques and 20% phrasal calques, all new formations.

In Yan Fu's mind, the matter of political economy was probably so new that it needed brand new terms; for this reason, there are just a few semantic calques, while the majority are structural and phrasal calques. Moreover, he did not aim to be clear, he just tried to make his readers feel the deep difference between old Chinese tradition and new Western concepts, even by using obscure neologisms.

### 4.4. Semicalques, native neologisms and native words

Autochthonous origin has the highest importance in these three kinds of words, because here the author chooses an exact native equivalent for the foreign term (native word), invents a completely new term with no resemblance to the structure or the etymology of the foreign term (native neologism), or simply takes inspiration from it but then alters it slightly (semicalque).

Yan Fu had 16% semicalques, nearly one-fourth more than Wang Fengzao (13%); whereas Wang Fengzao chose native neologisms in a percentage of 12%, one-fourth more than Yan Fu (9%) and more than the double in native words (respectively 17% and 8%). The difference in native words is sharp: 17% in the *Fuguoce* against 8% in the *Yuanfu*.



Wang Fengzao clearly preferred motivated to unmotivated terms. A native neologism, and mostly a native word, maybe was easier to grasp than a semicalque. By contrast, Yan Fu gives the impression of pursuing the new: semicalques were preferable to native neologisms and native words for their newness.

## **5. General profile of the readers and of their influence on the translation work**

Looking at all the results of the lexicological analysis of the two texts examined and of the historical survey about the environment of two translators, it is now possible to sum up the connections between the readers and the terminological work of the translators.

The readers of Wang Fengzao's *Fuguoce* were future diplomats, officials and government translators and interpreters. In order to prepare themselves for these tasks, they needed easy and clear textbooks in order to pick up the essentials of Western culture. Wang Fengzao wanted to provide them with the tools of Western political economy. In his mind the new terminology had to be as true as possible to the content of the text he translated. Wang Fengzao and his readers surely did not feel a personal urgency for changing China. They had in mind the convenience of mastering both material and mental Western instruments, and through them overcoming the technological gap, recovering the status of Kingdom of the Middle.

The readers of Yan Fu were young scholars, bureaucrats and intellectuals, quite dissatisfied with the tradition and looking for new systems of organization for the State and society.

Yan Fu's translation of the *Wealth of Nations* was aimed accordingly not at explaining Western economics for explanation's sake, but at exhibiting the virtue of Europe (and mostly of England); the author wanted to show his readers England's wealth and power, which allowed it to dominate the world and which China had been striving for in the previous fifty years, but still lacked at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The lexical choices of Yan Fu express the difference between the old, 'rotten' Chinese traditions and good Western customs. In short, while Wang Fengzao chose the clearest words, Yan Fu chose the most expressive ones. The phonetic loans evoke the sounds and the atmosphere of the West, while the other patterns of coinage provide the newest word the author could think of, simply to deepen the difference between Chinese tradition, to be abandoned, and Western tradition, which was proving to be vital and successful.

## 6. Conclusions

In this paper, I have reported on the results of the analysis of the neologisms in two Chinese translations and information about their readership. The object has been to provide all necessary data to understand not only how these loanwords originated but also why they were used. The lexical data have been explained in the light of relevant historical background information.

The lexical data and the historical factors highlighted in this enquiry are valid for an analysis of the development of the terminology of political economy in the last two decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The results show that in that period, when the first two Chinese essays on political economy appeared, mostly from 1895 onwards, the coinage of terminologies in China was heavily influenced by the political expectations of the users.

It is highly likely that other domain specific lexicons had different patterns of generation and development. In fact, some scientific disciplines were introduced in China long before the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and their lexicon, at that time, was quite established; on the other hand some other specific lexicons were imported after the critical date of 1895. The combined interpretation of lexicological data and historical data can reveal whether the creation of these lexicons was influenced by the profile of the users as well, and whether the main notions of these domains and their acceptance were manipulated by later readers.

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