

The Concepts of Politics and the Politics of Concepts: Translating Political Terminologies during the Fall of the Chinese Empire

As scholars become increasingly interested in the long-term influence of empires on the social life and institutions of (ex-) colonies and post-imperial metropolises, a usually ignored aspect is knowledge. Along with the fall of empires and the independence of successor states comes the shift of epistemes and discourses (Foucault 2006). One of the most critical issues in the communication of knowledge between colonies and metropolises is translation (Robinson 2016). Although sociologists have delved into the cultural impact of empires on colonies (Connell 1998), the research on translation from the perspective of the sociology of empire is still insufficient.

The sociology of translation primarily analyzes the social institutions and coordinated activities of producing a translated work and the meaning-making in this process. However, the competition between different translations and the political significance of such competition remain largely unexamined. Drawing on political sociologists' work on ideas and institutions and studies on idea diffusion in the sociology of science and knowledge, our study aims to explain how the meanings and contexts of these newly introduced political concepts evolved and explore why certain translations prevailed over others from 1840 to 1937 in China, an era characterized by the invasion of foreign imperial powers, the collapse of Chinese empire, and the formation of a new Chinese state. Combining interpretive historical analysis with computational methods to scrutinize texts from over 50,000 newspaper pages and books cataloged in the National Index to Chinese Newspapers & Periodicals (*Quan Guo Bao Kan Suo Yin*), our preliminary research identifies five approaches for translating new terms, compares the relative popularity of different translations of a same concept in different periods, explore the changing meanings of these political terms, and examine the social origin and political consequences of translating political concepts in an unsettled time. In the following, we will briefly go over the literature that constitutes our theoretical framework, and explain our methodology.

1. Translation: a social activity, political action, or idea diffusion?

Translation became a research subject for sociology in the late 1990s and early 2000s. At early stages, when sociologists study the institutions and activities of translation, they usually adopt a Bourdieusian perspective, analyzing literary fields and translators' habitus (Heilbron and Sapiro 2007). These works explain how translators accumulate symbolic capital, how their status shapes the work they translated, and how they navigate multiple fields, be it national or international, market or literary (Sapiro 2014). In parallel with the distinction between the sociology of culture and cultural sociology (Alexander 2003), whereas these early works take translation as a cultural activity that is to be explained by structural or material forces, recent works, by contrast, put meaning at the center and analyze how meaning-making is reflected in and influences translations. Foregrounding the context of globalization, scholars are increasingly interested in exploring the role of translation activities in the collision of global culture and local meanings (Kuipers 2015; Bielsa 2014; 2016; 2022; Jijon 2019;

Angermeyer 2022; Dulley 2022). Except for a few cases (Dulley 2022)¹, scholars are generally interested in translators and translated works, rather than concepts or terminologies. In addition, they did not explain why, for the same word, some translations become more popular than others. To explain this question, we need to inquire about the theories of ideas in sociology of science and political sociology.

Translation could be understood as the diffusion of ideas, a process that scholars of science and technology studies are interested in. Using hyperbolic embeddings to analyze the interplay between social structures and the diffusion of ideas, Li, Wu, and Evans (2020) demonstrate how social centralization within scientific networks leads to semantic convergence. Keuchenius and her colleagues' study integrates computational and interpretative methods to examine the diffusion of Granovetter's Strength of Weak Ties hypothesis, revealing how scientific ideas undergo transformation and adaptation across different scholarly communities (Keuchenius, Tornberg, and Uitermark 2021). Cheng et al.'s (2023) study explores the diffusion of new ideas in science, emphasizing the dual influence of social prominence and intellectual coherence on their widespread adoption. Other students, although do not directly refer to Latour's theory in their works, also analyze the social factors that enable and constrain the diffusion of new ideas in the scientific community (Goldberg and Stein 2018; Deichmann et al. 2020; Basov, de Nooy, and Nenko 2021; Stephens and Cummings 2021; Leahey, Lee, and Funk 2023). When a political term is translated, a new idea is also brought to a political community, so the abovementioned studies provide us with methodological tools to examine their popularities. However, political terminologies are different from scientific ideas because they are more sensitive to social dynamics and potentially able to bring political consequences. To address these questions, we must examine political sociological studies of ideas.

Political sociologists and political scientists define ideas as "casual beliefs" that are produced by cognition, and they build connections between things and people, guiding actions (Béland and Cox 2011). Ideas within policy debates can be classified into foreground elements like prescriptions and background assumptions (Campbell 1998). They function either as resources or motivators (Anderson 2013), and ideational power can be used to persuade, impose, or structure thoughts (Carstensen and Schmidt 2016). Although they phrase differently, we can synthesize their theories as revealing the duality of idea as both a resource that actors can strategically deploy to achieve their aims and a driving force that motivates or constrains elite behaviors. The making of welfare policies in the 19th and 20th centuries is usually the empirical case where scholars apply ideational analysis to explain the formation, transformation, and divergent development paths of policies and policy proposals (Steinmetz 2001; Béland and Hacker 2004; Somers and Block 2005; Mehta 2013; Anderson 2013; 2018). On one hand, existing literature provides us with a comprehensive analysis of the force of ideas in shaping political institutions. On the other hand, these studies mainly choose countries in the West as their case. When it comes to the long history of the struggle between imperialist forces and national independence movements, foreign concepts

¹ Exception may also include Hallett, Stapleton, and Sauder's (2019) article on public ideas, if we consider the transfer of academic ideas to public domains as a case of translation.

and ideas and local institutions and cultures have been in a state of chronic tension, which provides us with cases to examine the complex interplays between ideas and institutions in the long-durée.

Historical sociologists offer insights to explain this issue, by, for instance, analyzing the long-term influence of colonial policies and practices on the state form and capacity of newly independent nations, including their tax capacity (Alexopoulou and Juif 2017), military power (Hariri 2019), and legal and political structure (Bertelsen 2016). When scholars compare one empire's multiple colonies, they usually try to explain why, under the rule of the same empire, different colonies had different policies and state capacities after their independence. The answers they find include state-society relations (Charrad 2001) and the types of imperial rule (Lange 2009). In addition, comparative studies reveal how different empires' colonial policies brought different legacies (Go 2011; Ali et al. 2019; Schmitt and Shriwise 2023), and analyze trans-imperial and cross-colonial influences (Go 2002). Post-imperial theory, by contrast, explores the enduring power of imperial culture in post-imperial metropolises (Hell and Steinmetz 2014). These theories can be applied to explain the diffusion of political ideas in late imperial and early republican China when new concepts were imported, translated, interpreted, and contested.

2. China from 1840 to 1937: the fall of an empire and the rise of a nation-state

What makes China a unique case is that, since 1840 in the late Qing dynasty, China has been under the influence of multiple foreign imperial forces and, to some extent, acquired its inter-imperiality (Parvulescu and Boatcă 2022). But unlike Parvulescu and Boatcă's case of Transylvanian, in China, each foreign empire only directly controlled a relatively small concession as their colonies and colonized China in a coordinated and competitive way by, for instance, enforcing the Qing government to give privileges to their citizens. Subsequently, late Qing and early republican China was best understood as an arena of empires where various imperial forces competed with each other and fostered their own proxies in a bid to establish dominance over China or at least to protect their interests. In addition, Qing emperors saw themselves as the successor of the 2000-year Chinese empire, and, at least partly, the Qing dynasty inherited its imperial institution and culture. For instance, the concept of uniformity, an inherent component of Chinese imperial ideology, was upheld by the Qing dynasty, which makes it different from other empires that were more or less empires of difference (Barkey 2008). Usually, it was when the imperial power declined that witnessed the development of local autonomy and regionalism, as well as the diversification of culture and ideology. Late Qing and early Republican China was an example of such an unsettled period. Thus, in this paper, this case will be suitable for us to examine the competition between and diffusion of different translations of modern political terminologies, and the evolution of their meanings in the transition from imperial to post-imperial period.

Historians and linguistics have explored the significant transformation of the Chinese lexicon influenced by socio-political changes and Western impact, marking the evolution of modern Chinese towards becoming a national language during the mid-

19th to late 19th centuries (Masini 1993). Later, scholars not only examined the linguistic innovations and development of new vocabulary to accommodate Western concepts during the late Qing dynasty but also underscored that these lexical changes were a reflection of broader social transformations (Lackner, Amelung, and Kurtz 2001). Shin (2010) specifically studied how the shared use of Chinese characters facilitated vocabulary exchange between China and Japan. These historical studies reveal the basic patterns of vocabulary translation and idea dissemination but lack specific analysis of the changes in the frequency of vocabulary usage. Jin and Liu (2009) meticulously analyze the evolution of Western political concepts in China from 1830 to 1930, leveraging a database containing 120 million characters, to reveal how these ideas significantly influenced 20th-century Chinese political thought and ideology. However, they do not distinguish between the popularity trends of concepts in mass media (primarily newspapers) and academic works (primarily books), nor do they systematically compare the evolution of the meanings of terms. This will be the starting point of our study.

3. Methodology

We select 25 key concepts based on previous works on the translation and evolution of Western-imported ideas by historians (Jin and Liu 2009; Lackner, Amelung, and Kurtz 2001; Masini 1993; Shen 2010). Our selection is grounded in a comprehensive understanding of the era, highlighting five primary translation strategies for Western-imported terms: (1) **Matching** the imported term with an existing Chinese word, (2) **Reinventing** an existing word to imbue it with the imported term's meaning, (3) **Inventing** a new term, (4) **Transcribing** from Japanese, mostly by directly taking the Chinese character(s) in a Japanese term or the Japanese translation of a Western term, and (5) Direct **transliteration**, representing the pronunciation of the Western term (often English) with phonetically similar Chinese characters. The application of these strategies across the 25 selected terms is detailed in Table 1. Based on these 25 terms, our analytical plan includes two parts.

First, we will survey over 50,000 newspaper pages and books cataloged in the National Index to Chinese Newspapers & Periodicals using text scrapping techniques. For each translation method outlined in Table 1, we record the article or book title, author's name, publication date, and the immediate context of the term's occurrence (either the entire sentence or the immediate 10 words before and after it, whichever is longer). Preliminary descriptive statistical analyses will be conducted to identify any discernible patterns in the usage and relationship between different translation methodologies. We hypothesize that: (1a) transliterations will diminish over time, (1b) the reinventing and transcription from Japanese methods will be most prevalent during the reform and revolutionary years (1905-1912), and (1c) terms originally from classical Chinese, whether through matching or reinventing, will gradually be supplanted by newly invented terms.

For our principal analysis, we employ word embeddings, a computational technique based on vector space modeling, to quantitatively examine cultural and social patterns through the semantic representation of words in a high-dimensional space (Mikolov et

al. 2013). This method assigns a vector to each word, encapsulating its meaning based on the context of its occurrences across the corpus (Nelson 2021). Semantic similarity or dissimilarity between pairs or groups of words can then be assessed, typically using the cosine similarity scores (Kozlowski, Taddy, and Evans 2019). Using word embedding analysis, we will examine the following aspects:

- Semantic similarity between different translations of the same term (for example, between *guozu* 国族 and *minzu* 民族, both translations of “nation”).
- Pattern of evolution or change in the meaning of each term, as indicated by their semantic association.

We propose that the combination of findings on these two aspects will allow us to draw conclusions about the changing meanings of these terms. If we observe, for instance, that one translation a) becomes predominant over time and b) is semantically linked with a distinct set of other words, we can infer that the term’s underlying meaning has gone through a significant, substantive shift. This change may reflect a deliberate, possibly strategic decision by authors to reshape the discursive field through their choice of terminology.

Recent research advancement on idea diffusion shows that this process is influenced by the status of the generator, the social network of idea diffusers, and the interconnectedness between new ideas and extant ideas (Zhou 2022; Cheng et al. 2023). Accordingly, we further hypothesize that: (2) the more socially prominent the translators or adopters of a new political concept, the more widely the translation will diffuse, (3) the more socially extensive its reach among disparate ideological communities, the more widely the translation will diffuse, (4a) from 1840 to 1895², translations that are linked with conservative ideas or concepts will enjoy greater diffusion and acceptance, (4b) from 1896 to 1910³, translations that are linked with reformist ideas or concepts will enjoy greater diffusion and acceptance, (4c) from 1911 to 1927⁴, translations that are linked with revolutionary ideas or concepts will enjoy greater diffusion and acceptance, and (4d) from 1928 to 1937, translations that are linked with conservative or reformist ideas or concepts will enjoy greater diffusion and acceptance.

To measure the status of translators and adopters, we will use BDRC (*Biographical Dictionary of Republican China*) Interpersonal Network Data (Armand and Henriot 2020b). The network contains two types of nodes: bio-nodes (objects of a biography) and nodes (individuals mentioned in a biography). We will use network analysis to measure the translator’s or adopter’s betweenness centrality, a strong indicator of an individual’s influence within a network, as it reflects their ability to facilitate or control the flow of information. To label their ideological orientation, we will use BDRC Institutional Affiliation Network Data (Armand and Henriot 2020a).

² In 1895, the Qing dynasty was defeated by the Empire of Japan in the First Sino-Japanese War, making the Chinese elite realize the necessity of political reform by establishing a constitutional government.

³ In 1911, in the list of members for the first responsible cabinet of the Qing Dynasty, half were from the Qing imperial family and Manchus. The constitutionalists were largely disappointed and dissatisfied with this, believing that the Qing government lacked sincere intentions to implement constitutionalism, and thus gradually sympathized with and leaned towards revolution.

⁴ In 1927, The Nationalist Party of China purged Communist Party members from within its ranks. After formally unifying the country in 1928, the Nationalist Party held power and turned against communism and revolution.

	Matching	Reinventing	Inventing	Transcribing from Japanese	Transliteration
World	天下、万国	世界			
Individual	己	个人		私	
Society	群	社会		社会	
Nation		国族	国族	民族	哪逊
State	邦国	国家			
States	万国、万邦				
Democracy		民主、民政			德谟克拉西
Republic				共和、众政	
Economy		经济	计学、理财、富国		伊哥挪谜
Ideology	意理		意底（缔）牢结	意识形态	意德沃罗基
Science		格致、博物		科学	赛因斯
Revolution	革命、造反	改革、维新	改良	革命	
Rights		权利	民直、天直		
Colonize			属地、新埠	殖民、植民	
Empire	天下、国		皇之国、天下国家	帝国	
Citizen	邑人、市人				
Corporation			法人、公司	会社	
Constitutionalism			立宪政体		
Civilization	教化、感化	文明			
Polity		国体、政体			
President		头人、酋长、国主、统领	总统		伯理玺天德
Foreigner	夷、洋		外国人		
Liberty		自由	自主之权		
Freedom		自主	自主之事		
Class	等		阶级		

Table 1. Translation methods of 25 concepts

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