Conference interpreting in mainland China

An overview of the development of conference interpreting in the world's largest developing country, and a glance at the joys - and challenges - of working as conference interpreters in a rapidly changing China.

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China is in the midst of an exciting transformation that is opening her doors ever wider to the outside world. As international contacts multiply, growing demand for high-quality interpretation is creating the conditions for the emergence of conference interpreting as a true profession. In this article, we give an overview of the development of conference interpreting in the world's largest developing country, and describe the joys - and challenges - of working as conference interpreters in a rapidly changing China.

Introduction

With Beijing's selection as host city for the 2008 Olympics and WTO accession just around the corner, China's level of international engagement has reached an unprecedented height as a result of more than two decades of reform and opening. In the context of ever-increasing international contacts in both the public and private sectors, professional conference interpreters are becoming valued for their critical role in ensuring effective and successful communication across the linguistic and cultural divide. Higher demands are being placed on quality, professional credentials are becoming recognised - and even required, new and more diverse training programmes are being offered, and increasing numbers of colleagues are becoming full- or part-time freelances in a rapidly maturing and diversifying conference market.

I. The beginnings

The profession of conference interpreting was formally introduced into China with the establishment of the United Nations Training Programme for Interpreters and Translators in 1979. Set up as a joint project between the UN and the Chinese government to train professionals for the United Nations, the programme turned out 98 interpreters (out of 217 graduates), many of whom are now working for the UN and other international organisations, some for the Chinese government, and a few as full-time freelances.

In 1994, the UN programme was reconstituted as the Graduate School of Translation and Interpretation of Beijing Foreign Studies University ("Bei Wai"). It continues to offer a two-year course of professional training in conference interpreting at the MA level, but its graduates (32 in conference interpreting out of 57 to date) are now responsible for securing their own employment. Most become staff interpreters or officers in government ministries and agencies, with a minority taking positions in the private sector; it is still rare for a graduate to go freelance.
To date, the majority of China's professional interpreters have been trained at Bei Wai, but these make up only a fraction of the large number of practitioners, including government officers and corporate personnel who perform interpretation duties.

II. Interpreting in the government system

The government is by far the largest user of interpretation (and translation) at the start of the 21st century, and mostly meets its needs in-house. Almost every government entity, from the central government to the provinces and municipalities, and from ministries to agencies to state-owned enterprises, has a unit specifically in charge of dealing with the "non-Chinese" world. Various units are known as the Foreign Affairs Office, Department of International Cooperation, Office of Foreign Economic and Trade Relations, etc., these units employ officers with foreign language degrees who provide, inter alia, T&I services for their institution.

In most cases, there is no distinction between interpretation and translation responsibilities, and the majority of these officers have no specific training but learn their skills on the job. In addition to T&I, these "foreign-affairs personnel" tend to have other responsibilities, and are regarded more as government officers than T&I professionals. Interpreting and translating are considered lower-level duties, and it is rare to make them a career. As officers are promoted to increasing levels of responsibility, T&I duties are taken over by the incoming generation. (Both China's current foreign minister and ambassador to the United States, for example, began their careers as interpreters in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.)

This model even applies to a number of Chinese booths in the UN system. Government ministries are designated official counterparts, and hence Chinese interpretation providers when interpreters are recruited from mainland China, to various UN agencies. For example, the Ministry of Agriculture is responsible for FAO, the Ministry of Labour and Social Security for ILO, the Ministry of Health for WHO, etc. When there is a need for Chinese interpreters to be sent from China to a UN conference organised by one of these agencies, in-house teams are often dispatched from the foreign-affairs unit of the counterpart ministry in China. When more people are needed for a larger conference, these teams can be put on loan to each other.

III. The emergence of freelance professionals

Against this background, the recent move of credentialed, experienced conference interpreters to become (full- or part-time) freelances is significant for the Chinese interpreting community, representing an initial breakaway from the official monopoly and a step toward the establishment of conference interpreting as an independent profession.

The trail-blazer was ZHANG Wei, a graduate of the UN programme on staff at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who decided in 1993 to quit the official establishment and test the waters as an independent professional. Zhang was soon followed by others, who joined him either by leaving their in-house positions or by working with him and other colleagues to build up the Chinese market in other innovative ways (see section VI below).

Freelance professionals are now becoming a strong competitor and even a preferred service-provider for many users, especially in the private market sector. As most freelances have had formal professional training and years of experience working in-house, they are more valued by users who have come to appreciate the importance of high-quality interpretation. For those who can compete in the freelance market, there is strong incentive to do so, since a day's fees are double (or more than double) a month's salary for a government employee, and further growth in the ranks of freelances can be expected.

While the monopoly is being broken, though, it would be difficult for a freelance to get started
without having some government background. Hence, the most successful full-time freelances today tend to be former government employees, and most professionally trained interpreters still turn to the government for their first job, rather than attempting to go freelance.

The Chinese counterpart ministries continue to be the only recruiters for their respective UN agencies. They are now more open to recruiting freelances in addition to their own in-house teams, but freelances recruited through the ministries are deemed to have been seconded by the government, and work under a separate agreement. Outside the ministry system, however, freelances have been recruited directly by the UN in their independent professional capacity, which is a very encouraging and welcome development. As China's economy grows and with further political and social reforms, freelances will only stand to profit from a more open, transparent, and competitive environment, and hence expanded job opportunities.

IV. The conference market

Before the 1990s, conferences tended to be government-organised, and topics were more macro than micro, more policy-oriented than operational, and more general than technical. The interpreters were either free labour supplied in-house or paid only nominal fees if borrowed from other institutions. Conference interpreting, and the need for high-quality professionals, was a new concept to many conference organisers, let alone the general public.

The beginning of real growth in the Chinese conference market came in the 1990s. Cities in China, particularly Beijing and Shanghai, became increasingly popular venues for international meetings. The UN and a number of its specialised agencies, Interpol, the Fortune Global Forum, and the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, to name just a few, have brought major international conferences to these cities. This continuing trend has greatly increased the need for multi-language conference interpreting services.

The most dynamic segment of the conference market, however, is the private market sector, as the international corporate community implements aggressive business plans in a growing and more open China, and becomes increasingly active in organising conferences, seminars, and workshops as part of its government and public relations campaigns.

Significantly, the corporate world has been largely responsible for major positive changes on the demand side. As international corporations are generally more quality-focused than budget-sensitive, and their organisers are accountable for results, they are more demanding in terms of the performance of the interpreters and demonstrate more appreciation for high-quality professional services. It is in the private market sector, then, that professionalisation is most evident, as professionals prove their value by outperforming less-qualified practitioners.

The corporate world has also made the lives of conference interpreters more interesting and challenging by introducing a host of technical issues into the booths. Many IT companies, for example, have begun to choose cities in mainland China to launch their products, and conference interpreters are often the first presenters of new technologies to a public audience in Chinese.

These developments are resulting in a change in awareness about conference interpreting. As in other parts of the world not too long ago, there was a generally accepted misperception that anyone with foreign language competence should be able to interpret. Now, after much frustration with bad interpretation, more users have learnt that professional service is indispensable, and conference interpreting is increasingly regarded as a highly demanding and intellectually challenging job. In the high-end private market sector, only with professional credentials and significant experience in their resumes, and in some cases solid references as well, are interpreters able to convince conference organisers of their competence to provide this critical and increasingly less-underestimated link in their conference package.
V. Professional practices and working conditions

With the local AIIC members taking the lead, conference interpreters in China have been making relentless efforts in promoting the profession and advocating and communicating best practices. The major references for professional practice are the AIIC standards and sample contracts. While each interpreter may have his or her own variation based on these, the basics remain within the range generally acceptable to the conference interpretation community. Terms and conditions are often discussed and communicated among colleagues and adjusted accordingly, and professional fees have increased steadily to come in line with international levels.

Signing a contract has not been an established practice for interpreting services, particularly when it comes to a contract between an organisation and an interpreter in his or her personal capacity. Unless the interpreter makes a particular effort, clients may not even realise the need for a contract in the interests of both parties. Some clients can be reluctant to sign a written contract, and payment in the event of the cancellation or rescheduling of a conference, or even the last-minute substitution of interpretation personnel by the client (yes, it has happened), can be highly problematic.

The dominant conference languages are Chinese and English, and the majority of conferences are served by one two-way booth per room. The markets for interpretation between Chinese and other languages like Japanese, French, and German are much smaller. In multi-language conferences organised locally, the relay language is almost always Chinese (but could be English or French if the organiser were to choose to recruit an international team and had the financial resources to do so). In practice, for example, this means that at a conference with English, French, and Chinese, a French speaker would typically be interpreted into Chinese by a Chinese A interpreter in the Chinese/French booth, and English interpretation would then be provided via relay from Chinese by another Chinese A interpreter in the Chinese/English booth.

Technical conditions range from heaven to hell. Some top-end venues, like the international conference centres in Beijing and Shanghai and the China World Hotel in Beijing, have professionally built booths and audio-visual systems that match the best facilities internationally. At the other end of the spectrum are booths that demonstrate total ignorance of the requirements of conference interpreting. The White Swan Hotel in Guangzhou, wonderful as it may be in every other respect as a five-star hotel, has allowed only enough space for one small chair in each booth.

Mobile booths are often used as substitutes in the absence of fixed facilities. These can, however, turn out to be nothing but a windshield-like piece of plastic set on a table somewhere in the conference hall. Then there are the plywood booths with saran-wrap windows, the booths with rough-hewn glass so thick that it approximates a fish-eye lens, and the booths which are behind the stage and do not have a view of the room....

Acoustics are generally supported by standard SI equipment from well-known international manufacturers. A fact of life for the conference interpreter in China, however, is the omnipresent mobile phone and its nerve-racking disturbances. Any use of these gadgets around certain SI systems - even receiving an incoming call with the ringer turned off - creates serious distortion in the interpreters' headphones. Given that 90 out of a hundred local delegates at a product launch may have a mobile phone, and that the contraption's piercing jangle was an extra acoustic feature even at Yo-Yo Ma's concert in Beijing, this will continue to be a headache - literally - until these systems are replaced by ones that are cellular-resistant.

Despite, or perhaps because of, all these gripes about technical conditions, the equipment companies have made commendable progress in their understanding of operational requirements and in improving their technical support. Competition in the equipment market, especially at the higher end, is making equipment providers benchmark against professional standards and the needs of the
interpreters. The best policy, however, is to communicate requirements clearly to the organiser, insist on proper working conditions, and bring a mild pain-killer just in case.

VI. Intermediation and organisation: Let a hundred flowers bloom

The organisation of government and business in China has changed dramatically as a result of rapid institutional reform and the development of the private economy. In this dynamic transition period, a new market order is gradually taking shape through the interaction of multiple actors whose respective roles are presently in flux.

In the world of interpreting, this is reflected in a blurring of the lines between public and private. Some institutions offer the services of their staff interpreters on the private market, and others have even spun off their interpretation functions to become income-generating units. In other cases, staff members take paid outside assignments with the permission of their work unit, and pay out of their fees a commission to their institution, part of which may even be distributed among their colleagues who worked in-house while they were working outside.

While perhaps somewhat confusing at first glance, this trend is in keeping with the context of today's China, given that most professional interpreters are full-time staff somewhere and derive job-related benefits from that status, that the conference market is growing fast and pays what in terms relative to a government salary are extremely high fees, that local clients tend to trust a government-affiliated unit more than a private service provider and the collective more than the individual, and that such an arrangement is financially beneficial to both the work unit and the employee and helps retain staff who might otherwise leave to go fully freelance.

On the other side of the coin, there has been a proliferation of private translation agencies and English schools offering all kinds of T&I services, including simultaneous interpretation. As elsewhere in the world, these are highly variable operations in terms of professionalism and quality, but do tend to be clustered toward the lower end of the market. A number of these outfits now even offer profit-oriented training in simultaneous interpreting to the English-learning public, and enrolment seems to be high, reflecting an awareness of the fees commanded by professionals but not of the demands of professional practice. A more significant source of work for conference interpreters is the higher-end intermediation service, like international PR companies and PCOs.

No co-operative bureaux per se have yet been formed by the interpreters, for the interpreters, although, as elsewhere, freelances build up a client base and recruit one another for conferences they are working at, and a number of colleagues are becoming more active on the co-ordinating side.

VII. Training and accreditation

With the growth in demand for high-quality interpretation, the need for training in interpreting in general has expanded significantly. Training of some kind is now being offered at more institutions and in more formats than ever before.

In 2000, interpreting was made a compulsory course for all undergraduates majoring in English, and is now taught in most BA programmes as a one-year course in the fourth year. This new requirement has generated a great deal of interest in interpretation pedagogy, and many teachers called upon to teach interpreting have expressed the need for instructor training and for curriculum development at the national level.

New postgraduate programmes and courses in T&I are being offered at increasing numbers of institutions, including Xiamen University, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Beijing Language and Culture University, Beijing Second Foreign Language Institute, and Shanghai International Studies University.
Some government institutions provide internal training for new staff. The Department of Translation and Interpretation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, for example, runs a stringent in-house training programme with very good results. Other government departments have collaborated with the EU’s Joint Interpreting and Conference Service (JICS) training facility, sending their staff to Brussels for training. Most of these programmes have focused on consecutive, reflecting its continuing importance in China, and involve a combination of intensive job-focused training and on-the-job supervision and guidance. In a welcome development, it was recently announced that collaborative training with the EU will become formalised into a one-year diploma in conference interpreting at the University of International Business and Economics in Beijing beginning this year.

Until now, however, the only course of training in conference interpreting has been the two-year MA programme at Beijing Foreign Studies University ("Bei Wai"), formerly the UN programme. Now running as the Graduate School of Translation and Interpretation, the Bei Wai programme has a unique standing in China given the history of its relationship with the UN and the government. It is also the alma mater of many chief interpreters, most notably of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and hence has received much exposure within officialdom and the general public through media coverage of meetings between the Chinese leadership and their opposite numbers from other countries and of the interpreters who work for them under the public eye. For the teachers and researchers out there who would like a good reason to visit China, Bei Wai will host in May 2002 a national conference on interpreting training and research, with a focus on cognitive processes.

Despite the rapid development of conference interpreting as a profession, there seems to be no move to create a national accreditation system. Professional accreditation in China is generally a government function run through the competent line ministry. Lawyers, for example, are tested, licensed, and regulated by the Ministry of Justice. While the municipal government of Shanghai has set up a test-based accreditation scheme mainly aimed at general-level consecutive interpreters, there is no parallel in Beijing or within the state government, let alone a formal accreditation system for conference interpreters. Since there is no tradition or mechanism in China for independent professional bodies with a regulatory function, a national accreditation system seems unlikely unless the government develops an interest in regulating this new - and small - profession. Local AIIC members do underscore their membership of the international association in their public relations and marketing efforts, but are still far too few to have a well-recognised profile. The closest analogue to professional accreditation at present is a degree from Bei Wai or elsewhere and working experience in the government and/or UN system.

Conclusion

These are, then, as the saying actually does not happen to go in Chinese, most interesting times to be living and working in China as conference interpreters. There is a strong sense among colleagues that we are making important contributions to international communication and understanding in a rapidly changing China, and are, from inside our booths, facilitating international dialogue, reform, and development in a country that is home to almost a quarter of the world's population. Conference interpreters in China look forward to further exciting developments in the profession with the profound socio-economic transformation of China and heightened international engagement in both the public and private sectors. We are also looking forward to the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing, and the opportunity to work for what may be our largest audience ever.

Recommended citation format:
