

TRANSLATORS' ASSOCIATION OF CHINA

During a trip to China sponsored by the Daloon Foundation and the Tsinghua University, Beijing, Cay Dollerup paid a visit to the Translators' Association of China. The visit was mediated by Professor Luo Xianmin of Tsinghua University and he and Cay Dollerup were received by Professor Sun Chengtang, deputy secretary general of the Association and deputy editor Yang Ping of the Chinese Translators Journal. Subsequently Professor Lin Wusun, executive vice president of the TAC, proffered additional information.



Gold fish in the lake of the Botanical Garden, Beijing, China

CD: With an annual increase of 7% in the Gross Domestic Product and, consequently, foreign trade of China, one would expect the number of translators in this country to be high. How many people do you think make a living from translation and interpreting in China?

TAC: We cannot give you the exact number, but five years ago our former President Ye Shuifu, who recently passed away, estimated that the figure was 500,000 persons.

CD: How about your membership?

TAC: Within China, TAC is an umbrella organisation covering local associations which have individual members. But overseas Chinese translators and interpreters may join as corresponding individual members of TAC.

CD: How is TAC organised?

TAC: TAC covers the country's 30 provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions. TAC takes care of the interests of the local associations and the specialized associations such as the Scientific and Technological Translators Association. The local organization takes care of the interests of its members. They send representatives to the National Council of TAC. This national council has more than 200 delegates and meets every five years. It elects the executive council members. The local associations vary in size and have from a few scores to several hundred members. All of these associations pay an annual fee to the national organization. We do not keep track of their membership numbers.

CD: How do people become members of the local associations?

TAC: In order to join, applicants must, first, be graduates in a profession, be it in engineering, translation, or – since the organisation is academically oriented – lecturers or professors with a foreign language. Secondly, they must know one foreign or ethnic language in addition to Chinese – that is the official Chinese, Hanyu, not as many foreigners believe Mandarin. Thirdly, applicants must have translation experience and, often, some publications to their credit. Interpreters must have different qualifications. The local associations have to follow the overall rules of TAC.

CD: So there is no direct communication with individual members?

TAC: We keep the local associations informed and communicate information about conferences and the like. Thus we issue newsletters to the local and other affiliated associations and publish *Chinese Translators Journal*. In addition to these, we have eight academic committees covering different specialties. These are, for instance, foreign affairs translation and interpreting, literary translation, Chinese into a foreign language, science and technology, and ethnic languages translation. These committees are formed by TAC to promote academic activities such as organizing conferences and seminars and holding panels to publicize their achievements. TAC communicates directly with the committees and expects them to handle communication with individual members in their special fields.

CD: What kinds of translation do your members do?

TAC: Literary, social sciences and media translations used to dominate the field. Now scientific, technical, business, trade and even legal translation are rapidly expanding specialties. This trend is especially obvious in the Shanghai and Guangzhou areas. It must be stressed that a considerable number are concerned with translation between Hanyu Chinese, and one of the minority languages within China. This language transference is important not only nationally as all laws adopted the National People's Congress, the highest legislative body, must be rendered into the languages used by the major ethnic minorities but also because the autonomous regions for the ethnic minorities must have local laws rendered into the languages of the local ethnic minorities. There are altogether 55 minority ethnic groups in China, but it is not all that have a written language of their own.

CD: In what way would you say that things are different from the West?

TAC: Besides the academics, there are also in our ranks professionals who work in units, that is in government offices and bureaus. In these units, we still employ as a system of professional titles according to which you begin as an assistant translator. You are assessed every five years and you can then advance through the stages of translator, deputy senior translator which is the equivalent of an associate professor, to a senior translator who is then the equivalent of a full professor. Promotion is determined by a panel of senior translators assessing the quality of your work in accordance with the criteria demanded at the various levels. I believe this system is unique to China.

CD: Do you also take in interpreters and subtitlers as members?

TAC: Yes, though we do not have their numbers at our command

CD: What kind of influence does TAC have?

TAC: We are moving from a planned economy to a market economy. TAC is now an academic association, but with the introduction of market economy, it is in the process of assuming some of the functions of a trade association. At present, TAC is not empowered to issue authorisation or licenses, and it does not negotiate fees for translation work. But we are speaking out through our members and in the press for the need to have these tasks attended to for the benefit of translators and interpreters as well as for that of the entire society. With the introduction of market economy, TAC is helping the Ministry of Personnel devise a professional qualification test, training courses for beginners and continuing education for the practitioners.

CD: Thank you for telling us about the TAC and its activities. I believe that every language professional will appreciate the enormous importance of language work in China. –

- Now, if we turn towards translation activity in China in general, what would you say about developments in recent years?

TAC: In the first place, there is no doubt that today it is English-Chinese translation that dominates the market. Translation into and from other languages has declined in relative importance. After English, come Japanese, French, German, Korean, Russian, and Spanish. Although these languages are given in some kind of loose order of priority, there are great variations from one specialty to the other.

CD: In the old days, literary translation dominated. What is the picture now?

TAC: The bulk has increased, but then the relative importance of literary translation as a special field has diminished. When TAC was originally founded, the literary committee played a very important role. Today it is the foreign affairs translation and interpreting, scientific and technical as well as ethnic languages translation, translation theory and teaching and the Chinese into foreign languages which have gained importance. Late last year we founded a committee on legal translation. There is little doubt that this reflects a general change in Chinese language work: the number of translations in trade and finance, science and technology, medicine, localization of foreign media and the like is increasing prodigiously.

CD: You used to have problems with the Berne Convention which you signed, if I remember correctly, in 1994.

TAC: As far as copyright and royalties are concerned we follow the international agreements. However, since books and other publications are considerably cheaper in China, the royalties given Western authors or publishers are necessarily lower than those in the West. This issue is taken care of by other agencies than us.

CD: What is the status of translators in China?

TAC: Interpreters, especially conference interpreters, enjoy high status and pay. In their field, supply far outstrips demand. We would like to see similar rises in status and remuneration for translators. During the past year or so, TAC presented awards of honour to outstanding translators and interpreters as part of our effort to bring about public awareness of the importance of as the need for quality performance by our profession.

CD: What are the challenges and problems that you foresee for translation in China in the next few years?

TAC: The fact that China has joined the World Trade Organisation and is going to host the Olympic Games in 2008 will mean that there will be an increased demand for translation that will eventually bring Chinese legislation in line with international legislation.

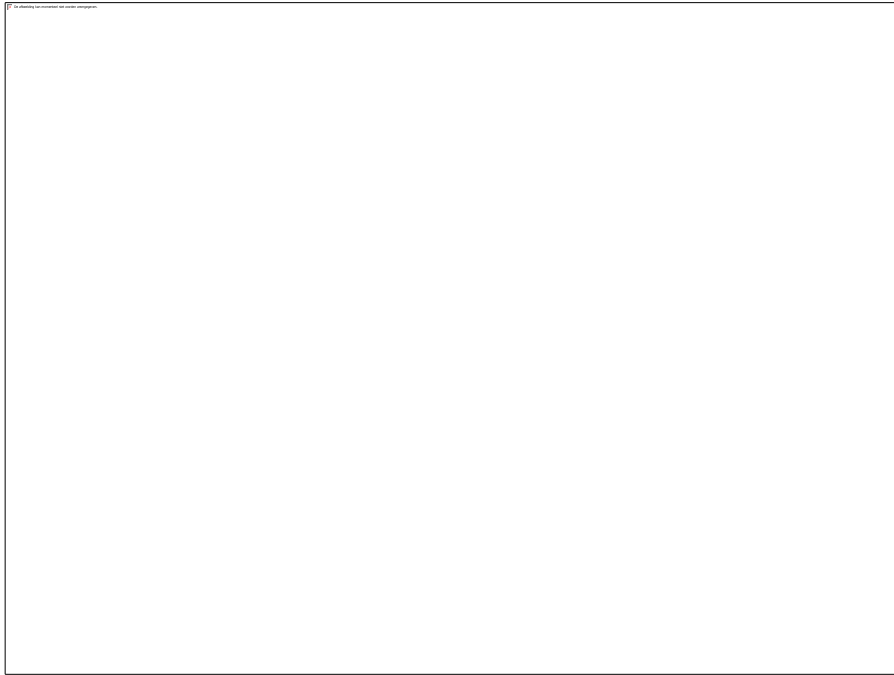
Yet, we are operating with a market economy. We believe this will lead to more translation but with a poorer quality unless a conscious effort is made to reverse the trend. In China – like in so many other countries - it is often believed that everybody who knows a foreign language can translate. Now, more and more users are aware that this is

not the case and that it is quality that counts. A number of major translation agencies have recently formed a translation service committee under the auspices of TAC to ensure some kind of quality and price control so that the mavericks who charge extraordinarily low fees because they have work done by intermediaries and students are driven out of the market and can no longer cheat the users.

As a matter of fact, there is a real dissatisfaction with the present state of market disorder among many users as well as within the ranks of translators themselves.

We are therefore happy to hear that local assessment systems are being introduced, notably in coastal provinces and cities and that there are places where there is certification of translators.

In late June 2002, the Ministry of Personnel agreed to have TAC help draw up a program to introduce a national system of certificates for translators and interpreters. This development bodes well for TAC, the Chinese translators and interpreters, and the country as a whole.



Palace garden in Nanjing