Loans from the Middle Kingdom revisited

HONGYUAN WANG

Echoes from *ET* in 1987: borrowings from Chinese into English

RECENTLY I went over the back numbers of *English Today* and re-read the article *Kāi Fàng: Loan words to the Middle Kingdom*, in the issue of October 1987, in which Elizabeth-Anne Malischewski describes how, through transliteration and adaptation, English words have been adopted into Chinese. This article attracted and kept my attention, for I have a great interest in English borrowings in Chinese.

Languages borrow from one another and these borrowings enrich the language. Take the English language for example, which has undergone tremendous changes in 1,500 years, and on the way has absorbed many exotic words to enrich and enlarge its vocabulary (Wang, 1999). Chinese is similar, and has borrowed many words form English. This borrowing has enriched and enlarged the Chinese vocabulary, in Chinese, nor can anyone deny that English has grown closer and closer to the life of the Chinese people since the 'open-door policy' was adopted in 1978 (cf. Kang, 1999).

In this article, I would like to describe how English words have continued to be adopted into Chinese, by citing many examples which were not mentioned by Malischewski more than 15 years ago. I sincerely hope that my following description might serve as a useful addition of her article.

Generally speaking, the English adoptions into Chinese happen mainly through the following ways:

Loan translation

This method of simply translating the meaning of a word from English into Chinese can be used for most English words, for which appropriate Chinese equivalents are either available or can be found. Examples of such adoptions are of two kinds:

1 simple word-for-word translation, as with:

shū ('book')
hóng ('red')
shūcài ('vegetables')
pīpíng ('criticize')
zūnjìng ('respect')

2 Complex translation and structure, as in:

mìyuè ('honeymoon') from *mì* 'honey' and *yuè* 'moon'
xiàzǎi ('download') from *xià* 'down' and *zǎi* 'load'
wǎngmín ('netizen') from *wǎng* 'net' and *mín* 'people'
diànyǐng ('film') from *diàn* 'electricity' and *yǐng* 'picture/photo'
shōuyīnjī ('radio') from *shōu* 'receive', *yīn* 'sound', *jī* 'set'
jīqìrén ('robot') from *jīqì* 'machine' and *rén* 'person'
shìguǎnyīng'ér ('test-tube baby') from *shìguǎn* 'test-tube' and *yīng'ér* 'baby'

HONGYUAN WANG was born in 1956 and educated at Xi'an University of Foreign Languages, the People's Republic of China. Currently he is a professor in the English Department of Yulin College, Shaanxi, China, teaching English lexicology and intensive reading. From 2001 to 2002 he was a government-sponsored visiting scholar at the School of Linguistics & Applied Language Studies, the University of Reading, England. He has been an EFL teacher for 21 years and has published a number of papers in China. His research interests are in English lexicology, translation and contrastive English/Chinese studies. Email <wanghongyuan@yahoo.com>

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gǔndòngxānwén ('rolling news') from *gǔndòng* 'roll' and *xīnwén* 'news'
xìnxīgāosùgōnglù ('information superhighway') from *xìnxī* 'information', *gāosù* 'high speed', and *gōnglù* 'highway')

3 Translating the meaning and transliterating the pronunciation of a borrowed word. In addition to *yōumò* ('humour'), *mótè* ('model'), *bēngdài* (bandage), and *tǎnkè* ('tank'), all mentioned by Malischewski, the following are both recent and successful, and combine translation and transliteration:

bèngjí ('bungee') from *bèng* 'bounce' and *jí* 'extreme'
hēikè ('hacker') from *hēi* 'wicked' and *kè* ('visitor')
xīpíshì ('hippies') from *xīpí* 'grinning cheekily' and *shì* 'person'
yǎsī ('IELTS', the acronym for *International English Language Testing System*) from *yǎ* 'proper', *sī* 'think'
tuōfǔ (TOEFL, the acronym for *Test of English as a Foreign Language*) from *tuō* 'rely on', *fǔ* 'good fortune'

4 Adopting and adapting the first part of an English word and the meaning of the second part, as in:

yīntèwǎng ('internet') from adapted English *yīntè* 'inter-' and Chinese *wǎng* 'net'
shāwénzhǔyì ('chauvinism') from *shāwén* 'Chauvin' and *zhǔyì* '-ism'
mótuōchē ('motorcycle') from *mótuō* 'motor' and *chē* 'cycle'
péngkè yáogǔnyuè ('punk rock') from *péngkè* 'punk' and *yáogǔnyuè* 'rock'
àolínpǐkè yùndònghuì ('Olympic Games') from *àolínpǐkè* ('Olympic') and *yùndònghuì* 'Games'

5 Transliterating the pronunciation of a word borrowed from English and adding a Chinese element which carries part of the meaning. The many examples include:

àizībìng ('Aids') from *àizī* 'Aids' and *bìng* 'disease'
nàikèxié ('Nike') from *nàikè* 'Nike' and *xié* 'shoes'
huá'ěrzīwǔ ('waltz') from *huá'ěrzǔ* 'waltz' and *wǔ* 'dance'
bǎolíngqiú ('bowling') from *bǎolǐng* 'bowling' and *qiú* 'ball'
kǎbīngqiāng ('carbine') from *kǎbīng* 'carbine' and *qiāng* 'rifle'
jípǔchē ('jeep') from *jípǔ* 'jeep' and *chē* 'automobile'
juéshìyuè ('jazz:') from *juéshì* 'jazz' and *yuè* 'dance music'
kǎjībù ('khaki') from *kǎjī* 'khaki' and *bù* 'cloth'
mǎlāsōngsàipǎo ('marathon') from *mǎlāsōng* 'marathon' and *sàipǎo* 'running race'

6 Transliterating only the pronunciation of a word borrowed from English by using characters to imitate the sounds of the lending language. It is evident that a phonetic borrowing can express concrete or even abstract concepts more concisely and effectively than a semantic borrowing, which needs a wordy explanation. The examples of this kind of borrowing are numerous:

jítā 'guitar'
dísīkē 'disco'
nílóng 'nylon'
pūkè 'poker'
léidá 'radar'
ting 'tin'
kèlóng 'clone'
mǎfēi 'morphine'
shāfā 'sofa'
sūdá 'soda'
gālí 'curry'
mángguǒ 'mango')
biànshì 'pence'
bùdīng 'pudding'
àngsī 'ounce'
nígǔdīng 'nicotine'
hǎiluòyīn 'heroin'
fánshì lín 'vaseline'
wūtuōbāng 'Utopia'

In general, loanwords from English through transliteration tend to be of no more than three syllables, in accordance with the pattern of word formation in modern Chinese (cf. Malischewski, 1987). However, a few with more than three have been accepted into the Chinese language, as for example two English medical terms transliterated with four syllables each:

āsīpǐlín aspirin
fúěrmǎlín formalin

However, another transliterated word with four syllables – *xiēsīdǐlǐ* 'hysteria' – has been in the *Contemporary Chinese Dictionary* for a long time: since 1979.

7 For a number of borrowed English words,

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both translated and transliterated forms exist in Chinese and sometimes one form tends to be replaced by the other according to public preference. For example, *yǐnqíng* is the transliterated form for 'engine', whereas *fādòngjī* is its translated form, in which *fādòng* means 'initiate' and *ji* is 'machine'. For the word *microphone*, the transliterated form is *màikèfēng* and the translated form is *huàtǒng*, in which *huà* is 'talk' and *tǒng* is 'tube-shaped object'. For the word *modern*, the transliterated form is *módéng* and the translated form is *xiàndàide*, in which *xiàndài* means 'modern' and the suffix *de* signifies an adjective. For the word *vitamin*, the transliterated form is *wéitāmìng* which has already been replaced by its translated form *wéishēngsù*: a very good translation in which *wéi* means 'maintain', *shēng* means 'life', and *sù* means 'element'. The transliterated form of 'penicillin' is *pánníxīlín*, which has now however been replaced by the now standard translated form *qīngméisù*. For *OPEC*, an acronym for 'the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries', the transliterated form *ōupèikè* is preferable to the translated form *shíyóushūchūguózūzhī* which consists of seven syllables and is obviously far too long.

In English, the word 'cool' can be used as an adjective and a verb, and has several meanings, one of which is 'very attractive, fashionable, relaxed, etc., in a way that people admire' (*Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, p.300) or 'great; excellent' (*Random House Websters' Dictionary of American English*, p.301). Although this meaning of 'cool' can be easily translated into Chinese as *tàibàngle* or *hǎojíle* ('wonderful, excellent'), it has been transliterated as *kù* ('cool'). Nowadays, young people like using this transliteration. What is more, the Chinese verb *wán* ('play') can collocate with *kù* ('cool') to mean *gǎn shímáo* ('follow the fashion'). Another typical example is the transliterated form *xiù* ('show'), which can be translated into Chinese easily as *biǎoyǎn* ('perform'), a transliteration that is very popular in China. The forms *xiǎopǐnxiù* ('theatrical sketch performance'), *xiàngshēngxiù* ('comic dialogue performance'), and *fúzhuāngxiù* ('fashion show') can now be seen everywhere in newspapers and on the internet. The Chinese verb *zuò* ('make') can go with *xiù* ('show') to form a new collocation which means 'to perform'.

8 Translating the English word in part, then keeping the rest as English without translation or transliteration to form the hybrid of English and Chinese. The parts kept as English are usually in English letters or are abbreviations of English words. Examples are. *X guāng* ('X–ray', 'guāng-ray'); *IP diànhuà* ('Internet protocol telephone', in which *diànhuà* means 'telephone'); *B chāo* ('ultrasonic diagnosis B', where *chāo* is the Chinese abbreviation of 'ultrasonic diagnosis'); and *SOS értóngcūn* ('SOS children's village': *értóngcūn* 'children's village'). So far 32 hybrid words of English and Chinese have entered the *Contemporary Chinese Dictionary* (Chinese-English edition, 2002).

In addition to the types of borrowing described above, acronyms and initialisms such as *APEC, SARS, CD-ROM, DVD, GDP, WC* and *WTO* are frequently encountered in contemporary Chinese and have more or less become part of the language. Although this direct borrowing has caused a lot of public comment (cf. Kang, 1999), it is a phenomenon which cannot be neglected. Consequently, 107 directly borrowed words have been listed in the newly-published *Contemporary Chinese Dictionary* (2002).

At present, English has been widely accepted as a utilitarian tool for science, technology, national development and modernization (cf. Cortazzi & Jin, 1996). As time goes by, Chinese will borrow more and more words from English. There is no doubt that this borrowing cannot and will not stop. It is therefore worth watching. ■

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