
ENGLISH TO CHINESE TRANSLATION: Eenie, meeny, miney, moe?

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INTRODUCTION

As the global community shrinks through state of the art communications and transportation systems and the global economy becomes more interdependent; the need to communicate with Chinese, in their native language, has increased significantly. There are many reasons for this phenomenon. Although English has become the language of international commerce and China has embraced a nation-wide 2nd language educational program to introduce English at all levels of the educational system; China's English language teaching methodology and curriculum fail to produce competent English speakers or writers. China has become the manufacturing capitol of the world and very probably the world's number one economic super power, thus making business communications with China all the more important. Communicating with China, to be most effective and avoid misunderstandings, requires communication in Mandarin.

While the Chinese study English for 16 years and memorize lists of English words and set phrases, they do not adequately comprehend common, everyday English and they are not capable of producing comprehensible oral or written English. This is due to the emphasis on English learning of dictionary definition English to the exclusion of English acquisition. Of course, there are always exceptions, but we are here discussing the most prevalent of circumstances. The exceptions usually involve "turtles" (Chinese who have studied abroad and returned to their motherland) or foreign born Chinese who immigrate to China with English as their mother tongue.

Foreigners who are not fluent in Mandarin require the assistance of translation/interpretation (TI) services.

Every Chinese university has an academic journal but not a single one will publish an article in English, not even the three major foreign studies universities that pride themselves on their English teaching programs. The Academy of Social Sciences Press also requires everything in Chinese. Should you decide to have your article translated into Chinese; it will then be edited by the journal editor and again by the party secretary assigned to the journal editor. If you have the final Chinese version translated back into English, you will probably not recognize the article and certainly it will not convey your original message.

All TI services are not created equal.

TYPES OF TI SERVICES

Google “Chinese translation services” and you will find approximately 510,000 web sites. Less than 10% of these sites are articles about translation, as opposed to advertisements for actual translation services.

Many Google hits are forum postings by freelance Chinese university students trying to make money on the side, while pursuing their educational goals. In 2003, a very impressive forum posting by two graduate translation students at a famous Shanghai university offered translation services at 100 rmb per 1,000 Chinese words. They were retained to translate 9 chapters of an English book into Chinese. They were paid a total of 20,000 rmb. Unfortunately, the Chinese publisher found the translation work so inferior that it was rejected for publication. Using unsupervised students may not be satisfactory for publication purposes but may be adequate for non-technical business communications.

Famous Chinese professors at famous TI universities also offer TI services. The cost can be as high as 600 rmb per 1,000 Chinese words and the time for completion can be very long due to the professor’s workload. However, the final work product is usually of publishable quality.

Private TI companies fall into two main categories: those located in China and those located outside China. Some are ISO9001 registered companies that conform to the European Standard BS EN 15038 and some are not. For TI companies located inside China, translation costs run from 100 rmb per 1,000 Chinese words to 300 rmb per 1,000 Chinese words. For TI companies located outside China, the cost, quoted in US dollars, can run from \$23 (161 rmb) to \$68 (476 rmb) per 1,000 Chinese words.

Some TI companies claim to have expertise in technical, engineering, law, medical and other specialty areas such as dubbing, book translations etc.

QUOTE REQUESTED

The following quote request was sent to TI companies inside and outside China:

Gentlemen:

I require an English to Chinese translation of a major academic paper. The paper can be viewed in two files at:

<http://www.usingenglish.com/esl-in-china/holistic-english-1.pdf>

<http://www.usingenglish.com/esl-in-china/holistic-english-2.pdf>

There are approximately 40,500 English words.

Please communicate with me as soon as possible regarding fees and completion time.

Thank you.

The following responses were received from TI COMPANIES INSIDE CHINA: *(Grammatical and punctuation errors are bracketed and italicized)*

Company A

[NOTED AND] THANKS FOR YOUR EMAIL!

[PLS] CHECK OUR QUTATION AS BELOW:

MAJOR ACADEMIC PAPER
ENGLISH TO CHINESE
40500 ENGLISH WORDS = ABOUT 80,000 CHINESE WORDS
UNIT PRICE: RMB110/1,000 CHINESE WORDS
[ABOUT] FEES *[IS]*: *[RMB8,800]*

COMPLETION TIME: ABOUT 13-15 DAYS AFTER YOU *[CONFIRMED]* ALL THE DETAILS.(WE CAN ADJUST THE TIME ACCORDING YOUR *[REQUIRE]*)

[PLS] FEEL FREE TO *[CONTACT WITH US]* IF YOU HAVE ANY *[QUESTION]*.

AND KINDLY *[PLS]* ADVISE YOUR CONTACT DETAILS THEN WE *[CAN EASY]* TO CONTACT WITH YOU TO TALK ABOUT THE DETAILS.

Company B

Thank you so much for writing to us about translation of the paper. We are *[sorry for late reply]* as your mail arrived last weekend. Hopefully it is not too late for us to contact you now.

Regarding the fee and time needed, we would like to quote you a total price of *[RMB9,000.00]* and we could get the translation back to you next Monday or a little bit earlier if you really need it urgently.

As a professional translation service supplier, we always do our very best to provide clients with translation service of superior quality and value and try our best to achieve excellence in clients' satisfaction.

Once again, we thank you for your inquiry and look forward to hearing from you soon.

Should you have any question, please feel free to [give us a shout, and we'll be there immediately]. To know more about us, please visit our homepage at

Company C

Good [morning!Happy] to [contact with you]!

Please check the attached quotation and our company [profile,any] question please let me [know, thanks]!

单位(Unit):RMB							
NO.	原语种 (Source Language)	目标语种 (Target Language)	价格 (Price)	预计总量 (Estimated Quantity)	预计总费用 (Estimated Fee)	交付时间 (Time of delivery)	备注 (note)
1	英语 (English)	中文 (Chinese)	300元/千中文 (RMB 300 yuan/1000 Chinese characters)	97778中文 (97778 Chinese characters)	29333元 (RMB 29333 Yuan)	25个工作日 (within 25 working days)	home publish
2	英语 (English)	中文 (Chinese)	200元/千中文 (RMB 200 yuan/1000 Chinese characters)	97778中文 (97778 Chinese characters)	19557元 (RMB 19557 Yuan)	25个工作日 (within 25 working days)	do not publish
按照实际翻译量结算费用 (The fees should subject to the actual translation qty)							

Company D

The translation unit price for the documents attached is RMB ¥130/1000 Chinese characters and this quotation includes tax. The estimated translation fee is about RMB ¥9500. A translator in our company can finish 4000 words per day, so if you need the translation version urgently, we may arrange several translators to work together on your documents. Tell me your deadline for this translation job, Ok?

Company E

Thank you for your email and for your interest in our services.

Our rate for this project is as follows:

42,586 English words @ RMB 0.60 = RMB 25,551
 Less RMB 2,551 for the large volume involved
Total RMB 23,000

We would need three weeks to complete this project.

Kind regards,

Company F

Thank you for your enquiry.

We are [*comfortable to handle*] this translation work[,] and our regular process is translating + editing + proofreading. Each further step is accomplished by a senior editor.

The English to Simplified Chinese [*charge rate*] is [*0.55RMB*]/word, so the estimated total cost would be [*22275RMB*].

We can turn it around within 15 working days, but it is negotiable if you would [*need*] it sooner.

Please [*do*] feel free to let me know if you would like to discuss anything further, [*looking*] forward to hearing from you soon.

Company G

After checking the given material we count an amount of 40,938 words.

We charge 0.06 US\$ per word. [*Therefore will charge*] an amount of: 2,456 US\$
However, we will give you a discount of 10% which [*is :]* 245US\$
Overall our charge for this work will [*be :]* 2,211 US\$.
It will take less than 25 days to complete the translation.

The following responses were received from TI COMPANIES
OUTSIDE CHINA: (*Grammatical and punctuation errors are bracketed and italicized*)

Company H

Thank you for your message. Please send me the file so we can view it. Our rate for English into Chinese translation is \$0.23 USD/word with 10% surcharge for technical material. If you have any questions, please let me know.

Company I

Thank you for your inquiry. Here is our cost estimate for the 2 files (total word count is 42,496): \$6,374.40 US.

Translator: Native Chinese speaker, university degree in English to Chinese translation (M.A., B.A.)

We accept and provide delivery by fax, by regular mail, or by email in doc, [*txt*] and other formats.

Company J

Thank you for your email. We have read both papers. They are very fascinating. As for the fee, we charge \$68 per 1000 words. The total translation fee is US\$2754. We can get it done within a month.

Please feel free to contact me if you need further information.

FOLLOW-UP CORRESPONDANCE:

Assuming that the initial responses were form letters or cut and past letters, we selected several companies for further correspondence that would require a creative reply.

Company A

[NOTED WITH THANKS!]

ACTUALLY, THIS IS A GOOD *[IDEAR]*, BUT NOW WE ALREADY HAVE MADE THE ADVERTISEMENT *[BY ANOTHER WAY]*. AT THIS TIME, WE DON'T WANT TO DO THAT. ANYWAY, THANKS A LOT. HOPE YOU CAN *[UNDERSTANDING]*. AND IF YOU NEED THE TRANSLATION *[BUSINESS]*, WE CAN HELP YOU.

[PLS] FEEL FREE TO *[CONTACT WITH US]* IF YOU HAVE ANY QUESTION

THANKS AND BEST REGARDS

Company B

Once again, we thank you for your inquiry and look forward to hearing from you soon. Should you have any question, *[please feel free to give us a shout, and we'll be there immediately]*. To know more about us, please visit our homepage at

[Sorry for late reply] and look forward to hearing from you soon. (3rd email)

Company C

Hi, I want to clarify the quotation for you! Maybe just from the price, *[it is not exactly signal]* for you to understand it!

[I.In] our company, we have a scientific quality control process to ensure translation quality:

2. Thesis's quoted price [*vary*] with the [*request.Attached*] quotation I clarify the [different].

Please check our quotation again [with] the others, you will find [*our quotation is very preferential price*]!

Thanks and best regards!

Company D

... what's more, if you are sure the translation versions are for publication, the unit price will be more expensive: RMB ¥160 for 1000 Chinese characters because the versions for publication need more painstaking effort in translation and proofreading processes. We are professional in translation and guarantee the quality.

Thank you for your attention.

ANALYSIS

Companies A, B, C and F failed to instilled any confidence in their translation capabilities based upon the numerous grammatical and punctuation errors in their English business communications. These are professional translation companies communicating with a prospective customer. They claim to be professional and yet their business communications are very unprofessional. It would be anticipated that the lack of language competence displayed in the business solicitation correspondence would carry over into the translation work. The customer, lacking any knowledge of Mandarin, would not become aware of the translation problems until it was too late, after the damage had been done. A TI company that claims to pay attention to details but fails to pay attention to the details of its business communications is not a company to trust. Actions speak louder than words.

Company A (inside China) has not yet learned the keyboard sufficiently to realize the difference between upper and lower case characters.

Company B (inside China) has perfected the apology for “late reply.” This may foretell the future of missed deadlines, with the appropriate apology.

Companies C and D (inside China) were the only ones to point out different qualities of translation services based upon the final use of the translation. The price is higher if the final translation product will be published. The bottom line is that if you want a really professional translation, you must say so and be willing to pay more. Only company C made this fact clear in their initial bid quote correspondence.

Companies E and G (inside China) were the only companies inside China that did an actual word count of the files supplied via the internet web page.

Companies I and J (outside China) were very professional in their communications. They went so far as to actually do a word count of the files supplied via an internet web site. However, Company I stated “Translator: Native Chinese speaker, university degree in English to Chinese translation (M.A., B.A.)” A PhD would have been a better confidence builder.

Company H (outside China) asked for transmittal of the files, completely overlooking the original communication that included a web site address where the files could be read.

The companies inside China were generally cheaper than those outside China.

None of the companies claimed to be an ISO9001 registered company that conforms to the European Standard BS EN 15038. The absence of this claim constitutes a definite red flag. Inclusion would have been a good marketing tool and confidence builder. None of the companies claimed to have a PhD in translation supervise or edit the final translation product.

The original quote request letter asked for a reply “as soon as possible.” All of the companies responded within 24 hours. This could be viewed as a positive but in light of the poor quality of the responses; it seems to be indicative that there may be too many companies offering TI services.

CONCLUSION

The Chinese translation industry, particularly inside China, needs to pay more attention to the front office business end of things and their public relations effort. The industry lacks modern business management skills and projects a negative, if not incompetent, public relations image.

Obtaining translation services from a freelance service is dicey at best. However, paying a higher price is no guarantee of a higher quality translation and obtaining a low price may prove to be no bargain at all.

It is suggested that before making a final decision it would be prudent to ask each prospective company to provide a Chinese translation of one identical sample English paragraph. When all of the Chinese samples are in hand, send the Chinese samples out to a different group of companies seeking an English translation. The one that comes back closest to your original English narrows you to two companies; the one that provided the Chinese translation and the one that provided the English translation.

Although this may be a burdensome and time consuming process, it is one way to reduce your risk of a tragic and expensive misadventure.

Otherwise, just recite **“Eenie, meeny, miney, moe, catch a tiger by the toe, if he hollers, let him go, you are it!”** This is one way to accomplish random selection. As the carnival barker shouts out “Pay your money – Take your chances – Win a prize.”

POSTSCRIPT

A draft of this paper was shared with all of the TI companies involved. The Companies responded to this paper with silence, an overly defensive posture, and even agreement. One company requested permission to translate the article into Chinese to submit to a trade journal in China. One company arranged a personal meeting with the author, at the end of which the manager thanked the author for so many constructive ideas to improve their business model. One company outside China entered into an extended series of communications attacking the author and what had been written, championing and defending the TI industry to an absurdity, blurring the business of translating with the work of translating. Several companies exchanged constructive dialogue with the author that resulted in several edits of the article.

Company J (Outside China)

Thanks, Martin, for your research. I share your sentiment.