

“Transfer” XIV: 1-2 (2019), pp. 141-181. ISSN: 1886-554

TRANSLATION, “INTERNATIONAL ATHLETIC EVENT,” AND  
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS:  
A *BEGRIFFSGESCHICHTE* STUDY OF CHINESE TRANSLATIONS OF  
ΟΛΥΜΠΙΑΚΟΙ ΑΓΩΝΕΣ (“Olympic Games”) <sup>1</sup>

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Reception date: 02/02/2018; Acceptance date: 15/03/2018

This paper establishes a critical dialogue among three kinds of cross-national activities: translation, the Olympic Games, and international relations. All three activities involve interstate *amicitia*<sup>2</sup>—where *traduttore/traditore* cannot be clearly distin-

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<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank the European Institutes for Advanced Study, the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study, and the Polish Institute of Advanced Studies for their generous fellowship support which enabled me to complete this essay and other writing projects.

<sup>2</sup> Supposedly the Latin rendition of the Greek word *philia*, there is nonetheless a significant semantic difference between *amicitia* and its Greek counterpart. Both the Greek and the Latin terms are commonly rendered as “friendship” in English. But the Latin word designates strategic political association rather than genuine closeness with mutual ethical commitment. The strategic term allows the Romans to hypocritically and ruthlessly pursue their own interests in the international arena in the name of “equality” and “friendship.” As Richard Billows points out, although *amicitia* was supposedly a relationship between social equals, in reality it was rarely equal. When transferred to the arena of international relations, *amicitia* was never an equal relationship. The Romans always viewed themselves, rightly or wrongly, as the superiors in the relationship, the ones to whom gratitude and its accompanying *officium* of deference were owed. And they were quite ruthless, as well as hypocritical, in exploiting relations of *amicitia* to their advantage in pursuit of their international policies and objectives (320).

The semantic manipulations that took place in the Roman translation of the Greek term *philia* provide a good illustration of a central argument in this paper: namely that *diplomatic translation is itself an act of diplomacy*—of *subverting the authority of the source text in the guise of paying homage to it, and of pursuing a different agenda while claiming to be merely translating the original expression*. As Billows puts it, “though in outward form the Romans operated in



guished, and where amity/enmity cannot be easily set apart. My discussion of the structural similarities among these three kinds of cross-national activities intersects with my examination of the historical connections of the Olympic Games to translation and international relations.

The essay also seeks to shed new light on international relations via Translation Studies, and to demonstrate how international politics can be examined as the “politics of translation” in action.

### **Methodology: Innovations via Interdisciplinary Dialogues**

#### 1.1. Translation and International Relations (IR)

Language is not “mere words.” Language can make things happen: it is a major instrument for making or breaking relationships —be it individual relationships or international relations. Language can construct or undermine power hierarchies; it can establish relations of equality or inequality, and assert or resist domination. As IR relies heavily on language —on translation in particular— translation is necessarily the critical medium for maintaining or remaking existing power differentials. Unfortunately, translation is often “invisible” in IR scholarship. This paper provides one example of my attempts to shed new light on IR via Translation Studies,<sup>3</sup> and to demonstrate how international politics can be examined as the “politics of translation” in action. In response to Clausewitz’s observation that “war is the continuation of politics by other means,” my paper demonstrates how translation can be the continuation of both politics and war by other means.

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terms of the Greek concept of *philia*, in fact they understood *philia* in terms of their own rather different notion of *amicitia*, and applied it in a very one-sided way at that” (322).

<sup>3</sup> Other examples of my scholarship in this direction include my essays “*Translatio Temporis* and *Translatio Imperii*” and “Translation, Power Hierarchy and the Globalization of the Concept ‘Human Rights.’”



1.2. Translation and IR via Koselleck’s *Begriffsgeschichte*

While translation can open up a new horizon for examining IR, IR can help us approach translation anew by substituting the criterion of “successful” for “truthful” when evaluating translation. For IR, a good translation proves its merits not so much by being *faithful* to the source text (ST), as by being *successful*—that is, by successfully establishing the country’s desired relations with the nation of the source language. This attitude toward translation is a product of IR’s overall agenda. What matters in IR (and politics in general) is *agency* and not *fidelity*. Fidelity by default commits one to subservience; fidelity in translation is no exception. Faithfulness in translation is premised upon a prioritization of the source language above the target language (TL), and the author above the translator — binary pairings in which the first terms are active and the second *passive*. The principle of fidelity by default reduces translation to the status of a slavish messenger for the ST, always inadequate and always inferior.

*Agency* being a supreme good in IR, using IR to engage Translation Studies could help foreground the translator as an *author* rather than a mere language transcriber. The *diplomatic translator*<sup>4</sup> does not just *passively register* and “*suffer*” the semantic changes that inevitably take place as a text is rendered from the SL to the TL. Rather, s/he *actively* capitalizes upon —and manipulates— those semantic gaps in order to maintain or subvert the existing power hierarchy. This is how I use *Begriffsgeschichte* to blaze new paths for both Translation Studies and IR.

*Begriffsgeschichte*<sup>5</sup> focuses on examining the semantic history of key concepts as it intersects with social-political

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<sup>4</sup> “Diplomatic translator” is a pun, referring to both an individual who translates for a diplomatic mission, and a translator skillful at navigating and negotiating in the best interests of his party.

<sup>5</sup> For an explanation of *Begriffsgeschichte* (conceptual history) and how it can be fruitfully deployed to engage Translation Studies, please see my “*Begriffsgeschichte*, the Will to Power, and a New Politics of Translation.” *Begriffsgeschichte* examines the intersections between semantic history and

history, and emphasizes how semantic changes both reflect and effect<sup>6</sup> social-political changes. Translation—a process in which semantic changes inevitably take place—can be used to reconfigure the relations between the nations of the SL and the TL by transforming the relationship between the two languages and cultures.<sup>7</sup> Let me use two examples to illustrate this point: Zhou Enlai’s rendition of *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai*, and the West’s choice to leave the term *jihad* untranslated.

At the Geneva Convention in 1954, the late Premier Zhou Enlai actively sought to move China out of the diplomatic isolation engineered by the United States. To make friends with other countries and to introduce China to the outside world,

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social-political history. By scrutinizing the key concepts as articulated in the language of a certain country at a given time, one can gain insight into the social-political history of that country. A good example can be found in Koselleck’s study of the concept modernity. *Neuzeit*, the German term for modernity which literally means “new time,” came into existence because people started to develop a new experience of time in the modern period. The concept of modernity (*Neuzeit*) emerged because a so-called new time (*neue Zeit*) came into being (Koselleck, “Neuzeit”).

Note, however, that concepts do not merely reflect but can also effect social and political changes. In Koselleck’s words, concepts are not limited to defining given states of affairs, but can also “reach into the future. Concepts of the future became increasingly new-minted; positions that were to be secured first had to be formulated linguistically before it was possible to enter or permanently occupy them.” Some concepts register past and contemporary experiences, others generate experience and are called “concepts of expectation.” The range of possible actions are in large part determined by the concepts available. As Melvin Richter puts it, concepts “frame and restrict, augment and limit the vocabulary available to their own and later generations.” Koselleck’s analysis of “*Neuzeit*,” for instance, explores not just the conceptual preconditions for the emergence of modernity but also the transformation of the modern condition by conceptual practice.

<sup>6</sup> Not surprisingly, *Begriffsgeschichte* is closely related to *Wirkungsgeschichte* in Gadamer—one source of inspiration for Koselleck.

<sup>7</sup> New concepts allow us to envision new ways of constructing society and conducting politics. They can limit certain actions while facilitating others. What is introduced from the outside is usually more radically heterogeneous than new thoughts generated within one’s own tradition; the result of introducing new concepts through translation could thus be explosive or even revolutionary.



the Chinese delegation held a reception and showed Chinese movies. Zhou Enlai rendered the title of the film *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai* (梁山伯与祝英台)<sup>8</sup> as *The Chinese Romeo and Juliet*. *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai*—referring to the names of the two lovers in the story—is the original title of both the film and the Chinese folktale on which it was based. There are other renditions possible. The most popular translation nowadays, for example, is *The Butterfly Lovers*.<sup>9</sup> *Love Eterne* was adopted when the film was remade in Hong Kong in 1963.<sup>10</sup> The *skopos* of Zhou, however, was the neutralization of the United States’ attempt to exclude China from the world community. By connecting the Chinese play to a Shakespearean play in his translation, Zhou effected a continuity between Chinese culture and world culture, between the Chinese community and the world community.

Zhou translated the title of a Chinese classic by way of referencing a Western classic in order to reconnect China to the family of nations. The West does the exact opposite with *jihād* in order to exclude the term and its associated culture from the world community. Although “(Islamic) Holy War” was briefly used by American news in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, *jihād* became ubiquitous in American (and then European) usage not long afterwards, and “Holy War” disappeared from public discourse when referencing attacks waged by Muslims. The maintenance of *jihād* in its foreign look segregates *jihād* (and the culture associated with it) as an absolute Other that can never be integrated into the non-Muslim world. From the viewpoint of Western Islamophobics, *jihād* is untranslatable

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<sup>8</sup> This was the 1953 movie produced by the Shanghai Film Studios (上海电影制片厂).

<sup>9</sup> This is how the *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai Violin Concerto* has been rendered. *The Butterfly Lovers Violin Concerto* is perhaps the most famous Chinese musical masterpiece known and performed outside China. Composed by He Zhanhao (何占豪) and Chen Gang (陈钢), it was first performed in the Shanghai Lanxin Theater (上海兰心大戏院) on 27 May, 1959.

<sup>10</sup> This is the English rendition of the title of the film produced by the Shaw Brothers in 1963.



and should not be translated. It can never —and will never— be assimilated into “our” culture. It is a practice so vile that it needs to be forever segregated from “our” language, lest it contaminates “our” linguistic and cultural consciousness. It cannot —and should never— be translated, lest Christianity and the Western Civilization become tainted on contact.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> See my “*Begriffsgeschichte*, the Will to Power, and a New Politics of Translation” for my critique of Venuti’s ahistorical and culturally blind generalization about the “ethics of foreignization.” Foreignization is not necessarily a way of paying respect to the SL. It can also be a strategy for excluding and even demonizing the other as absolutely incommensurable with human culture.

Foreignization implies that the other is outside the reach of one’s linguistic, cultural, and moral imaginary. It can work to demonize as much as it can idealize or even idolize the other. To expropriate Aristotle’s *Politics I, 2, 1253a1-4*, the being who exists outside the *polis* —the being *foreign* to the *polis*— must be either a beast or a god. In other words, the Other absolutely incommensurable with the human order (which in reality is a willful universalization of one’s particular cultural norms and moral order) must be either the sacred or the profane.

The West’s decision to substitute *jihad* for “Islamic Holy War” is a rhetoric of demonization. By contrast, “the sacred” is at issue when Muslim enthusiasts insist on keeping the word from their own faith untranslated. For the believers, *jihad* should be kept untranslated even in their own foreign media channels because, from their viewpoint, the sacredness of *jihad* is beyond the linguistic and moral capacities of Western cultures and cannot be conveyed by any foreign language. (For similar reasons, the Jews keep YHWH untranslated, and even take away the vowels because God’s name is deemed too sacred even to be spoken.) Foreignization operates with similar effects in secular realms. Keeping the ST’s expression in its original foreign form suggests that the term is outside the linguistic-epistemic-moral horizon of the target culture. In both religious and secular contexts, foreignization underscores the incommensurability between the source and target cultures —which can work to show either deference or contempt for the other. *Guanxi* is a good example of the former, *chop suey* the latter. Non-Chinese wishing to trade in or with China must learn the secret of *guanxi*. Significantly, before China became a significant economic power, the term was typically translated into “connections.” But as China rose in its economic profile, the translated term was increasingly trumped by the untranslated one, so much so that nowadays, the term *guanxi* is ubiquitously adopted by non-Chinese trading with China —a testimony to how those wishing to trade with China need to conform to the Chinese business cultural order and etiquette, in the same way as those who believe in Christianity are expected to follow Christian practices.



The earlier translation “(Islamic) Holy War” inadvertently places it on a par with the Crusades. Using the same term “Holy War” to designate both Islamic and Christian Holy Wars render the two parallel concepts. Substituting this translation with the untranslated term *jihad* deprives the Islamic practice of any comparable ideas or rough equivalents in Western cultures. Replacing “(Islamic) Holy War” with *jihad*, in other words, relegates the Muslim term from the status of a parallel concept to the wars waged by Christians, to functioning as the latter’s counter-concept.<sup>12</sup> “(Islamic) Holy War” suggests that Islam shares something in common with the West —that is, Holy War. By contrast, *jihad* suggests that Islamic and Western civilizations are absolutely incommensurable with each other. Christian Holy War even gains in respect when “Islamic Holy War versus Christian Holy War” was substituted by “*Jihad* versus Holy War.” In the latter, *jihad* is relegated to an “absolutely Other” that cannot be assimilated into “Human Civilization.” In the binary opposition “Holy War vs. *Jihad*,” one can no longer find two kinds of “Holy War” sharing the negative and positive semantics associated with all “Holy Wars.” Rather, an absolute contrast emerges between “Holy War” and *Jihad* — between “our war which is holy” versus “yours which is evil.”

Keeping *jihad* untranslated does not just make it into a counter-concept to the Christian religious order (*Jihad* versus Holy War); it also turns *jihad* into a counter-concept of war waged by the Western secular order and all secular orders modelled after the West (*Jihad* versus War). In the binary pair “War (waged by Civilized Nations) versus *Jihad*,” the latter diacritically acquires the semantics of irrationality, barbarism, primitivism, backwardness, and the inability to separate religion and politics. Against the foil provided by “*Jihad*,” “War”

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*Chop suey*, on the other hand, carries with it the ring of “cheap, lower-class food.” In the days after the “Century of Humiliation” and before China started regaining her world prominence, *chop suey* was a metonymy for Chinese food.

<sup>12</sup> There are many other ways of pairing concepts, such as complimentary concepts, competing concepts, etc. See §1.3.



acquires the aura of being associated with rational decision carried out to defend justice or a good cause. By keeping *jihad* in its foreign look, in other words, the West excommunicates it and its associated culture from the “Human Community,” demonizing it as the Radical Evil, cutting it off totally from the West’s linguistic, epistemological, and moral horizons, and rendering it completely alien to the human moral order.<sup>13</sup> The translation choice made by the West—that is, the choice to foreignize *jihad* as much as possible—serves as an entry point to stigmatize the culture associated with it as an outcast from the Family of Nations.

In contrast to Zhou Enlai who made a Chinese classic into a parallel concept to Western classics in order to *find a place* again for China in the world community, the West foregrounds the foreignness of *jihad* and projects it as a counter-concept to human civilization as spearheaded by the West, thereby *denying it a place* in humanity’s moral, epistemological, and cultural orders. The late Chinese premier deployed the strategy of using a parallel concept in his translation to represent Chinese classics as part and parcel of world classics, and the Chinese civilization as an integral part of world civilization, thereby breaking America’s diplomatic isolation of China. By contrast, the West used the strategy of counter-concept to further divide and isolate the Islamic civilization from the rest of the world.

Meaning arises diacritically and changes according to contexts. The translation decision one makes—for example, regarding whether to render a term as a parallel or a counter-concept to the original—inevitably affects and changes the semantics of the term in both the SL and TL, as well as how the source and the target cultures are viewed and understood. My paper capitalizes on the politics and rhetoric of conceptual pairing—a key topic in *Begriffsgeschichte*—to demonstrate how translation can effect changes in the ways the source and

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<sup>13</sup> In popular consciousness in the West and even in some former colonies, the West continues to be equated with the pinnacle of human civilization.

target cultures are perceived, and bring about reconfigurations in the relations between the two nations.

1.3. Strategic Combinations of Concepts to Reshuffle International Relations—Remaking and Expanding Koselleck’s “Asym-metrical Counter-Concepts”

In order to demonstrate how translation can remake the international moral and political order, I go beyond Koselleck’s well-known idea of “asymmetrical counter-concept” due to its inadequacy for addressing the complexities of international relations (or any kind of human relationships). “Asymmetrical counter-concept” structures the human world in terms of binary opposites. This method of conceptual pairing aggrandizes the first term by denigrating the second. The famous examples provided by Koselleck are “Hellenes/barbarians,” “Christian/heathen,” and “*Übermensch/Untermensch*.” Under the influence of Carl Schmitt, Koselleck tends to approach the human world (which he calls “the historical world”) from the viewpoint of “friend versus enemy,” overlooking many other possible structures of human relationships. To account for the complexity of international *amicitia* where no clear, perpetual lines can be easily drawn between “friend” and “foe,”<sup>14</sup> I go beyond Koselleck and offer some other possibilities of conceptual pairing in order to discuss how translation can play a significant role in (the reshuffling of) IR (Cheng 2014: 199-200).

Before applying conceptual pairing to discuss translation and IR, let me first illustrate the critical role of concept combinations in diplomacy with China’s strategic performance in the founding of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). In response to America’s attempt to cast the AIIB as a counter-concept to the World Bank, the IMF, and the Asian Development Bank (with the United States,

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<sup>14</sup> In fact, the analysis of any kind of human relationship would require going beyond Koselleck’s “asymmetrical counter-concept.” Aggressive confrontation is only one of the many kinds of human interactions.

Europe, and Japan “acting on behalf of world interests”),<sup>15</sup> China reformulated the AIIB into a complementary concept to the existing architecture,<sup>16</sup> and as such re-presented China as an equally responsible player on the world stage. Even more importantly, the non-confrontational “complementary” role that China proffered to the world presented the country as eager to support and assist others to flourish —a role that contrasted favorably to the United States’ acrimonious attempts to undermine a country it deemed a potential competitor, especially when it comes to comparing which country is a more suitable world leader. The complementary concept presented by China also eased the way for European countries to apply for membership without having to commit themselves to a high-stake mutually exclusive decision of choosing “either China or the United States”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Numerous news reports describe how, “[s]ince President Xi Jinping launched the bank initiative in late 2013, the administration of US President Barack Obama has voiced misgivings about the bank’s transparency, governance and potential conflicts with existing institutions, particularly the Manila-based Asian Development Bank” (Huang).

<sup>16</sup> Beijing repeatedly declared that the AIIB would complement existing international institutions (Huang). This idea was endorsed by other prominent Western figures outside the United States. Christine Lagarde, Managing Director of the IMF, for example, publicly stated in March, 2015 that the IMF and the World Bank would be “delighted” to cooperate with the AIIB. See <http://www.bbc.com/news/business-32007090>.

<sup>17</sup> Needless to say, this has the subtle effect of creating fissures within the concept of “the West” headed by the US, displacing it with an emerging “Eurasia” headed by China. In other words, China is quietly eroding the “Old New World Order” of “the West versus the Rest” headed up by the United States in the early twentieth century, and displacing it with a “New New World Order” of “Eurasia versus the United States (and its allies)” headed up by China in the early twenty-first century.

The concept of “The West” merits some elaboration. At the roundtable “Universal History, the West, the East, and the Rest” at the Telos Conference held at the Deutsches Haus of New York University on February 14, 2014, Adrian Pabst opined that the terms East/West originated from the Cold War. I respectfully disagreed, and pointed out that “The West” became a Master Concept shortly after World War I. Prior to “the Great War,” the dominant concept was “Europe” instead. The first and second volumes of Oswald



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Spengler’s *Decline of the West*, for example, were published respectively in 1918 and 1923 rather than in the 1960s.

What is new in the concept of “The West” (in contradistinction to “Europe”) is not just the inclusion of the United States, but, more significantly, the inauguration of the United States as the leader of this “New World Order.” The shift from the concept of “Europe” to “the West” both reflects and effects *the displacement of the Old World Order of “European supremacy” by the New World Order of “U.S. supremacy.”* Even as “The West” includes Europe, it does so by reducing the Continent from being a Master Concept to a sub-concept second to the United States.

“The West” as an entity, even more than “Europe,” is a product of *geopolitical* mapping naturalized as a *geographical* designation, given that the United States is not even connected to Europe geographically; rather, the two are separated by a vast stretch of ocean, and the United States was, prior to World War I, outside the Oriental-Occidental imaginary. (That the designation of the United States as part of “the West” is geopolitical rather than “geographical” became even more evident when considering how the United States also strategically uses “the Pacific Rim” to project its influence over the eastern hemisphere. The United States’ double self-definition as both “the West” and “the Pacific Rim” is a case in point of *Begriffsgeschichte* (conceptual history) as “*Wirkungsgeschichte*” (effective history)—namely, concepts are deployed by the United States to effect both leadership over the West and hegemony over the East.)

The displacement of “Europe” by “the West” was a gradual process. The Monroe Doctrine in 1823 started displacing European with U.S. influence in the Americas. The most decisive act, however, was Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points (which he first proposed in January 1918) whose arguments for nations’ right to self-determination effectively dissolved all the major empires in Europe (Austrian-Hungarian, Prussian, and Ottoman), making way for the new “empire” of the United States to preside over “the New World Order.” In response to this new “empire,” the U.S.S.R. was created in 1922 as the alternative “empire” (supplanting the Russian Empire) that could rival the American Empire after World War I. The U.S.S.R., in other words, was the last empire (partly in Europe) that could subvert U.S. hegemony. It is not surprising that the U.S.S.R. since then has been remapped as part of “the East” rather than “Eurasia”—a move that conceptually detaches and divides the U.S.S.R. from Europe, thus facilitating the reinvention of the latter as “the West” headed by the United States *“East/West” at that point became conceptual weapons to artificially separate the U.S.S.R. from Europe despite their geographical connections, and to connect the United States to Europe despite their geographical divide.* In short, the “world map” was thoroughly redrawn, and world powers totally reshuffled, as the concept “Europe” got supplanted by the new geopolitical concept “the West.”

U.S. supremacy, which is founded on the structure of “the West versus the Rest,” is very much dependent on Europe staying together as a whole (and



### Chinese Translations of “Olympic Games” and China’s Strategic Management of International Relations

From the late nineteenth to the twentieth century, the Olympic Games were often used as a venue by the West to project and impose its power, parameters, and cultures upon the world. I examine how China progressively carved out a voice and a niche for itself in this Western-dominated event by (mis-)translating “Olympic Games.” If the Olympic Games have been seized upon by the great powers to assert themselves on the world stage, China’s strategic subversion of the Western concept of the “Olympic Games” via translation can be used as an entry point for investigating China’s diplomatic self-repositioning in international relations.

My focus is the messages China sent to other countries through the choices it made for rendering the name of this international event Ολυμπιακοί Αγώνες (Olympic Games). More specifically, I probe how China uses its “mistranslation” to speak back to the West and to strategically reposition itself on the world stage at various historical junctures. I investigate, for example, how the trumping of the “accurate” by the “wrong”

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presided over by the United States). This was why David Cameron’s promise of a 2017 referendum on Britain’s EU membership was anxiety-raising for the United States. Not surprisingly, Thomas Wright of the Brookings Institution complained that “Americans are frustrated [with Cameron’s handing out the choice to the British people of a possible “Brexit”] because they want a *strong Britain* and a *strong Europe*” (Beatty; my italics). However, far more unnerving for the United States than Britain’s “assertion of independence” is China’s “New Silk Road” which threatens to deterritorialize “the West versus the Rest” project, reterritorializing the world instead in terms of a “Eurasia versus the United States” being headed by China this round, as was what seemed to start happening when the U.K. asserted its national independence (against Western solidarity) by joining the AIIB, thereby triggering a domino effect among other European Union members—a domino effect which threatened to dissolve “Western integrity” into national competitions among different European powers as the United States found itself in an increasingly isolated position by the scramble of its major “Western allies” for a piece of the pie in the AIIB.



translation of Ολυμπιακοί Αγώνες from the 1930s to the 60s intertwined with China’s protests against imperialism during that period, how the “mistranslation” continues to be embraced after that period, and how attempts were even made via the Beijing Olympics to displace the original semantics of “Olympic Games” with the Chinese (mis-)translation —that is, by supplanting the imperialistic deep structure of the Olympics with a new moral order which China purported to bring to the Games.

“Olympic Games” in Greek is Ολυμπιακοί Αγώνες (*Olympiakoi agones*). *Agon* was a highly valorized concept in ancient Greece animating all aspects of Greek civilization including politics, tragedy, and the Olympic Games. *Agon* refers to contest, struggle, and strife, viewed positively by the Greeks as the spirit through which members of the *polis* challenged each other to excel. A game is thus “a diversion of the nature of a contest, played according to rules, and displaying in the result the superiority either in skill, strength, or good fortune of the winner or winners” (*OED*), or a “competitive activity or sport in which players contend with each other according to a set of rules” (*Free Online Dictionary*). Let me now provide a much abbreviated history of Chinese translations of *Olympiakoi agones*. The first modern Olympic Games took place in 1896. The year 1928 witnessed the first appearance of a Chinese translation in an English-Chinese Dictionary, the *Combined English-Chinese Dictionary* (综合英汉大辞典). “Olympic Games” was translated as *Alinpike jingji dahui* (阿令辟克竞技大会 The Olympic Grand Contest) —rather faithfully capturing the original Greek meaning of “games.” *Guoji yundong dahui* (国际运动大会 The Grand International Athletic Event) was suggested as a second alternative in the same dictionary. Annotations were given after those two translations, explaining the Olympic games as “再兴之近代万国运动会，仍系每四年举行一次 (the revived international athletic event; continues to be held every four years).” In the same year, *Dictionary for Chinese Education* (中国教育辞典), a far less influential dictionary, rendered



“Olympic Games” as *wangguo yundonghui* (万国运动会 International Athletic Event), with the annotation that “this is our country’s translation for the Olympic contests” (欧林比亚赛会之我国译名). In the 1930s, the most authoritative dictionaries such as *Zhonghua Encyclopedic Dictionary of Phrases* (中华百科辞典), *An Ocean of Phrases* (辞海), and *Practical Bilingual English-Chinese Dictionary* (双解实用英汉字典) offered translations more faithfully reflecting the etymology and the real meaning of “Games” in Olympic Games, such as *jingji dahui* (竞技大会 grand contest), *saihui* (赛会 showdown), or *bisaihui* (比赛会 competition). The less scholarly publications, however, translated “Games” as 运动会 (athletic event).<sup>18</sup> 1937 was the last time a major dictionary (*An Ocean of Phrases* 辞海) rendered “Games” in this “truthful” manner. After the Communist takeover, *yundonghui* (运动会 athletic event) totally replaced the more faithful translations of *jingjihui* (竞技会 contest) or *bisaihui* (比赛会 game).

#### 2.1. 1938-1970: “Olympic Athletic Event” and Various Chinese Attempts to Stand Up against Imperialism:

Setting the health-oriented *yundong* as a counter-concept to the “contest” and “recreation-oriented” Western sport was not just a Maoist adversarial posture. It also represented a legacy of anti-imperialism in China that was already strong in civil society in the pre-Communist era. It is not surprising that, while the major Chinese dictionaries up till 1937 stuck to the scholarly principle of “fidelity,” the smaller dictionaries—that is, popular sentiment—preferred the “mistranslation.” While the Olympic “Grand Contests” have been the occasion for powerful nations to scramble for glory ever since the modern revival of

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<sup>18</sup> Such publications included *The Eastern Pictorial* (东方画报, 1934), *The English-Chinese Dictionary of Definitions, Composition, Grammar, and Synonyms* (英汉求解、作文、文法、辨义四用辞典, 1936), and *World Standard English-Chinese Dictionary of Phrases* (世界标准英汉辞典, 1936).



the tradition in the midst of high imperialism,<sup>19</sup> the “unfaithful translation” provides a venue for the Chinese people to assert their difference from, and independence of, the “Western chauvinistic nationalistic and capitalistic-imperialistic competitive culture.” In contrast to the competitive overtone of *Agones* (contest), the choice of *yundonghui* (“Athletic Event”)

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<sup>19</sup> Pierre de Coubertin’s idealistic vision and good intention notwithstanding, proposals for international competitions were basically a nineteenth-century idea, and the revival of the Olympics in modern times (1896) took place in Europe’s age of high imperialism. In the second half of the nineteenth century, different empires’ attempts at monopolizing power took the form of a scramble for colonies outside the West, and the civilized guise of international events inside the Western hemisphere. Some years after the beginning of these international forums, these competitions eventually manifested in military action, and the Western Empires entered into wars—into *world wars*—to decide who was going to be the Emperor of all emperors. For further elaboration, see Alan Guttman’s *Games and Empires*, Aaron Beacom’s *International Diplomacy and the Olympic Movement*, Matthew P. Llewellyn’s *Rule Britannia*, and David Levinson and Karen Christensen’s *Encyclopedia of World Sport*.

Armies have long been using sports to hone their warrior skills and boost the fighting spirit. As early as ancient Greece, the Olympics were already held in part to prepare for war and in part to worship the gods. Dyreson analyzes the increasingly intense entwinement of sports and militarism as European nations were spurring each other on to high imperialism in the second half of the nineteenth century: “by the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, most military leaders in industrializing nation-states thought modern soldiers needed athletic competitions during the Industrial Revolution. [...] Advocates promoted [sports] both as morale-builders and means of enhancing military preparedness. [...] Other industrialized nations also employed sporting competitions to inspire martial nationalism in their armed forces. The major imperial powers of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century—Great Britain, France, and Germany—used sports to train their armies and navies. [...] (Dyreson 1998: 20). During the same period in the United States, sports were also promoted in relation to imperialist ambitions. Henry Cabot Lodge, a high-profile American politician at the turn of the twentieth century, explicitly linked sports to conquests, evident in his exhortation to Harvard University to bolster its athletic program: “The time given to athletic contests and the injuries incurred on the playing-field are part of the price which the English speaking race has paid for being world-conquerors” (Hoganson 1998: 37). The YMCA was actively involved in sports programs for the US military in World War I (Pope 1995: 435-456). In the global age, American sports-imperialism has taken on a new form. As the Canadian sports historian Geoffrey Smith observes, “In most global sport—so much of it Americanized—we behold a new and insidious form of imperialism.”



suggests an occasion for promoting health consciousness and physical exercise.

Preserving China’s distinct identity through translation is especially important when China had repeatedly been bullied by imperialist powers, and when the West had been using sports to carry out cultural colonization. Mark Dyreson points out how the colonial powers, including the United States, “used sports in efforts to impose Western styles of civilization on the peoples of Asia, Africa, and the Pacific” (Dyreson 1998: 20). Johan Galtung further elaborates that the modern Olympic Games have carried an imperial role of planting in cultures worldwide the conflict-based deep structure of modern sports as well as an attendant set of Western structures of space, time, knowledge, nature, and relationships (Galtung 1982). By way of the unfaithful translation *yundonghui* —a health-centered concept— China resisted the imperial powers’ further attempts to project, and to impose, their “power and glory” via the contest-based Games they promoted.

The Chinese populace’s preference for *yundonghui* had been prepared for by various anti-imperialism protests in China, including a nationwide anti-YMCA movement in 1922-1924 denouncing the organization for being an agent of the United States seeking to control Chinese sports and education, and to colonize Chinese culture with Christianity:

During the early 1920s, especially during the period of 1922-1924, a widespread anti-YMCA sentiment developed in China, which reflected a general push to recover national sovereignty, including control over sports and education. In July 1923, the Chinese decided to create a new organization, called the Chinese Athletic Association (*Zhonghua tiyu xiehui*), in opposition to the YMCA-dominated China Amateur Athletic Union. The YMCA was denounced as an agent of America and accused of “training running dogs of imperialism.” (Xu Guoqi 2008: 70)

Anti-imperialist sentiment ran high in the Chinese attitude toward physical exercise especially after the Mukden



Incident (also known as the Manchurian Incident) in 1931. Tang Zhijie reports:

Since the 918 Tragedy in 1931 brought about by the Japanese invasion of Manchuria, the call for a form of physical exercise appropriate for Chinese culture and circumstances ran high, so much so that Western sports were criticized for being purely recreational, distracting our youths from politics and the predicament of the nation. (Tang 2009: 59)

It was perhaps no accident that after the year 1937, even major dictionaries ceased to give the “faithful translation.” It was on July 7, 1937 that Japan launched its full-scale invasion of China—a brutal invasion that was to last eight long years, ending on September 9, 1945.

2.1.1. “Olympic Athletic Event” and Anti-Imperialism:  
“Exercising for the Nation”

The Chinese embrace of the “wrong” translation *yundonghui* (运动会 athletic event) was linked to anti-imperialism in some indirect manners also. The triumph of the “unfaithful” translation *yundonghui* over the “correct” translations *jingjihui*, *saihui*, and *bisaihui* coincided with the ubiquitous appearance of *yundong* (and related terms such as *tiyu*<sup>20</sup>) in the Chinese language at this time when “training strong bodies (*yundong*), strengthening the race, and saving the nation” (Xu Guoqi 2008: 8) were energetically promoted by both the state and civil society.

Significantly, the semantics being suppressed in the Chinese reception of translations of “Olympic Games” was not

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<sup>20</sup> The literal meaning of *tiyu* (体育) is “the cultivation of the body.” “Physical education” would be the closest idiomatic translation. The term was adopted from Japan, where it originally referred more to personal hygiene and general health than physical exercise. But when China began to embrace Western sports, both *yundong* and *tiyu* were associated with the urgent need to build a strong constitution in order to defend the nation against foreign invasion (Xu Guoqi 2008: 12).

just “competitiveness,” but also “recreation.” *Yundong*<sup>21</sup> for the Chinese from the 1930s through the Mao era was a moral duty. Exercise was not a pastime for the individual. Rather, it was the responsibility of every Chinese citizen to acquire physical fitness in order to help defend the country. After China’s repeated defeats by colonial powers, the Chinese increasingly traced one reason for their losses to the weakening of the Chinese people by opium. Under the influence of Social Darwinism, Liang Qichao tied physical fitness to national survival. Yan Fu argued in “On Strength” (March 1895) that China could stand strong again only if the Chinese people would improve their physical, intellectual, and moral stature — with physical training as the top priority (see Xu Yuanmin 1994: 13-24).<sup>22</sup> The Chinese obsession with “exercising for the state, exercising for the nation” began in the late Qing Dynasty and continued through the Nationalist to the Communist era. In a 1920 editorial, Tianjin’s influential *Dagongbao* proclaimed that “Encouraging physical training among the Chinese is critical for saving the nation and strengthening the race (*jiuguo qiangzhong*).” Likewise, *Shishiyuebao* (*Current Events Monthly*,

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<sup>21</sup> *Yundong* literally means “movement.” In classical Chinese, the term was used primarily to describe cosmic motions. It was then deployed by the Japanese in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to render “physical training” —a rendition adopted by the Chinese after the country embraced Western sports. The expression began to acquire connotations of competition and even recreation only toward the end of the 1980s when China became increasingly open to Western influence.

<sup>22</sup> Interestingly enough, Avery Brundage —the IOC president from 1952 to 1972 who considered himself an expert on Chinese culture— harks on this Chinese obsession in his “Civilization May be Saved by Athletes,” an essay written in the late 1930s: It has come to be my conviction that there was more than a coincidence between the corruption of sport and the ruin of ancient cultures .... China offers a splendid modern example pointing to the conclusions I arrive at among the ruins of Mediterranean civilizations. In this most ancient and veritable civilization- the Chinese- physical fitness and its national organization have been neglected. The highly intellectual citizens of China have allowed themselves to be plundered by their own bandits for generations. Nations which have developed physical fitness through the hardships of their environment and constant conflict, with the discipline thereby built up, have done as they pleased with China for generations”. (n.d.; quoted from Xu Guoqi 2008: 21).



an important magazine based in Nanjing)<sup>23</sup> advised the Chinese public the following: "The purpose for our advocating physical education focuses on removing national shame and supporting national survival and national renewal" (*Shishiyuebao* 9, no. 3 [October 1933]: 1). The 1930s slogans *jiuguo qiangzhong* (save our nation and strengthen our race) and *tiyu jiuguo* (strengthen the body to defend our country) were highly popular across China (Xu Guoqi 2008: 62). The idea of "training strong bodies for the nation" was rigorously promoted by all Chinese leaders regardless of their political ideologies, including Sun Yat-sen, Chiang Kai-Shek, and Mao Zedong.

This is to say, even as the Chinese adopted Western sports, they "gave them new meanings" (Xu Guoqi 2008: 28). It should come as no surprise that these new meanings also got manifested in the Chinese people's understanding of the Olympics. Thus, *yundonghui* (运动会 athletic event) soon outstripped other competing concepts such as *jingji dahui* (竞技大会 Grand Contest), *saihui* (赛会 showdown), or *bisaihui* (比赛会 competition) as the most popular translation for "Games" by a nation aspiring to health—a nation eager to be rid of the humiliating label "the Sick Man of East Asia."<sup>24</sup> This obsession became particularly strong in the wake of Japanese aggression. Lu Zhouxiang observes:

Soon after the Mukden Incident, "Training Strong Bodies for the Nation," "Save the Nation and Strengthen the Race" and "Use Sport and Physical Education to Save the Nation" became

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<sup>23</sup> Nanjing was the capital of the Nationalist government from 1927-1937.

<sup>24</sup> While the "Sick Man of Europe" was used by the Europeans to refer to the Ottoman Empire in decline, the "Sick Man of East Asia" was a self-deprecating phrase used often by Chinese intellectuals to goad their fellow countrymen into efforts of self-strengthening and self-renewal. See Zheng Zhilin's "The Earliest Record of 'The Sick Man of East Asia'" for what might be the most thorough study of the origin of this expression. China's "Sick Man of East Asia Complex" ran so deep that China's first gold medal in the 1984 Los Angeles Games was celebrated by *Xinhua she tiyu bu* in the following language: "the label of the 'sick man of East Asia' was once and for all thrown away into the Pacific Ocean" (*Cong ling dao shi wu*, 13; quoted in Xu Guoqi 2008:216).



widespread slogans. Physical education was regarded as a basic way of defense against the Japanese invasion by the nationalists, educationalists and political elites. Led by Cheng Dengke (1901-91), Head of the College of Physical Education at Nanjing Zhongyang University, educationalists and nationalists called for the implementation of the idea of “National Physical Education” in the mid-1930s. (Lu 2011: 1033)

Significantly, the “correct” translation of “Games” was basically displaced by *yundonghui* once Japan launched a full-scale invasion of China in 1937. The call to the whole nation to stand up as a strong people became all the more urgent. As Xu Guoqi notes, “not until after the long war with Japan ended in 1945 did the expression *tiyu jiuguo* [acquire fitness to save our nation] disappear from the public vocabulary” (Xu Guoqi 2008:62). Not surprisingly, *yundonghui* (运动会 athletic event) totally “usurped” the more accurate translations under the Communist leader Mao Zedong who was obsessed with creating a people with strong constitution and stamina through rigorous exercises. He had the vision of turning China into a country of fit and strong people who could effectively defend their motherland, especially against the United States and the U.S.S.R.—the two superpowers during the Cold War period. The obsession with remaking the Chinese people into a strong and healthy population dated back to Mao’s early days. The first article he published in the radical journal *New Youths* (新青年) while still a student at the Hunan First Normal College in 1917 was entitled “A Study of Physical Culture (体育之研究).” The piece called on his fellow countrymen to develop strong constitutions through regular exercise so that they could better serve their country. Mao continued this exhortation to his people in his later life, including the calligraphic inscription he authored as the Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party for the All-China Sports Federation (中华全国体育总会成立大会) on June 10, 1952: “Promote Physical Exercise; Strengthen Our People’s Constitution (发展体育运动，增强人民体质).” Not surprisingly, within less than a month after the founding of the



People's Republic of China in 1949, the central government convened a national congress, which became the All-China Sports Federation (ACSF), and called for the development of “a national, scientific, and popular new program of athletics.” Maoist China implemented twice daily routine exercises and post-lunch naps for the whole nation. Mao also set an example for his people with his “historic swim” in the Yangzi River at the age of 72.

There were other reasons contributing to the fading away of more accurate translations suggesting contest or competition from the Chinese vocabulary for the Olympics. For one thing, those translations would only remind the Chinese in the early twentieth century of their humiliations, as they were far from able to compete internationally in athletics as in other kinds of national achievements. Driven as international relations are by the will to power, it is of course important for nationalists when translating to consider how the development of their country is to be compared to that of others—especially to the countries associated with the source languages. By rendering the Olympics as an international “athletic event (运动会)” rather than a “Grand Contest (竞技大会),” *the focus shifted from competition to participation, and the definition of honor was transposed from victory in contests to membership and participation in the international community.* The Chinese population was gradually educated by the proliferating journals published by intellectuals to understand Olympics as a platform for China to enter the family of nations as an equal and respected member (Xu Guoqi 2008: 233), rather than as an arena of competition for glory.<sup>25</sup> The “unfaithful” rendition

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<sup>25</sup> It was through years of effort that cosmopolitan-leaning Chinese intellectuals gradually convinced the country that the really urgent task was for China to gain recognition by the international community through participation in Olympic Events; whether the Chinese athletes could gain recognition at the podium should not be the primary concern. In 1904, many Chinese newspapers and journals contributed to educating the population by reporting on the Third Olympic Games. On October 24, 1907, the highly respected educator Zhang Boling (张伯苓) gave a speech at the Tianjin Schools' Sports Day (天津学界运动会),



created a new space for China to gain national pride from her visibility in international *events*, while simultaneously filtering out any reminder of China’s (in-)ability to gain visibility at the medalists’ podium. Little wonder that the “inaccurate” translation defeated the “faithful” rendition and took root in the Chinese lexicon.

In terms of the vocabulary I develop for analyzing international relations, the Chinese came to perceive the Olympics not in terms of China’s competition to become a *Master concept* in the world, but as an opportunity for reinventing China as a *parallel and equal concept* to other nations. *Yundong* (athletics) is preferred to *jingji* or *bisai* (contest or showdown) for translating “(Olympic) Games,” because—in contrast to “showdown”—“physical exercise” is a universal good and is equally accessible to the Chinese as it is to other peoples.

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emphasizing that many European countries which did not expect to perform well nonetheless sent their athletes to participate in the Games. He strongly recommended China to take part also. After the London Olympics in 1908, a pro-active newspaper in Tianjin urged that China should fight for the opportunity to participate—and even host—the Olympics. Before Liu Changchun set off for the 1932 Los Angeles Olympic Games as the one-athlete delegation from China, Wang Zhengting, President of China’s National Amateur Athlete Federation, presented him with the Chinese national flag at a send-off ceremony. Wang reminded him that, this being the first participation of a Chinese athlete in the Olympics, it was important to win honor for the country and to fly the flag of the Republic of China among the flags of other nations (Xu Guoqi 2008: 42). It would be a number of years before the Chinese would win their first Olympic medal. But the Chinese did learn in time the significance of raising China’s visibility in the international arena through participation in international events such as the Games. Shen Siliang, Head of the 1932 Olympic Delegate, reflected on the expedition as follows: “[D]uring the Olympics, the Chinese flag was on all the stands, and on the streets it was plainly seen, with those of other nations. The sight of our delegation, marching in orderly array, training as others trained, participating in games, was all good propaganda. At least other people are now aware we are a nation to be counted....” (Morris 1999: 555; Morris mistakenly associates Shen with the 1936 Games.)



2.2. Since 1949: Communist China’s Various Strategic Uses of the “Unfaithful Translation” *Yundonghui* to (Re-)Shape Its Role on the World Stage

Questions may arise: China is no longer being bullied by colonial powers, and the nation performs well on the Olympic medal counts. So why does the country not revert to the more faithful translation “Grand Contest” in its twenty-first-century rendition of “Olympic Games”?

As mentioned, concepts are not mere passive reflections of their social-historical circumstances. They can also be deployed to (re-)make social-political or even international relations. The remaking of concepts can be subtly effected through translation, likewise international relations.<sup>26</sup> How China translates Western concepts necessarily involves how China interprets and remakes those concepts, and how China remakes those concepts in turn necessarily involves how the nation (re-)situates itself in relation to the source culture.

2.2.1 The Communist China’s Legacy of “Self-Reliance” and National Autonomy: Unfaithful Translation, Cultural Autonomy, and National Identity

By critically examining what the “unfaithful” translation *yundonghui* has been helping China to achieve in the international arena since the early twentieth century, I wish to make clear why the “inaccurate” translation continues to be embraced by Communist China.

Fair enough: *yundonghui* is an “unfaithful” translation. But it is precisely this “unfaithfulness” which allows China to assert its cultural autonomy and unique identity. While “运动会 (Athletic Events)” in the Chinese translation of “Games” bears the imprint of the Chinese obsession with health in the aftermath of the Opium Wars and other defeats by colonial powers, the “unfaithful” translation is still in use to date also because of the autonomy it has helped China achieve and the

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<sup>26</sup> See my essay “*Translatio Temporis* and *Translatio Imperii*.” (2014).



distinct Chinese identity it has allowed the country to carve out on the world stage. From the late 1930s till the global age, the mistranslation “Athletic Events” has served different roles in Chinese diplomacy, presenting China as a counter-concept to the West at one point, as a complimentary concept at another. There were even attempts at certain historical junctures when China capitalized on that mistranslation and attempted to transform it into a new Master concept displacing the Western meaning of “Games” as “competition.” Regardless of which kind of international relations it helps structure at different times, running throughout the entire history of the term *yundonghui* is a cultural autonomy this unique (mis)interpretation of *agones* has helped China to achieve. This is to say, *yundonghui* is not a mere “symptom” of Chinese anxiety and aspirations. It “survives the test of time” also because of a distinct Chinese identity it helps to effect.

Note that “unfaithfulness to the source text” have consistently been the signature practice of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) for asserting China’s distinct identity, national autonomy, and its spirit of “*self-reliance*” —a spirit especially underscored by Mao Zedong in his declaration of the ability of the Chinese people to stand tall without relying on even China’s one-time “Big Brother” the U.S.S.R. And this “unfaithfulness” has been the stance adopted by the CCP even in its interpretations and translations of Marxism and Leninism. It is not uncommon nowadays to hear “socialism with Chinese characteristics” being mocked as a cynical excuse for the PRC to implement capitalism. While this interpretation might bear a degree of truth, what it overlooks, however, is the long tradition of the CCP’s insistence on Chinese autonomy —on China’s ability to strike out new paths when borrowing foreign ideas by *making them serve* the special cultural and historical circumstances and needs of China rather than the other way round.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> In fact, long before “socialism with Chinese characteristics” became a favorite slogan of post-Deng China, “Marxism with Chinese characteristics” had already



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been one of the central tenets of Mao who was anything but friendly to capitalism. Mao strongly criticized slavish adherence to foreign ideas as “dogmatic” (Mao, “On Contradiction,” 1937: 322).

This resistance to the wholesale, uncritical adoption of foreign ideas already characterized the style and the practice of the CCP at its founding stage, when Chen Duxiu maintained that China should not follow blindly the U.S.S.R. given the different circumstances of China. However, it was Mao who boldly departed not only from Lenin but also from Marx.

By sinicizing Marxism, Mao made this foreign import subjectively meaningful and concrete for the Chinese population. But he did so not by limiting, but by expanding, Marxism. Mao’s Chinese interpretation and transformation of Marx liberated the theory from its original confinement of candidacy for socialism/communism to highly industrialized countries, to include third-world countries also. Via yinyang philosophy, he also transformed what the West regarded to be contradictions into symbiotic relations, thus enabling Marxism and Third-World nation-building projects to be mutually reinforcing endeavors.

By “mis translating-retranslating” Marx, Mao asserted China’s independence not only of the hegemony of capitalism but also the hegemony of abstract Marxist universalism. It was Mao’s extension of Marxism by making it immediately valid for the Third World also that made Mao influential worldwide on intellectuals and revolutionaries in the 1960s and 70s. Mao’s *Little Red Book* “ranks second only to the Bible” in terms of print circulation (Leese 2014: 23). Mao’s thoughts, in other words, have far wider dissemination than Marx’s own writings. It was Mao who really introduced Marx to different corners of the world.

Had Mao only dogmatically followed Marx, the world would have no reason to read Mao in addition to Marx. Had Mao only dogmatically followed Marx, China and the Third World would have been excluded from the Communist project, and Marxism would have thus undermined its own claim to “universal validity” from the very start. It was Mao’s Chinese transformation of Marxism, in other words, that helped legitimize Marxism’s claim to universality.

See my essay “Translation as a New Tool for Rethinking the Local and the Global in the History of Revolutions” for a detailed analysis of how Mao’s “unfaithful translation” of Marxism in one and the same stroke *made Marxism serve China*, and *recreated Marxism to help make good Marxism’s claim to universality*.



2.2.2. The Conceptual History of *Yundonghui* in Communist China in the Context of IR

2.2.2.1. 1949-1972: *Yundonghui* as a Counter-Concept to “Games/Contests”

It is not difficult to understand why the unique cultural identity the “mistranslation” inadvertently creates for China was enthusiastically embraced by Mao Zedong and his followers. *Yundonghui* was posed as a Chinese counter-concept to Western “Games” —conveying China’s concern with health in contrast to the big powers’ concern for power and glory. Important to note is that concepts were heavily mobilized as weapons by both the East and the West during the Cold War period. *Yundonghui* was just one instance among many. Take, for example, how the PRC along with other Communist countries injected strongly positive semantics into the term “the people” (人民 *renmin*) and used it as a counter-concept to the Western concept “citizen.” Likewise, *airen* (愛人 “my beloved”) displaced the bourgeois nuclear family concept of “my husband/wife” (丈夫/太太). The “unfaithful translation” *yundonghui* allowed China to assert a Third-World moral upper hand (itself a counter-concept to the First World’s military and economic upper hand): it expressed the CCP’s position that athletic events should be about health rather than imperialistic competitions for domination and the monopoly of glory.

2.2.2.2. 1971-1982: Ping Pong Diplomacy, and the New Semantics of *Yundong*

As China’s foreign policy changed, different terms were used with new semantics to promote a different set of attitudes toward other countries. Not surprisingly, *yundong* (athletics), which played a major role in Chinese diplomacy in the 1970s, changed from being a counter-concept to a “friendly” concept<sup>28</sup> to “Games.”

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<sup>28</sup> The coinage is a pun on the Communist ideology accompanying sports during this period: namely, “Friendship First, Competition Second.”

Although the ping pong diplomacy started in 1971 with China’s acceptance of an invitation from Japan to participate in the 31<sup>st</sup> World Table Tennis Championships in Nagoya, the most important diplomatic breakthrough in this period was the thaw in Sino-American relations liaised by ping pong games between the two countries. Immediately from the beginning of this period, sports were promoted by the CCP with the slogan “Friendship First, Competition Second.” By tightly attaching that slogan to sports, *yundong* became invested with the semantics of “building relations,” and “health” receded into the background. Now athletics is no longer so much about strengthening people’s constitutions to confront the enemy, as keeping the enemy closer through diplomacy —that is, by converting “enemies” into “friends.”<sup>29</sup> In order to make friends, one needs to cater to the other’s values and taste. Thus “competition” in athletics was no longer trivialized as an “ideology of the capitalists.” The value of competition was incorporated into the new Chinese interpretation of sports, but only in a secondary position to the Chinese principle of “friendship.” The attachment of the new slogan to sports, in other words, evacuated the former belligerent “friend versus enemy” semantics from *yundong* and replaced it with “converting enemies into friends (化敌为友)” —the latter being a concept with a long tradition not only in Chinese ethics but also in Chinese political theory and military strategy— and as such could easily tap into the Chinese mores.

By including “competition” in its new sports slogan in 1971, the PRC signified its willingness to meet the West halfway. The inclusion expressed the CCP’s willingness to recognize “competition” as a legitimate component of sports, even though the slogan once again subtly set “Chinese Communist values” above “Western values” by ranking “competition” as “second” to “the Chinese principle,” by subsuming “Capitalistic-

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<sup>29</sup> This is one reason why I find the Schmittean-Koselleckian counter-concept to be inadequate for describing human relations, including international relations which is the focus of this essay.



Imperialistic Competition” under “Chinese-Communist World Brotherhood.” Note also that the CCP deliberately preserved the term “Friendship” instead of changing it to “Diplomacy.” The former term quietly sets up a contrast between “Chinese Communist brotherhood” and “Western *amicitia*”<sup>30</sup>—or “the sincere and committed friendship from the Chinese people”<sup>31</sup> versus “Western strategic alliance or relations of convenience”—another CCP feat of subtly asserting its moral upper hand in contrast to the West’s military and economic upper hand.

*Yundonghui* thus changed from being a counter-concept to the Western “Games” to being primarily a “friendly” concept, even though, as explained above, there lurked a subtext in the slogan which continued the CCP’s former legacy of contrasting its moral supremacy to the “competition-driven capitalistic-imperialistic West.”

Note that the investment of *yundonghui* with the new semantics of “Friendship First, Competition Second” did more than help the PRC effect a new kind of international relations. It also facilitated the Chinese people’s acceptance of former foes (such as the United States and Japan) as friends. With the slogan “Friendship First, Competition Second,” the Mao administration also made clear that China’s first priority is to make friends. Mao’s explicit instruction was to “sacrifice the game over the ‘mini-globe’” in order to “win over the big globe”—that is, sacrifice the scores achieved in ping pong in order to win over the friendship of the whole world. Practically speaking,

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<sup>30</sup> See n. 2.

<sup>31</sup> Communist ideology stresses the brutality of capitalist cut-throat competition, in contrast to which communism offers brotherhood and solidarity for the oppressed. In China, the Communist idea of brotherhood was interpreted via its traditional concept of friendship which is an authentic, existential, and ethical commitment involving the two parties’ readiness to live and die for each other. This concept of friendship had a very strong hold on traditional Chinese culture, and is a tradition that the Chinese used to be very proud of. The high publicity being given to “Friendship” at the 2008 Beijing Olympics was an attempt to “sell” a new kind of IR based on “Confucian Friendship” to displace “Western *Realpolitik*.”



athletes were expected to make a personal sacrifice —that is, intentionally lose the game— if that would help win the friendship of the other teams and the countries they represented.<sup>32</sup>

Through increasing interactions with the outside world, Chinese athletes gradually found that maintaining their old cultural values in the international sports arena would only put China at a disadvantage. After the death of Mao and Zhou, athletes became more and more outspoken about their discontent. Six years after Mao passed away, the Director of the Chinese National Sports Commission Mr. Li Menghua (李梦华) declared at a meeting on February 1, 1982 that, henceforward, the CCP’s ping pong gambit slogan “needs not be mentioned often (可不再多提).”

#### 2.2.2.3. 2008 Beijing Olympics:

Ever since the PRC started opening up to the world, Western values quickly took over traditional Chinese as well as Communist values. Between 1982 and 2008, China had also come a long way in developing both its national and athletic profiles. The people became eager to prove their “worth” by competing against other countries. So why was the “mis-translation” still in place at the Beijing Olympics —at China’s first ever Olympics— when the nation was eager to present its very best to the world? Far from suppressing the wrong translation, the CCP even invested heavily in reactivating the almost forgotten Maoist semantics of “Friendship” and “Health”

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<sup>32</sup> At this point, China was still trying to grasp Western “games” culture via the lenses of traditional Chinese culture (including the culture of martial arts tournaments that had gone on in China for centuries). In *kung fu* tournaments as much as in daily life, strong emphasis was placed by traditional Chinese culture on “saving the other’s face.” To preserve the other’s dignity and self-esteem, one would intentionally lose to the other—even if one was the stronger party. In pre-modern China, such generosity and considerateness often inspired gratitude and friendship from the other side. But this social practice and the values on which it was based were at odds with the norms and expectations of international sports competitions.



to both the outside world and within China when hosting “the Games.” (And of course, the mistranslation has continued unabated after the Beijing Olympics to this date.) “Friendship” was the theme ubiquitous in all kinds of publicities about the Beijing Games —from various theme songs produced for the Games to the opening ceremony. Throughout the country, the Maoist legacy of “health” was revived and people were encouraged to exercise to improve their constitution.<sup>33</sup>

Not surprising: the Beijing Olympics was the state’s opportunity to assert *China’s distinct identity* and, above all, to showcase China as bringing *new values to the Olympics (and to the world) in the global age*. The communist state elaborately orchestrated China’s transformation of “Games”—that is, from *competition and rivalry*—into “Friendship,” within which framework China emerged as leading the world in a joint effort to connect all nations into “*One World, One Dream*.”<sup>34</sup> In the process of calling the world’s attention to the CCP’s *remaking* of the Olympic Games from its former legacy of imperialistic powers vying for glory into an event of global friendship, there was nonetheless a transformation of the earlier CCP legacy. “Friendship” was no longer about China desperately seeking friends to help the country break out of diplomatic isolation. Rather, hovering *over the* reborn “friendly” concept was an emerging competing concept: of a *newly emerging globalizing force led by China based on “friendship,”* challenging the globalizing force which up to that stage had been led primarily by the United States through “*aggressive capitalistic-imperialistic practices*.”

There was another reason for “Friendship” and “Health” to make their high-profile conceptual return in the preparations

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<sup>33</sup> This legacy continued to be promoted even in the post-Olympic period, such as the State Council’s publication of the “National Fitness Regulation” at the recommendation of the Sports Ministry in August 2009.

<sup>34</sup> Hai Ren, Professor of Beijing University of Physical Education and Director of the Centre for Olympic Studies at the Beijing University of Physical Education, deems “harmony” to be a special contribution of Chinese culture to the Olympics (Hai Ren, 1999: 212).



for, and during, the *Beijing Aolinpike Yundonghui* (Beijing Olympic Games).<sup>35</sup> The CCP had to reaffirm its loyalty to, and continuity of, the Party’s legacies on the world stage in order to persuade the international community of both the eternal validity of the wisdom of the CCP and the integrity of that legacy.

“Friendship” was everywhere in the publicity for the Beijing Olympics—from theme songs such as “You and I,” to the 2008 drum-beaters<sup>36</sup> who initiated the Grand Opening

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<sup>35</sup> While the CCP’s principle intended audience of “*yundonghui* as (the occasion of) Friendship” was the international community, the semantics of “Health” was revived primarily for the internal audience—that is, the Chinese population. In the run-up to the Olympics, there were many lively promotions of sports urging the Chinese people to take good care of their health. Similar to the objective of the CCP’s revival of the Maoist “Friendship” legacy to the outside world, the CCP’s invocation of the Maoist legacy of “*yundonghui* as (the promotion of) health” inside the nation helped to reaffirm the continuing validity and relevance of the directions the CCP has been giving to its people. For more details on the “Health Legacy of the Beijing Games,” see Jin, Ljungqvist, and Toedsson (2010).

<sup>36</sup> Drum-beating was indispensable to festivities in ancient China—and remains so to date on festive occasions even in big cities, as, for example, the drum-beating accompanying the dragon and lion dance in the Chinese New Year. It was not surprising that drum-beating was used to express joy at friends’ arrival or excitement over good news at the Beijing Olympics. There are even expressions in both *putonghua* and Chinese dialects using drums and gongs as a figurative expression for joy, such as the saying “Happiness being announced by drums and gongs all the way to Heaven (锣鼓喧天).” See also Z. Wu, J. Borgerson, and J. Schroeder who note how the drum-beating in the Opening Ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympics worked together with other audio and visual displays to bring out the Confucian message of welcoming friends: “drum-beating as an indispensable part of Chinese welcoming ceremonies, the chanted Confucian saying, ‘Friends have come from afar, how happy we are!’ and the visual representation of this saying circling the stadium [...]” (Wu, Borgerson, and Schroeder 2013: 93). Western media have tended to read the revival of Confucianism in China as the “totalitarian government’s tool for imposing conformity.” In addition to twisting Confucianism out of context (and thus such media’s tendency to gloss over why Confucianism was rigorously purged precisely in the days when the CCP was the most totalitarian), one important message that such superficial readings missed is precisely how *Confucianism offers an alternative concept of cosmopolitanism (Humanity in Grand Togetherness 大同)* which can be used as a *competing concept to*



Ceremony with a collective recitation of a quote from Confucius: "Friends have come from afar —what joy and excitement (有朋自远方来，不亦乐乎)!"— inducting nations from all corners of the world to “Chinese friendship” that extended back 5000 years.<sup>37</sup> A message that stood out in the presentation of the history of Chinese civilization at the Grand Opening Ceremony was: long before the age of globalization, China has already been extending wide its arms to welcome friends from different parts of the world.

### Originalities and Contributions

By engaging Translation Studies in a critical dialogue with *Begriffsgeschichte*, international relations, and sports nationalism, this essay seeks to make the following contributions:

#### 3.1. Use *Begriffsgeschichte* to Open New Horizons for Translation Studies:

Using *Begriffsgeschichte* to engage translation history, I redefine the latter as the crystallization of “successful versus unsuccessful” rather than “faithful versus unfaithful” translations. A careful reading of the history of translation would reveal how renditions which manage to dominate over alternative options and establish themselves as the “standard” translation in history are not necessarily the most “accurate” version. Rather, the key to their survival is how well they tap into the social and political cultures of the time. I substantiate my argument via an analysis of the Chinese history of “mistranslating” Ολυμπιακοί Αγώνες. Another essay of mine under review demonstrates how Luther’s “heretic rendition” of the Bible became canonized—and he the

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*challenge the U.S.-led model of globalization based on economic and military domination.*

<sup>37</sup> The Opening Ceremony presented 5000 years of Chinese civilization. In addition to showcasing her different contributions to world civilization, one theme running throughout is the long Chinese tradition of “Friendship.”



founder of a new faith—because his “mistranslation” successfully tapped into the agenda of various German princes of his time.

Under the scrutiny of the conceptual history method, the target text is no longer a slavish, always inferior copy of the source text, nor is “distortion” of the source text a mere “mistranslation” passively awaiting criticism of its failure to live up to the original. Rather, the differences between the translation and the original call attention to the agency of the translator and his/her ability to subvert the power hierarchy between the source and the target cultures, and to creatively (mis-)understand, reinterpret, and to reformulate the source text in order to serve the target culture. László Kontler correctly highlights how the conceptual history approach returns attention from the author to the translator, and how any translated text “must [...] be understood in terms of an agenda specific to the translator’s historical context”:

because [*Begriffsgeschichte*] regards translation as an act of reading, filtering into an independent speech act substantially conditioned by the translator’s historical circumstances, it prioritizes the intentions of the translator over those of the author of the text in its interpretation. (László Kontler 2009: 194)

### 3.2. Shedding New Light on International Relations and *Begriffsgeschichte* via Translation Studies:

My use of translation to interrogate international relations and cultural studies is made possible by my expansion and transformation of Koselleck’s *Begriffsgeschichte* method. Koselleck uses semantic history to interrogate social and political history, and examines the social and political ramifications of semantic changes. I appropriate Koselleck’s method to investigate how changes in semantics brought about by translation can both reflect and effect changes in international relations. Furthermore, to better address the complexities of the politics of translation and semantic changes concerning international



relations, I go beyond Koselleck’s “asymmetrical counter-concept.” The development of multiple ways of pairing concepts to discuss translation and international relations is my own.<sup>38</sup>

3.3. Use Translation Studies to Illuminate Anew Social and Political History:

My method also seeks to make new contributions to social and political history by reexamining it via the history of translation. I examine the struggle between “the successful translation” and “the more accurate translation” to explore what the former has to tell us about a nation’s anxieties and dreams.

3.4. Use Translation Studies to Break New Paths for Investigating Sports Nationalism:

Scholarly discussions of sports nationalism in China is a relatively new field triggered by China’s successful bid for the 2008 Olympics on July 13, 2001, gaining real momentum only from 2008 onwards.<sup>39</sup> However, no writing I know of so far has used the Chinese mistranslation (*yundong*) to engage that subject. In fact, the association of “games” with “health” (*yundong*) is so deeply planted in the Chinese collective memory that no scholarly attention seems to have been paid to how the rendition *Alinpike jingji dahui* is actually not an accurate translation.

3.5. Translation Studies and Sports Diplomacy:

Although there is no lack of publications on sports and diplomacy in China, I have encountered no scholarship that engages the subject from the standpoint of translation.

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<sup>38</sup> This essay applies and further extends the theoretical framework I elaborate in my essay “*Translatio temporis* and *translatio imperii*.”

<sup>39</sup> The most important scholars on this subject are Xu Guoqi, Lu Zhouxiang, Fang Hong, and Andrew Morris. The field is still far from being well developed.

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“Transfer” XIV: 1-2 (2019), pp. 141-181. ISSN: 1886-554

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**Abstract:**

This paper establishes a critical dialogue among three kinds of cross-national activities: translation, the Olympic Games, and international relations. All three activities involve interstate *amicitia* —where *traduttore/traditore* cannot be clearly distinguished, and where amity/enmity cannot be easily set apart. My discussion of the structural similarities among these three kinds of cross-national activities intersects with my examination of the historical connections of the Olympic Games to translation and international relations.

The essay also seeks to shed new light on international relations via Translation Studies, and to demonstrate how international politics can be examined as the “politics of translation” in action.

**Keywords:** Translation Studies, International Relations, Begriffsgeschichte, Olympic Games, Nationalism in sports



“Transfer” XIV: 1-2 (2019), pp. 141-181. ISSN: 1886-554

TRADUCCIÓN, "EVENTO DEPORTIVO INTERNACIONAL" Y  
RELACIONES INTERNACIONALES: UN ESTUDIO BEGRIFFSGESCHICHTE DE  
TRADUCCIONES CHINAS DE ΟΛΥΜΠΙΑΚΟΙ ΕΓΩΝΕΣ

**Resumen:**

Este documento establece un diálogo crítico entre tres tipos de actividades transnacionales: la traducción, los Juegos Olímpicos y las relaciones internacionales. Las tres actividades involucran *amicitia* interestatal, donde el *traduttore/traditore* no se puede distinguir claramente, y donde la amistad/enemistad no se pueden separar fácilmente. El ensayo también busca arrojar nueva luz sobre las relaciones internacionales a través de los Estudios de Traducción, y demostrar cómo la política internacional se puede examinar como la "política de traducción" en acción.

**Palabras clave:** Estudios de traducción, Relaciones Internacionales, Begriffsgeschichte, Juegos Olímpicos, Nacionalismo en los deportes

