After having studied Latin, German, and linguistics in high school and college, I started learning Mandarin Chinese in graduate school at the age of 23. I took two years of college classes and spent one year in an intensive language program in China. After that I learned by doing. In 2002 I volunteered to translate from Chinese into English the biography of He Zhenliang, China’s senior sports diplomat and member of the International Olympic Committee (IOC). In 2006 it was published by the Foreign Languages Press, the publishing arm of the Party Central Committee’s Foreign Propaganda Office. In this photo of the press website the book appears under the report of the 17th Party Congress. I translated a number of Olympics-related official publications into English, and this resulted in my being invited to be the only foreign member of an academic team that worked with 2010 World Expo Shanghai (the modern incarnation of world fairs). I translated the *Shanghai Declaration*, a document advocating for sustainable urban development which was read out at the closing ceremonies of the Expo; Premier Wen Jiabao presided. In both my work for the Olympics and Expo, I was slipped onto the teams with the tacit approval of their higher-ups, even though I was in contexts where foreigners were not, technically speaking, supposed to be, and I had no official credentials. But my colleagues who were charged with interfacing with the outside world really needed my help, and could not get the same kind of help elsewhere.

Based on these experiences, I’ll make two observations about translating between China and the outside world via official channels - the first is cultural, the second political.
1) A widespread assumption was that the cultural differences between China and the West are too great, Chinese culture is too complex for Westerners to grasp, Chinese to English translation is sometimes impossible. I did not find this to be true. From my perspective, the problem was more basic – the poor level of translation services available in China, whether government offices or commercial companies. Native English speakers were needed, but there aren’t enough native English speakers in the profession. Because the non-native speakers could not do it, they thought translation was impossible. A result of this attitude about the futility of even trying to translate Chinese into English is that in the final drafts of the Shanghai Declaration, the section in which the Chinese and English are most dissimilar is that which describes the theme of the Declaration, “Cities of Harmony.” No attempt was made to synchronize them and I was told that the leaders had decided, “The Chinese and English don’t have to be the same.” “Harmony” in China is a word with strong utopian connotations, a bit like “liberty” in the U.S. and Europe. “Building a harmonious society” is the hallmark slogan of President Hu Jintao, which has been promoted in government propaganda in all realms of life. The word “harmonious” has been derided by the Western China critics and parodied within China, where the phrase “river crab” 河蟹, which sounds similar to “harmony” has been used by dissidents to criticize the government while avoiding internet censors. Knowing the negative connotations of “harmonious” among China watchers, I argued that it would be best to avoid the word, which, in any case, is not a common word in English. Instead, we used the phrase “cities of harmony.” The English version contained wording from the two drafts that had been developed by the intellectuals, but the Chinese version had departed from them:
**Definition of “City of Harmony” 和谐城市**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>English version</strong></th>
<th><strong>My translation of the Chinese version</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>We aspire to build cities that establish harmony between diverse people, between development and environment, between cultural legacies and future innovations. A city of harmony reveals itself when people are in harmony with nature, society, and themselves, and when there is also harmony between generations.</td>
<td>We believe that a City of Harmony should be a living City Being that is rational, self-renewing, and full of life, and built upon a foundation of sustainable development; a City of Harmony should be an urban synthesis of an environment-friendly ecology, an intensive and efficient economy, and an equitable and peaceful society. We are confident that this kind of City of Harmony is the effective means of achieving a “Better City, Better Life.”</td>
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2) There are restrictions on free speech with respect to sensitive political topics in China that need to be better understood in the West, because they constitute an important metalanguage. This is called the 提法, literally “ways for raising [issues].” They are originally set by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Central Propaganda Department, and those lower down the hierarchy learn them from studying their documents. The Central Propaganda Department has a representative in every television and radio station and every organization that is approved to publish print materials in China, and English-language documents meant as foreign propaganda are carefully scrutinized by a committee. The internet is controlled in a different way and is a lot freer.

The tightest 提法 are those that surround the Taiwan problem. Since the official Chinese position is that Taiwan is a province of China and not a sovereign state, no words are allowed that symbolize Taiwan as a nation. The name “Republic of China” is banned. In the Olympic Games, it marches into the stadium as “Chinese Taipei.” Even this is contested between the mainland, which translates it as Zhongguo Taibei 中国台北, while Taiwan translates it as
Zhonghua Taibei 中华台北 (the original agreements were in English, and only specified “Chinese Taipei”). This difference of one character is almost meaningless even to Mandarin speakers, although if one were to split hairs, hua refers to the Chinese people while guo refers to Chinese national territory. In English translations, the word “Taiwanese” is forbidden because it is considered to symbolize a national identity (as it does in “Chinese” or “Portuguese”) – even though we have plenty of words like Shanghainese or Genoese, in which –ese symbolizes a sub-national identity. I was told to use “Taiwan side” rather than “Taiwanese.”

Under the tifa, the phrase “human rights” could not be raised in official meetings with non-Chinese unless by someone specifically charged with this issue, which was assigned to the Foreign Propaganda Office of the Party Central Committee, until sometime after Hu Jintao mentioned them in the 2005 Party Congress. Thus, the phrase was not used in meetings between IOC and their Chinese counterparts until January 2007; before that time they only alluded to “political issues.” So when Beijing was bidding for the Olympic Games in 2001, members of the bid committee were not allowed to raise the topic with foreigners. It took a special dispensation from the Minister of Foreign Affairs to allow human rights to be mentioned in Beijing’s bid presentation to the IOC (one time, in one sentence). In 2008 Amnesty International then used this to claim that China had violated its own promises, and it became a good example of why the Chinese avoided using the word if possible.

Translation offered me unprecedented opportunities to work inside the two biggest mega-events in human history – the Beijing Olympics and Shanghai Expo, because I was able to offer skills that probably could not be found everywhere else. On the Chinese side, the English-language skills and understanding of Western culture were not strong enough; on the non-Chinese side, people did not understand cultural and political background. One certainly could
not disregard the *tifa*, and in fact I think that in my first project, the biography, there might have been some fear that I might sneak “Free Tibet!” into the text somewhere – I was told that it must be a literal, *word-for-word* translation, and *could not change a single word*. This constraint required a lot of creativity in sticking as close to the Chinese as possible while producing intelligible English. I will not win any literary awards, because I maintained a slightly stilted and politicized language that, I felt, reflected the original Chinese. But the lesson in cross-cultural translation was invaluable. In sum, language, culture, and politics are inseparable.