



Choose your words wisely: labelling advice before entering the Chinese market

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Language and cultural adviser Jing Cao explains the best ways to overcome the culture divide to successfully market wine brands to Chinese consumers.



How do you translate my brand name into Chinese? This is the most frequently asked question from new exporters who set their eyes on China. My usual answer will be: it's not that simple. Languages are invented by people, not computers. A language is not a binary code, it reflects the creativity of the human mind. Put it this way, translating words can be far more challenging than cracking secret codes. So let's explore some facts that are oblivious to many monolingual Australians.

Do I need to have a Chinese name for my brand?

Yes you must. Apart from regulatory requirements, the Chinese language is a completely different language system. It is made up of written characters known as 'logograms', and each of these logograms must carry a meaning. On the other hand, the English language is made up of alphabets, and each letter only represents sound rather than concept. As a result, Chinese people remember words by their meanings, while English-speaking people remember words by their pronunciations. Quick example, 'Coca-Cola' is known as '可口可乐' in China, which meanings 'tasty and fun'. Chinese consumers remember this meaning from reading the characters, but most of them are not able to pronounce the English name.

So how can I convert English into Chinese?

Let's be academic for a few seconds. There are two methods you can use to convert texts from English to Chinese:

Translation – the process of communicating the meaning of a source-language text into an equivalent target-language text. Where is the key word? EQUIVALENT! For example, 'grape' can be translated into '葡萄' in Chinese. Because grapes have been grown in China for thousands of years, naturally there is a word for it.

Transcription – the process of using Chinese logograms to transcribe phonetically the sound of words and names foreign to the Chinese language. For example, 'Shiraz' being a foreign grape variety is transcribed into Chinese as '西拉' or '设拉子'. Neither of these Chinese names mean anything, these characters are put together to resemble the pronunciation of 'Shiraz'.

What can possibly go wrong?

Unlike the mining and manufacturing industries, the vocabulary in the wine industry is not cut and dried but highly creative and unique. And let's remind ourselves that wine is a relatively new culture for the majority of China's population.

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The first issue is that many words are not translatable because there are no equivalents over there. Wineries need to take a good look at their marketing collateral culturally and linguistically and work out whether they need to change some 'wine words'. Wine Australia in 2016 designed an Australian Wine Flavours Card in the hope of bridging such a gap. 'Cooked game' flavour, for example, is matched with 'Chinese sausage'. And instead of saying 'red plum', Chinese people are more familiar with 'persimmon'.

The second issue can cause a lot of damage to your brand, and the horrifying part is that you

won't even notice it. When a foreign term or name is transcribed into Chinese phonetically, quite often there is no rule to say which Chinese characters to choose. Take two of our famous wine regions for example, 'Barossa Valley' and 'McLaren Vale' are both transcribed into Chinese based on their pronunciations. However, a total lack of holistic and strategic thinking leads to different variations among different government agencies. Tourism Australia calls Barossa '芭萝莎', while Wine Australia calls Barossa '巴罗萨'. McLaren Vale is known as '麦拿伦谷' by the South Australian Tourism Commission, but known as '麦克拉伦谷' by Wine Australia. How could you promote a region or a brand, when there is no consistency in the marketing collateral?

I can't speak Chinese. Can't I just let my Chinese agent decide what to do?

Of course you can, if you don't care about your brand. A wine importer is not always a good translator or a good writer. An agent in Hong Kong doesn't necessarily understand the common words used in mainland China. How can you ensure that your message is translated accurately and faithfully, with nothing omitted, altered or added without your consent? The only way to fully protect your brand is to engage the service of a professional translator, then ask your agent to stick to the official brand story and transcribed brand name, rather than allow them to create their own version.

If you have multiple importers (you totally should) in China, it is absolutely critical that every importer uses the same brand story and the transcribed brand name. One of the largest Australian wineries gave this freedom to their Chinese agents and the result was that this winery had multiple transcribed names in different parts of the country. On one of the popular e-commerce platforms, the description was 'this famous brand XXX comes from Australia, and is also known as YYY, and also known as ZZZ'. How can you build customer loyalty when you suffer from identify crisis?

In 2012, the famous auction house Christie's became embroiled in a 'misunderstanding' with several Bordeaux wineries over some unofficial transcriptions of chateau names. Christie's was planning to publish a poster showing Chinese names for nearly all the 61 chateaux of the 1855 classification, but they went ahead without consulting the wineries about how their names were transcribed into Chinese. Several Bordeaux wineries were upset as they did not approve such Chinese names at all. Christie's had to embarrassingly withdraw these posters amid protest.

Translation really is a factor that can make or break your brand. Don't be laid back. (Is 'laid back' translatable into Chinese? I'll have a think and let you know).



About Jing Cao

Jing Cao is the Director of Chinese Language and Cultural Advice. He is an expert in management

consulting, cultural intelligence training, language and brand strategy. Jing's clients include government agencies, universities, tourism destinations, and many iconic Australian wines. Through his tailored training

programs and consulting services, Jing helps his clients build knowledge-based competitive advantages and maximise their opportunities in the China market.

About Chinese Language and Cultural Advice

Established in 1998, Chinese Language and Cultural Advice (CLCA) provides professional training, project management, business intelligence and language support services in Australia.