

Review

From "the Flowery Flag" to "the Beautiful Nation": On the Evolution of Chinese Appellations for the United States from the Perspective of Cultural Psychology

Deying Yu^{1,*}

¹ School of Foreign Languages, Zhaoqing University, Zhaoqing, China

* Correspondence: Deying Yu, School of Foreign Languages, Zhaoqing University, Zhaoqing, China

Abstract: The Chinese appellation for the United States is a highly frequent term in Sino-American cross-cultural communication, and its evolution reflects profound shifts in China's socio-cultural psychology. Based on a review of historical documents concerning the Chinese translations of the United States since the Ming and Qing dynasties, this paper divides the evolution of the Chinese appellation for the United States into four stages: the stage of neutral transliteration, the stage of derogatory portrayal, the stage of mixed evaluation of praise and blame, and the stage of friendly standardization. Analyzing from the perspective of cultural psychology, this evolutionary process is not merely a matter of linguistic conversion but a concentrated manifestation of Chinese cultural concepts, national cognition, identity, and cross-cultural communication awareness during specific historical periods. The study reveals that the transformation of the Chinese appellation for the United States mirrors the complex psychological journey of the Chinese people—from a sense of cultural superiority as the "Celestial Empire," through the humiliation of being forced into the global system, to an active pursuit of international recognition—thereby providing historical insights for contemporary Sino-Western cultural exchange and mutual learning.

Keywords: Chinese appellation for the United States; cultural psychology; national cognition; cross-cultural communication; translation evolution

1. Introduction

In the process of intercultural communication, country names are among the most frequently used terms. They serve not only as referential symbols for geographical entities but also as vehicles for projecting national cultural psychology. Over the more than two hundred years of Sino-American cultural exchange, the Chinese appellation for the United States has undergone a complex evolution—from "Huāqí" (Flowery Flag, or Spangled Banner) to "Měiguó" (Beautiful Nation)—with more than 60 different translations recorded during this period [1]. What cultural psychological mechanisms lie behind this linguistic phenomenon? How have changes in the Chinese perception of the United States been manifested through the translation of its name? These questions merit in-depth exploration.

Cultural psychology is a branch of psychology that explores people's cultural psychological behaviors [2]. As a discipline that investigates people's psychological activities and behavioral manifestations within cultural contexts, cultural psychology emphasizes that culture constitutes a unique organization of the individual and their environment, and it focuses on examining how culture influences and shapes psychological processes and behaviors [3]. Examining the evolution of the Chinese translation of the designation for the U.S. from this perspective reveals that language, as a symbolic system of culture, undergoes transformations that precisely mirror shifts in national psychology. Therefore, by tracing the evolution of the translation of the designation for the U.S. in Chinese context, one can gain insight into the Chinese people's

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national perceptions, cultural concepts, and cross-cultural communication awareness during specific historical periods.

Based on previous research, this paper carries on a systematic review concerning the Chinese appellations for the U.S., analyzing their evolution and underlying motivations from the perspective of cultural psychology, aiming to provide historical reference for cultural mutual understanding in contemporary international relations.

2. Literature Review

The study of the evolution of the designation for the U.S. has a long-standing tradition in Western academia. T. H. Lambert initiated the study of the name of America: "It is a curious coincidence, that the names of China and America, the two countries guarding the Pacific, appear in history for ages before the days of the men who are supposed to have christened them [4]. China, is said to bear the name of the Tsin dynasty and the America of Vespucci." In his research, Lambert focuses on the civilization of the chief aborigines of the Western hemisphere, the evidence that America was the national name of their empire, that this name was known to the Spaniards, who adopted it, an explanation of the supposition that America was named after Vespucci, and the etymology of the name. This study helps others to understand why there were so many Chinese names for the U.S.A. in history and why the majority of Chinese people still tend to confuse the U.S. with America nowadays.

Both George C. Hurlbut and Edward Gaylord Bourne provide detailed information on the historical evolution of the name of America, including the terms "New World," "Other World," "West Indies," and "Western Hemisphere." [5,6]. According to Edmund C. Burnett, the name "United States of America" appears to have been used for the first time in the Declaration of Independence, the appearance of which was the result of evolution [7]. Burnett explains in detail the connotation of "United" and the variation of the names, such as the United Colonies of the North Hemisphere, the Twelve United English Colonies of North America, the United Colonies of Congress, the United Colonies of America, the United Colonies of North America, and finally the adopted title of the United States of North America. Burnett's findings provide valuable sources for the study of the evolution of the appellations of the U.S.A. in Chinese history.

In contrast, Chinese scholars' research on the Chinese translation of the name of the United States has mostly focused on aspects such as its historical periodization, translation strategies, and patterns of evolution. YANG points out that the word America contains two levels of connotations: the name of the American continent and that of the United States [8]. HE lists some transcriptions of the name of the United States of America and the three levels of embodied meanings, namely, the union of the new nation, the states being the components of the nation, and the nation representing the great share of America [9].

In terms of historical periodization, LIANG divides the Chinese translation of the United States into three historical periods: the periods of transliteration, transliteration plus liberal translation, and the establishment of the present name of the United States [10]. XU distilled the dynamic evolutionary characteristics of early translations, transitioning from "a proliferation of ambiguities" to "gradual convergence," revealing an overarching development trend from divergence to approbation [11].

In terms of translation strategies and methods, LIAN and DAI summarized four primary models for translating country names-transliteration, graphic translation, free translation, and a combination of transliteration and free translation-thereby providing a theoretical framework for analyzing the typology of translated American country names [12]. XIU and DAI, on the other hand, explored the linguistic selection mechanism underlying the evolution of translated names from the perspectives of cultural connotation and lexical strategies [1].

Furthermore, numerous case studies grounded in historical documents have further enriched the empirical foundation of this field. Li and Niu's examination of country name translations before and after the Opium War in the *Illustrated Treatise on the Maritime*

Kingdoms, Zhang's analysis of monosyllabic and disyllabic national names in late Qing and early Republican vernacular newspapers, Shen's exploration of toponymic notation in *Xin Shi Di Li Bei Kao Quan Shu* (*The Complete Geography Textbook*), and Li's investigation into the origins of translated country names for European and American nations all provide detailed historical data revealing the diverse forms of the American country name in modern Chinese texts [13-16]. These translated names illustrate the processes of coexistence, competition, and evolution of the American country name in the modern Chinese context. A review of the existing literature reveals that the academic community has systematically examined the Western origins of the name of the United States and the evolution of its Chinese translation in modern China, clarifying the macroscopic historical trajectory from transliteration to free translation and from diversity to uniformity. However, current research predominantly focuses on historical textual criticism and linguistic analysis, while the exploration of the "Chinese cultural psychology" implicit in the changes of the translation of the country's name remains relatively underdeveloped and warrants further in-depth investigation.

3. The Evolution of the Chinese Appellation for the United States

The evolution of the Chinese appellation for the United States can be roughly divided into four historical stages, each corresponding to the different depths of Chinese understanding of the United States and the shifts in emotional attitudes toward it.

3.1. *The Stage of Neutral Transliteration (from the Late Ming Dynasty to the Opium War)*

This stage began in the late 16th century with the arrival of Western missionaries in China and lasted until the outbreak of the Opium War in the mid-19th century. Its fundamental characteristic was the predominance of transliteration, with the Chinese terms primarily derived from the pronunciation of "America," the continent name, and not yet imbued with any significant emotional connotations.

The earliest Chinese document to introduce the American continent is considered to be Matteo Ricci's *Kūnyú Wànguó Quántú* (*A Map of the Myriad Countries of the World*), drawn in 1602, which transliterated America as "Yāmòlǐjiā" [17]. The term continued to be used by Giulio Aleni, the Italian missionary, in his Chinese-language work *Zhīfāng Wàijì* (*Records of Foreign Lands*) in 1623. These early translations were purely based on transliteration, reflecting the missionaries' objective introduction of new geographical discoveries, at a time when the Chinese had not yet formed an independent understanding of the United States.

In 1784, the American merchant ship "Empress of China" arrived in Canton, marking the prelude to direct Sino-American contact. Due to similarities in appearance, language, and attire with the British, the Chinese initially often mistook Americans for Britons. As late as 1795, British merchants lodged a complaint with the Chinese authorities, stating: "The Hēmǎilígā also speak our language and dress like us, but they have a different flag. Please do not confuse them with us." [10]. The term Hēmǎilígā mentioned here is a transliteration of "America," specifically referring to Americans.

Meanwhile, among the populace in Guangdong, a custom emerged of referring to foreign nations based on the distinctive features of their flags. The stars on the American Star-Spangled Banner were perceived by the Cantonese as "flowers," hence they called the United States the "Flower Flag Country" (*Huāqíguó*). This designation became widely adopted in folk usage and persists in terms such as "Flower Flag Ginseng" (American ginseng) to this day. In 1820, XIE Qinggao's oral account, recorded by YANG Bingnan in the *Hǎi Lù* (*Record of the Seas*), referred to the United States as "Mǐlǐgān Guó" and noted, "This is the same as the Flower Flag Country that comes to Canton." Although various translations emerged during this period, they largely adhered to the principle of transliteration without deliberate positive or negative connotations in character selection, exhibiting a relatively neutral characteristic.

3.2. *The Phase of Derogatory Depiction (from the Opium War to the Pre-Westernization Movement Period)*

The outbreak of the Opium War in 1840 marked a significant turning point in Sino-American relations. The powerful ships and advanced artillery of the Western powers forcibly opened China's doors, shattering the Chinese people's cultural confidence in their identity as the "Celestial Empire." Dominated by a sense of national humiliation, the appellations used for the United States and other Western powers began to take on derogatory connotations.

The most typical characteristic of this phase was the addition of the "mouth" radical to Chinese characters in transliterated names to convey disdain. For instance, terms like *Mǐlǐjiān* and *Mǐlǐgān* used Chinese characters with the "mouth" radical for phonetic translation, implicitly carrying a derogatory implication of being "not of our kind." In 1857, the Xianfeng Emperor, in an imperial edict, referred to "*Mǐ qiú pǒ zhī gǎn dài*", which means "the American chieftain knows gratitude quite well," directly using the character *qiú*, (chieftain) to refer to Americans [18]. This term equated them with leaders of "uncivilized" tribes. Such lexical choices reflected the official hostility towards the Western powers at the time.

From the perspective of cultural psychology, these derogatory transliterations exemplify the psychological mechanism of ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism is the tendency to view other peoples and cultures through the lens of one's own cultural standards, often manifesting as "in-group favoritism" and "out-group derogation" [19]. In the humiliating context following the Opium War, the Chinese people employed pejorative appellations as a means to safeguard their wounded national self-esteem, attempting to achieve a form of psychological superiority over the Western powers at the linguistic level. As some scholars have pointed out, the use of characters like *yí*, (barbarian) and *qiú*, (chieftain) was a reflection of the contemporary Chinese populace's rejection of and discontent with the aggression of the Western powers.

3.3. *The Mixed Evaluation Phase (the Westernization Movement to the Late Qing Dynasty)*

The Westernization Movement, which emerged in the 1860s, marked a significant shift in the Chinese perception of the West. The proposition of "learning the superior technologies of the barbarians to counter the barbarians" signified an acknowledgment of Western superiority in material affairs and an attempt to learn from and emulate it. This cognitive shift was also reflected in the translation of the American exonym, presenting a complex situation where both positive and negative appellations coexisted.

On one hand, official documents continued to use established names. For instance, in the Treaty of Wanghia, the United States was formally referred to as "*Yàměilǐjiàzhōu Dàhézhōngguó* (the United States of America)" [20]. This translation was relatively neutral but had not yet adopted commendatory characters. On the other hand, as understanding of the West deepened, some intellectuals began to adopt translations with more positive connotations. In 1848, Xu Jiyu, in his *Yinghuán Zhìlüè* (A Brief Survey of the Maritime Circuit), used the translation "*Mǐlǐjiān Hézhōngguó*" and noted, "Foreign place names are the most difficult to discern; ten people translating them yield ten differences, and even one person may employ inconsistent terms." [21]. Wei Yuan, in his *Hǎiguó Túzhì* (Illustrated Treatise on the Maritime Kingdoms), referred to the country as the "*Hézhōngguó*," "*Yùnàishìdiéguó*," "*Mǐlǐjiānguó*," and "*Huāqíguó*," and clarified: "People in Guangdong call it *Huāqíguó* (Flowery Flag Country) [22]. Actually, *Mǐlǐjiān* refers to *Mòlǐjiā*, also written as *Měilǐgē*, which is the name of a continent, not a country. In Western languages, cities or settlements are called '*shìdié*' (states). Since *Mǐlǐjiān* has no king, only twenty-six tribal heads, and they elect a grand head to govern, they name their country *Yùnàishìdiéguó* (Country of the United States), which is translated to 'Confederated States'."

It is noteworthy that the translation "*Měilǐjiān*" emerged during this period. After the 1860s, reformers like Zeng Guofan began using the term "*Měilǐjiān*" in their memorials to the throne. Research indicates that Zeng Guofan combined the characters from two earlier translations, "*Mǐlǐjiān*" and "*Měilǐgē*", creating the new term "*Měilǐjiān*". This translation selected the three Chinese characters-*měi* (beautiful), *lì* (advantageous), and *jiān* (strong)-

each carrying positive meanings, reflecting a shift in attitude towards the United States. From the perspective of cultural psychology, this phenomenon of beautifying the exonym suggests that modern Western civilization, characterized by commercial warfare and national prosperity and power, had begun to alter China's millennia-old aesthetic tastes and ethical concepts.

3.4. The Stage of Friendly Stereotype Formation (from the Republic of China Era to the Present)

In the early 20th century, with the rise of America's comprehensive national power and its relatively moderate behavior during the Boxer Indemnity refund and the invasion of China by the Eight-Nation Alliance, Chinese perceptions of the United States further improved. Coupled with the dispatch of a large number of students to study in the U.S. and the admiration of revolutionary party members for the American democratic system, the translation of "Měilǐjiān Hézhōngguó" as the name for the United States gradually became standardized. The Republican government formally used the translation in diplomatic documents, a practice continued after the establishment of the People's Republic of China.

Publications such as *The History of American Independence* by the Translation and Compilation Society in 1902, *The History of the American War of Independence* by the New Publishing Society in 1904, and *The History of the American War of Independence* by the Commercial Press in 1912 all adopted the abbreviated term "Měiguó" for the United States of America. In 1943, during her speech to the U.S. Congress, Soong Mei-ling specifically explained: "In Chinese, 'America' means 'beautiful country'", elevating the cultural connotation of this translation to its fullest expression [23].

Thus, the evolution of the Chinese designation for the United States from "Flower Flag" to "Měiguó" was completed. This transformation was not merely a process of standardizing the translation but also a reflection of the psychological trajectory of Chinese perceptions of the United States—from vague to clear, from rejection to acceptance, and from disparagement to praise.

4. A Cultural Psychological Analysis of the Evolution of the Chinese Appellation for the United States

The evolution of the Chinese appellation for the United States is, on the surface, a matter of lexical choices in translation. At a deeper level, however, it reflects shifts in Chinese cognitive patterns, cultural conceptions, and national identity. Examining this phenomenon from the perspective of cultural psychology can reveal the underlying psychological mechanisms.

4.1. Perceptual Cognition and the Cognitive Trait of "Observing Phenomena to Conceive Images"

Chinese people place great emphasis on intuition in cognition, excelling in perceptual understanding and stressing the imitation of objective things. They are skilled in imagistic thinking and excel in intuitive experience and imagination, but are less adept at logical reasoning [24]. This cognitive characteristic directly influenced the early translation methods for the American appellation.

The term "Huāqí guó" (Flower Flag Nation) is the most typical example. It was not based on a rational understanding of the nature of the United States but rather on a perceptual depiction of the visual image of the American flag. The habit of distinguishing foreigners by the characteristics of their national flags or physical features, such as hair, among the people of Guangdong, reflects Chinese people's cognitive approach of observing phenomena to conceive images. Similarly, early transliterations such as "Miělgān" or "Mǐlǐjiān," though adopting phonetic transcription, still favored the use of Chinese characters that imitated the sounds, reflecting the primacy of perceptual cognition.

From the perspective of cultural psychology, this cognitive pattern is related to the Chinese understanding of nature. Chinese people tend to believe that humans and nature can be united as one, which leads to an emphasis on the imitation of objective things in

cognition. When this cognitive pattern was applied to the translation of country names, it gave rise to early appellations based on visual features (e.g., Flower Flag) or phonetic imitation (e.g., Miēligān).

4.2. Ethnocentrism and the Psychological Motivations Behind Pejorative Translations

The psychological roots of the pejorative translations that emerged after the Opium War lie in ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism refers to the habitual tendency to judge foreigners or foreign groups based on the standards and practices of one's own culture or ethnic group, manifesting as a belief in the superiority of one's own culture over others [25].

Traditionally, the Chinese referred to themselves as "Huáxià" or "Zhōnghuá," while viewing neighboring ethnic groups as "Yí" (barbarians), "Róng" (western barbarians), "Mán" (southern barbarians), and "Dí" (northern barbarians). This cultural mindset of distinguishing between Huá (China) and Yí (barbarians) persisted into modern times and naturally evolved into derogatory appellations when encountering Western powers. In Qing dynasty documents, terms such as "Míyí" or "Mǐyí" were common, reflecting the application of the traditional barbarian concept to the United States. From a philological perspective, the character "Mǐ" uses the Chinese character with a "mouth" radical, while "Yí" inherently carries a pejorative connotation for the U.S. Such lexical choices themselves serve as expressions of cultural attitudes.

It is worth noting that ethnocentrism not only fosters derogatory terms for outsiders but also reinforces self-praise among insiders. While the Chinese referred to themselves as the "Celestial Dynasty," they simultaneously labeled powers such as the United States as "Yí" (barbarians) or "Qióu" (chieftains), essentially striving to maintain psychological balance on a linguistic level. The emergence of ethnocentrism inevitably affects inter-ethnic sentiments, and language, as a tool of communication in society, is deeply influenced by it [25].

4.3. The Evolution of Cultural Values and the Commendatory Shift in the Translation of Foreign Country Names

The commendatory shift in the Chinese translation of the United States' name during the latter half of the 19th century reflects a significant transformation in China's cultural values. The evolution from the derogatory term "Míyí" (American Barbarian) to the appreciative "Měilíjiān" (Beautiful and Strong Country) embodies a fundamental reorientation in the Chinese attitude toward Western civilization.

From the perspective of cultural psychology, this transformation involves a reconstruction of the "cultural self-concept." The cultural self-concept refers to an individual's cognitive framework, shaped within a specific cultural environment, regarding the relationship between oneself and others. Confronted with the impact of the West, the Chinese were compelled to reposition the relationship between self and other, acknowledging the advancement of the West in certain domains. This psychological adjustment manifested in the translation of country names, leading to the adoption of laudatory Chinese characters such as "Měi" (beauty), "Lì" (advantage), and "Jiān" (strength) to designate the United States.

This commendatory shift was not unique to the translation of the United States. Translations for other Western countries established during the same period, such as "Yīngguó" (England), "Déguó" (Germany), and "Fàguó" (France), similarly employed terms with positive connotations. As XIE Guian points out, the commendatory phenomenon in the Chinese translation of Western country names indicates that the modern civilization represented by the West, characterized by commerce, warfare, wealth, and power, had altered China's millennia-old aesthetic sensibilities and ethical concepts [26]. This signifies that the Chinese began to use laudatory terms, previously reserved for self-reference, to denote others, marking a cultural-psychological transition from isolation and self-absorption to openness and tolerance.

4.4. Holistic Thinking and the Standardization of Translation

The evolution of the Chinese translation of the United States' name from diversity to eventual uniformity also reflects the holistic thinking characteristics of the Chinese nation. In terms of cognition, the Chinese people tend to understand things from an overall perspective, emphasizing the whole and valuing relational networks [27]. This cognitive trait propelled the standardization of translations.

In Chinese history, there were more than 60 different translations of the name of the United States, including pure transliterations (e.g., "Miě Lì Gān"), image-based translations (e.g., "Flower Flag Country"), and combinations of sound and meaning (e.g., "MěiLìGē United Provinces"), demonstrating considerable arbitrariness. However, as China's understanding of the United States deepened, Chinese people began to seek a standardized and uniform translation. This tendency toward unification reflects the Chinese cognitive pattern of "emphasizing the whole and valuing relationships." As some scholars have pointed out, "The Chinese tend to understand things from a holistic perspective, viewing all things in the world... as an integrated whole and projecting this holistic concept onto various domains" [24].

To some extent, the efforts of individuals such as E. C. Bridgman, WEI Yuan, and XU Jiyu to scrutinize and unify the translation reflect this holistic thinking. They sought to identify the "correct name" among the many translations, aiming to create a version that could both accurately represent the sound and appropriately convey the meaning, ultimately achieving a "conventional" uniformity. This process reflects the systematic cognitive characteristics of the Chinese people in their understanding of the external world.

5. Conclusion

The evolution of the Chinese appellation for the United States, from "Flower Flag Country" to "Mei Guo (Beautiful Nation)," represents a condensed history of Sino-American cultural exchange and, even more so, a mirror of the transformation of Chinese cultural psychology. This evolutionary process demonstrates that the translation of a country's name is by no means merely a technical issue of linguistic conversion but a process of meaning construction deeply embedded in cultural psychology and social contexts.

From neutral transliteration to derogatory depictions, and then to varying evaluations and friendly designations, the choice of appellations at each stage reflects the Chinese people's national cognition, emotional attitudes, and cultural concepts during specific historical periods. The cognitive characteristic of sensory perception gave rise to image-based appellations such as "Flower Flag Country"; the psychological mechanism of ethnocentrism led to derogatory terms such as "Mī Yí"; shifts in cultural values facilitated the emergence of laudatory translations such as "Měi Lì Jiān"; and the habit of holistic thinking contributed to the eventual unification of the translation.

Examining this evolution from the perspective of cultural psychology offers valuable insights for contemporary international interactions: First, nation names carry profound cultural and psychological connotations, and their symbolic significance should be fully appreciated in international communication. Second, the choice of translations for foreign countries reflects the interactive relationship between self-perception and the perception of others, and cross-cultural communication requires sensitivity to such psychological projections. Finally, the evolution of translations is a dynamic historical process; the linguistic principle of "conventionality" should be respected while maintaining cultural autonomy.

Today, when we use the term "Měi Guó," we might recognize that behind these two characters lies the tortuous journey of the Chinese people's understanding of the world over the past two centuries. It embodies a psychological transformation from cultural insularity to openness and inclusiveness, while also reminding us to engage in cross-cultural communication with a more rational and balanced mindset in the era of globalization.

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