

EDITORIAL

A

lthough many Asian countries are still recovering from the after-shocks of the 1997 financial crisis,

the conference industry is doing fairly well, albeit with less lavish events than in the eighties.

In this issue we present the situation of conference interpreters in China and in Japan. China, a giant that has been growing at a remarkable rate, is gradually getting the number of conferences that its size and importance deserve, according to CIAP associate Jane Jiang Hong. However, there is still scope for more international conferences in many of the less visited provinces that have not had the opportunity to play host to delegates.

Japan has had an exciting conference market for many years, but the sluggish economy has led to a serious reduction in the generous sponsorship of international meetings and events by Japanese corporations. Ken Yokota looks at the impact that this has had on the conference interpretation market in Japan.

We hope you will enjoy this issue and, if you have any comments, please send them in.

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BREAKING AWAY FROM OFFICIAL MONOPOLIES

The General Picture

Formal training of conference interpreters started in China in 1979 with the United Nations Program for Interpretation and Translation. Ninety-eight of the program's 217 graduates are now professional interpreters, most of them staff interpreters of the United Nations and other international organizations. The UN program's successor, the School of Interpretation and Translation of Beijing Foreign Studies University, continues to offer professional interpretation training at the graduate level and has become the leading Chinese interpretation programme.

In China, interpreters work for government agencies or they freelance. Conference interpreting as an independent profession did not exist until very recently when one interpreter courageously decided to become the first freelancer in China. Zhang Wei, a graduate of the UN Training Program and staff of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, quit the official establishment in 1993 and became independent. He was followed by others who left their in-house positions to build up the market in China.

This move was a significant break from the official monopoly of interpretation services. Chinese government agencies, including research and education institutions, still are the largest employers of interpretation and translation services. Every Chinese ministry or provincial government has a department to deal with the "non-Chinese" world, with in-house interpreters and translators who are usually foreign language graduates. In most cases, no distinction is made between

Freelance interpreters are the main force behind the promotion of the profession in China.



interpretation and translation which government officials learn on the job.

Most international conferences held in China before 1993 got translation and interpretation (T&I) services from the government institutions that had sponsored them. This applied even to Chinese at the United Nations. When there is a UN conference, the in-house team of the counterpart institution will usually be recruited. Such teams are also loaned to other

ministries for large conferences. But today, freelance professionals with formal training or a proven track record provide strong competition in the T&I market because many



Some of the 60-odd interpreters from many countries that worked at the Olympic Games in Sydney, Sept. 2000

employers prefer the quality of their service. Chinese ministries still provide interpretation for UN meetings, but recruit freelancers in addition to their own interpreters.

Freelance interpreters are the main force behind the promotion of the profession in China. As independent professionals they have to provide a high-quality service to survive in the market. This means applying professional practices, ethics and working conditions in keeping with those of the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC).

The conference market

As China has opened up to the outside world, the market has gradually changed. Before the 1990s, almost all conferences were organized by government agencies. Conference interpreting was a new concept to many conference organizers, let alone the general public. Now, cities like Beijing have become popular venues for international multilingual conferences, where Chinese is often used as the relay language. The most used languages are Chinese and English, while Japanese, French and German are occasionally used at business meetings.

Many international corporations organize their conferences, seminars and training workshops in China and

have introduced major changes to the conference market. Business people are generally more quality-conscious and more demanding. This has created the right kind of market for the new generation of Chinese conference interpreters, allowing them to demonstrate their professionalism and outperform less qualified practitioners without proper formal or on-the-job training. Their quality is also better compensated. Corporate meetings are more stimulating for interpreters because many IT companies choose cities in China to launch their new technologies and products and interpreters are generally the first to put that technology into the Chinese language. The profession has matured and the market will continue to expand as China becomes more involved in international affairs and particularly when it joins the World Trade Organization (WTO).

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Technical conditions and training

Technical conditions for simultaneous interpretation vary greatly. Some conference centres and hotels offer built-in booths and excellent audio-visual systems, others offer totally unacceptable mobile booths consisting

sometimes of only a plastic shield on a table.

However, equipment suppliers are becoming more aware of the needs of interpreters thanks to the growing competition in the simultaneous interpretation (SI) equipment market.

Interpreters are well advised nonetheless to always check and insist on proper working conditions.

Interpretation training has become popular and diversified. Many universities and colleges offer some basic interpretation training as part of the curriculum. Some government departments have their own training programs. The T&I Division of the Foreign Ministry runs a stringent training program for their staff. Some government agencies send staff to the European Union in Brussels for intensive short-term training. However, the only university-level training for conference interpretation is provided by the Graduate School of Interpretation and Translation of Beijing Foreign Studies University.

Public perception of the profession of conference interpretation has evolved. Frustration as a result of bad interpretation has taught many users that professional interpreters are indispensable to the proceedings of their functions. Conference interpretation in the People's Republic of China is now regarded as the intellectually challenging profession that it is.

Jane Jiang Hong

Multilingualism

Most professional conference interpreters prefer to work from a B or a C (acquired) language into their A (or first) language. This practice is enshrined in the language classification system of the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC), and it is assumed that this direction is intrinsically better. Professor Danica Selescovitch, a noted theoretician and teacher of interpretation, posited long ago that interpreters express spontaneously the ideas or the meaning the speaker is trying to convey, which is why this can only be done in one's mother tongue or A language. The assumption is that it is easier to understand the original utterance in one's acquired language(s) while speaking in one's own language. I would submit that there might be some advantage in working in the other direction.

A few years ago I attended a stimulating, international conference of researchers in interpretation in Finland. After a session chaired by myself, a French interpreter came up to me and said, "When your colleagues from Japan interpret into English, which I must take to interpret into French¹, I don't understand 85 per cent of what they say. Maybe the delegates are smarter and understand more..."

There ensued a lively debate with a few other participants on the issue of whether interpreters should work into their A or B language. Exasperated, I declared, "If you want to know what the Japanese are saying, why don't you learn Japanese? We have spent a great deal more time, money and energy in learning English than you have in learning Japanese."

For historical reasons, the Japanese have learned English and other languages

Sometimes, elaborate idioms or expressions being used by a speaker can be misunderstood by an interpreter whose native tongue is not that of the speaker.



J-P. Allain, President of AIIC, delivering a lecture on ethics at the Daito Bunka University, Tokyo. To his left, Prof. M. Kondo, AIIC member, who interpreted into Japanese. April 2001.

to a far greater extent than Europeans have learned Japanese or Chinese. Japan, an island nation, was forced by the United States of America to open itself to the rest of the world in the mid-19th century. The four black ships sent from America were the first manifestation of 'Western modernity' to reach Japan. Until then it had been able to fend off most Western influences - even the warring guns were kept out of Japan for a few centuries as Samurais battled with swords - or to contain them in a small man-made island off the coast of Nagasaki. But now, Japan was determined to modernize and win her rightful place in the newly discovered community of nations.

The country was opened up for the second time at the end of World War II with the arrival of the American occupation forces. Some observers feel that the Japanese are poor English speakers because of their country's lack of colonial experience.

However, with the increase in trade and cultural links between Europe and Asia, and more specifically China and Japan, new demands are being put on interpreters and on interpretation methods. When I was interpreting at the US Department of State many years ago, the prevailing notion was

that there is less chance of misunderstanding a statement made in one's mother tongue and expressing its content in one's acquired tongue. The interpreter cannot control the

original in terms of its register, level of vocabulary, ways of expression, speed and accent, use of idioms, etc. Sometimes, elaborate idioms or expressions being used by a speaker can be misunderstood by an interpreter whose native tongue is not that of the speaker.

All this points to the need to re-examine the theory underlying AIIC's present language classification system. The entry into the European Union of a number of countries with languages that hitherto have not been widely used at international conferences, such as Czech, Serbo-Croat, Rumanian, Polish, Hungarian, etc., has led AIIC to launch a review into its language classification system. This may impact on the conference interpretation market, because it has implications for the association's admission procedures as well as the use of relay interpretation.

**Prof. Masaomi Kondo
Member of AIIC, Japan**

¹This is called 'relay interpretation'.

Searching for interpreters

A new Internet service was recently introduced to help conference organisers and businesses find conference interpreters. The Interp.Net portal was officially launched on 10 January 2001 by 12 groups of consultant interpreters, all members of AIIC.

The purpose of the portal is to give clients easy access to professional conference interpreters who organise teams of interpreters, who are members of AIIC and who follow the professional and ethical standards of the Association.

By accessing www.interp.net clients can find a group of consultant interpreters anywhere in the world. By clicking on the URL of a group, the viewer will get a description of the group and its services as well as the names and addresses of the group's members. Interp.Net members are committed to providing clients with prompt service, including information and quotes for teams of interpreters.

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The conference interpretation market in Japan

In Japan, interpreters are recruited mainly through agencies each time their services are needed. A large part of the market is dominated by the major agencies who operate as professional conference organizers, making maximum use of their logistics capability. They can offer an all-inclusive package ranging from interpretation services to travel arrangements, but the size of the agency means little in terms of its ability to provide good conference interpretation services. The specialized capabilities of small niche players should not be underestimated. In fact, the smaller agencies, especially the ones owned and run by conference interpreters, probably provide a better service, as they are more capable of judging the competence of individual conference interpreters.

In Japan as elsewhere, English, the lingua franca of the day, is in greatest demand. The number of Japanese-English interpreters far outstrips all other interpreters. Traditionally, French, Spanish and other European languages have filled the remaining top slots, but we are now seeing a rise in the demand for Asian languages, notably Korean and Chinese. This probably means that, despite the baggage of history and the frequent uproars caused by careless statements of unrepentant politicians, relations between Japan and its neighbors are improving. Only a handful of interpreters, however,



A moment of relaxation for interpreters at the COPAL Conference in Kota Kinabalu, Oct. 2000. (fr R to L) S. Mizne (Brazil), U. Schneider (Germany), I. Stegman (Brazil), A. Blackhurst (Portugal), A. Lanz (UK).

are capable of working with these "emerging" languages.

Barring large conventions, the demand for multilingual interpreting services in Japan is limited. This means that Japanese agencies lack experience in organizing interpretation for five or six booths, e.g. English, French, Russian, Chinese and Korean in addition to Japanese. Consultant interpreters overseas can

Smaller agencies, especially the ones owned and run by conference interpreters, probably provide a better service.

therefore play a useful role here by putting together teams of non-Japanese interpreters, as they have done at all the G-7/G-8 summit meetings of industrialized countries held in Japan to date.

The stagnant Japanese economy has had surprisingly little impact on the interpretation market so far, at least not in terms of business volume. Nevertheless, the market seems to be developing a dual

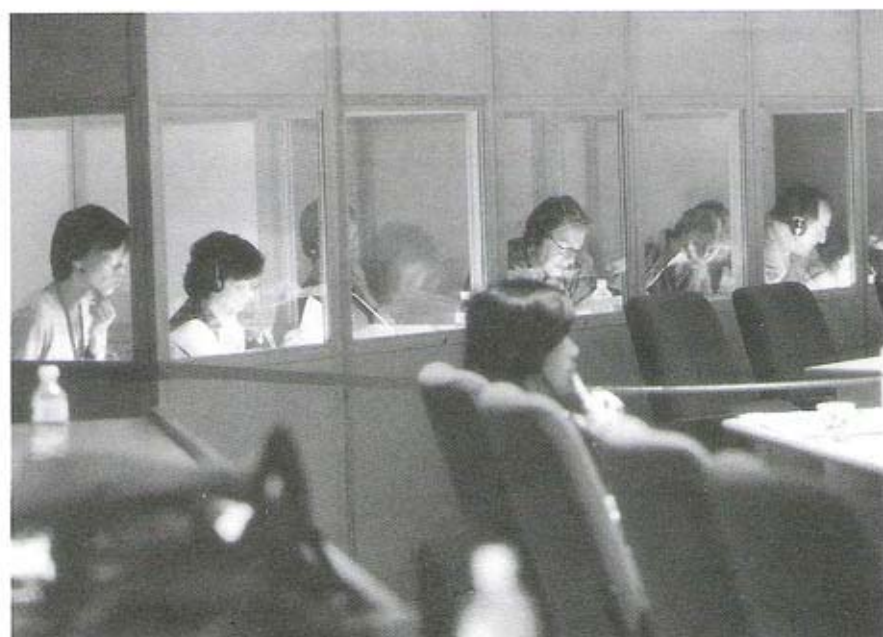
While a reasonable amount of price competition may contribute to a sound market, cutthroat price competition is suicidal.

structure: a premium market and a discount market. In the latter, stiff price competition seems to be the order of the day, with agencies offering previously unheard of heavily discounted package prices, with only one interpreter where a

minimum of two would be needed to assure quality of service. While a reasonable amount of price competition may contribute to a sound market, cutthroat price competition is suicidal, as competent interpreters decide to call it quits and younger people are not attracted to the profession.

Ultimately, a fair price is the best option. Competent interpreters ensure effective and, in the long run, the least costly **communication**, which is the purpose of any gathering.

Ken Yokota
Conference interpreter, Tokyo



Interpreters busy at work at an international conference using 4 languages in Taiwan, 2000.

TEAMS OF INTERPRETERS ORGANISED BY CIAP RECENTLY

Aug. 2000	Singapore	Daimler Chrysler: Project GO in dialog workshop
Sep. 2000	Melbourne	WEF: Europe - East Asia Economic Forum
Oct. 2000	Hong Kong	HK Democratic Foundation: 'Thinking about 2007' seminar
Oct. 2000	Macau	Seminar on Public Prosecutions & Judicial Matters
Oct. 2000	Kota Kinabalu	COPAL: International Cocoa Research Conference
Apr. 2001	Osaka	International Table Tennis Federation Assembly
May 2001	Kyongju	COTAL Asia-Latin America Tourism Conference
July 2001	Kuala Lumpur	TFNet: Tropical Fruits Network Special Assembly
Aug. 2001	Kathmandu	Education International Congress
Sep. 2001	Singapore	Intl.Federation of Pharmaceutics Congress
Oct. 2001	New Delhi	World Medical Association General Assembly
Oct. 2001	Bangkok	Codex Committee Meeting on Food Hygiene

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WHAT IS AIIC?

Founded in 1953, AIIC (Association Internationale des Interprètes de Conférence - International Association of Conference Interpreters) is the only worldwide association of professional conference interpreters. AIIC has over 2,500 members in 75 countries and is recognised by the United Nations, the World Bank, NATO, the European Union and many business organisations as the only representative of professional conference interpreters and the authoritative voice on matters of conference interpretation.

AIIC sets professional standards and working conditions accepted worldwide. Together with the International Organisation for Standardisation, AIIC's Technical and Health Committee has drawn up standards ISO 2603 for built-in booths and equipment for simultaneous interpretation and ISO 4043 for mobile booths for use in conference rooms without built-in facilities.

ASSOCIATION
INTERNATIONALE DES
INTERPRÈTES DE CONFÉRENCE

aiic

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WHAT IS CIAP?

Conference Interpreters Asia Pacific (CIAP) is a network of consultant interpreters, all members of AIIC, who live and work in the Asia-Pacific region. CIAP was established in 1990 to provide conference interpretation services to the growing conference industry in the region.

Its members advise conference organisers on language requirements, choice of conference venues, technical equipment, seating arrangements and so on, and recruit teams of interpreters suited to the needs of a conference.

CIAP associates can provide simultaneous interpretation teams for English, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, French, Spanish, German, Italian, Portuguese, Russian and other languages.

CIAP

CONFERENCE INTERPRETERS ASIA PACIFIC

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There are CIAP Associates in several cities in Asia-Pacific. For the consultant interpreter nearest to you, please see the list of names and contact numbers provided in this issue.

Website: www.ciap.net