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Police Interpreting by Semiprofessional Master of Translation and Interpreting Students in China—A Sociocultural Perspective



Mianjun Xu¹  , Tianyuan Zhao²  & Juntao Deng³ 

¹ Faculty of English Language and Culture, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou, P.R. China

² Graduate School of Translation and Interpreting, Beijing Foreign Studies University, Beijing, People's Republic of China

³ Vice Dean, School of Foreign Languages, Wuhan Institute of Technology, Wuhan, People's Republic of China

Abstract

This study aims to understand the characteristics, challenges, and problems of police interpreting by Master of Translation and Interpreting (MTI) students in China and the motivations and perceptions of the student interpreters involved. The research questions include: How do MTI students perceive police interpreting? Why do they participate in it? What are the challenges they face? And how can this practice be improved? The study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining a self-administered questionnaire survey with semi-structured interviews involving MTI students and police officers. The research is grounded in the sociocultural perspective on interpreting, emphasizing the influence of macro, meso, and micro-level factors in the interpreting process. The findings reveal that police interpreting in China is characterized by its urgent nature, long working hours, and reliance on English as a lingua franca. Student interpreters are motivated by financial gain, academic requirements, and personal interest, but face significant challenges, including legal knowledge requirements, language proficiency issues, and psychological pressure. The study concludes that while MTI students are crucial for police interpreting, there is a need for professionalization, improved training, and better working conditions. Limitations of the study include a lack of foreign nationals' perspectives and the limited number of interviewees.

Öz

Bu çalışma, Çin'deki Mütercim Tercümanlık Yüksek Lisansı (Master of Translation and Interpreting – MTI) öğrencilerinin polis çevirmenliği özellikleri, zorlukları ve sorunları ile bu süreçte yer alan öğrenci çevirmenlerin motivasyonlarını ve algılarını anlamayı amaçlamaktadır. Araştırma soruları şunları içerir: MTI öğrencileri polis çevirmenliğini nasıl algılıyor? Neden buna katılım sağlıyorlar? Karşılaştıkları zorluklar nelerdir? Ve bu uygulama nasıl iyileştirilebilir? Çalışma, MTI öğrencileri ve polis memurlarını kapsayan öz değerlendirmeli anketleri, yarı yapılandırılmış mülakatlarla birleştiren karma yöntem yaklaşımını benimsemektedir. Araştırma, çeviri sürecine makro, mezo ve mikro düzey faktörlerin etkisini vurgulayan sosyokültürel çeviri perspektifine dayanmaktadır. Bulgular, Çin'deki polis çevirmenliğinin acil niteliği, uzun çalışma saatleri ve İngilizcenin geçer dil (lingua franca) olarak kullanımına dayalı olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Öğrenci çevirmenler motivasyonlarını maddi kazanç, akademik gereksinimler ve kişisel ilgiden alsalar da, hukuki bilgi gereksinimleri, dil yeterliliği sorunları ve psikolojik baskı gibi önemli zorluklarla karşı karşıya gelmektedirler. Çalışma, MTI öğrencilerinin polis çevirmenliği için çok önemli olmalarına rağmen, profesyonelleşme, iyileştirilmiş eğitim ve daha iyi çalışma koşullarına ihtiyaç duyulduğu sonucuna varmaktadır. Çalışmanın kısıtlamaları arasında yabancı uyruklu kişilerin bakış açısının eksikliği ve görüşme yapılan kişi sayısının sınırlı olması bulunmaktadır.


Keywords

Master of Translation and Interpreting (MTI) · police interpreting in China · semiprofessional · student interpreter · sociocultural perspective



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 Corresponding author | Sorumlu Yazar: Mianjun Xu mianjunxu@263.net



Anahtar Kelimeler Mütercim Tercümanlık Yüksek Lisansı (MTI) · Çin'deki polis çevirmenliği · yarı-profesyonel; öğrenci çevirmenler · sosyokültürel bakış açısı

Introduction

Police interpreting refers to interpreting for police interrogations and police interviews (Hale 2007, 64). It is a subcategory of legal interpreting and a domain of community interpreting. Police interpreting serves interactions between officers of the police, the Customs, anti-smuggling bureaus, or other law enforcement institutions in scenarios outside the courtrooms on the one hand and suspects or victims on the other hand, excluding court interpreting in the strict sense (Berk-Seligson 2000; Pöllabauer 2006; Gamal 2012, 2014a, 2014b, 2017). Though both police and court interpreting are part of legal interpreting, the two differ in terms of participants, level of formality, privacy, goal of events, and system (Hale 2007, 66).

In countries where immigration is prevalent, police interpreting and interpreters have attracted extensive professional and scholarly attention, but in China, police interpreting is a relatively new phenomenon. With more frequent economic, cultural, and academic exchanges between China and the rest of the world, vast numbers of foreign nationals have toured or worked in China, among whom some may be involved in illegal entry, stay, work, gatherings, and dealings, so the need for police interpreting involving foreign nationals has kept increasing. As no official figure or existing literature reveals the status quo in Guangzhou, the situation in Shenzhen, a metropolis adjacent to and similar to Guangzhou will be used as a reference. Between 2014 and 2019, criminal cases involving foreign nationals included illegal immigration, theft, drug trafficking and/or manufacturing, dangerous driving, cross-border commodity and/or human smuggling, fraud, intentional injury, illegal stay, robbery, credit card fraud or purposeful impairment, disruption of public services, and provocation of troubles (Liu 2021). To maintain social order and fight against crimes, the police in major cities like Guangzhou often take sudden actions in public places where some foreign nationals are suspected of illegal gatherings or dealings. As a result, suspects are interrogated or interviewed by police officers before further actions can be taken. As most foreigners do not speak Mandarin Chinese or any Chinese dialect, interpreting is needed for police investigative interviewing, a right commonly seen in international practices and guaranteed by the Ministry of Public Security of the People's Republic of China (2020).

Although it is hard to obtain official figures, according to the police officers interviewed in this study, the majority of interpreters for sudden large-scale police actions in Guangzhou and other major cities in China are Master of Translation and Interpreting (MTI) students, referred to as trainee interpreters or semiprofessional interpreters because they are still being trained to become professional interpreters (Liu & Lei 2017). The term semiprofessional interpreter in the present study is slightly different from that used by Tipton and Furmanek (2016, 261), since the latter refers to semi-trained interpreters and is more likened to the nonprofessional interpreter. MTI students can be placed toward the professional end of the continuum of interpreter types discussed in Berk-Seligson (2009, 18). They may or may not have obtained professional accreditations, such as China Accreditation Test for Translators and Interpreters (CATTI) certificates. The CATTI examination structure comprises three sequential levels: basic (III), intermediate (II), and advanced (I), reflecting progressively higher standards of translation proficiency. Candidates can take translation or interpreting tests, or both. All MTI education institutions require that their students sit for CATTI II, but do not compel them to pass it. In Guangzhou, MTI students for police interpreting are usually hired on a "first come, first served" basis via Twitter-like social media such as QQ or WeChat groups to communicate part-time jobs available to them. Apart from their identity as MTI students, the applicants do not need other proof of their qualifications.



Compared with other countries, police interpreting in China has several sociocultural characteristics. First, as China is a non-immigrant country, police interpreting is usually between local police officers and foreign nationals instead of between local police officers and citizens, immigrants, or refugees of foreign origins. Secondly, police interpreting is often needed for sudden large-scale police actions, requiring several or even a large number of interpreters simultaneously. Third, the language combination is predominantly between Chinese and English rather than between Chinese and the native languages of the interviewees, who may have come from various countries and regions and have limited proficiency in English. Fourth, when police interpreting is needed, law enforcement institutions usually commission translation and language service companies to hire interpreters. Such a practice differs from other countries, such as Australia, where police interpreting is generally outsourced to freelance, accredited interpreters (Gamal 2014a, 81). Because of its peculiar yet important nature resulting from China's unique sociocultural contexts, police interpreting in China deserves further study.

Literature Review

As an important domain of community interpreting, police interpreting has produced an array of literature over the past decades, primarily comprising the following categories. First, some scholars offer a general introduction to police interpreting (e.g., Herráez & Rubio 2008; Fowler et al. 2015; Gamal 2014a, 2014b, 2017). Second, some have dealt with performance-related issues, including such topics as the linguistic features of original utterances, problems and challenges caused by the use of untrained interpreters, factors affecting the impartiality of interpreting, and risks and benefits of police interpreting (e.g., Krouglov 1999; Berk-Seligson 2000, 2009; Komter 2005; Nakane 2007, 2014; Heydon & Lai 2013; Lai & Mulayim 2014; Goodman-Delahunty & Martschuk 2016; Lee 2017; Hale et al. 2020; Howes 2019; Tipton 2019; Wilson & Walsh 2019). Other topics such as ethics (Mulayim & Lai 2017), gender and politeness (Nakane 2008), the myth of the interpreter's invisibility (Nakane 2009), the role of silence (Nakane 2011), and the pragmatic competence of police interpreters (Gallai 2013, 2017) are also discussed. Third, others have called for collaboration between police officers and interpreters, particularly the need to train them to cooperate (Laster & Taylor 1994; Russell 2000; Perez & Wilson 2004; Lee & Huh 2021). Fourth, another research focus is police interpreter training. For example, Russell (2002), Mulayim et al. (2014), Hale et al. (2018), Salaets and De Pooter (2015), Howes (2018), and Norton (2020) discuss the training of police interpreters and offer some suggestions for its future development. Other explorations include Dhimi et al. (2017), who report how they developed an information sheet to aid interpreters in rapport building in police interviews, and Monteoliva-García (2020), who discusses standby interpreting in which the police interpreters were involved only when language barriers hindered the monolingual communication between the interviewer and the interviewee. This brief review is far from exhaustive because the vast literature is beyond the scope of this study.

Recent studies have further delved into the nuances of police and legal interpreting, offering valuable insights applicable to the Chinese context. For instance, studies on interpreter-mediated police interviews in Asian countries, such as Lee (2017) and Lee & Huh (2021), have emphasized the significance of cultural sensitivity in communication. These studies highlight how cultural differences can impact the interpreting process, from how suspects express themselves to the expectations of police interpreters, paralleling the challenges faced in Chinese police interpreting, which aligns with the growing trend of using technology to enhance the quality and efficiency of interpreting services globally.

Despite these advances in police and legal interpreting research, some gaps deserve further study. First, police interpreting in the Chinese context remains understudied. Second, there are few empirical studies on semiprofessional interpreters or student interpreters. Third, studies on police interpreting by semipro-

professional interpreters from the sociocultural perspective are even scarcer. For these reasons, the present study tries to address the following research questions:

- (1) How do MTI students perceive police interpreting?
- (2) Why are MTI students (not) involved in police interpreting?
- (3) What challenges do the student interpreters face in police interpreting?
- (4) What are the existing problems of police interpreting? How can police interpreting be improved?

To answer these questions, this study uses a self-administered questionnaire survey and semi-structured interviews involving MTI students and police officers from a sociocultural perspective.

Research setting

As police interpreting is an interpreter-mediated social interaction between two parties in an imbalanced power relationship, relevant research should consider specific sociocultural factors. As pointed out by Pym (2006, 3-4), in community interpreting or dialogue interpreting, there has been a growing focus on mediators and social contexts rather than the texts themselves, so questions such as “who is doing the mediation, for whom, with what networks, and with what social effects” are of greater interest. In other words, interpreting does not happen in a vacuum, instead, both linguistic and extralinguistic factors influence the process and product of interpreting. Pöchhacker (2006, 215-232) suggests the social turn of interpreting studies. He maintains that interpreting studies should not only focus on the cognitive processing of interpreting, but also on the roles of interpreting in discursal interactions and the identity, role, and power of interpreters as mediators, as well as social, professional, and institutional aspects of interpreting activities under the macro sociocultural contexts, such as professional issues like professional qualifications and professional ethics.

Based on the above sociocultural perspective on interpreting, this study suggests that in addition to process and product analyses, the specific social, economic, cultural, and political contexts in which police interpreting happens deserve equal attention. In this study, the sociocultural factors of police interpreting can be discussed from the macro, meso, and micro levels, which are interwoven and interrelated. However, for convenience, they are expounded separately.

First, at the macro-national level, China is a non-immigrant country, so it seldom witnesses the scenarios of police interpreting common in countries with many immigrants, such as between police officers and immigrants, asylum seekers, or refugees. Police interpreting in China is for sudden large-scale police actions involving foreign nationals, a phenomenon that has become more prevalent in major cities in China. In contrast to conference interpreting, community interpreting receives much less attention in the Chinese context. This is reflected in the fact that there have been no specially designed accreditation tests for police interpreters in China or a stable team of professional in-house police interpreters, so they turn to MTI students when the need for police interpreting arises. MTI student police interpreters differ from ad hoc interpreters who are untrained bilinguals, such as fellow police officers, interviewees’ family members, friends, or compatriots who speak the same language or vernacular as the interrogated. They also differ from in-house or freelance professional interpreters in that although they have received some formal professional training in translation and interpreting, they may not have acquired the practical knowledge and experience of real-world interpreting, particularly police interpreting. In China, English predominantly serves as the lingua franca for police interpreting, though it is not the native language of any participant.

Second, at the meso-institutional level, there are disparities in educational and social resources available to them. In Eastern, more economically developed coastal cities, there is more frequent international communication in various fields, leading to a greater need for interpreting; in less economically developed inland regions, the situation is the opposite. In addition, students in more prestigious institutions with a

longer MTI-running history are also better positioned than their counterparts in later-comer institutions. The students in the present study enjoy the privilege of studying at a prestigious foreign-language university, one of the first institutions to run the MTI program in Guangzhou, where there are abundant opportunities for police interpreting.

Third, at the micro-individual level, sociocultural factors such as academic requirements, financial needs, peer influences, and personal interests are also at play. For one thing, MTI students must complete 400 hours of real-world or mimic interpreting and write a dissertation that can be an academic paper, a survey report, an internship report, or an interpreting practice report. Police interpreting experience enables them to gain practice hours and gather materials for their dissertations. In addition, as police interpreting scenarios are usually inaccessible to outsiders, their mysterious nature may arouse students' interest in participation. Moreover, although it is common practice for parents in China to provide financial support to their adult children who are studying at university, an increasing number of postgraduate students have chosen to be more self-reliant by doing part-time jobs. The sociocultural factors at the macro, meso, and micro levels collaboratively affect police interpreting in China.

Research Methodology

To explore police interpreting by MTI student interpreters in China from a sociocultural perspective, the authors conducted a case study with quantitative and qualitative data collected from two sources: a self-administered questionnaire survey and semi-structured interviews.

The self-administered questionnaire aims to collect quantitative data. It targets MTI students at University G, one of the first universities to offer MTI education in China. The University runs both interpreting and translation tracks. MTI students in the interpreting track must take various general-purpose and domain-specific interpreting courses; those in the translation track have limited access to interpreting courses. More specifically, in the MTI curriculum of the University, police interpreting is not offered as a stand-alone course, but just as part of the court interpreting course.

Based on the existing literature and the analyses of the 23 MTI dissertations on police interpreting practices on China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), the largest and most comprehensive database for journal papers, periodical articles, Master's and doctoral dissertations, proceedings, annals, and a lot more, a questionnaire consisting of 30 questions was designed on wenjuan.com, an online questionnaire platform. It was distributed in November 2023 via WeChat and QQ groups to MTI students of the School of Interpreting and Translation Studies of University G. The first 29 questions are single-answer or multiple-answer ones and the last an open one, covering the respondent's demographic information; experiences of interpreting in general and police interpreting in particular; perceptions of characteristics, challenges, interpreter roles, and assessment of and suggestions for police interpreting; and primary consideration for (not) making police interpreting a profession. Ninety-eight responses, including 13 (13.3%) males and 85 (86.7%) females, were collected and were all valid. The respondents' demographic information is shown in [Table 1](#). As the questionnaire is part of a larger research project, some responses are not reported in detail in this paper.

Table 1

Respondents' demographic information

Items		No.	%
Respondents Total	Male	13	13.3
	female	85 98	86.7
Language combination	Chinese-English	85	86.7



Items	No.	%
Chinese-Korean	9	9.2
Chinese-Japanese	2	2.0
Chinese-French	2	2.0
Taking interpreting courses during undergraduate years	75	76.5
Without taking interpreting courses during undergraduate years	23	23.5
Taking law-related courses during undergraduate years	17	17.4
Without taking law-related courses during undergraduate years	81	82.6
CATTI-III Translation	39	40.0
CATTI-III Interpreting	9	9.2
CATTI-II Translation	29	29.6
CATTI-II Interpreting	7	7.1
Shanghai Intermediate Interpreting Certificate	2	2.0
Shanghai Advanced Interpreting Certificate	3	3.1
Judicial Interpreting Certificate	2	2.0
None	35	35.7
Yes	76	77.6
No	22	22.4
16 times or more	13	13.3
11-15 times	3	3.0
6-10 times	9	9.1
1-5 times	51	52.0
Liaison Interpreting	69	70.4
Consecutive Interpreting	28	28.6
Simultaneous Interpreting	6	6.1

The semi-structured interviews, though small-scaled, try to reveal personal insights and narratives denied by questionnaire surveys. The interviewees were selected by convenience sampling, i.e., they were accessible to the researchers and willing to be interviewed on the premise of anonymity. With informed consent and clarifications of their right in the interviews, two police officers and five MTI students with experience in police interpreting in Guangzhou were interviewed by the first author in January 2024, either face-to-face or via WeChat voice call. All the interviewees pledged frankness and neutrality in their opinions and observations.

The authors of this paper strictly followed the research ethics by briefing the interviewees on the objectives of the research topic and by promising voluntariness and anonymity before the interviews. The authors have not obtained any institutional approval because there are no institutional regulations concerning individuals' participation in academic research. To protect their privacy and anonymity, the interviewees will be referred to by letters (see Table 2). All interviews were conducted in Chinese, each lasting about 20-30 minutes. With the interviewees' approval, the interviews were recorded using an automatic transcribing recording pen and checked manually later.

Table 2
Interviewees' Profile

Name	Gender	Position	Age	Times involved in police interpreting
A	M	Police officer	The late 40s	Over 100
B	F	Police officer	The late-20s	About 40
C	F	MTI student	The early 20s	3
D	F	MTI student	The early 20s	1
E	M	MTI student	The mid-20s	6
F	M	MTI student	The early 20s	4
G	F	MTI student	The mid-20s	2

We applied different methods to analyze the quantitative and qualitative data. We calculated the absolute numbers and the percentages of the questionnaire items with Excel software for quantitative data. For the interviews, we read the transcriptions individually following thematic coding before discussing them together. We tried to associate the collected data with the sociocultural contexts to which MTI students are exposed, as we mentioned in the previous section, the sociocultural factors at the macro, meso, and micro levels combined influenced students' perception and decision-making. Whenever a disagreement occurred, we re-read the transcriptions to clarify any ambiguity and sent them to the interviewees for member check.

The two types of data complement and triangulate each other to present a more comprehensive and convincing picture of police interpreting in Guangzhou, a representative of China.

Results and Discussions

This section presents and discusses the results from the questionnaire survey and the semi-structured interviews, namely, perceived characteristics of police interpreting, students' (non)participation, major challenges, and existing problems and suggestions for improvement from the sociocultural perspective, which views this specific field of study from the macro, meso, and micro levels.

Perceived characteristics of police interpreting

In the questionnaire survey, the respondents were asked to choose all characteristics typical of police interpreting. The results are shown in [Table 3](#).

Table 3
Respondents' perceived characteristics of police interpreting

Characteristics	Choices	Percentage
Urgent nature of tasks	49	50.0%
Long working hours and indefinite duration	39	40.0%
Limited language proficiency of the interviewee(s)	38	38.8%
Tremendous psychological pressure for interpreters	32	32.7%
High professional requirements	30	30.7%
Noisy working environment	15	15.3%
No idea of the characteristics of police interpreting	24	24.5%

Among the listed characteristics, the "urgent nature of tasks" received the highest recognition (50.0%). This finding aligns with previous research by Berk-Seligson (2000), who noted that police interpreting often occurs in high-pressure, time-sensitive situations. In the Chinese context, the sudden large-scale police

actions further exacerbate this urgency. Interviewee C stated, “Once I had to rush to the site within 30 minutes after I got the notice, without any preparation. I had no idea what was to happen. It was stressful.”

It is worth special attention that only 30% of respondents acknowledged high professional requirements. Surprisingly, nearly a quarter of the respondents had no idea about the characteristics of police interpreting. The interviewed police officers and student interpreters further elaborated on the listed characteristics.

The sociocultural context can be used to interpret the surveyed results. First and foremost, police actions are usually prompt and urgent, leaving police interpreters little or no time for pre-task preparations. It is often the case that once they are assigned the interpreting task, the student interpreters are taken to a certain place and briefed on the nature and requirements of the task. They can surf the internet with their smartphones for terms relevant to the upcoming situation. However, what they are engaged in may differ tremendously from what they have been told previously. The fact that police interpreting is often required for sudden, large-scale police actions can account for such inconsistency. Releasing key information in advance can lead to leakage and failure of their actions.

Second, the sudden and unexpected nature of police interpreting in China often makes the duration of interviews unpredictable, and the environment noisy and hectic. As police interviews usually occur at unusual times and places, the interviewed foreign nationals are often uneasy, annoyed, or even hysterical, creating a noisy and irritating atmosphere for all parties concerned. Sometimes, the nervous breakdown of the interviewed foreign nationals makes the student interpreters uncomfortable and affects their interpreting performance.

As Student D recalled,

“I got the interpreting opportunity with 19 other MTI students through the WeChat group, which offers information on part-time jobs one day in advance. We were first informed that it was about illegal entries. I just had enough time to look up some related terms. At about 6:00 p.m. the next day, we were carried to a nightclub where many foreigners gathered. It turned out to be a police action for reported drug-taking. We were divided into 10 groups, two in each. My partner and I followed two police officers and 10 foreign suspects to a detention center. The investigative interview started at approximately 10 p.m. and lasted until 8 a.m. the following day. We two took turns interpreting for the police officers and the suspects. We didn’t sleep, so we felt hungry and sleepy late at night and in the early morning. With the crying, pleading, and shouting of the suspects, my mind wandered from time to time, and I had to try hard to remain sober. (All the direct quotations in this study are translated from Chinese.)”

This narrative underscores the urgent and chaotic nature of police interpreting, corroborating findings with Nakane (2014) on the psychological toll of interpreter-mediated police work.

Third, using English as the lingua franca of the interview, rather than the native languages of the interviewed foreign nationals, renders limited language proficiency another distinctive characteristic of police interpreting in China. This echoes related research, such as Hale (2007), who emphasizes the importance of using the interviewee’s native language for accurate communication. However, in the Chinese scenario, though the interviewed foreign nationals are informed initially that if they prefer to be interviewed in their mother tongue, they have the right to do so (The Ministry of Public Security, 2020), in reality, the urgent nature of the situation prevents them from finding interpreters that can speak their native languages in time. Moreover, interpreters who can speak foreign languages other than English, in particular, less commonly used vernaculars or dialects, are in short supply because most Chinese learn English as their first foreign language from primary to tertiary education, and most MTI programs are offered between Chinese and English. This situation jeopardizes the interpreters and raises concerns about the quality of communication and the potential for misunderstanding.

Student interpreters' participation in police interpreting

The police officers and the student interpreters offer diverse opinions regarding the latter's involvement in police interpreting due to their differences in identity, expectations, perceptions, social status, and job responsibilities.

To the police officers, investigations of foreign nationals are part of their routine work, so they expected student interpreters to be facilitators and co-workers who could help them obtain the necessary information as soon as possible. As police officer A suggested,

"I hope the interpreter can discover whether the suspect is telling the truth or lying. If it is the latter case, I hope they can ask follow-up questions to delve deeper into the matter. It can save us so much time. I don't have time to listen to the suspect's long and tedious stories that have nothing to do with the interrogation."

The perceptions of police officers, shaped by their job responsibilities, are similar to those of their counterparts in existing literature (e.g., Nakane 2009, 2014; Howes 2019). The police officer's expectations of interpreters to take an active role in the investigation, such as asking follow-up questions, contrast with the traditional belief that interpreters should remain neutral and be mere conduits of messages (e.g., Berk-Seligson 1990; Morris 1995; Hale 2007). This difference in perception reflects the unique dynamics of Chinese police interpreting, where the urgency of obtaining information may override the traditional ethical norms of interpreting.

The police officers thought the accessibility of MTI students was another reason for their participation. With 316 higher education institutions offering MTI programs nationwide, MTI students are ready reserves for emergency police interpreting. In addition, as the tasks are often carried out at irregular hours, few, except for the young and energetic student interpreters, can shoulder the responsibilities.

In addition, engaging student interpreters in large-scale police interrogations is out of economic consideration. The police force does not have sufficient in-house professional interpreters for sudden large-scale police actions, and hiring professional freelance interpreters can cost a lot of money. By comparison, hiring student interpreters is much more practical economically.

For the 27 questionnaire respondents who claimed to have had police interpreting experiences, the most popular reason for engaging in police interpreting is earning some extra money (24 responses), followed by enriching interpreting experience (21 responses), practicing interpreting skills (18 responses), satisfying curiosity (14 responses), and completing course requirements (5 responses). The student interviewees offered similar reasons. These options show that their participation was prompted by personal and institutional factors, involving economic, academic, and professional considerations, with the economic one being the top reason.

In China, MTI students pay an annual tuition fee of tens of thousands of RMB (about US\$10,000), which can be a handsome sum for some disadvantaged families. Though they also enjoy a monthly subsidy of several hundred RMB from the government, it cannot cover all their living expenses. Therefore, apart from family support, part-time jobs, such as police interpreting, present viable outlets of income.

The remaining options are related to academic and professional considerations. The more they engage in real-world interpreting, the more experienced and qualified they will become, and the more employable they will be upon graduation. In addition, personal interest and curiosity also contribute to students' participation in police interpreting.

Perceived challenges of police interpreting

The perceived challenges of police interpreting also show sociocultural influences. Of the nine challenges of police interpreting summarized from the existing literature (e.g., Hale 2007) and the 23 students' interpreting practice reports, the respondents were asked to select the four most relevant ones. The results are shown in Table 4.

Table 4
Respondents' perceived challenges of police interpreting

Challenges	Choices	Percentage
Requiring legal knowledge	77	78.6%
The strong accent of the interrogated	41	41.8%
Requiring high language proficiency	40	40.8%
No time for pre-task preparations	39	40.0%
Considerable psychological pressure	32	32.7%
Mental fatigue and distraction from working long hours	21	21.4%
Being required to do other tasks	19	19.4%
Noisy working environment	14	14.3%
Physical breakdown due to working long hours	13	13.3%
Others	3	3.1%

The top challenge—requiring legal knowledge (78.6% of respondents)—underscores the importance of specialized expertise in police interpreting. This aligns with research by Berk-Seligson (2009) and Hale et al. (2018), who emphasize the need for interpreters to have a solid understanding of legal concepts and procedures to ensure accurate interpreting in legal settings. Students' awareness of the importance of domain-specific knowledge may be attributed to their interpreting education and direct or indirect involvement in police interpreting.

However, MTI students may not be familiar with China's legal system, making the challenge even more pronounced. Interviewee E shared, "I felt overwhelmed during my first police interpreting task because I didn't know much legal terminology, and I was worried about making mistakes." This highlights the urgent need for targeted legal training for student interpreters, in line with recommendations of existing literature on interpreter training (Russell 2002; Mulayim et al. 2014).

The second and third challenges are the strong accents of the interrogated (41 responses, 41.8%) and requiring high language proficiency (40 responses, 40.8%) respectively. These two options are related to the common practice of using English as the lingua franca for police interpreting in China, a phenomenon that deserves further study separately. The failure to use the native language of the interrogated and the student interpreters' unsatisfactory language proficiency may bring extra burdens to the interrogated, leading to comprehension problems and further complicating the interrogations. Language-related issues in this study echo the concerns raised in previous studies on police interpreting (e.g., Nakane 2007).

The fourth challenge was no time for pre-task preparations, recognized by 39 (40.0%) respondents. The urgent nature of police actions made it hard, if not impossible, for student interpreters to make short-term preparations. For confidentiality, the pre-task briefing, if any, usually concealed the real actions to be taken. More often than not, the student interpreters had no idea what was expected of them, let alone make well-targeted preparations.

Other challenges were also recognized by some respondents (see Table 4) and confirmed by the student interviewees. For example, the connotations with suspects made student interpreters concerned about their

safety, as most of them had never stayed so close to someone suspected of committing certain crimes. “Will the interviewee assault me physically or do anything abnormal?” The three female student interviewees all expressed similar concerns. Such worries might distract them and affect their interpreting performance, especially if the student interpreter is more introverted and vulnerable. All the interviewees admitted that before their first police interpreting experience, they had no idea of what the situation would be like and how they could prepare themselves psychologically and emotionally.

Student G described her interpreting experience in the janitor’s room of a detention center:

“I sat beside a young policewoman in her twenties, facing two unhandcuffed suspects, while two security guards stood two meters away. The suspects, outraged about being detained, shouted and yelled angrily in a language incomprehensible to me. The sense of insecurity prompted me to provide additional information not provided by the police officer. When the police officer answered the suspects’ questions hesitantly, I used the affirmative to avoid further annoying the suspects. By so doing, I was plunged into self-criticism for violating the fidelity rule of interpreting.”

G’s narrative shows the agony she experienced due to the disparities between classroom instructions and real-world scenarios, illustrating an ethical dilemma confronting semiprofessionals, a theme noted in Angelelli’s (2004) work on interpreter visibility.

The police’s expectation of student interpreters to shoulder extra tasks or play different roles was another challenge for student interpreters. The student interviewees mentioned their dilemmas in determining their roles. Though the code of ethics for interpreters had taught them to remain integral, neutral, and impartial during the interpreting process, they acknowledged that they had difficulty assuming an invisible role as a conduit, microphone, voice box, mouthpiece, echo, language converter, bilingual ghost, or non-person in the interpreting process (see Shackman 1985; Wadensjö 1998a, 1998b; Roy 2000; Angelelli 2001a, 2001b). This tension reflects a fundamental debate in interpreting studies regarding role boundaries. The conduit model (Reddy 1979; cited in Roy 2000) posits that interpreters should function as neutral linguistic channels, strictly avoiding intervention or visibility. This traditional view is rooted in legal and institutional settings where impartiality equals fidelity to the source message (Morris 1995; Hale 2007). However, critical scholars argue that absolute neutrality is unattainable, as interpreters inevitably exercise subjectivity through utterance filtering, turn-taking management, and even ethical intervention (Angelelli 2004).

The police’s additional expectation further complicated the balance, forcing students to navigate between professional ideals and pragmatic constraints. As a result, they took up volatile roles, such as direct participants, facilitators, and advocates of the interviewers or the interviewees. They took sides sometimes with the police and sometimes with the interviewed foreign nationals. Sometimes they also played the role of comforters. All the student interviewees mentioned their emotional tension before and during the interpreting tasks.

Another aspect pertinent to students’ confusion about their expected roles is the confused use of first-, second-, or third-person pronouns. In their classroom instructions, they had been taught to use first-person pronouns to refer to the speaking party and second-person ones to the listening party. However, the student interpreters, feeling uncomfortable representing any party, tended to use third-person pronouns to refer to the speaking party, which was consistent with the findings of Bot (2005). In other words, they were more inclined to use indirect quotations than direct ones. As Student C mentioned, “When the police officer said ‘We did this for a certain reason’ in Chinese, I interpreted it as ‘The police officer said that they did that for a certain reason’ in English because I desperately wanted to let the investigated foreigner know that I was not part of the police.”

These results show the sociocultural influences on MTI students and confirm that challenges come from issues related to language, context, participants, culture, and system (Hale 2007, 138). Unlike ad hoc interpreters with little or no knowledge about the theory and practice of police interpreting or professional ones with rich experience, police interpreters in the present study were trained theoretically and practically to become professional interpreters. Their perceptions of the challenges of police interpreting are shaped by their educational background, the unique social context in which police interpreting takes place, including the nature of police investigations, participants, the use of English as the lingua franca, the expected and unexpected roles of interpreters, the police officers' lack of concern about the physical and mental well-being of the student interpreters and a lot more.

Problems with police interpreting

According to the results of the questionnaire survey and the interviews, problems with police interpreting manifest themselves at the macro, meso, and micro levels involving sociocultural factors. At the macro-national level, police interpreting in China struggles to gain sufficient academic, professional, and industrial recognition and establish itself as an independent field of study.

First, there is no specially designed accreditation for police interpreting in China. In contrast to developed countries, where interpreters must pass rigorous examinations to practice in legal settings, China lacks specific certification requirements for police interpreting. Even the general-purpose CATTI certificates are not mandatory for police interpreting. In the present study, the MTI-student identity was the sole criterion for application and selection, highlighting the lack of professional standards.

Second, compared with other types of interpreting, literature on police interpreting is still scarce in the Chinese context, though the increasing demand calls for further exploration of this special field. Except for *Policing English Interpretation Course* (Pan et al. 2023), few other textbooks for police interpreting are available in the market to guide police interpreting training, leaving educators and students with limited learning materials. This lack of research and educational resources further hinders the professional development of police interpreters and the advancement of the field.

Third, the need for professionalization of police interpreting has not been widely acknowledged, reflected by the fact that there are no stable in-house professional interpreters available when large numbers of interpreters are needed at the same time, so student interpreters, namely, semiprofessional interpreters rather than accredited professional ones have been used, which runs counter to characteristics of the professionalization of interpreters (Chai & Zhang 2006; Bao 2007, Xie 2013, 2014; Liu & Lei 2017).

At the meso-institutional level, there are also signs of inadequacies. On the one hand, the interpreter selection process was somewhat random and convenience-based, generally through translation and language service companies entrusted by the police, without requiring students to demonstrate their interpreting competence, such as holding CATTI certificates. The student interpreters were often hired on a one-off basis, which was not conducive to professionalizing police interpreters or maintaining professional standards.

The police officers were not trained to work with interpreters, much less care about their physical and psychological needs and pressures. They also expected student interpreters to assume extra roles and shoulder additional responsibilities such as being interrogators and coworkers, which runs against the professional ethics of interpreters. The students often had to work irregular hours on end in some unusual places, subjected to nervous breakdowns and potential physical attacks by the interrogated.

Such unpredictability can be challenging and daunting since it raises issues of workflow management, working conditions, and pay (Tipton & Furmanek 2016, 38), directly affecting their willingness to choose

police interpreting as their future career. The low remuneration to student police interpreters also dampened their enthusiasm for further participation or full-time police interpreting.

On the other hand, the student interpreters had not been trained professionally, mentally, or emotionally to handle high-stakes crisis scenarios. Existing literature highlights that interpreters in crisis settings frequently face acute psychological stressors, including vicarious trauma, ethical distress, and role overload (Doherty et al. 2010; Bontempo & Malcolm 2012; Valero-Garcés 2016). For instance, in emergency communication, interpreters often encounter graphic descriptions of violence, emotionally charged narratives, or life-threatening situations, which may trigger anxiety, burnout, or even post-traumatic symptoms (Roy 2000). Without proper mental preparedness and emotional resilience training, student interpreters—as seen in our study—struggle to compartmentalize these experiences, potentially compromising both their well-being and interpreting accuracy (Pöchhacker 2019; Lai & Heydon 2015).

Furthermore, the lack of structured debriefing mechanisms or institutional support exacerbates these challenges (Bancroft et al. 2013). While professional interpreters in crisis contexts may develop coping strategies over time, student interpreters are particularly vulnerable due to their limited exposure and training gaps in self-care protocols. Though most of the surveyed MTI students of University G had taken both practical and theoretical interpreting courses, and some majored in legal interpreting, their institution did not offer any specific training in police interpreting, not to mention any psychological and emotional guidance for interpreting in potentially precarious scenarios.

As MTI students often assume police interpreting tasks voluntarily without informing their course instructors or supervisors, the interpreting process and products are not sufficiently supervised or monitored, except when the transcriptions are used as objects of analysis for their dissertations. It reveals that the same problems of lack of supervision revealed by Benmaman (1998, 182) persist.

At the micro-individual level, problems of police interpreting in China are related to the interpreters' educational background, work experience, language proficiency, legal knowledge, and expectations for their future careers. Most MTI students in University G or other MTI institutions studied English-related programs for their undergraduate degrees with no or little real-world working experience, let alone doing police interpreting. Most of them had not taken any courses in forensic English, which made the interpreting task more daunting. With increasing competition and unpredictability in the job market, more and more students choose to become school teachers, civil servants, or other jobs that guarantee stable incomes. As a result, few students in the present study were willing to pursue careers in police interpreting. Once personal reasons, such as completing course requirements, satisfying curiosity, or gathering materials for dissertations, are catered for, MTI students may lose their further interest in police interpreting, be it part-time or full-time.

The unclear role expectations from police officers violate the ethical norms of interpreting and put the interpreters in difficult positions, potentially compromising the fairness and integrity of police investigations. Moreover, the lack of support for interpreters' well-being, both physical and mental, is concerning. Long working hours, high psychological pressure, and exposure to potentially dangerous situations adversely affect student interpreters.

Suggestions for police interpreting

To address the above problems with police interpreting, the following suggestions are put forward at the macro, meso, and micro levels, respectively.

At the macro-national level, measures include the following. First, the accreditation of police interpreters should be put on the agenda. This can be done by aligning it with the existing CATTI system. Candidates

aspiring to become police interpreters should take additional tests, including legal knowledge and physical and mental fitness to work under pressure for prolonged durations, in addition to the normal CATTI subjects.

Second, it is essential to establish police interpreter pools at the local, national, and even international levels by translator and interpreter associations, MTI institutions, and the police to maintain relatively stable interpreter teams. The police interpreter pools can ensure that when the need for police interpreting arises, qualified interpreters can be quickly secured, especially when involving online or remote interpreting and requiring interpreters for languages other than English.

Over the past decades, remote interpreting, such as telephone and video-conference, has become an alternative to face-to-face police interpreting (Tipton & Furmanek 2016, 64-68). It has been more mature since the COVID-19 outbreak. The interpreter pools are also expected to assume expanded responsibilities in training, recommending, and contacting relevant people. In this regard, China can learn from the US National Language Service Corps (NLSC) (<https://www.nlscorps.org/>).

According to their language proficiency and professional training, interpreters can sign up for police interpreting tasks that suit them and choose their service time and forms. The interpreter pools should also train their members regularly and irregularly to keep them updated and networked to ensure their quality and availability. Simultaneously, the government should allocate more funding to support research and develop textbooks and other educational materials.

At the meso-institutional level, efforts can be made to enhance research, collaboration, and education. First, different sectors, including MTI institutions, translation and interpreting associations, law societies, and the police can join hands to explore further the characteristics of police interpreting, the merits and demerits of student police interpreters, and the specific problems and challenges they may encounter so that more relevant and better targeted academic and professional guidance can be provided. Large-scale surveys of stakeholders, including interpreters, police officers, and foreign nationals, can be conducted to understand the overall situation.

Second, MTI institutions and the police should enhance communication and collaboration (cf. Salaets & de Pooter 2015). The former can establish internship bases at the latter, and police officers can familiarize student interpreters with the procedure and specific requirements of police interpreting. The two sides can also build regular online and offline communicative mechanisms, channels, and platforms.

Third, MTI institutions should enhance the training of MTI students and police officers. Joint training courses could be offered to both police officers and student interpreters to form a collaborative, ethical, and trusting partnership between them, as suggested by Perez and Wilson (2004), Salaets and de Pooter (2015), Norton (2020), and Lee and Huh (2021).

Both police interpreters and police officers require professional training to work effectively. Police officers should understand the working mechanism of interpreting and the potential psychological and professional pressure of interpreters, and learn to establish a good rapport with them. If conditions permit, police interpreting scenarios can be video-recorded for detailed analyses of linguistic, extralinguistic, and paralinguistic features, including patterns, quirks, and inadequacies.

Interviewing police officers should also enhance their foreign language proficiency, particularly listening and speaking, to ensure a better understanding of the interviewees and direct communication. In that case, they may only need interpreters for stand-by interpreting, a practice discussed by Monteoliva-García (2020). Direct communication between the police interviewer and the interviewed foreign national(s) can increase the efficiency of police interviewing and avoid interpreters' dilemmas between assuming undesirable roles as (co-)investigators and maintaining neutrality.

To reduce or eliminate student interpreters' professional, ethical, psychological, and emotional stress when carrying out police interpreting, MTI institutions should offer more professional training courses such as professional ethics, criminal psychology, public relations, and interpersonal communication; as well as obtaining more psychological and emotional support from specialized counseling organizations of the university and society. Before and during the interpreting tasks, they should provide the student police interpreters with more guidance for professional and psychological preparations. They should also offer professional rehabilitation treatment to students who have suffered severe trauma from the interpreting experience.

Moreover, the fact that most police interpreting in China takes place in Chinese and English rather than in Chinese and the native language of the interviewed foreign nationals calls for more MTI interpreting programs of other language combinations to guarantee the legitimate rights of speakers of less commonly used languages and to comply with the international practice of providing interpreting in their native language.

At the micro-individual level, more incentives and training are also needed. The perceived challenges discussed above can hinder students' willingness to participate further and their decision to become full-time police interpreters. Only when they can prepare themselves better academically, professionally, and psychologically can they join in police interpreting more willingly and regularly. Of course, all these can only be fulfilled with joint efforts at the macro, meso, and micro levels. By enhancing social status, working conditions, pay, and training, police interpreting can attract more qualified interpreters and improve overall performance.

Finally, technology-enhanced interpreting devices, such as translation Apps and voice translator devices, should be incorporated into police interpreting to reduce or eliminate the dependence on human interpreters. For example, interpreter management systems like Primaxis (primax.com) can be established to dynamically align police's needs with interpreter resources such as credentials, time available, and expertise.

Conclusion

This study analyzes police interpreting by MTI student interpreters in Guangzhou, China, from a socio-cultural perspective through a questionnaire survey and semi-structured interviews. The findings reveal that police interpreting in China is characterized by its urgent nature, long working hours, and reliance on English as a lingua franca, which aligns with previous studies by Berk-Seligson (2000). Student interpreters are motivated by financial gain, academic requirements, and personal interest, echoing the role of economic and scholarly factors in interpreting participation found in related studies.

However, they face significant challenges, including legal knowledge requirements, language proficiency issues, and psychological pressure, consistent with the emphasis on the need for specialized knowledge and language skills in police interpreting as highlighted by Berk-Seligson (2009) and Hale (2007). Though MTI students play a crucial role in police interpreting, there is a need for professionalization, improved training, and better working conditions. This study confirms the precarious yet critical role of MTI students in China's police interpreting system, extending literature on semiprofessional interpreters to non-immigrant contexts.

The practical implications of these findings are clear. For interpreter training programs, it is essential to incorporate more legal knowledge and language proficiency training, especially in handling diverse accents and working under pressure. This could involve developing specialized courses or workshops tailored to the unique requirements of police interpreting.





For police departments, establishing clear guidelines on the roles and responsibilities of interpreters and providing better support and working conditions would enhance the quality and effectiveness of police interpreting. Additionally, fostering better communication and collaboration between police officers and interpreters, as recommended by previous research (Perez & Wilson 2004; Lee & Huh 2021), should be a priority.

This study has limitations, such as the exclusion of interrogated foreign nationals, the absence of analyses of the interpreted texts, and the limited number of interviewees. Additionally, the interpretations of the research results may not be sufficiently objective and comprehensive. Subsequent research might address four key extensions of this work: first, recruiting student interpreters representing different geographical regions and language combinations to understand the phenomenon across China more comprehensively; second, engaging additional stakeholders including minority language speakers and non-native detainees to incorporate diverse perspectives; third, investigating the growing domain of remote and technology-assisted interpreting, in line with increasing use of technology in the field as explored by Tipton & Furmanek (2016); and fourth, undertaking systematic comparisons between urban Chinese contexts and international jurisdictions to identify best practices and areas for improvement.



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Author Details	Mianjun Xu (PhD., Associate Professor)
Yazar Bilgileri	¹ Faculty of English Language and Culture, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou, P.R. China  0000-0003-1805-3103  mianjunxu@263.net
	Tianyuan Zhao (PhD., Associate Professor)
	² Graduate School of Translation and Interpreting, Beijing Foreign Studies University, Beijing, People's Republic of China  0000-0002-7104-6394
	Juntao Deng (PhD., Professor)
	³ Vice Dean, School of Foreign Languages, Wuhan Institute of Technology, Wuhan, People's Republic of China  0000-0002-3781-8952



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