

\$5000 CHINESE MT



PHOTO BY LOUIS ROSSETTO

Among all the larger-than-life shimmer and gloss of Hannover's Cebit show, one minimalist booth: cardboard boxes and plastic bags strewn among assorted bargain basement furniture, and a lot of homesick-looking Chinese sitting behind their "Greatwall 386" computers.

They were demonstrating Transtar, an English-Chinese machine translation package developed by the privately owned China Software Technique Corp.

Transtar, billed as "the world's first commercialized English-Chinese MT system," was first released in September 1988 "following ten years of research." It costs US\$5000, runs on a 386, and its translations are "OK," according to a sinologist onlooker in Hannover.

LT / Electric Word was allowed the briefest of test spins around Transtar. We took a random English sentence from LT#12: "BMW puts out three basic types of documentation: sales literature, parts lists and maintenance manuals, and the owner's manual."

Programmer Zhao Xiaohang keyed the sentence in, and Transtar went into action.

The package's interface looks so simple, it's hard to believe it isn't a PC utility that you might get free of charge

with a computer magazine subscription.

After a menu or two, Zhao Xiaohang assigned the sentence a file name, chose "computer science" from one of what he claimed was the package's nine 20,000-word specialized glossaries, and hit return. No pre-editing took place.

The package first looked up all the words in its 40,000-word general dictionary, then in the specialized glossary, and beeped. It had run into an unknown word: "BMW." (So what do post-Mao yuppies drive?) Zhao Xiaohang opted for "leave" in the "change-or-leave menu," and one minute later, the Chinese translation was displayed.

According to an editor of the German periodical *Chinesisch und Computer*, who was present at the test, the translation was not bad. Just two mistranslations: Transtar couldn't find the phrasal verb "to put out" among its 7,000 idioms, and so used "to put" instead; and it translated "documentation" as "documents." Zhao Xiaohang postedited the Chinese sentence and smiled at the result.

Written in Cobol and C, Transtar consists of an analysis component of 4,000 rules, and a generation component of 2,000 rules. Analysis im-

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plements morphological, syntactic, and "semantic meaning" rules.

According to the Chinese Trade Council, 500 copies of Transtar have already been sold in China, mainly to universities and the People's Army.

Now the China Software Technique Corp. is furiously looking for distributors outside China.

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