

'Translators and traitors': What to be wary of when reading translations of PRC diplomatic/foreign affairs statements

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Key takeaways

- Official People's Republic of China (PRC) Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) translations are of variable quality, and may inadvertently – and at times perhaps intentionally – convey different messages from their Chinese source:
 - The quality of MFA translations may be sub-optimal and should ideally be substituted by professional translations where possible;
 - They are often based on post-edited paraphrases as opposed to direct quotes of statements from PRC leaders and spokespersons, and there are sometimes discrepancies between the translation and the original statement;
 - They sometimes differ from the Chinese original because they address different reader cohorts: Chinese-language MFA statements are directed more towards a domestic audience relative to their official translations;
 - MFA translations are at times an important supplementary source to accurate translations of Chinese source-texts – since they are less directed at domestic image management, they may better reflect the tenor/substance of official diplomatic representations. Discretion should be applied in deciding whether differences found in MFA official translations are worth noting.
- Vivid depictions of concrete phenomena/actions – especially those which appear out of place or which use highly evocative language can be a sign that a Chinese idiom has been translated literally and at the expense of its figurative meaning. While commentators should seek to reflect the tenor of the idiom, they need to be careful not to misinform their readers by conveying the literal meaning at the expense of the figuration meaning.
- Translations that regularly exhibit a surgical level of specificity above that which is found in Western diplomatic statements should be approached with caution – they may be distorted by a translator's aversion to opacity.
- 'Core interests' might be 'Core Interests': vague assertions of relationship expectations – especially in joint statements – might be understood on the PRC side as a commitment to concrete obligations, and the contents/scope of these obligations may be subject to redefinition. This is especially relevant for policymakers.

- English translations whose focal point is unclear, and which appear convoluted, preachy or that espouse grand visions in highly technical or, conversely, archaic language, may have allowed the representation of domestic attempts at Communist Party of China (CPC) image maintenance to obscure their core message and/or misrepresent their tenor. Reports or analyses focused on more immediate policy responses should seek to isolate their core message.

Introduction: 'Translators and traitors'

The prolific American translator Mark Polizzotti several years ago wrote an article for *The New York Times* which asked a curious question: 'Would history have been different if Khrushchev had used a better interpreter?'¹

The reference was to a statement from the USSR's First Secretary Nikita Khrushchev that was translated into English as 'we will bury you' by his interpreter Viktor Mikhailovich Sukhodrev. The rendering, delivered to Western Bloc representatives in Moscow in November 1956, prompted a walkout from the envoys of 12 NATO nations and set back efforts to improve relations. Six years later the world moved to the brink of catastrophe with the unfolding of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Many modern translators feel that Khrushchev's statement might have been better translated as something akin to 'we will outlast you.' For the most part, of course, they had the benefit of years of scholarly and professional reflections on this translation problem, as opposed to the few seconds available to Sukhodrev. In any event it is questionable that there was a 'better' Russian-English interpreter available to Khrushchev than Sukhodrev. While he is most famous for this one stumble, Sukhodrev's career was long and widely celebrated. His contributions saw him earn decorations, and rare platitudes from both sides, with Henry Kissinger describing him a 'splendid interpreter,'² and Richard Nixon praising him as 'a superb linguist who spoke English as well as he did Russian.'³

This historical sojourn is instructive, for it shows that when languages and political cultures are quite divergent, translation in the high stakes field of diplomacy can throw up conundrums that stump the very best translators – potentially with devastating consequences. This is relevant today in the case of the world's current superpower rivals, the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC). Like Sukhodrev's 'we will bury you,' there have recently been influential translations of statements by the PRC's leader Xi Jinping which read 'those who play with fire will perish by it',⁴ and 'heads bashed bloody against a Great Wall of steel'⁵ – both of which are contentious renderings of Chinese idioms. While grave consequences from translations of this ilk have not arisen thus far, misnomers and ill-considered translations of diplomatic statements have become common fare in the increasingly polarised sphere of political and media-driven commentary on the PRC. With tensions having risen again in the wake of US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan, it is pivotal that attempts are made to redress this.

In some ways, however, avoiding such misinterpretations has become more difficult. This is not because we lack the tools to challenge problematic translations. Rather, it is because the volume, accessibility and efficiency of these tools have surpassed the discretion of their users, and blurred the lines of hermeneutic authority. Over the last few years Western audiences have often been presented with a veritable feast of fast paced news and analyses on the PRC's foreign affairs that include translations of official PRC

1 Mark Polizzotti, 'Why translation matters,' *The New York Times*, July 28 2018 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/28/opinion/sunday/why-mistranslation-matters.html>>.
 2 Henry Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1982), p. 291.
 3 Matt Schudel, 'Viktor Sukhodrev, polished interpreter for Soviet leaders, dies at 81,' *The Washington Post*, May 17 2014 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/viktor-sukhodrev-polished-interpreter-for-soviet-leaders-dies-at-81/2014/05/17/674731d8-dde8-11e3-b745-87d39690c5c0_story.html>.
 4 Vincent Ni and Joan E. Greve, 'Xi Jinping tells Joe Biden not to play with fire' over Taiwan in two-hour call', *The Guardian*, July 29 2022 <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jul/28/xi-jinping-tells-joe-biden-not-to-play-with-fire-over-taiwan-in-two-hour-call>>.
 5 See, for example, David Crawshaw and Alicia Chen, "Heads bashed bloody": China's Communist Party centenary with strong words for adversaries', *The Washington Post*, July 1 2021 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/china-party-heads-bashed-xi/2021/07/01/277c8f0c-da3f-11eb-8c87-ad6f27918c78_story.html>.

statements. Alongside and at times intersecting with them has been the rise of the Great Translation Movement, a social media campaign which, in its attempt to expose hidden and less savoury elements of PRC political commentary, has at times led to a conflation of public and official narratives. This wave, and the unprecedented scale of the Chinese diaspora, the expedience of user-friendly online translation tools and the need to keep up with a hyper time-competitive and ever-shrinking news cycle that increasingly sources social media, has brought about the unfortunate yet perhaps irreversible popularisation of this once esoteric vocation, as well as the conflation of impressionist renderings with professionally rigorous ones. On top of this, the competition to be heard has been tilted, with media and other amplified voices – often less aware of the subtleties and at times gravity of the art of diplomatic translation than seasoned professionals, and at times catering for a highly partisan reader cohort – rewarded for prompt and confident renderings of passages that accomplished, non-partisan operators might approach with considerable caution and time-consuming deliberation. To this can be added the problem that sub-optimal translations can and often do appear in what are otherwise eminent and reliable sources (such as *The Washington Post*), while those coming from the official source – the PRC’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) – can in themselves be problematic.

For these reasons it is now perhaps harder than ever for those interested in PRC diplomatic or foreign affairs texts to filter translations which may be sub-optimal or agenda driven from competently compiled ones. This is made harder by the problem that globalisation, and advances in linguistics and translation technology, have to a degree conspired to mask the timeless limitations of translation as an enterprise – something that was perhaps a more natural accompaniment to perceptions of cultural ‘otherness’ in less cosmopolitan times. *Traduttore, traditore* (translator, traitor), a phrase coined by irate Italians offended by the alleged literary butchery of French renderings of the works of the immortalised Florentine writer Dante, captures well the problem of *lacuna* – the inevitable occurrence of ‘gaps’ wherein what can be conveyed by the lexical resources of one language has no direct equivalent in the target language. Having a sharp eye for *lacuna* may not be able to mitigate the unwitting ‘treachery’ it compels – let alone the less blameless treachery of partisan commentators. But identifying the potential sites of such linguistic and cultural ‘treachery’ might prevent misplaced confidence in the fidelity of translations from having unwanted consequences.

It is this core idea that is the inspiration for this short analysis, which is written for consumers of these translations who are interested in, or who are engaged professionally or academically with, PRC international affairs. Needless to say, the scope of this problem is broad, and cannot be dealt with comprehensively in such a short analysis. As such, this paper simply seeks to highlight recent translation controversies, focusing on those that could help start a conversation about the sorts of guidelines that might enable readers to be better aware of the limitations of translations in this field, better equipped to use them appropriately, and better able to spot renderings that might be regarded as misleading or sub-optimal. As this analysis endeavours to show, while this may seem complex and impractically arduous, it needn’t necessarily be so. In the case of publicly accessible Chinese-language PRC diplomatic statements, significant translation conundrums, and the ‘betrayals’ of the original text that they might inspire, are often associated with certain identifiable linguistic and literary idiosyncrasies. While recognising that their identification cannot come close to overcoming the problem of *lacuna*, the hope at the least is that this analysis may raise awareness of how its presence tends to be manifest in PRC diplomatic or foreign affairs statements and help readers identify at least some of the more egregious problems that could potentially have significant ramifications in the real, consequential world of international relations.

Loyalty by treachery – the problem of official PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs translations

One often cited source of English translations of the PRC’s MFA statements is the MFA’s official website. While it has become relatively comprehensive and prompt in its production of translations, its work is often described among professional translators in the PRC through the idiom ‘creating a cart behind closed doors’ *bimén zàochē* 闭门造车 (whose gauge might not match that of the roads they are designed for) – i.e., a translation divorced from proper scrutiny or a translation that did not undergo a thorough quality review by a qualified first language speaker. Yet some MFA translations on matters of significance are approached with more care, and these sometimes serve a slightly different function from the Chinese-language statements they are derived from. While this analysis hopes to bring awareness to readers about the limitations of MFA translations, it also needs to be pointed out that they can, at times, be useful for playing a supplementary role

in cross-checking official PRC statements. This is because there are times when MFA translations obligation to be 'loyal' to the Ministry's mission leads them to 'betray' the source text – at times for reasons that are understandable.⁶

Suggestion or demand? Depends on who you tell

One recent controversy that relates to this issue involved an MFA statement on a foreign ministers' meeting between Australia's Penny Wong and the PRC's Wang Yi in early July this year.⁷ The controversy's particular focus was on reports that Beijing had issued a series of four 'demands'⁸ on Canberra to repair their relationship – which came on the back of extensive Australian media commentary on what had been characterised as '14 demands'⁹ or '14 grievances',¹⁰ a dot-point list of difficulties with the Australian government handed by a PRC embassy official to an Australian journalist in late 2020 (PRC Ambassador to Australia Xiao Qian denied these were 'demands' issued directly from Beijing during an address hosted by the Australia-China Relations Institute at the University of Technology Sydney in June¹¹). This is an instructive example for while it was largely inconsequential, it had the potential to be more so. In its wake, for instance, Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese responded to a leading question on the statement by saying that Australia 'doesn't respond to demands' – although he also put it that he would take the word of his Foreign Minister above reported accounts in the Chinese media.¹² In this case, Beijing's reply – or at least, that which was expressed in its state mouthpiece the *Global Times* – relayed the assumption that Albanese may have been misled on the contents of the document by Australian media coverage, on account that 'some anti-China forces in the US and Australia do not want to see PRC-Australia relations break the ice.'¹³

After the Prime Minister's statement, a series of articles emerged from Australian authors which also bemoaned allegedly distorted interpretations of the MFA text, and imputed that they might be linked to an anti-PRC bias in the Australian media. Four were written by people one would expect to have some familiarity with the language (at least in translation) of PRC's officialdom: an expert on transnational and diasporic Chinese media, Professor Wanning Sun of the University of Technology Sydney,¹⁴ who cited a translation from University of Sydney Professor and former consul-general for Australia in Hong Kong, Jocelyn Chey,¹⁵ former Australian diplomat Gregory Clark¹⁶ and Australia China Business Council national board member and *CGTN* columnist Daryl Guppy.¹⁷

Professor Sun, drawing upon Professor Chey's own translation, felt that a potentially biased media had misinterpreted a 'positive and forward-looking' statement to serve as further proof that 'China is again lecturing us.' Clark lamented that 'mistranslations and distortions of Chinese statements, deliberate or

- 6 Wu Jingjian and Matt Turner (trans.), 'When diplomacy is lost in translation', *Sixth Tone*, April 9 2021 <<https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1007260/when-diplomacy-is-lost-in-translation>>.
- 7 Stephen Dzedzic and Anne Barker, 'Penny Wong and Wang Yi meet on sidelines of G20 in Bali, with hopes of 'stabilising' Australia-China relationship', *ABC News*, July 8 2022 <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-07-08/penny-wong-and-wang-yi-meet-on-sidelines-of-g20-in-bali/101220320>>.
- 8 Tyrone Clarke, 'China again urges Australia to meet four demands to 'recalibrate' soured ties following Anthony Albanese's rebuke', *Sky News*, July 12 2022 <<https://www.skynews.com.au/australia-news/politics/china-again-urges-australia-to-meet-four-demands-to-recalibrate-soured-ties-following-anthony-albaneses-rebuke/news-story/d8f77ffd4826670fe11af358dae57483>>.
- 9 Peter Hartcher, 'China offers Australia friendship but expects the full kowtow', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, June 7 2022 <<https://www.smh.com.au/national/china-offers-australia-friendship-but-expects-the-full-kowtow-20220606-p5ard4.html>>.
- 10 Daniel Hurst, 'China's infamous list of grievances with Australia 'should be longer than 14 points', top diplomat says', *The Guardian*, November 19 2021 <<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/nov/20/chinas-infamous-list-of-grievances-with-australia-should-be-longer-than-14-points-top-diplomat-says>>.
- 11 See 'UTS:ACRI address: China's Ambassador to Australia Xiao Qian', Australia-China Relations Institute, University of Technology Sydney, June 24 2022 <<https://www.australiachinarelations.org/content/utsacri-address-china%E2%80%99s-ambassador-australia-xiao-qian>>.
- 12 Tory Shepherd, 'Australia 'doesn't respond to demands', Anthony Albanese tells China', *The Guardian*, July 11 2022 <<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2022/jul/11/australia-doesnt-respond-to-demands-anthony-albanese-tells-china>>.
- 13 'China-Australia ties cannot be eased on top of 'minefields': Global Times editorial', *Global Times*, July 12 2022 <<https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202207/1270381.shtml>>.
- 14 Wanning Sun, 'Misconstruing China's 'demands', Australian media beat the drums of war', *Crikey*, July 13 2022 <<https://www.crikey.com.au/2022/07/13/australian-media-china-demands/>>.
- 15 Jocelyn Chey, 'When words matter: Reviewing the Wong-Wang meeting', *Pearls and Irritations*, July 13 2022 <<https://johnmenadue.com/when-words-matter-reviewing-the-wong-wang-meeting/>>.
- 16 Gregory Clark, 'Australia-China relations woefully lost in translation', *Asia Times*, July 19 2022 <<https://asiatimes.com/2022/07/australia-china-relations-woefully-lost-in-translation/>>.
- 17 Daryl Guppy, 'No excuse for China-Australia relations mangled in translation', *CGTN*, July 18 2022 <<https://news.cgtn.com/news/2022-07-18/No-excuse-for-China-Australia-relations-mangled-in-translation-1bLxzCqSLjW/index.html>>.

otherwise, are poisoning bilateral relations.’ Guppy noted that a ‘thaw’ in the bilateral relations was ‘marred by language barriers’ – in this case ‘a mangled understanding of the translated record of the meeting.’ In a dissenting view, Kevin Yam, a formerly Hong Kong-based lawyer and pro-democracy activist who now resides in Australia, noted that ‘Whereas nothing in the English readout suggested the four action points were ‘demands’ or ‘musts’, the Chinese version was different.’¹⁸ He cautioned readers not to ‘assume the English version is a faithful translation of the Chinese version’ and ‘[a]lways consult the Chinese version.’

This small example brings out a number of issues that will be addressed later in this analysis – including the problem of reflecting ambiguity in PRC diplomatic texts. But at its core, it comes back to the problem that Chinese-language statements and their official in-house translations can on occasion serve different (albeit overlapping) functions. Yam was not entirely wrong in his assessment of the difference between the Chinese and official English statements, and he was to some extent correct in this case when he said one should ‘not insult the intelligence of Chinese officials by assuming they are mere translation errors.’ What his analysis failed to deliver was a deeper understanding of what might be behind these discrepancies.

An important thing to consider is that Chinese-language MFA statements and their English translations serve overlapping but ultimately different reader cohorts. English translations are primarily read by and directed towards the outside world, while Chinese originals have become increasingly sensitive of the impression they could leave upon the PRC’s domestic audience. The tensions between these two agendas has increased in recent years due to a trend in the Xi Jinping era that has seen some MFA texts repurposed to help mobilise support for the government: a phenomena most succinctly captured in an article in *The Diplomat* through the use of the Chinese phrase *chūkǒu zhuǎn nèixiāo* 出口转内销 – the shift to domestic consumption of that which was produced for export.¹⁹ This persists despite the fact that the proliferation of translators/Chinese-literate commentators in the West has made the latter able to produce accurate renderings of these statements on a greater scale – which may already be having an impact on this practice. Given this, and the fact that MFA statements from press conferences and so forth are often written as paraphrases as opposed to quotes, it is worth watching, moving forward, whether trans-editing between Chinese and English texts (i.e., the subsequent realignment of original statements and their translations to iron out notable differences), or the insertion of deliberate ambiguities into the source text to increase the licence of translators, will become a more notable element of these texts moving forward (it could be tentatively argued that there are inchoative signs of this). But this is something that requires further study and is a matter for another day.

In any event, such tensions between the different functions of Chinese statements and their English translations can impact the nature and scale of discrepancies between Chinese statements and their official English translations – just as it shapes differences between the official translation and accurate translations from non-official sources. The particular example highlighted by Yam – revolving around the interpretation of the words *yào jiānchí* 要坚持 – is in this sense instructive. As Yam appears to appreciate, this phrase often appears in discussions on domestic policy, where it regularly accompanies public pronouncements, or directorates from the central government to local and provincial governments. Interpreting it as a ‘demand’ – conveyed through a translation such as ‘must unswervingly remain committed to’ – is in this sense not inappropriate. In inserting this phrase in official MFA statements, the statement passes on a connotation of Beijing’s status as an authoritative voice in the international arena. As Yam noted, the English translation, which uses the phrase ‘stick to’, does not convey this tone.

Nonetheless, the range of meanings that this phrase can encompass, in a purely semantic sense, is broad enough to allow some ambiguity. More importantly, while its use in international relations text does at times

18 Kevin Yam, ‘On China’s list of ‘demands’, mind the language’, *The Australian*, July 18 2022 <<https://www.theaustralian.com.au/commentary/on-chinas-list-of-demands-mind-the-language/news-story/21b570fea7655973f9116dd1f630d8de>>.

19 Brian Wong, ‘How nationalism is changing’, *The Diplomat*, May 26 2020 <<https://thediplomat.com/2020/05/how-chinese-nationalism-is-changing/>>.

come closer to the sense that is evident in domestic political texts,²⁰ in other examples it carries a less peremptory tone – something a little closer to the wooden-sounding ‘stick to’ rendering of the official MFA English translation, and the ‘should be maintained/should continue’ translations of Professor Chey. For example, its use can be found in passages where a strong peremptory tone is out of sync with its broader discursive context, such as passages which urge the international community to be ‘open and inclusive’, and to abide by the ideal of ‘peaceful coexistence’.

In relation to the language of ‘demands,’ it should be emphasised that the use of modal auxiliary verbs such as ‘must’ by diplomats is, of course, hardly exclusive to PRC diplomacy. The American embassy in Georgia, for instance, in early August released a statement that ‘The People’s Republic of China must now reveal more about its role in supporting Confucius Institutes’ activities on U.S. college campuses’,²¹ and – in an example of its use between friendly nations – in late 2018, Ukrainian Ambassador Andriy Melnyk to Germany told German radio that ‘Germany must take a clear line... and put [Russian President Vladimir] Putin in his place.’²² The imperative sense of ‘musts’ can, after all, be predicated on the authority of principles as opposed to the power differentials between interlocutors. Yet if it is to be argued that the official MFA translation challenges the boundaries of interpretive licence to downplay the imperative sense imbued in the original, we should ask why this is so. If an ancillary function of the text was to convey a peremptory tone in order to press home, or compel Australia to acquiesce to, a hierarchical articulation of the relationship between the two nations as alluded to in Australian media commentary (as some titles/opening lines in Australian media commentary put it, pressuring Australia to ‘bend to the will of Beijing’²³ or ‘kowtow’ to the PRC²⁴), why would this not be conveyed in the language the target nation reads? Why also, in the final analysis, does this seem so at odds with the initial cautiously welcoming response to the foreign ministers’ meeting from Australia’s skilled yet hard-nosed foreign minister Penny Wong (who, while acknowledging that the conversation was ‘frank,’ described the meeting as a ‘first step towards stabilising the relations’²⁵ and noted, ‘I welcome our discussion on issues of concern between our two countries’²⁶)?

Reason vs indignation

Another more recent example of what may reflect the strategic use of discrepancies between a Chinese source and an official MFA English translation involves a statement that is likely indirectly related to the United Nations Human Rights Office’s recently released report on the PRC’s treatment of ethnic Uyghurs in its Xinjiang region.²⁷ On August 11, in the lead-up to the release of the report, an MFA spokesperson, Wang Wenbin, was asked by a *China News Service* (CNS) representative for his opinion on a report compiled by

20 For example, a late February 2022 MFA statement (author’s translation) presented the following summary of a speech from PRC Foreign Minister Wang Yi that touched on the contents of an online meeting between the PRC and America’s leaders in November 2021: ‘To make the two nations’ leaders’ consensus workable, Wang Yi put forward a four-point proposal for quickly getting the Sino-U.S. relationship back on track: [The United States] 1. must remain committed (*yào jǐnchí*) to the one China principle to reinforce the political foundation of the China-U.S. relationship; 2. must remain committed to mutual respect to ensure our relations can move in the right direction; 3. must remain committed to mutually beneficial cooperation so that China and America can both grow and prosper; and 4. must remain committed to the responsibility of great nations to provide a greater share of public goods to the world. 王毅就落实两国元首共识，推动中美关系早日重回正轨提出四点主张：一是要坚持一中原则，夯实中美关系政治基础；二是要坚持相互尊重，把握中美关系正确方向；三是要坚持合作共赢，促进中美各自发展繁荣；四是要坚持大国责任，为世界提供更多公共产品。 See MFA, Wang Yi: ‘Tuidong Zhong-Mei guanxi zaori chonghui zhenggui’ 王毅：推动中美关系早日重回正轨 (Wang Yi: Drive to get the Sino-U.S. relationship quickly back on track), February 28 2022 <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/wjbzhd/202202/t20220228_10646163.shtml>. It might be considered that the peremptory tone of each of these ‘demands’ is modified by what is being demanded (however, the reference to ‘win-win cooperation’ could be interpreted as a ‘demand’ that America stop engaging in trade behaviours that damage the PRC’s economic interests; ‘mutual respect’ could also refer to a specific set of concerns outlined in the web meeting).

21 U.S. Embassy Tbilisi, ‘Confucius Institutes advance Chinese propaganda on campuses,’ U.S. Embassy in Georgia, August 27 2020 <<https://ge.usembassy.gov/confucius-institutes-advance-chinese-propaganda-on-campuses/>>.

22 Reuters Staff, ‘Put Putin in his place’, Ukrainian ambassador tells Germany’, *Reuters*, November 28 2018 <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-russia-diplomacy-idUSKCN1NXORZ>>.

23 Ally Foster, ‘China doubles down on four demands to repair Australia ties’, *news.com.au*, July 13 2022 <<https://www.news.com.au/finance/economy/china-doubles-down-on-four-demands-to-repair-australia-ties/news-story/051c4cd6f54c12fae006fa73bddb8578>>.

24 Peter Hartcher, ‘China offers Australia friendship but expects the full kowtow’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, June 7 2022 <<https://www.smh.com.au/national/china-offers-australia-friendship-but-expects-the-full-kowtow-20220606-p5ard4.html>>.

25 Katharine Murphy and Paul Karp, ‘Penny Wong: China and Australia take ‘first steps towards stabilising relationship’’, *The Guardian*, July 8 2022 <<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2022/jul/08/penny-wong-china-and-australia-take-first-steps-towards-stabilising-relationship>>.

26 Penny Wong, ‘Meeting with China’s State Councilor and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Wang Yi’, media release, July 8 2022 <<https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/penny-wong/media-release/meeting-chinas-state-councilor-and-minister-foreign-affairs-wang-yi>>.

27 Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, ‘UN Human Rights Office issues assessment of human rights concerns in Xinjiang, China’, press release, August 31 2022 <<https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/08/un-human-rights-office-issues-assessment-human-rights-concerns-xinjiang>>.

the ‘China Society for Human Rights Studies’ 中国人权研究会, whose title was awkwardly translated as ‘US commits serious crimes of violating human rights in the Middle East and beyond’ 美国在中东等地犯下严重侵犯人权罪行.²⁸ The focus of Wang’s reply²⁹ – abiding by the CPC’s (Communist Party of China) curious propensity to number things – was an elucidation of the ‘three serious crimes’ the US has ‘committed’ in ‘the Middle East and surrounding areas’ (MFA translation³⁰).

The first ‘crime/violation’, according to the MFA’s translation of the spokesperson’s remarks, was that ‘the US has launched wars that damaged people’s right to life and survival.’ The original Chinese, however, was stronger in tone, stating that America had ‘wantonly launched’ 肆意发动 these wars. The English translation also said that America ‘just cannot deflect responsibility for starting wars.’ This is a polite translation of the archaic/formal Chinese phrase 难辞其咎, which generally conveys the indefensibility of past actions, akin to the phrase ‘can hardly absolve oneself of blame/responsibility.’

MFA English translations: ‘toned down’ – or un-hyped?

The transformation of what has been called the PRC’s ‘diplomacy of indignation’,³¹ or ‘diplomacy of anger’,³² has been a notable hallmark of its ‘wolf warrior’ approach that flourished under Xi. Yet in the case of MFA translations, the difficulty of translating for emotional effect – especially in relation to texts originally oriented towards a very different political ideology and culture – at times intersects with strategic decisions as to whether it is desirable to do so. In both of the aforementioned cases, it is understandable that the Chinese version would have a stronger tone than the English translation. The first statement was released on the back of a low point in Australia-PRC relations, during which Australia’s call for an independent investigation into the origins of the COVID-19 virus had stirred indignant responses in Chinese state media. The second statement included a ‘call on the UN Human Rights Council and OHCHR to increase their attention to the human rights violations committed by the US in the Middle East and other regions’, and as such was arguably intended to form part of a pre-emptive attack on the legitimacy and impartiality of the UN Human Rights Office report into the PRC’s treatment of its Uyghur minority that turned out to be damning, and damaged the PRC and the CPC’s reputation. While the English version of the first statement may have extended an olive branch to Australia, the Chinese version may have been concerned with managing the reputational damage of being seen to back down against a ‘recalcitrant’, non-peer power. The Chinese version of the second statement was perhaps strongly defensive when it presented a forceful and emotionally laden attack on the US’ behaviour in the Middle East – but the English would arguably have needed to tone down to come across as dispassionate and reasonable to a less sympathetic international audience.

‘Playing with fire’ – hyped-up English translations?

There are, of course, also times where the opposite may be true – where English MFA translations of certain passages may be stronger in tone than the Chinese original. The most recent example of this is the widely cited official translation of Xi Jinping’s ‘Those who play with fire will perish by it.’³³ That Chinese phrase is derived from a common idiom – the topic of Chinese idioms will be addressed later in this analysis. And while ‘perish’ can be justified in the English translation, it is not necessary to capture the figurative sense of the idiom, which could simply be translated as ‘those who play with fire will get burned.’

Strengthening the English translation in excess of or to the limits the Chinese original makes sense in this instance. The English translation, directed towards an international audience, presented a clear warning that

28 China Society for Human Rights Studies, ‘Meiguo zai Zhongdong deng di fanxia yanzhong qinfan renquan zuixing’ 美国在中东等地犯下严重侵犯人权罪行 (The grave human rights violations committed by the United States in areas such as the Middle East), *People’s Daily*, August 10 2022 <<http://world.people.com.cn/n1/2022/0810/c1002-32498723.html>>.

29 ‘2022 nian 8 yue Waijiaobu fayanren Wang Wenbin zhuchi lixing jizhahui’ 2022年8月11日外交部发言人汪文斌主持例行记者会 (Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin’s regular press conference on August 11, 2022), Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Republic of Poland, August 11 2022 <http://pl.china-embassy.gov.cn/zgyw/202208/t20220811_10741518.htm>.

30 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, ‘Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin’s regular press conference on August 11, 2022’ <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/202208/t20220811_10741637.html>.

31 Andreas B. Forsby, ‘What is behind China’s diplomacy of indignation?’, *The Guardian*, November 13 2020 <<https://thediomat.com/2020/11/what-is-behind-chinas-diplomacy-of-indignation/>>.

32 Todd D. Hall, *Emotional Diplomacy: Official Emotion on the International Stage* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2015), pp. 39–79.

33 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, ‘President Xi Jinping speaks with US President Joe Biden on the phone’, July 19 2022 <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202207/t20220729_10729593.html>.

sought to deter America from sending officials to Taiwan, and arguably served to help absolve Beijing from blame should any accidents or escalations eventuate. The Chinese document, on the other hand, may have been measured so that the PRC's 'countermeasures' – which were in the final analysis far removed from those which threats of 'perishing' would intimate – would not fall too short of Beijing's bellicose rhetoric. In essence, the latter was constructed to avoid a domestic audience seeing Beijing's eventual response as a humiliating backdown, which could potentially lead to an increase in public pressure on Beijing to plot a more destructive course towards kinetic war (anecdotally, it appears that some social media voices within the PRC were at the time nonetheless disappointed with a perceived gap between the inflamed rhetoric and the PRC's response).

MFA statements: can they be better in translation?

What do these phrases tell us about the usefulness of MFA translations? It seems to be the case that they often fall short of being ideal, and it may often be the case that many are the result of a lack of proper scrutiny or oversight (it could be argued that there is an overall difference between the quality of translations directed to smaller and larger nations). But to the extent that certain significant messages directed to other nations are curated with greater care, and are likely to be in tension with the message the CPC may want to convey domestically, these MFA translations can play a supplementary role – at least for those whose interest lies more in determining immediate foreign policy ramifications, as opposed to the more vexing questions of the ramifications of the shifting interplay between foreign policy and domestic politics. In the first example given above, the English translation of *yào jiānchí* as something closer to 'advice'³⁴ as opposed to a demand may be regarded as taking interpretive licence, but appears to have better matched the tenor of the meeting as it was subsequently represented by Australia's foreign minister, as well as the relatively benign nature of the desired outcomes to which the phrase was applied. In relation to the second example, the Chinese and English MFA renderings reflect two approaches that the PRC may have adopted in behind-the-door meetings to block the release of the UN Human Rights Office report on Xinjiang, one leaning on a complaint based on reason, the other slanted towards indignation and possibly intimidation. In the 'perish' by 'fire' example, the MFA translation conveyed the intensity of the PRC's opposition to Pelosi's Taiwan visit, while a more accurate translation might have served as a better source for estimating the threat level likely to be posed by Beijing's retaliatory actions.

In short, for the very reason that they are less likely to be influenced by domestic image management considerations, English MFA translations that differ from more literal renderings can be valuable sources of information. While they should always be complemented with professional translations, they should not be ignored. The reader should take note of the situation/issue being discussed, and use their judgement to decide whether an MFA translation might convey important information that might not be found in the Chinese-language statement. For instance, depictions of closed-door meetings might be an instance where MFA translations contribute important insights – for when there is a lack of directly observable empirical evidence, and it is a case of Beijing's word against that of a foreign government/representative, the CPC's domestic audience might afford more weight to the former.

Chinese idioms

Another notable translation issue that has reared up in recent years relates to the misinterpretation and misrepresentation of Chinese idioms.

Chinese idioms have to some extent been a permanent fixture in PRC political texts. Yet they have risen in popularity in recent years alongside the PRC's cultural nationalism, which has produced a greater conversance in classical Chinese literature – as well as history – among the PRC's political and economic elites. In their most common forms, Chinese idioms should be very easy for literate Chinese readers and trained Chinese-English translators to spot – they often emerge in the form of archaic four-letter word phrases, convey abstract ideas through depictions of events and concrete objects, and often appear vivid and/or evocative. Yet choices between the strategies of domestication and foreignisation (i.e., expressing meaning in a manner which is clear and natural to the target culture, or carrying across alien elements imbued in the original that

³⁴ As described in Tory Shepherd, 'Australia 'doesn't respond to demands', Anthony Albanese tells China', *The Guardian*, July 11 2022 <<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2022/jul/11/australia-doesnt-respond-to-demands-anthony-albanese-tells-china>>.

might defy the conventions of the target language), and tension between literal and figurative meanings, can throw up difficult conundrums that are not easily remedied (Mao's insistent and now popularised use of the term 'paper tiger' *zhǐ lǎohǔ* 纸老虎 is an example of this).³⁵ Common problems are that translations may pay attention to the literal and not figurative meaning of idioms, or alternatively, merely relay the figurative meaning and not the visceral force of the idiom – leading to failures to convey the fundamental meaning or affective prosody (i.e., emotional sense or power) of a statement respectively. On occasion, such problems have resulted in inappropriate English translations that threatened to raise diplomatic tensions.

Figurative meaning vs evocative power

Perhaps the most famous recent example – one that stands aside Sukhodrev's famous error in terms of its evocative power, if not, ultimately, its gravity – is a translation of a phrase from Xi Jinping's speech marking the centenary anniversary of the CPC in mid-2021. On July 1 that year *The Washington Post* featured an article penned by David Crawshaw and Alicia Chen. The title of the article was "Heads bashed bloody": China's Xi marks Communist Party centenary with strong words for adversaries."³⁶ A line in the article read: 'any external attempts to subjugate the country would result in 'heads bashed bloody against a Great Wall of steel'.' The latter phrase was from a commonly referenced translation of Xi's speech. Tellingly, and in relation to the point made above, it differed markedly in tone from the less gruesome rendering that appeared in the official MFA translation.

The offending phrase on this occasion was the idiom *tóu pò xuè liú* 头破血流 – whose origins lie in *Journey to the West* (西游记), the famous 16th century Buddhist-themed Chinese novel perhaps best known in Australia through its televised incarnation, the English-dubbed Japanese television series *Monkey*. In a literal reading, it describes a cut opening on a person's head and blood gushing out of it. The figurative meaning, however, implies a defeat or failure that is so humiliating that it has an unpleasant aftertaste or lingering psychological impact. A roughly comparable colloquial English phrase that brings together the sense of being 'bloodied' and suffering humiliating defeat might be 'given a bloody nose' – however, the Chinese phrase is comparably stronger.

The aforementioned *Washington Post* translation, which focused on the evocative literal depiction and downplayed the figurative meaning, was repeated in other prominent media publications including *Reuters*,³⁷ *CNN*,³⁸ and *The Atlantic* (the title of the latter was 'What will drive China to war?'³⁹), and was accentuated by Chinese voices, with the wolf warrior columnist, and former editor-in-chief of Beijing's mouthpiece the *Global Times*, Hu Xijin, tweeting the interpretation that 'anyone who dares try to bully China will get their heads bashed.'⁴⁰ Similar interpretations of this passage appeared in a number of English-language mastheads⁴¹ and were splashed across chat forums and social media. The same phrase was also used in a serious analysis of

35 Wu Jingjian and Matt Turner (trans.), 'When diplomacy is lost in translation', *Sixth Tone*, April 9 2021 <<https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1007260/when-diplomacy-is-lost-in-translation>>.

36 David Crawshaw and Alicia Chen, "Heads bashed bloody": China's Communist Party centenary with strong words for adversaries', *The Washington Post*, July 1 2021 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/china-party-heads-bashed-xi/2021/07/01/277c8f0c-da3f-11eb-8c87-ad6f27918c78_story.html>.

37 Lew Run Tan and Ryan Woo, 'Xi warns against foreign bullying as China marks party centenary', *Reuters*, July 1 2021 <<https://www.reuters.com/world/china/beijing-set-celebrate-centenary-chinas-communist-party-2021-06-30/>>.

38 'Connect the World', transcript, *CNN*, July 1 2021 <<https://transcripts.cnn.com/show/ctw/date/2021-07-01/segment/01>>.

39 Michael Beckley and Hal Brands, 'What will drive China to war?', *The Atlantic*, November 1 2021 <<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/11/us-china-war/620571/>>.

40 'Zhonggong jiangdang bainian: Xi Jinping yanjiang zhong 'tou po xie liu' yici weihe yinfa Zhongwai reyi' 中共建党百年：习近平演讲中“头破血流”一词为何引发中外热议 (Centenary of the founding of the Communist Party of China: Why Xi Jinping's use of the phrase 'head cut open and blood gushing' in a speech is sparking heated controversy within and outside China), *BBC Chinese*, July 3 2021 <<https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/world-57703178>>.

41 See, for example, Nick Whigham and Reuters, "Bashed bloody": Telling detail during Chinese president's brutal speech', *Yahoo News* (Australia), July 1 2021 <<https://au.news.yahoo.com/bashed-bloody-telling-detail-during-chinese-presidents-brutal-speech-050320925.html>>; Tribune News Service, 'World takes note of Chinese President Xi Jinping's 'blood and steel wall' speech', *The Tribune*, July 2 2021 <<https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/world/world-takes-note-of-chinese-president-xi-jinpings-blood-and-steel-wall-speech-277257>>; Chris Buckley and Keith Bradsher, 'Marking party's centennial, Xi warns that China will not be bullied', *The New York Times*, November 11 2021 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/01/world/asia/xi-china-communist-party-anniversary.html>>; Robin Brant, 'CCP 100: Xi warns China will not be 'oppressed' in anniversary speech', *BBC*, July 1 2021 <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-57648236>>.

the PRC's policy intentions in a Wilson Center China Fellowship report⁴² (the Wilson Center did, however, also published another short article which said such translations had taken the phrase out of context⁴³).

This interpretation did meet with some pushback. Yang Liu, a journalist working for the Washington DC bureau of Beijing's mouthpiece *Xinhua News*, bemoaned the 'gruesome translations being floated' noting that the phrase translated as heads bashed bloody often merely 'conveys total failure.'⁴⁴ David Rennie, Beijing bureau chief for *The Economist*, tweeted that 'some Chengyu [i.e., four-character idioms] sound more aggressive to f[orei]gn ears.'⁴⁵ More recently Wanning Sun argued that it was an example where 'what is delivered as a figure of speech intended for domestic Chinese audiences who are versed in revolutionary language ends up being translated verbatim.'⁴⁶

Yet others felt that playing down Beijing's language choice is wrong. For instance, *The Washington Post's* Gerry Shih, in reply to Yang, argued 'it wasn't necessary to choose that idiom (broken heads and flowing blood) but for a rhetorical objective... Why whitewash?' Anecdotally, sources in the PRC have conveyed to the author that while the use of inflammatory rhetoric in domestic discussions on foreign policy has become more proliferate during the Xi Jinping period, the choice of this phrase was met with some shock by less nationalistic Chinese intellectuals.

To an extent both of these arguments have a point. Translations which bury the figurative meaning of an idiom beneath a literal translation can be wrong and potentially hazardous. Yet those that fail to convey the evocative force of certain idioms can be misleading and fundamentally alter the tenor of the original statement. Negotiating the two, however, presents difficult conundrums for translators. An example of how this can be done, curiously enough, can be found in an article in Beijing's mouthpiece the *Global Times* on Pelosi's Taiwan visit.⁴⁷ Referring to an idiom used by a PRC foreign ministry spokesperson, Zhao Lijian, the article noted 'China's Foreign Ministry on Monday used the phrase 'yanzhen yidai' [yán zhèn yǐ dài 严阵以待] (We are fully prepared for any eventuality) which literally translates into 'streamlining army formation to wait for the enemy.'⁴⁸ While the latter translation is poorly worded, the general practice of putting the figurative and literal meanings of certain key idioms alongside each other in such a manner provides a functional if not stylish way to overcome the conundrum of rhetorical and literal meanings being treated as a zero-sum choice or being negotiated in ways that does injustice to both of them. In the latter case, it was especially important that a vague promise of being 'prepared' was not cast aside for a literal reading that implied Beijing had issued a specific threat that 'the PLA will be mobilised to meet (i.e., Pelosi's plane),' which could potentially have had catastrophic ramifications. Putting the two alongside each other conveyed the evocative weight of the Chinese statement without locking Beijing into an unwanted military escalation.

How, then, could *tóu pò xuè liú* be rendered? Below are some suggestions:

中国人民也绝不允许任何外来势力欺负、压迫、奴役我们，谁妄想这样干，必将在14亿多中国人民用血肉筑成的钢铁长城面前碰得头破血流

42 Michael Beckley, 'Desperate times, Desperate measures: Slowing growth is making China more dangerous' (in Lucas Myers, ed., *Essays on China and U.S. Policy*, Washington: Wilson Center, 2022), p. 21.

43 J. Stapleton Roy, 'Read Xi Jinping's words in proper context', Wilson Center, July 27 2021 <<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/read-xi-jinpings-words-proper-context>>.

44 Yang Liu (@yangliuxh), 'The word 头破血流 from #CPC100 speech seems to be gaining traction, w/ some gruesome translations being floated. But let's be fair, this is one of those words that gradually lost their literal meaning over the yrs, to chn ears it conveys total failure, not broken skull & blood', Twitter, July 2 2021, 2.03am <<https://twitter.com/yangliuxh/status/1410630168092217354>>.

45 See 'Zhonggong jiangdang bainian: Xi Jinping yanjiang zhong 'tou po xie liu' yici weihe yinfa Zhongwai reyi' 中共建党百年：习近平演讲中“头破血流”一词为何引发中外热议 (Centenary of the founding of the Communist Party of China: Why Xi Jinping's use of the phrase 'head cut open and blood gushing' in a speech is sparking heated controversy within and outside China), *BBC Chinese*, July 3 2021 <<https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/world-57703178>>.

46 Wanning Sun, 'Misconstruing China's 'demands', Australian media beat the drums of war', *Crikey*, July 13 2022 <<https://www.crikey.com.au/2022/07/13/australian-media-china-demands/>>.

47 Gerry Shih (@gerryshih), 'Sorry but it wasn't necessary to choose that idiom (broken heads and flowing blood) but for a rhetorical objective. Could've easily chosen something else. Xi's general message was essentially tough, non-conciliatory, antagonistic toward the West. Why whitewash?', Twitter, July 2 2021, 2.36am <<https://twitter.com/gerryshih/status/1410638416698617861>>.

48 Zhang Han and Leng Shumei, 'China's defense ministry issues fresh, rare warning 'action the most powerful language' over Pelosi's Taiwan visit; reinforces resolve', *Global Times*, July 28 2022 <<https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202207/1271693.shtml>>.

The people of China will never allow any foreign powers to bully, oppress or subjugate us. Anyone that vainly attempts to do so will smash against the great steel wall forged by the flesh and blood of over 1.4 billion Chinese people⁴⁹ and will **fail dismally/have their noses bloodied** (lit., ‘**smash against the great steel wall... [so hard] that their heads will be cut open and bloodied**’). (Author’s emphasis).

The above example roughly captures the general figurative meaning of the phrase *tóu pò xuè liú* 头破血流. At the same time it retains the vividness and visceral quality imbued in the Chinese phrase. ‘Smash’ is also better than ‘bashed,’ since walls are inanimate. This translation thus captures a core idea conveyed in the Chinese original: that ‘foreign powers’ failure in this task will entail significant material costs and/or be humiliating. At the same time it conveys the sense that the blame for ‘foreign powers’ potentially being ‘bloodied’ or humiliated should not be attributed to PRC aggression, but rather ‘foreign powers’ own actions, and their underestimation of the resolve (and support for the Chinese government/Communist Party) of the Chinese people.

Hidden meanings: historically embedded idioms

This brings us back to Xi’s ‘those who play with fire’ statement, which has increasingly been used by the MFA in relation to America’s ‘interference’ in relation to the Taiwan issue. It should be noted that the literal meaning of the Chinese idiom *wán huǒ zì fén* 玩火自焚 contains the implication of ‘perishing by flame’ (the last word in the phrase is used in the Chinese word for cremation *fén shī* 焚尸 – however, a more archaic use of it implied ‘to burn’ more generally). However, its rhetorical meaning serves as an analogy to the general idea that intemperate or evil acts have consequences – or that, put more simply, ‘those who play with fire get burned.’ The layered senses of the phrase – implying at the least an accusatory exhortation, but also a threatening or macabre depiction of stern consequences – may be why it has become increasingly preferred by Beijing’s MFA spokespeople.

But its choice may have also been inspired by another element – the historical backdrop of the idiom. The idiom has its Chinese origins in a story in the pre-Christian era classic historical commentary (or, arguably, history-themed literary classic) the *Zuo Zhuan*. The line from which it was derived was ‘weapons (a metaphor for the military/armies) are the same as fire, if they aren’t sheathed/contained, [those who employ them] might destroy/incinerate themselves’ 夫兵，犹火也，弗戢，将自焚也. Put another way, the original phrase from which the idiom was derived was specifically a warning about the unintended ramifications of employing military power.

If the historical analogy is to be drawn out further – and it is admittedly very difficult to assess the extent to which this was intended or read into by Chinese elites – there are other interesting historical parallels with the Taiwan scenario. Firstly, the military action warned against involved a state being dragged into a war by allies seeking to resolve disputed leadership/sovereignty claims (i.e., the ‘true’ prince of the state of Song was living in exile in the state of Zheng, which was being attacked by Song and its allies). In relation to recent PRC narratives concerning the United States, the context of the story behind the passage is interesting in other ways. The phrase, written as advice by the statesman of Lu, Zhong Zhong 众仲, to his second cousin, Duke Yin 隐公, was couched in a criticism of the Wei state’s leader Zhouyu 州吁 who – as rendered in the excellent recent translation of this passage by Stephan Durrant, Wai-ye Li and David Schaberg – was described as a tyrannical leader who ‘depends on weaponry (i.e., military power) [to sustain his rule] and is comfortable with cruelty.’ As Zhong Zhong predicted, Zhouyu soon after was unable to ‘escape calamity.’ He was assassinated not long after, and the state of Wei subsequently fell from being a great state to a minor player.

Chinese idioms: More (and sometimes less) than meets the ear

In short, the literal translation of idioms can be at best misleading, at times reductive, and on occasion exceptionally hazardous. Fortunately, there are clear warning signs of their appearance and mistranslation.

⁴⁹ As pointed out by J. Stapleton Roy, the former ambassador and Founding Director Emeritus of the Kissinger Institute on China and the United States, the reference to building a ‘great wall’ with ‘the flesh and blood’ of the Chinese people appears in China’s national anthem and implied resistance against Japanese aggression. See ‘Read Xi Jinping’s words in proper context’, Wilson Center, July 27 2021 <<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/read-xi-jinpings-words-proper-context>>. The original title of the anthem, as it is usually translated, is ‘March of the Anti-Manchukuo Counter-Japan Volunteers’ 反满抗日义勇军进行曲.

Vivid and/or evocative depictions of concrete events, acts or phenomena that contain things like natural elements, animals, human anatomy, or outdated technology, and that seem out of context or out of synch with a passage's tone, are tell-tale signs that an idiom has been translated literally, and that the figurative meaning of the idiom may not have been captured. Translations of phrases that show these signs should be treated with care and be complemented with alternative translations, with an instruction to the translator to convey the figurative as well as the literal meaning. However, the visceral qualities the literal translation evokes should not be dismissed – idioms can be evocative rhetorical devices, and are often chosen with some deliberation on account of this property.

Double meaning and ambiguity

To an extent both of the above examples bring attention to an important trait that is prominent in PRC diplomatic texts – the liberal use of ambiguity and double meaning. These characteristics are common throughout the diplomatic realm, but are more prominent in the Chinese case, and can manifest themselves in the latter in ways that are idiosyncratic.

Yet before the specific manifestations of ambiguity in Chinese texts are addressed, it is perhaps best to briefly remind the reader of the significant role of ambiguity and double meaning in diplomatic language more generally. Vagueness and ambiguity are both the bread and butter of diplomatic language, and are often the most well-worn and ornamented devices in the tool kit of skilled diplomats and foreign affairs spokespersons. Diplomats and foreign affairs spokespersons are, of course, often required to make clear statements on policy, their nations' position on certain events or disputes, and their nations' interests or red lines. But they are ultimately not policymakers, and as such are required to strictly stick to what are often narrow ranging briefs – meaning that the purvey of what they can say is limited, and unprepared speech must often be designed to convey very little in the way of real information. Aside from this is the prominent diplomatic tactic of 'constructive ambiguity,' epitomised by Henry Kissinger's deliberately ambiguous wording of the 'One China policy,' on the basis of which the US both acknowledged Beijing's sovereignty claims, and reserved the right to obstruct the latter from unilaterally enforcing them. Put another way, ambiguity for a diplomat/foreign policy spokesperson serves defensive as well as an array of strategic purposes.

Hence the capacity to convey ambiguity and deal with double meaning with a nose for subtlety and nuance are some of the skills that set apart translators of diplomatic statements from those of other fields. The importance for translators in this field to resist the temptation to see repeated tags as redundant verbal tics (i.e., 'I guess'), mistake omission for error, fill in gaps or draw out seemingly obvious logical inferences, or disregard careful attempts to de-identify a referent (i.e., adjust the degree to which the target of criticism is made explicit or obvious), cannot be overstated. Translation is a mug's game when the translator seeks to convey the unknowable intentions of the speaker/author as opposed to the content of his words, and in the realm of diplomacy in particular, such a proclivity can have catastrophic consequences. A mark of consummate professionalism in this field is often not the demonstration of rhetorical dexterity, but rather the humbling task of producing translations that may come across as wooden, fuzzy or inane. As the great Song Dynasty literary and political figure Su Shi once wrote of his eminent peer Ouyang Xiu, 'Those of great wisdom appear foolish.'

'Unrestricted potential' or 'no bottom line': Omission and ambiguity in Beijing's 'no limits' relationship with Moscow

Chinese is a language which has some inherent advantages in expressing ambiguity. Firstly, it facilitates deidentification by allowing for the omission of the subject – and also, in many circumstances, the object. Stark omission is also a common rhetorical tool in formal/polite Chinese speech. Stark omission here refers to the practice of emphasising a quality to bring attention to the absence of another quality. A somewhat humorous example of the latter, from when the author was a student in Taiwan, is that one might say a person 'really obeys the road rules' 很遵守交通规则 to emphasise that they have no salient virtues worth complementing. What is being omitted is usually hinted at through a broader discursive sequence or context.

Perhaps a prime example of how ambiguity can be used in PRC diplomatic statements – and can be downplayed in interpretation – relates to the so called 'no limits relationship' between the PRC and Russia.

Much has been made in recent months of the joint statement made by the Kremlin and Beijing which spoke of their ‘no limits’ friendship immediately prior to the invasion of Ukraine. Prime Minister Albanese, for instance, raised this as evidence of ‘how interconnected they are,’ while also stating ‘the attack on a sovereign nation won’t be just regarded as being just about Ukraine,’ and ‘what is playing out there has consequences in our own region.’⁵⁰ That statement – perhaps in conjunction with other intelligence – has also allegedly prompted European strategists to move towards such a ‘one theatre thesis’ (i.e., a global theatre of strategic/ideological competition straddling the Pacific and Europe),⁵¹ while Ukraine’s Ambassador to Australia, Vasyl Myroshnychenko, recently said that ‘this ‘no limits’ partnership between the PRC and Russia is a sign that at least from a geopolitical standpoint, from the point of defeating the West, it’s a union, it’s an alliance.’⁵²

To what extent does the ‘no limits’ relationship between Beijing and Moscow pose a threat to Western interests or global security? This is obviously a question for intelligence agencies, geostrategists and defence/security analysts. But to the extent that the language used to describe the relationship is in itself one of the causes of rising concerns among Western allies, it is important that the translation of this depiction receives careful scrutiny. On this front, in the author’s view, there has been a notable disjunct between representations before and after the beginning of the Russian invasion in late February: while the ‘no limits’ pledge has been affirmed in statements from official PRC spokespersons since the invasion, Beijing’s post-invasions statements, including those made just days after the invasion, have been substantially more ambiguous about what this means relative to those made prior, even to the extent that some appear self-contradictory – i.e., that the ‘no limits’ relationship has ‘limits’.

It can be noted, for instance, that in early December 2021 – well prior to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine – Le Yucheng, the PRC’s Vice Foreign Minister, described the bilateral relationship between Russia and the PRC as follows:⁵³

中俄友好没有止境、合作没有禁区、互信没有上限。中方将进一步加强同俄方的战略沟通与协作

There are **no boundaries** (*zhǐjìng* 止境) to Russia and China’s friendship, **nothing is off limits**/there are **no ‘forbidden areas’** (*jìnqū* 禁区) in terms of cooperation, there is **no upper limit** (*shàngxiàn* 上限) to our mutual trust. China will further strengthen our strategic communication and collaboration with Russia. (Author’s emphasis).

The above articulation appears to clearly convey that ‘no limits’ in relation to the friendship between the PRC and Russia means just that – i.e., nothing is ‘off limits’ or ‘off the table.’ Put another way, ‘no limits’ as articulated in this statement appears close to what a native speaker of English might understand ‘no limits’ to mean in this context.

A similarly clear articulation was later presented in the ‘Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development’ on February 4, the first day of the Beijing Winter Olympics, and weeks prior to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine:⁵⁴

[Both sides] reaffirm that the new inter-State relations between Russia and China are superior to political and military alliances of the Cold War era. Friendship between the two States has no limits, there are no “forbidden” areas of cooperation, strengthening of bilateral strategic cooperation is

50 Jorge Branco, ‘Albanese warns world leaders Ukraine invasion has ‘consequences in our own region’, *9News*, June 29 2022 <<https://www.9news.com.au/world/australia-france-updates-anthony-albanese-hails-very-productive-chat-with-emmanuel-macron-at-nato-summit-leaders-dinner-in-madrid-spain/ed3b2377-a14a-4bb3-ba8b-b1029deb82d7>>.

51 Rory Medcalf, ‘NATO shares in Australia’s China risk’, *The Australian Financial Review*, June 30 2022 <<https://www.afr.com/policy/foreign-affairs/nato-s-globalised-strategy-20220628-p5axf0>>.

52 Ben Packham, ‘Warning to NATO on China’s pact with Russia’, *The Australian*, June 26 2022 <<https://www.theaustralian.com.au/nation/politics/warning-to-nato-on-chinas-pact-with-russia/news-story/29b06d0dab55db81b0c0b08b82f3b2c4>>.

53 ‘Waijiaobu Fubuzhang Le Chengyu: Zhong-E youhao meiyou zhijing, hezuo meiyou jinqu, huxin meiyou shangxian’ 外交部副部长乐玉成：中俄友好没有止境、合作没有禁区、互信没有上限 (Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng: China-Russia friendship has no boundaries, cooperation has no forbidden areas, mutual trust has no upper limits), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, December 3 2021 <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/wjbxw_new/202201/t20220113_10492145.shtml>.

54 President of Russia, ‘Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development’, February 4 2022 <<http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5770>>.

neither aimed against third countries nor affected by the changing international environment and circumstantial changes in third countries.

The above statement again clarifies that ‘no limits’ means that ‘nothing is off limits’ in relation to cooperation. However, in an interpretation of the statement made in late March by, the PRC’s Ambassador to the US, Qin Gang, this level of clarity and unconditionality, was not replicated. Below is the official embassy translation⁵⁵ of the interview in which Qin’s statement appears, with added supplementary information/alternative renderings in key places where the translation is notably unfaithful to the original Chinese:⁵⁶

In the joint statement, the two countries defined key areas of future cooperation and laid out shared views and positions on international affairs. The essence is that we must promote democracy in international relations, uphold the purposes and principles of the UN Charter, oppose the resurrection of Cold-War mentality, and oppose bloc confrontation. These expressions carry profound significance and are in line with the basic norms governing international relations. So there is no limit [*shàngxiàn* 上限] to how far China-Russia cooperation can go [**in these areas 这些领域**]. Having said this, we should also be clear that China-Russia cooperation has **no limits [no ‘forbidden areas’/nothing is off limits *méiyǒu jīnqū* 没有禁区]**, but it does have a bottom line [*dǐxiàn* 底线], that is the purposes and principles of the UN Charter, the [universally recognised 公认] international law and basic norms governing international relations. **These are the guideline[s] for China to deal with relations with any country [These are the guidelines to which we adhere when we manage our relationship with any country 这也是中国同其他任何国家处理双边关系时我们所遵循的行动指南]**. (Author’s emphasis).

The difference between Qin’s statement and those made prior to the invasion say a number of interesting things – as do, to a lesser extent, differences between the former and its official translation into English.

Qin’s statement stays faithful to the early official line that the relationship has ‘no upper limits’ and ‘no ‘forbidden areas.’ However, he qualifies both statements. ‘Limits’ can be more literally translated as ‘upper limit’ (the same two characters that appear in the first statement to describe both nations level of ‘mutual trust’). The latter may appear wooden and unnatural in English, but – as shall be elaborated later – the reference to ‘upper’ in this context is worth noting, because ‘upper limits’ can be distinguished with other types of limits in Chinese. Importantly, while this term was earlier applied to describe friendship between Russia and the PRC in a general sense, in Qin’s statement it is applied more specifically to cooperation in certain areas (these will be discussed later). Similarly, while cooperation continues to have ‘no ‘forbidden areas’ in Qin’s statement, it is also said to have a ‘bottom line’ *dǐxiàn* 底线 – a phrase often used to denote minimum or essential conditions, and that clearly contrasts with ‘upper limits.’ This ‘bottom line’ is identified as abidance with international law, the UN Charter, etc.

Equally importantly, the official translation of Qin’s interview differs again in its articulation of these varied articulations of ‘no limits’ (i.e., ‘no boundaries/forbidden areas’ etc). While areas for cooperation are listed, ‘no limits’ is again applied to Russian cooperation generally in the translated texts – or at the least, such an interpretation is made plausible. And ‘no ‘forbidden areas’ is removed and translated instead simply as ‘limits.’ Interestingly, this reflects more closely the language of a subsequent statement – that made by MFA spokesperson Wang Wenbin on March 30. The statement included the following articulation of the bilateral relationship:⁵⁷

中俄合作无上限，我们争取和平无上限，维护安全无上限，反对霸权无上限。中俄关系不结盟，不对抗，不针对第三方。

55 Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the United States of America, ‘Transcript of Ambassador Qin Gang’s interview with ‘Talk With World Leaders’, March 27 2022 <http://us.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/dshd/202203/t20220327_10656186.htm>.

56 ‘Fengyun duihua: Xiaotian duihua Qin Gang – shizilukou shang de Zhong-Mei guanxi’ 風雲對話：曉田對話秦剛——十字路口上的中美關係 20220324 (Talk with World Leaders: Xiaotian talks with Qin Gang – China–American relations at the crossroads), Phoenix TV: Talk with World Leaders, YouTube, March 28 2022 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wyZP4mh0Jow>>.

57 ‘Waijiaoby: Zhong-E zhengqu heping wu shangxian, weihu anquan wu shangxian, fan baquan wu shangxian’ 外交部：中俄争取和平无上限，维护安全无上限，反霸权无上限 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs: There is no limit to China and Russia’s endeavours for peace, no limit to their preservation of security, no limit to their opposition to hegemony), *The Paper*, March 30 2022 <https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_17376286>.

China-Russia cooperation has no upper limits; there are no upper limits to our endeavours for peace, no upper limits to our preservation of security; no upper limits to our opposition to hegemony. The China-Russia relationship is not an alliance, nor is it antagonistic, nor is it directed at any third party.

(On the website of the Mission of the People's Republic of China to the African Union, this statement was slightly altered and reads:⁵⁸ 中俄合作争取和平无上限，维护安全无上限，反对霸权无上限， which could be roughly translated as 'There is no upper limit to China and Russian cooperation in the endeavour to pursue peace, no upper limit to our preservation of security, no upper limit to our opposition to hegemony...'.)

From this it can be seen that of the three terms used to describe the 'no limits' relationship between Russian and the PRC – those describing the absence of 'boundaries,' 'forbidden areas' and 'upper limits,' only *shàngxiàn* (upper limits) can be found in Wang's statement. *Shàngxiàn* contains the word *shàng* 上 – which can mean upper, above or on top – and can imply 'limits' in the sense of potential or aspiration, with a light intimation of positivity. Moreover, it is qualified, in terms of the scope to which it is applied, in Qin Gang's original statement, and in the Mission of the People's Republic of China to the African Union's English rendering of Wang's statement. In other words, 'upper limits' to cooperation may or not be conditional depending on which text is consulted – but the words closer to what we might normally understand 'no limits' to mean in such a context in English – i.e., that nothing is 'out of bounds' *méiyǒu zhǐjìng* 止境 or 'forbidden'/'off limits' *méiyǒu jīnqū* 没有禁区 – are conspicuous in their absence in Wang's statement, and not reflected in the official translation of Qin Gang's statement. Where the latter is found in Qin Gang's interview, furthermore, it is conditioned by reference to a 'bottom line' *dǐxiàn* 底线 – but it is unclear how having nothing 'off limits,' and having a 'bottom line' can be reconciled with each other. While the joint statement notes that 'new inter-State relations between Russia and China are superior to political and military alliances of the Cold War era,' Qin Gang's statement also mentions that the PRC manages its conditional 'no limits' relationship with Russia in adherence to certain guidelines that it applies to every relationship, while Wang's statement clarifies that Beijing's relationship with Moscow is 'not' to be construed as an alliance. Both of these statements sit uneasily with the intimation that the 'no limits' relationship is uniquely special to Beijing, nor the pre-invasion statement that the relationship was 'superior to political and military alliances of the Cold War era.'

Finally, it is important to note the areas to which the 'no (upper) limits' statement is specifically applied in both Qin and Wang's statements. The former applies to 'promote democracy in international relations, uphold the purposes and principles of the UN Charter, oppose the resurrection of Cold-War mentality, and oppose bloc confrontation' – each of which resonate with critiques that are elsewhere applied explicitly or implicitly in Chinese statements directed at the United States and its core allies. Readers may notice on this front, for instance, other MFA statements such as '[The PRC's approach] differs fundamentally and essentially from the practice of the US, which is, ganging up to form small cliques and pursuing bloc politics to create confrontation and division based on ideology. China has no interest in the friend-or-foe dichotomous Cold War thinking' (February 24 2022);⁵⁹ and more comprehensively (albeit in a text produced subsequent to Qin's statement, on June 17 2022, and that doesn't explicitly name the offending 'countries'):⁶⁰

The first bad thing is that some countries are keen on ganging up to form small cliques and seeking a 'new Cold War'. In fact, they are inciting bloc confrontation, division and confrontation. The second one is that some forces have blatantly challenged the principle of non-interference in internal affairs, the international system with the United Nations at its core, the international order underpinned by international law and the multilateral trading system with the World Trade Organization as its cornerstone on bilateral and multilateral occasions.

Qin's statement, as such, appears to imply that 'cooperation' is targeted at opposing certain practices/institutions associated with the United States and its allies. In comparison, in Wang's statement, which

58 Mission of the People's Republic of China to the African Union, '2022 nian 3 yue 30 ri Waijiaobu fayanren Wang Wenbin zhuchi lixing jizhahui' 2022 年3月30日外交部发言人汪文斌主持例行记者会 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Wang Wenbin's regular press conference, March 30 2022), March 30 2022 <http://au.china-mission.gov.cn/wjbfyrth/202203/t20220330_10657653.htm>.

59 Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United States of America, 'Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying's regular press conference on February 24, 2022', February 24 2022 <http://us.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/lcbt/wjbfyrbt/202202/t20220224_10645282.htm>.

60 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 'Ensuring effective COVID control, stable economic performance, safe and secure development, and upgraded cooperation', June 16 2022 <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbxw/202206/t20220619_10706022.html>.

was slightly later, the tenets to which the ‘no limits’ relationship applies are the vaguely articulated and decontextualized concepts of ‘peace,’ ‘security’ and ‘opposing hegemony’ – each of which, aside from echoing past criticisms directed at the United States, contrast strikingly with Russia’s behaviour towards Ukraine.

In short, the ‘no limits’ comment made immediately prior to the Russian invasion of the Ukraine, and that was mobilised by some to support ideas such as the ‘one theatre’ concept, were followed by statements that continued to pay homage to the official language of ‘no limits,’ but which by means of ambiguity, self-contradiction and conspicuous omissions of key phrases, appear to have attempted to intimate that the ‘no limits’ relationship may, in fact, be rather limited. This appears to address what some commentators point out to be Beijing’s conundrum in relation to Russia – while it doesn’t want to damage its close relationship with Moscow, it is desperate to avoid the damage to its economy and international reputation that would be the likely consequence of showing explicit support for Russia’s ongoing invasion. Some influential figures arguably appeared to understand this conundrum – Australian Foreign Minister Wong, for instance, said in early July 2022, ‘It is especially important for countries that play leading roles in international fora, and countries with influence on Russia, to exert their influence to end this war. This includes China, as a great power... and with its “no limits partnership” with Russia.’⁶¹ Yet it was arguably always going to be a tall task to convey such ambiguity to an entire body of readers for whom ‘no limits’ typically means exactly what it (appears in English) to convey.

Core interests or Core Interests? Promises and obligations

Another idiosyncratic aspect of the ambiguity of translations in the case of Chinese diplomatic/foreign affairs statements relates to another overspill of the PRC’s domestic political culture into its diplomatic language. This in part has roots in the party-state’s proclivity to present itself as akin to infallible and omniscient. The challenge this creates is reconciling long-term projections and plans with unexpected eventualities, and the necessity to change tact in response to shifting circumstances. Discrepancies between plans/projections and their eventualities can be dealt with by strategically inserting vagaries into the former and subsequently maintaining a monopoly on their hermeneutic authority (i.e., the power to interpret what was originally meant/intended). In the PRC, this interpretive power extends to many parts of its administration and even its legal system. The PRC has what could be described as a ‘spirit of law’ system as opposed to the ‘letter of the law’ principle that marks the common law (or Anglo-American law) tradition, which essentially means that the National People’s Congress Standing Committee (NPCSC) has the authority to interpret statutes – although the practice of writing them in a way which imbues them with ambiguity in the first place helps ensure that it is not necessary to use this interpretive power in ways that come across as too overt and egregious. The ‘spirit of the law’ trumping the ‘letter of the law’ (together with the problem of judicial corruption and cronyism) has to an extent influenced certain business practices that were to become prominent in the early ‘opening up’ period in particular – i.e., the necessity to build relationships where mutual trust and affective bonds (i.e., *guanxi*) compensate for potential limitations in terms of the binding power of contractual agreements.

In PRC diplomacy this same principle applies, yet to a different degree, and in different ways. One involves the use of ambiguity – often in documents which emphasise affective bonds between nations – in ways that could potentially give Beijing the flexibility to reinterpret the concrete substance of mutual commitments, promises or obligations. Such practices often appear in statements which talk about relationships and mutual obligations, and that might – on account of their juxtaposition of affective language – appear more casual than substantial in a contractual sense. Note, for example, the following passage from an official MFA translation:⁶²

China and Pacific Island Countries will continue to support and help each other, firmly uphold each other’s core interests and major concerns, and keep consolidating and expanding the comprehensive strategic partnership.

⁶¹ Penny Wong, ‘A shared future: Australia, ASEAN and Southeast Asia’, speech, International Institute for Strategic Studies, June 6 2022 <<https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/penny-wong/speech/special-lecture-international-institute-strategic-studies-shared-future-australia-asean-and-southeast-asia>>.

⁶² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, ‘Wang Yi on consensus reached at second China-Pacific Island Countries Foreign Ministers’ Meeting’, May 30 2022 <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202205/t20220531_10694997.html>.

The above statement appears to be a fairly innocent description of an inchoative strategic partnership that has few strings attached. Yet, and to the extent to which it reflects the contents of jointly signed statements/agreements, it is not necessarily so. The key problematic passage is the oft-used phrase ‘core interests and major concerns’ (*héxīn lìyì hé zhòngdà guānqīē* 核心利益和重大关切). The use of ‘core interests’ (*héxīn lìyì*) in diplomatic language has been the subject of many debates among Chinese scholars and analysts. Core questions are both whether this is a descriptive term or a substantive policy category, and – if it is the latter – what its constituents are. As stated by Ma Bo of Nanjing University’s Collaborative Innovation Centre of South China Sea Studies, *héxīn lìyì* has been used at different times in official and semi-official sources in reference to many things including the ‘Taiwan problem,’ ‘problems in Tibet,’ the ‘South China Sea’ and ‘sovereignty of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands,’ however, its scope continues to be the subject of ‘contention and blurred recognition.’⁶³ In other words, it is questionable whether ‘core interests’ should be translated as a proper noun (i.e., ‘Core Interests’). It is, on this front, an open question whether the PRC may have positioned itself to redefine what these might be subsequent to the commitment of Pacific Island countries to ‘firmly uphold’ (or alternatively, ‘steadfastly defend/safeguard’ [*jiāndìng wéihù* 坚定维护]) them.

To an extent this is an issue that stands at the intersection of translation and content knowledge – in particular, knowledge of textual conventions that apply to contractual documents (including non-binding statements, such as Framework Agreements or Memorandum of Understanding) and that are associated with the PRC’s political culture and civil-law jurisprudence. It appears, moreover, that such vagaries are common in agreements/statements that describe agreements with small or impoverished nations (i.e., those that may be reluctant to pass over the benefits of an agreement over small matters of semantics). Perhaps a significant example of this is the leaked ‘Framework Agreement between the Government of the People’s Republic of China And the Government of Solomon Islands on Security Cooperation’ – a document which provoked concern in Australia and the United States that Beijing was attempting to lay the groundwork for establishing a naval base in the Solomon Islands. As pointed out by some observers,⁶⁴ the document contained a number of ambiguities which left open considerable space for interpretation, including ‘other law enforcement and armed forces,’ ‘other tasks,’ ‘relevant forces of China,’ and ‘stopover and transition.’ While we are not privy to the details that have been negotiated subsequently, the bar does appear to have shifted in terms of the Solomon Islands approach to security – despite the agreement having been described as non-exclusive and not directed at any third party, the Solomon Islands has since ostensibly ‘temporarily’ banned foreign navies – the first being that of the United States – from entering its ports.⁶⁵

Vagueness and ambiguity in texts of this kind serve many functions. In the first example, appearing to steer clear of detailing concrete commitments helps Beijing achieve an easy diplomatic win: positive responses are cheap to give when they are coupled with economic sweeteners and appear to involve no concrete obligations, and such responses can be sold to domestic sources as the expansion of Beijing’s influence. But the bigger advantage – especially in the case of dealing with weaker countries – is that it gives Beijing the room to decide what concrete actions or commitment these agreements might entail at a later date. This is not necessarily merely a cunning set up for obligation creep or affective debt-trapping, although it potentially can be. In the case of relationship building, it is in part based on the notion, associated with the malleable yet well researched concept of *guanxi* (sometimes translated as ‘relationships’), that partnerships based on mutual, more open commitments between two parties have advantages over a reductive approach to cooperation marked by conventional ‘letter of the law’ contractual approaches, which can lock both parties in to serving needs and obligations that might shift or quickly become redundant. Put another way, the use of vagaries and ambiguity in translations of documents which at times might appear to be juxtaposed with affective statements – and which thus appear to have a weak affiliation with the generic features of common law contracts – should not prompt an underestimation about the extent to which a ‘non-binding’ agreement may form the foundations for heightened Chinese pressure, or, potentially, obligatory demands.

63 Ma Bo, *Xi Jinping shidai de Zhongguo waijiao guancha: dingceng sheji yu redian wenti* 习近平时代的中国外交观察：顶层设计与热点问题 (Observations on China’s diplomacy in the Xi Jinping period: top-level planning and topical issues) (Singapore: Global Publishing, 2018), p. 181.

64 See, for example, this Twitter thread, dated March 24 2022, by Anna Powles, a lecturer in Security Studies at New Zealand’s Massey University <<https://twitter.com/annapowles/status/1506845794728837120>>.

65 Andrew Jeong, ‘Solomon Islands bans foreign navies from docking, in blow to U.S., U.K.’, *The Washington Post*, September 1 2022 <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/08/31/solomon-islands-navy-ship-moratorium/>>.

Ambiguity in translation: Sanctity in the fog of knowledge

To summarise, understanding some of the ways in which PRC diplomatic texts use ambiguity can help the reader spot potential issues with translations. Texts that consistently appear to make concrete and specific claims relative to the common fare of diplomatic language, or that juxtapose eulogies of affective bonds with vague commitments to mutual-obligation, should be approached with caution. ‘Wooden’ translations that appear vague or opaque should not necessarily be assumed to be deficient, and such apparent deficiencies should never serve as the grounds to conflate their explicit message with drawn-out interpretations.

(Mis)setting the tone: Why do PRC diplomatic texts at times appear rambling and ‘preachy’?

While diplomatic statements don’t always set out to say a great deal that is new, the premises they reveal, and the tone they convey, often in themselves play an important role in shaping their impact. Unfortunately, in the case of the PRC, efforts to curate statements for domestic consumption, a poor understanding of the mores and stylistic inclinations of Western political dialogue, and a general overestimation of the scope of political and ideological commonalities between modern China under the CPC and the democratic West, often conspire to result in translations of diplomatic language that fails to convey their originally intended tenor and tone.

Obviously, the PRC has become more assertive as its power and influence have grown, and not all instances of aggressive or abrasive language are merely incidental. Beijing’s so-called ‘wolf warrior’ diplomacy is a case in point. Nonetheless, apparently hostile, condescending or patronising language may in part be a product of translations which fail to identify discursive conventions and decode PRC bureaucratese, or which mistake apparent similarities between these and Western diplomatic texts for commonalities, and follow a foreignisation strategy under the guise of domestication (i.e., mistakenly assume certain statements come across as natural to a native speaker – a tell-tale sign of *bimén zàochē*). This last section aims to assist the reader to spot some of the tell-tale signs that an English translation may not capture the tenor and especially tone of a PRC diplomatic statement.

Lecture or sermon? The strange juxtaposition of scientism and archaicism

Generally speaking, political texts broadcast their legitimacy by paying homage to things, whether it be values, ideologies, institutions, ruling parties or leaders, or the identity and interests of the entities the latter are purported to serve. Relative to Western democracies, whose cornerstones of political legitimacy have been rhetorically streamlined by a long history of democratic continuity, modern CPC-led PRC’s political institutions are ultimately a hodgepodge of many elements that were only reshaped into their current incarnations after the death of Mao, or that are even in ongoing evolution. This means that post-Mao Chinese texts are often compelled to pay homage to a great many things – often as the party continues to redefine or educate people as to what those things are. The modern CPC’s scientism and high-modernity, its need to affirm its fidelity to its Marxist and Maoist roots, Chinese archaicisms related to its heightened promotion of cultural nationalism, and the almost mandatory salutes to Xi Jinping signature policies and slogans, combine to result in political texts that appear sermonising and that are semantically overburdened to the extent that decoding them – let alone translating them into another language – can be onerous even for highly literate non-insiders. While Chinese-language statements produced by the MFA are mercifully less imbued with these characteristics than their domestic counterparts (such as communications across departments or between local and central branches), they do, on occasion, carry over some of these traits.

The examples of this are abundant, but a few can help with the understanding of these phenomena. For instance, on January 31 2020, PRC Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying answered a question in relation to the ‘unfriendly US comments amid China’s fight against [the COVID] outbreak.’ The official MFA translation said:⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, ‘Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying’s remarks on unfriendly US comments amid China’s fight against outbreak’, January 31 2020 <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2535_665405/202001/t20200131_697015.html>.

Adversity makes one stronger just as polishing makes jade finer. The Chinese nation is known for its perseverance and resilience. We have every confidence that with the resolute leadership of the CPC, the enormous strength of socialism with Chinese characteristics and the strong support from the international community, the Chinese people, fighting with one heart and mind, will definitely win the battle against the outbreak and overcome any difficulty lying ahead to realize the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.

The above brings together a number of the aforementioned ‘homages’ that are common in Chinese domestic political texts. It starts with the translation of a well-known Chinese idiom *jīǎnnán kùnkǔ, yù rǔ yú chéng* 艰难困苦，玉汝于成 (often just *yù rǔ yú chéng*) whose origins lie in an 11th century inscription from the neo-Confucian thinker Zhang Zai. ‘The resolute leadership of the CPC’, ‘strength of socialism with Chinese characteristics’ and the ‘rejuvenation of the Chinese nation’ are common ingredients in modern word-salad-homages to the CPC-led Chinese state. Written in this way, the paragraph perhaps comes across as a long-winded lecture – and there is, on this front, most probably an intention to remind the United States not to underestimate the CPC or the level of public support it enjoys within the PRC. But, were it not for the role of domestic considerations in shaping the composition of the Chinese statement, the entire statement might have been more economically phrased as something like, ‘People are behind the CPC, and the nation will unite to overcome the outbreak and become stronger as a result – rest assured the pandemic will not impede the PRC’s rise.’

High-modernist bureaucratese

A slightly different example – which nonetheless also provides a classic example of the bureaucratese found in domestic political texts – involves a statement made on August 17 2022 on a planned follow-up meeting for the 8th Ministerial Conference of Forum on China–African Cooperation (FOCAC). One part of the statement read:⁶⁷

China and Africa have jointly overcome difficulties and challenges and worked together to advance the implementation of the outcomes of the 8th Ministerial Conference of FOCAC and made positive progress and important early harvests. In the face of complex and volatile international landscape and ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, both China and Africa find it necessary to hold a meeting of coordinators to strengthen coordination and planning, coordinate the approach to cooperation, identify priority areas and key projects and make steady and solid progress in the follow-up work so as to deliver more benefit to the two peoples.

Or more succinctly, ‘China and Africa[n representatives] are planning a follow-up to the 8th Ministerial Conference on FOCAC to address complex challenges brought about by global volatility and the COVID-19 pandemic.’

The first translation closely mirrors the Chinese (as many MFA translations do). And political texts are written like this in the PRC for several reasons. Firstly, it should be kept in mind that while the PRC’s economic performance has been a cornerstone of the party’s legitimacy and strong support, it remains insecure about other foundations of its political legitimacy. The CPC strives to convey itself as a bureaucratically competent and scientifically enlightened party-state apparatus, and these claims are often demonstrated performatively through its language use. The attempt to define the party according to a high-modernist vision – one that has seen the party’s upper echelons traditionally over-represented by engineers – is often reflected in something that one might expect of the latter’s ascent into leadership: namely, the conflation of broad modernist visions with unnecessarily detailed technical enunciations.

It should also be noted on this point that the CPC is not merely a source of political dictates in the PRC – it also sees itself as engaged in a grand project of not only making the PRC an economic powerhouse, but also making ‘China’ an admired ‘high civilisation’ populated by an educated, urbane and scientifically literate people. This mission, in the view of the party, is difficult but important, since the disastrous socio-moral after-

⁶⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin’s Regular Press Conference on August 17, 2022’ <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/202208/t20220817_10744894.html>.

effects of the cultural revolution (sometimes known as the ‘10 year calamity’), the subsequent shift away from communism, not to mention China’s not-too-distant past of what it refers to as the ‘feudalism’ of imperial China (the Qing dynasty gave way to Republican China in 1912), has made – in the view of some within the CPC – for considerable ideological confusion, and a ‘quality’ (*suzhi* 素质) of people that remains deficient and continues to require ideological, value and moral guidance. Put another way, if PRC domestic texts appear to have a bent for lecturing, it is, in part, because that is what they intend to do.

Unjumbled ramblings: Chewing the meat and spitting out the bones

How does one approach problematic translations of this manner? The key thing to remember, first of all, is the purpose for which they are to be used. A translation serving an endeavour to examine the PRC’s political culture, track changes in it or in CPC’s language, or explore deeper elements of the party’s ideological or foreign policy history, might want to fully represent all of the aforementioned elements. But for those interested in specific policy positions on concrete and more immediate foreign policy/foreign relations concerns, doing so can either confuse their central message or downplay its centrality, or convey a tenor to their audience that is fundamentally different from that which might be received by those (i.e., a domestic audience) familiar with the discursive conventions those texts adhere to. One way to extract the meat of their diplomatic message can be to simply treat certain language – especially political homages – as extraneous or redundant. The reason this is, in the author’s view, an acceptable approach at times, is because the word salads, and the scientism/high modernist inclination to conflate vision with technique, or strategy and tactics (perhaps in part a legacy of the CPC’s preferring their leaders to be engineers), can obscure core messages, are not always semantically functional, and can be a reflection of how the CPC performatively markets its own legitimacy, as opposed to the product of an attempt to educate their international audience.

Conclusion

Getting translations right is important for managing Australia’s relationship with the PRC – which is one of the most consequential, and certainly the most challenging of our times. Ideally, such an endeavour ought to be pursued through the proliferate body of academic and professional literature on translations of PRC diplomatic/foreign policy texts. However, in the less than ideal world we live in, it is becoming, by necessity, somewhat incumbent upon the consumers of these translations – especially those whose commentary on the PRC is influential – to share the burden of preventing mistranslations or misinterpretations from escaping scrutiny and having an undue influence on public debate – potentially with grave consequences. The scale of the opportunities and challenges posed by the PRC’s rise means that our best minds from many disciplines – from economists, policymakers and business people to security experts, strategic analysts and military planners – need to be mobilised, and that it cannot only be those with strong Chinese-language and historical knowledge that have a seat at the China-expertise table. Setting some guidelines for dealing with translation issues is arguably a compromise – however unsatisfying – between the impossible task of the latter completely monitoring and filtering in real time the proliferate output of an increasingly large and diffuse body of casual and professional translators, and the impractically time-consuming process of having the former achieving mastery of spoken and written Chinese Mandarin (Putonghua).

This analysis discusses a small number of examples in order to stimulate further discussion on guidelines that might help non-Chinese speakers whose work requires engaging with PRC diplomatic/foreign relations texts – in particular influential journalists – better appreciate the limitations and idiosyncrasies of translations pertaining to this field, and spot signs of sub-optimal translations that have could potentially inform poor or calamitous foreign policy responses. Based on a short overview of a small sample of recent translation issues, it tentatively proposes the following guidelines as a starting point:

- Official PRC MFA translations are of variable quality, and may inadvertently – and at times perhaps intentionally – convey different messages from their Chinese source:
 - The quality of MFA translations may be sub-optimal and should ideally be substituted by professional translations where possible;

- They are often based on post-edited paraphrases as opposed to direct quotes of statements from PRC leaders and spokespersons, and there are sometimes discrepancies between the translation and the original statement;
- They sometimes differ from the Chinese original because they address different reader cohorts: Chinese-language MFA statements are directed more towards a domestic audience relative to their official translations;
- MFA translations are at times an important supplementary source to accurate translations of Chinese source-texts – since they are less directed at domestic image management, they may better reflect the tenor/substance of official diplomatic representations. Discretion should be applied in deciding whether differences found in MFA official translations are worth noting.
- Vivid depictions of concrete phenomena/actions – especially those which appear out of place or which use highly evocative language can be a sign that a Chinese idiom has been translated literally and at the expense of its figurative meaning. While commentators should seek to reflect the tenor of the idiom, they need to be careful not to misinform their readers by conveying the literal meaning at the expense of the figuration meaning.
- Translations that regularly exhibit a surgical level of specificity above that which is found in Western diplomatic statements should be approached with caution – they may be distorted by a translator’s aversion to opacity.
- ‘Core interests’ might be ‘Core Interests’: vague assertions of relationship expectations – especially in joint statements – might be understood on the PRC side as a commitment to concrete obligations, and the contents/scope of these obligations may be subject to redefinition. This is especially relevant for policymakers.
- English translations whose focal point is unclear, and which appear convoluted, preachy or that espouse grand visions in highly technical or, conversely, archaic language, may have allowed the representation of domestic attempts at CPC image maintenance to obscure their core message and/or misrepresent their tenor. Reports or analyses focused on more immediate policy responses should seek to isolate their core message.

Author

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