

Redefining Translation and Interpretation in Cultural Evolution

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Chapter 13

Towards a Re-Definition of Government Interpreters' Agency Against a Backdrop of Sociopolitical and Cultural Evolution: A Case of Premier's Press Conferences in China

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ABSTRACT

The sociopolitical and cultural evolution as a result of the Reform and Opening up in 1978, facilitated not least by the inexorable juggernaut of globalization and technological advancement, has revolutionized the way China engages domestically and interacts with the outside world. The need for more proactive diplomacy and open engagement witnessed the institutionalization of the interpreter-mediated premier's press conferences. Such a discursive event provides a vital platform for China to articulate its discourse and rebrand its image in tandem with the profound changes signaled by the Dengist reform. This chapter investigates critically how political press conference interpreting and interpreters' agency in China are impacted in relation to such dramatic transformations. It is revealed that, while interpreters are confronted with seemingly conflicting expectations, in actual practice they are often able to negotiate a way as highly competent interpreting professionals with the additional missions of advancing China's global engagement and safeguarding China's national interests.

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INTRODUCTION

Interpreting is not conducted in a vacuum but a “situated” (Monacelli, 2009, p. 61) and contextualized activity inextricably linked with the broader sociopolitical and cultural settings. Far from being a randomly established communicative practice, the interpreter-mediated Premier-Meets-the-Press political press conferences in China can be seen as a natural response to and direct product of the sociopolitical and cultural changes that have ensued in the wake of the Reform and Opening up in 1978, a pivotal inflection point in China’s recent history. This interpreted discursive event in turn serves to further facilitate China’s global diplomacy and engagement, thus highlighting the decisive role of interpreters from the vantage point of discourse.

Looking beyond an essentialist and thus restricted understanding of culture that is reducible to national culture (Goodenough, 1964), this chapter considers it useful to understand culture in a multifaceted, multidimensional and inclusive manner given the increasingly blurred boundary between culture and various other elements. This is in the sense that, rather than a fixed and static entity, culture is a porous concept that encompasses and internalizes other political, socioeconomic, diplomatic and even technological dimensions of a given place and is subject to change and historical (re)definition over time. Using this dynamic understanding of culture as a starting point, this chapter focuses on the interpreting practice as well as interpreters’ agency in China’s political press conferences against a backdrop of sociopolitical and cultural evolution signaled by the open-door reform since 1978. With this overarching aim in mind, the specific objectives of this chapter are three-fold: firstly to contextualize this transformative interpreter-mediated event, secondly to investigate on an empirical level how such an evolution is reflected in the official metadiscourses prescribing government-affiliated interpreters’ expected roles and responsibilities, and thirdly to illuminate interpreters’ agency through an in-depth critical discourse analysis of their actual interpreting.

This study on the underexplored area of interpreters’ agency in China’s political press conferences fills many gaps. Traditionally, political scientists and Chinese studies researchers tend to focus on political systems, policies, activities as well as the role of major political actors in effecting change (cf. Fewsmith, 2010; Wang, 1994). Within media and communication studies particularly in relation to political press conferences in China, attention is mostly paid to the communicative practice per se as well as the two-way dynamics between politicians and journalists (cf. Wu & Zhao, 2016; Yi & Chang, 2012; Yi, 2016), thereby overlooking the crucial part played by interpreters as indispensable co-participants in the meaning-making and communicative process. Even in interpreting studies, a relatively new area compared with its considerably better researched translation counterpart, scholarly research has only rather recently begun to consider various cultural, sociopolitical and ideological dimensions (cf. Beaton, 2007; Beaton-Thome, 2010), following the “cultural turn”. In the specific Chinese context, the vast majority of studies on premier’s press conference interpreting have thus far focused on various grammatical elements, norms, and interpreting strategies, largely taking a prescriptive view (cf. Deng, 2013; Li & Hu, 2015; Wang, 2012). To the best of my knowledge, no study has (systematically) investigated interpreters’ mediation from the vantage point of political discourse against the backdrop of China’s political, cultural and social evolution to date. As such, bringing interpreter into the equation as a valid player in the triadic encounter, this chapter promises to further contribute to research on interpreter agency, constituting a current addition to the existing (historical) accounts of political/diplomatic translators and interpreters’ role (cf. Baranyai, 2011; Delisle & Woodsworth, 2012; Roland, 1999). Inherently interdis-

ciplinary in nature, this chapter also serves to enrich scholarship in Chinese studies, political science and communication studies alike.

CONTEXTUALIZING THE PREMIER'S PRESS CONFERENCES: A BRIEF GENEALOGY

The premier's press conference in China is held in Beijing each year towards the conclusion of the two sessions, which are the National People's Congress (NPC) and Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC). They respectively constitute China's top legislature and political advisory body, representing an important symbol of China's consultative and deliberative democracy. This section explores the nexus between the institutionalized practice of the premier's press conferences and the broader economic, political and cultural changes following China's economic reform engineered by visionary Deng Xiaoping in 1978.

Similar in essence to *Perestroika* and, to a lesser extent, *Glasnost* initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev in the former Soviet Union, China's Reform and Opening up, or *Gaige Kaifang*, has witnessed China's meteoric rise as a global powerhouse in economic, political and military terms. The period since the Dengist reform is designated "post-socialism" in recent scholarship (Dirlik & Zhang, 2000, p. 7) where China is increasingly open and seeks to construct "socialism with Chinese characteristics" in the aftermath of its previous endeavors. While the structural contradiction between China's market-oriented economy and its ideological formations still persists (Wu, 2001), there is little denying that this watershed moment, if not a complete sea change, signifies China's transition from a closed, homogeneous, inward-looking and ideologically isolated party-state in Mao's era to a more open, diversified and dynamic nation that is increasingly (and perhaps irrevocably) interwoven into the international community.

Post-socialist China is characterized by a more relaxed and pragmatic culture. This attitudinal change in favor of (economic) pragmatism is best epitomized in Deng's audacious and explorative learn-as-you-go approach of "crossing the river by feeling the stones" (*mezhe shitou guohe*) and his famous cat metaphor that "it does not matter whether it is a black cat or a white cat, as long as it catches the mice it is a good cat" (*buguan heimao baimao zhuadao laoshu jiushi haomao*). This way, policies and decisions were made based upon empirical criteria and pragmatist considerations and the corresponding ideological discourses were then rationalized and justified accordingly *post hoc* (Ji, 2011, p. 203). Alongside such economic pragmatism were diplomatic pragmatism and relative political relaxation, which have in turn given rise to signs of evolution particularly in the way China engages both domestically and internationally.

Pragmatic performance-based legitimacy, as Zhao (2009, p. 426) observes, has been key for Chinese leaders since Deng, resulting in a noticeable trend of engagement on the domestic front. This is in the sense that, in addition to the maintenance of government-citizen ties forged by political and ideological propaganda (Chen, 2003, p. 99), the government is increasingly keen to promote itself as accountable, efficient and equitable among the Chinese public. Internationally, while sporadic tensions and frictions still exist, China is increasingly involved in global affairs as a responsible key player in what Henry Kissinger (2011, p. xiii) calls "a process of mutual rediscovery" between China and the West. Perhaps marked by such milestone events as China's entry into the WTO, the Beijing Olympic Games and the Shanghai World Expo, the country is seeking to further project and refashion its image in the global arena. This trend of increasing openness and global engagement also manifests itself in such post-1978

guiding 'metadiscourses' (Zhang, 2010, p. 24) and slogans as Jiang Zemin's repeated call for "linking up with the international track" (*yu guoji jiegui*) and "keeping pace with the times" (*yushi jujin*), Hu Jintao's emphasis on enhancing China's "cultural soft power" (*wenhua ruanshili*) as well as Xi Jinping's focus on the "proper telling of China's story" (*jiang hao zhongguo gushi*).

Such far-reaching changes, without doubt, have left an indelible mark on the communicative practice in China. This, in particular, is reflected in the establishment of the interpreter-mediated premier's press conferences in China as an institutionalized practice. Openly held political press conference was an extreme rarity in China's pre-reform era. In actual fact, as Yi (2016, p. 228) observes, between the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 and the Reform and Opening-up in 1978, only one public press conference — chaired by the then vice premier Chen Yi and attended by foreign journalists — was held in 1965 with the purposes of announcing China's response to the sensitive military issues between China and the US and making clear China's official attitude towards the US War in Vietnam. Not surprisingly, at a time when the world was more markedly defined along ideological lines, political interpreters affiliated with the government should be viewed as instrumental in propagating overwhelmingly propagandist message in the (mutual) antagonism between China and the West.

If government-affiliated press conference interpreters in the pre-reform era mostly performed a role akin to that of an ideological mouthpiece, their role needs to be re-examined and re-defined in tandem with China's transition from hostility and ideological isolation (self-imposed or otherwise) increasingly to engagement and integration on an international scale. It was precisely against such a backdrop in post-socialist China that the premier's press conferences began to emerge as one-off *ad hoc* events and then started to institutionalize in 1993. This sociopolitical and cultural evolution, facilitated not least by the rapid technological advancement (Yi, 2016, p. 231) as well as the inexorable trend of globalization (Liu, 2004, p. 2), called for increasing transparency on the part of the government, accentuating the urgent need for speedy and effective transmission of information both internally and externally. As such, the premier's press conference started to be televised nationwide in China in the year 1998. Since then, the interpreted event has become the centerpiece of each year's two sessions, attracting widespread attention from Chinese and international journalists alike.

Nothing short of a defining moment in itself, this consecutively interpreted press conference, focusing on a wide range of topical issues, has enabled journalists to gain a deeper understanding of China straight from the horse's mouth and, at the same time, offered China's top decision-maker an opportunity to present China's domestic developments and global diplomacy to an international audience. While this institutionalized practice can be viewed as an important landmark of open engagement in post-socialist China, it is worth noting that, rather than merely a product, this interpreter-mediated event is also capable of effecting change in social reality. According to Giddens' structuration theory, a formal structure can both constrain and enable social actions (1984, p. 18). The premier's press conference, once established as a structure, can help further facilitate China's international engagement, proactive diplomacy and active discursive legitimation over time with possible human agency.

As a matter of fact, it is observed that, even over the years since the interpreter-mediated event started to institutionalize in 1993 until now, there is a pronounced trend towards further openness and engagement on the part of the Chinese premier. A potent testament to this is the quantitative study (Wu & Zhao, 2016) on the premier's press conferences. Their study shows that in the premier's answers over the last twenty years or so there has been a decline in aggressiveness and an increase in accountability and open engagement with the year 2003 being a "watershed" (Wu & Zhao, 2016, p. 462), possibly as a result of the SARS epidemic which hit China that year. This is exemplified in a comparison between the answers

given by then Chinese premier Li Peng in 1996 and by incumbent Chinese premier Li Keqiang in 2013 on a very similar question regarding Sino-US relations.

In the first instance, Premier Li Peng stated that China tried to “avoid confrontation” but the government and people “would never accept that a country imposes its own will on another country”, warning that “any threat of force to China would not lead to any good results”. However, 17 years later, Premier Li Keqiang answered a similar question rather differently by first making complimentary comments on the foreign journalist’s excellent Chinese and then joking with a warm smile on his face that since the journalist translated his own question he “should get paid double” from his news agency. Premier Li Keqiang candidly admitted to the existence of differences between the two powers and conveyed the reassuring message that as long as they were well managed the two countries can make their “common interests surpass” their differences with an appreciative “thank you” at the end. The relaxed, interactive, cooperative and engaging answer is in stark contrast to the relatively antagonist and adversarial reply in the first instance. This, therefore, provides a snapshot of change towards further openness and engagement since the establishment of the institutionalized practice. In a nutshell, this section has contextualized the premier’s press conferences *vis-à-vis* a background of change. The sociopolitical evolution necessitated the establishment of the televised press conferences, which has in turn facilitated China’s further openness and engagement.

PREMIER-MEETS-THE-PRESS CONFERENCES: AN IMPORTANT SITE OF DISCURSIVE POWER

While a lot has been made about China’s hard power (e.g. Caffrey, 2013) and more recently soft power (Kurlantzick, 2007; Lai & Lu, 2012), the significant discursive power (Gustafsson, 2014) of China remains largely neglected in existing scholarly research. This is even more so for the potentially important power of China’s discourse. Discursive power, according to Gustafsson (2014, pp. 411-412), refers to “the production of effects through the mobilization of particular discourses” and can be viewed as stemming from concrete material hard power underpinned by economic and military superiority. As such, if a state is capable of achieving its various (political and diplomatic) goals through discourse it “might be less willing to resort to” other hard power such as military force (Gustafsson, 2014). This section discusses China’s political discourse and its significance for China.

The notion *Chinese discourse* can be taken as an umbrella concept, or ensemble, that constitutes and is reflective of China’s overarching ideology, policies and stances. This ensemble contains layers of China’s discursive formulations and can thus be subdivided into a number of more specific components (e.g. Chinese discourses on Africa, the US, North Korea, the Middle East, climate change, democracy, corruption), all of which contribute to China’s overarching discourse. These layers of discourses can be viewed as temporarily stable yet open to change nevertheless just as the overarching Chinese discourse, collectively, is subject to historical (re-)interpretation and (re-)definition over time.

It has been observed that Chinese discourse is unique in a number of ways. As Kluver (1996, p. 133) emphasizes, Chinese discourse is more hortatory, justificatory, educational and theoretical in nature. This is in the sense that it exhorts, justifies and aims to teach the public about the proper normative stances to take. Also, as Shi-xu (2005, p. 45) contends, the Chinese discourse is distinctive in essence as it is embedded in China’s culture and traditional thoughts, thereby calling for a non-universalist and culturally differentiated approach to studying China’s discourse. However, despite its apparent uniqueness

and distinctiveness, there is little denying that Chinese discourse, perhaps just like its American, British, Russian or Japanese counterparts, is essentially ideological and persuasive in nature, serves certain political functions and, if articulated, can have potentially far-reaching discursive consequences. Similar to Russian president's end-of-the-year press conference, the transformative Premier-Meets-the-Press conference enables China to spell out its domestic and international policies, justify its actions, defend its national interests, and engage with the world proactively in an unprecedented way. The complex nature of this interpreter-mediated event means that it must be understood from more than one perspective. In many ways, it is arguably both a site of power and one that empowers.

It is a site of power in the sense that its ultimate aim is to offer some sort of authoritative closure from an official position and to convey political and inescapably ideological messages just as with all governments. A locus of power and site of ideology, this interpreter-mediated press conference is *per definitionem* discursive, constituting a vital technology in the Foucauldian sense to help the government produce a version of desired truth (Foucault, 1988). Meanwhile, the premier's press conference is also a site which empowers, making it possible for China to effect change through, *inter alia*, its discursive formulations. This is of particular significance at a time when non-Western developing countries like China oftentimes are still being portrayed as the cultural or ideological other (Said, 1978; Shi-xu, 2005) with their discourses marginalized and voices drowned out by the more vociferous West. As such, the Chinese discourse arguably functions as a counterbalance and force of resistance that can help level the playing field discursively in a way that is commensurate with China's growing political, economic and military prowess. Put differently, this institutionalized event has enabled China to challenge the almost naturalized Western hegemonic discourse, construct an appropriate image for itself, and further pursue its discursive power in the run-up to the (perhaps inevitable) changing of the guard in the future.

INTERPRETED DISCOURSE: CHINA'S CRUCIAL GLOBAL VOICE

Having explored the significance of China's discursive power in general, this section discusses, with examples, China's interpreted discourse in English, which is gaining growing attention from China's top leadership. While efforts to boost China's discourse and global image are multifaceted, multidimensional and multimodal in nature, interpreters' utterances (in English in the premier's press conferences) represent a particularly powerful subset in the ensemble of *technologies* and communicative instruments at China's disposal. In order for China's discourse to carry discursive power and effect change on a regional and international scale, its interpretation, for instance, into English, the global *lingua franca*, is not just necessary but paramount. This therefore highlights interpreters' important role as interlingual and intercultural agents in communicating beyond the national border in China's increasing bid to engage with the outside world through discursive means. The increasingly globalized and mediatized world we live in means that the interpreted discourse is often taken for granted as the officially sanctioned and, thus, indisputably correct version of China's voice. As such, press conference interpreters' words (in English) are often headlined on international newspapers, quoted *verbatim* by news presenters from influential media outlets like BBC, CNN and Al Jazeera, and presented in the form of news ticker crawling across the bottom of the TV screen as part of the breaking news. Interpreters' utterances, moreover, are also extensively invoked by researchers in various scholarly works as a valid and useful source of information in analyzing China's official policies and positions (often without mentioning that what is quoted is actually the English interpretation).

The following is a particularly telling example showcasing the importance of China's interpreted discourse. In the Premier-Meets-the-Press conference in March 2016, China's economic downturn was a focal point which drew global attention. Premier Li Keqiang answered questions about China's economy in Mandarin Chinese and almost instantly he was quoted *verbatim* on the BBC website as conveying the reassuring message that China will "not suffer a hard landing, we have full confidence in the bright future of the Chinese economy" in English (BBC News, 2016). Similar information was also widely quoted on influential media outlets and TV networks such as Reuters, ABC News in Australia, the English version of China's Xinhua news, as well as on many lesser known media outlets from countries like Canada, India and Bangladesh. The seemingly ordinary message in Chinese, once interpreted into English, mediatized on TV and then re-mediatized and re-contextualized in various other forms, can have far-reaching ramifications on a global scale in reassuring the international community and projecting a potentially positive image of the government as being confident, competent and in control.

Given the discursively consequential nature of China's discourse in English, the Chinese leadership is paying unprecedented attention to its complete, effective and nuanced articulation. Two examples are given here to illustrate the point. During the Premier-Meets-the-Press conference in 2007, a potentially sensitive and challenging series of questions were raised by a journalist affiliated with the French daily newspaper *Le Monde* in relation to democracy in mainland China. To answer this question, Wen Jiabao, the then premier of China, offered a detailed answer in Mandarin Chinese to justify and clarify his points, emphasizing the government's determination to pursue "socialist democracy" in order to let the people be "the masters" and highlighting the government's resolve to accomplish the "two major tasks" and "two major reforms". However, approximately 1 hour and 14 minutes into the press conference, upon the interpreter's completion of his consecutive interpretation, the premier can be heard double-checking with the interpreter rather audibly to see whether the sections regarding two major tasks and social equity and justice were interpreted into English. In response, the interpreter confirmed in a low yet still audible voice that both points were successfully rendered. Presumably, the above information constituted the core message the Chinese premier intended to convey and was discursively indispensable enough to merit double-checking with the interpreter in front of the audience.

Another apt example showcasing the Chinese leadership's fixation on the effective and nuanced interpretation of China's discourse is as follows. During Chinese premier Li Keqiang's visit to the US in September 2016, a welcoming dinner was organized by the Economic Club of New York, the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations, and the U.S.-China Business Council. Premier Li made remarks regarding globalization, as well as its impact on China's own development. His remarks were rendered consecutively into English by his interpreter that the UK and US have been the biggest beneficiaries of globalization and trade liberalization and "China is also a big beneficiary from this trend". The Chinese premier, with a reasonably good knowledge of English, made a rare move to interrupt the interpreter's onsite delivery, correcting her in a jocular way that China was only "one of" the beneficiaries.

This unexpected act drew laughter and applause from the audience. The ideological message behind such a correction, that is, the addition of the emphatic "one of", is clear nonetheless. This appears to be an implicit intertextual response to the comments made by former US president Obama in an interview with *The New York Times* that China is a "free rider" (*The New York Times*, 2014) in the international community. The seemingly more emphatic wording "one of" suggests that, rather than free riding, China's rise has in part been the result of globalization, where China is but one country out of many that have benefited from this broader trend (and this is in exactly the same way as the UK and US once did at various times in history). Again, it was precisely the discursively consequential nature of the English

interpretation that prompted the premier's uncustomary intervention. To sum up, as the above examples have demonstrated, the successful conveyance of the government's intended (ideological) message is predicated upon the interpreter's effective interpretation in a holistic, nuanced and even tactful manner. As such, far from being an inconsequential derivative or epiphenomenon, interpreted discourse in English represents in many ways China's global "voice" and is capable of effecting change in its own right (perhaps even more so than the original).

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF CHINA'S OFFICIAL METADISCOUSES ON GOVERNMENT INTERPRETERS' EXPECTED ROLES

The government interpreters, usually Communist Party members themselves, are, first and foremost, recruited as civil servants affiliated with the Chinese government and, more specifically, the Department of Translation and Interpretation of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (FMPRC). The translation and interpretation department is "responsible for providing English, French, Spanish and Portuguese translation of important state diplomatic events and diplomatic documents and instruments, as well as simultaneous interpretation and coordination of interpretation in multi-languages for major international conferences" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2014). Many of the interpreters enjoy something of a celebrity status among China's vast number of foreign language learners and trainee translators and interpreters. Also, as members of the upper echelon of China's ruling élite, quite a few interpreters and translators from the Department of Translation and Interpretation have even gone on to take prominent government positions as key diplomats and politicians.

In order to reveal how the broad trend of change towards openness and engagement in post-socialist China might be reflected in the institutional metadiscourses (Diriker, 2004; Diriker, 2009; Zwischenberger & Pöchhacker, 2010) prescribing interpreters' expected roles and responsibilities, official documents are critically examined as primary sources. The metadiscourses enacted in official documents are of great import as they are reflective of the broader sociopolitical reality and the prevalent expectations of interpreters at a given time and, at the same time, serve to shape the actual interpreting practice through the guiding and regulatory power they possess.

For this purpose, the FMPRC website and in particular the webpage pertaining to the normative and prescriptive metadiscourses on interpreters' expected roles and responsibilities are systematically studied. Critical scrutiny of the foreign ministry's webpage (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2013) dealing with interpreter recruitment reveals the following. Apart from possessing excellent bilingual skills and comprehensive knowledge in various domains, being calm, confident and flexible, government-affiliated interpreters are required to "accurately convey the message" and "guarantee the interpretation is complete, accurate, and fluent". This seems to be in line with Reddy's conduit metaphor (1979) and the traditional normative perceptions that interpreters should translate like a channel, faithful echo or input-output robot (Roy, 2002).

On the other hand, however, the webpage also indicates that qualified interpreters are required to be "adamant in stance" and have the ability and willingness to "resolutely safeguard China's national interests", "devote to the motherland's diplomatic cause with a high sense of mission" and "fight at the forefront of the diplomatic work for the party and country". This, not surprisingly, is in harmony with the generic requirements for all civil servants affiliated with China's foreign ministry, who must, among

other things, “safeguard national sovereignty, security and interests on behalf of the state; run diplomatic affairs on behalf of the state and the government” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, n.d.).

Moreover, another key aspect featured prominently in the official document is that these government-affiliated interpreters should be able to “build the bridge for communication”, as “China is actively exploring major-country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics” in order to “build a world of enduring peace and common prosperity” through “working in collaboration with peoples of all nationalities”. In other words, these interpreters are also duty-bound to help facilitate China’s proactive international diplomacy and global engagement. This is indeed well aligned with and reflective of the post-1978 change in mainland China towards increasing open engagement and global integration.

Such metadiscourses on interpreters’ expected roles are also reflected in an invited talk given by China’s chief interpreter Zhang Lu at Beijing International Studies University. Zhang Lu is currently the division chief of the Department of Translation and Interpretation with extensive experience interpreting for Chinese leaders on various occasions. In her talk regarding diplomatic/political interpreting and a day in the lives of government-affiliated interpreters, she mentioned that the interpreters “are representatives of the whole country and need to convey China’s voice in a comprehensive, accurate and vivid manner” and to provide interpreting services for the country is “a very honorable and glorious vocation”. Furthermore, she also emphasized that a good command of China’s official stances and policies on “sensitive issues” represents the “life and soul of diplomatic interpreters”. This is precisely what distinguishes them from freelance interpreters in the market.

As such, the metadiscursive analyses on primary sources available on China’s official FMPRC website have identified three key areas of (seemingly contradictory) requirements. On the one hand, government-affiliated interpreters need to be highly qualified linguists to interpret accurately and presumably in a mechanical and impartial manner. On the other hand, however, it is explicitly stipulated that they need to be patriotic civil servants to act adamantly and, at the same time, be staunch guardians of China’s national interests. Furthermore, they are also duty-bound to help facilitate China’s proactive international diplomacy and global engagement. While interpreting is never conducted in a vacuum and absolute accuracy, impartiality and invisibility on the part of interpreters are an unrealistic “myth” (Angelelli, 2004, p. 21), the juxtaposition of the three requirements is nonetheless conflicting (at least *prima facie*). This sort of active agency and mediation explicitly stipulated in the official document is of particular interest here as it is unheard of in the competence requirements in institutions like the United Nations and also something in stark contrast to the prevalent codes of ethics in organizations like the AIIC and NAATI (where the principles of accuracy and neutrality are strongly emphasized and espoused).

The mutually contradictory requirements are suggestive of the government interpreters’ work (the inherently complex nature of which defies any essentialist conceptualization). This, however, raises the further question as to how interpreters might negotiate their way between the seemingly irreconcilable expectations (e.g. How do they remain accurate and faithful if China’s national interests are at stake? How can proactive international diplomacy and positive engagement be possible if they are also required to take an unequivocal and stern stance? Do they oscillate between different expected responsibilities or do they prioritize one over the others?). With these in mind, a CDA analysis is carried out to examine how interpreters juggle between these expectations in their actual interpreting in an era of political, economic and cultural change.

A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS ON INTERPRETERS' AGENCY

Having identified the triple requirements in the government's institutional metadiscourses, this section focuses on how, in practice, the interpreter might negotiate a way between the divergent expectations of being a faithful and impartial voice machine, an active promoter of China's global diplomacy and image as well as a staunch guardian of China's national interests with great allegiance. Looking beyond any reductionist and prescriptive readings of the interpreters' role, an in-depth critical discourse analysis (CDA) is conducted to explore empirically interpreters' agency against a backdrop of change signaled by the Dengist reform in 1978.

With this in mind, the theoretical framework, corpus data and methodology used are briefly discussed here. Viewing discourse as a form of social practice that is both socially shaped and socially constitutive (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, p. 258), the descriptive, interdisciplinary and problem-oriented CDA provides the useful theoretical framework and analytical tools to reveal instantiations of power and ideology in language use which are often "out of sight" (Paltridge, 2006, p. 178). "Critical" here by no means refers to criticism. Instead, it refers to the critical attitude of taking nothing for granted and taking nothing at face value in order to make more explicit the (often) opaque relationship between discourse, power and ideology. In this study, Fairclough's three-dimensional model (1989) is adopted, which entails detailed analyses on the micro (textual), meso (discursive practice) and macro (sociocultural practice) levels.

The CDA analysis is conducted on a corpus consisting of transcribed data extracted from 20 consecutive years of interpreter-mediated Premier-Meets-the-Press conferences (1998 to 2017). The Chinese premier is ranked second in position within the government (immediately after the Chinese president) and is the highest level government official answering journalists' questions. In terms of topics, a wide array of issues is addressed (with questions ranging from the global economy to climate change, from China's agriculture to human rights, from Taiwan election to Hong Kong's prosperity, and from Sino-Japanese relations to Crimea). The discourse articulated at these press conferences constitutes China's most authoritative take in terms of government policies and positions (see previous sections for more details).

To investigate interpreters' agency and explore how their role is negotiated between the conflicting responsibilities, attention is paid specifically to the "added value" made on the part of the interpreters. As such, careful comparative and contrastive CDA analyses are carried out, focusing on the differences between the source and target discourses. This makes "shift" a particularly instrumental concept in the data analysis process. "Shifts" signify changes that have come about between the ST and TT in the translation or interpreting process (cf. Leuven-Zwart, 1989, 1990; Toury, 1995). It is observed by Toury (1995, p. 57) that there exist two major types of "shifts": namely "obligatory shifts" and "optional shifts". Due to the systematic (grammatical) differences between the ST and TT, "obligatory shifts" are often considered inevitable. Therefore, the focus of the present study is on the "optional shifts" that occur in the interpreting process, particularly those of ideological salience. Ideologically salient shifts can be viewed as concrete instantiations of interpreters' agency and ideological mediation as civil servants and members of China's ruling elite.

It is worth bearing in mind that the researcher does not take any explicit positions or aim to provide any value judgment with regard to China's political discourse and the interpreted one *per se*. The analyses are based solely on careful examination and identification of salient shifts, without foisting any pre-determined *a priori* categories upon the data. Also, while CDA on monolingual discourse is sometimes critiqued for making conclusions based on an imagined version of what could or should have been

written or said, the essentially comparative nature of analysis focusing on the “added value” concretely evidenced in discourse can be considered relatively more objective.

DATA ANALYSIS

Close critical readings of the source and target discourses reveal that the majority of information has been relatively accurately rendered. The fact that the interpretation is accurate and faithful in the main is not surprising. Having had to go through rigorous selection processes before being recruited into China's foreign ministry, the interpreters are highly well-trained and competent (who together are arguably the national team of translation and interpreting in China). Having said this, however, instances of interpreters' agency are also abundant (which does not in any way suggest that these are interpreting errors or the consecutive rendition is undependable or of subpar quality professionally).

Due to the limited space and the sheer number of salient cases identified in the corpus data, only representative examples are presented and discussed to illustrate the range of discursive strategies employed. The first type of agency pertains to interpreters' discursive fine-tuning of the ST to add an additional layer of engagement and interactivensness and portray the government in a more positive light. This, among other things, involves synthetic personalization, modality shifts, foregrounding as well as ideologically salient additions.

Synthetic Personalization

“Synthetic personalization”, according to CDA scholar Fairclough (1989, p. 62), is the discursive strategy commonly used in commercial advertisements and political language where mass audiences are addressed in a conversation-like manner as though they were addressed individually. This usually involves the use of the second-person ‘you’. Example 1 below illustrates its use by the government-affiliated interpreter.

- *Example 1*
- **Source Text:** 第三,是要促进社会公正。公正是社会创造活力的源泉,也是提高人民满意度的一杆秤,政府理应是社会公正的守护者。我们要努力使人人享有平等的机会,不论是来自城市还是农村,不论是来自怎样的家庭背景,只要通过自身的努力就可以取得应有的回报。不论是怎样的财富创造者,是国企、民企还是个体经营者,只要靠诚信公平竞争,都可以获得应有的成果。
- **Target Text:** *Third, we will promote social fairness. Fairness is a source of societal creativity and the yardstick for improving people's satisfaction with the work of the government. The government should be the guardian of social fairness. We need to work hard to create equal opportunities for everyone, for people from urban and rural areas, and for all those people regardless of their family background, so that people's hard work will be duly rewarded. And whatever type of wealth creator you are, a state-owned enterprise, a private enterprise or an individually run business, as long as you compete in a level playing field and conduct your business in a clean and honest way, then you will be able to taste the success.*

In this short stretch of text taken from 2013, the Chinese premier spells out the government's determination to help create a fairer society where everyone can be successful through hard work and fair play.

Towards a Re-Definition of Government Interpreters' Agency

In the original discourse in Chinese the third-person concept (e.g. 人人 everyone) is consistently used as an example in terms of the government's vision for a just and equitable society. However, although the third-person concept in the English interpretation is more or less maintained at the beginning through the use of "everyone" and "people", there is an obvious shift towards the repeated use of the second-person "you" and "your" at the end that "as long as *you* compete in a level playing field and conduct *your* business in a clean and honest way, then *you* will be able to taste the success". This way, the more objective and impersonal tone is replaced using the more dynamic and interactive second-person pronoun "you", thus constituting a typical case of synthetic personalization. Rather than treating the addressee as an undifferentiated whole and a remote irrelevant *other*, the use of "you" and "your" in the interpreted discourse seems to be talking with the audience as various individuals in a targeted manner. This, resultantly, forges a degree of intimacy and personal rapport, conveying the intended message in an arguably more appealing and convincing manner that in an equitable China success is not far away as long as you comply with the rules and go the extra mile. As such, a positive and personal image of the government has been constructed by the interpreter, demonstrating clear traces of China's open interaction and discursive engagement in general terms.

Modality

Political discourse is imbued with modality use, expressing a wide range of opinions, attitudes and stances. This makes modality another interesting area indicative of interpreters' agency and mediation in the corpus data. This is exemplified in the following two extracts below.

- *Example 2*
- **Source Text:** 不是人们常说穿鞋要合脚吗,施政应该利民惠民。谢谢!
- **Literal Translation:** *Don't people often say that wearing shoes needs to fit the feet (rhetorical question)? Administrating/governing should serve the people and benefit the people. Thank you.*
- **Target Text:** *Just as shoes must suit the feet, our administration must meet people's needs and deliver real benefits. Thank you!*

This example is excerpted from the press conference in 2015, where premier Li Keqiang answered questions posed by a journalist affiliated with Bloomberg regarding streamlining administration and delegating powers. Close comparative analyses between the original and interpreted discourses reveal that marked shifts have occurred in the interpreting process. It can be observed that "要", literally "need" or "want to" in Chinese, is re-modalized into English using the modal verb "must". And "应该" ("should") is also interpreted into English using "must". The employment of the high-modality "must" denotes a very strong sense of obligation that the government is duty-bound and highly determined to deliver "real" tangible benefits in order to truly satisfy the people's needs. The fact that both "need" and "should" are repeatedly re-modalized into English as "must" can also be viewed as a case of overlexicalization (*cf.* Halliday, 1978; Fowler et al., 1979). This is highly significant ideologically and helps add an extra layer of resolve on the part of the government through interpreting.

- *Example 3*
- **Source Text:** ...政府的一切权力都是人民赋予的,一切属于人民,一切为了人民,一切依靠人民,一切归功于人民。

- **Literal Translation:**...All of the government's power is granted by the people, all belongs to the people, all is for the people, all is dependent on the people, and all is attributable to the people.
- **Target Text:**...All the power of the government is bestowed on us by the people or the power belongs to the people. Everything we do should be for the people; we must rely on the people in all our endeavors, and we need to attribute all that we have achieved to people's power.

This example is taken from Premier Wen's opening remarks in 2007, where he sums up a lesson the government has learned over the years, that is, the centrality of the people. This extract, again, clearly demonstrates interpreter's active agency through modality use. While the original message relating to people has generally been maintained, it is worth noting that the interpreter has peppered the short sentence with modality "should", "must" and "need" (which are not triggered by the ST). It is also worth noting that the first-person plural "we", "our" and "us" have been repeatedly added by the interpreter. This not only demonstrates the interpreter's institutional identification with his employer but also helps reinforce the primacy of the government. In doing so, the relatively plain sentence discussing the centrality of people has become a site of image construction. In other words, a more active image of the Chinese government has been constructed as a result of interpreting with an extra layer of volition, responsibility and obligation.

Foregrounding

"Foregrounding" refers to the strategy to make certain elements in text more prominent, the use of which can be ideologically salient. Close scrutiny of the corpus data identifies a pronounced tendency for the interpreters to foreground the government as the key social actor (see example 4).

- *Example 4*
- **Source Text:** 政府工作走过了四个年头,它告诉我们,必须懂得一个真理...
- **Literal Translation:** *The government's work has gone through four years. It told us that (we) must understand one truth...*
- **Target Text:** *This government has been serving the people for four years. The four years of government work has taught me three things...*

Also extracted from the premier's opening remarks in 2007, example 4 is an apt case in point in terms of foregrounding. The sentence "政府工作走过了四个年头" (the government's work has gone through four years) is a rather mundane statement referring merely to the passage of time. This, interestingly, is rendered into English as "this government has been serving the people for four years" by the interpreter. As such, rather than the relatively static, vague and intangible "government's work", the Chinese government has been foregrounded as an active agent with concrete institutional presence. The employment of the present perfect continuous "has been serving" has further strengthened the prominent image of the government as a dedicated "servant of the people", indicating that such service and commitment are a consistent ongoing process which started in the past, is happening now and will continue into the future. Also noteworthy is that the concept "people" (untriggered by the ST) is brought into the equation. Such emphasis on "people" is well aligned with the government's increasingly people-oriented approach of governance signaled by the reform and opening up in 1978. Interestingly, however, it seems to suggest that the people (object) need to depend on the government to be served, thus further legitimating the

firm leading position of the government as the worthy actor (subject) every step of the way in the maintenance of government-citizen ties.

In addition to example 4, another salient case of the foregrounding of the Chinese government can be found in example 2 above. It is evident that in the original discourse “施政应该利民惠民” (administering/governing should serve the people and benefit the people) is a generic statement applicable to all governments, where the word “施政” is similar to a gerund in English as the general practice of administering or governing. This, however, is rendered into English as the concrete agent “our administration”, thereby bringing to the fore once again the active presence of the Chinese government. Also, the ideologically salient addition of the first-person plural possessive adjective “our” sheds light upon the interpreter’s in-group (van Dijk, 1984) identity as a member of China’s ruling elite and emphasizes that this specific government is the social actor that is capable of delivering “real benefits” to the Chinese people. These techniques taken together have constructed a positive image of the government as being highly accessible, dedicated, determined and responsible on the part of the interpreters.

Ideologically Salient Additions

As illustrated above, the government-affiliated interpreters do indeed play a role in China’s active engagement using various discursive strategies. Close readings of the ST and TT also reveal that interpreters often step in and act as defenders of China’s core national interests especially when sensitive issues are touched upon (although in a relatively subtle way). Example 5 and 6 below illustrate how ideologically charged expressions are added by the interpreters when China’s interests are (potentially) at stake.

- *Example 5*
- **Q:** *I am Jaime FlorCruz with CNN. During your last visit to Washington, President Bush clearly indicated his caution to both sides of the Taiwan Straits against taking unilateral steps that may change the status quo. But he also clearly indicated opposition to Taiwan’s plans to hold the referendum next week, which is a departure from the usually ambiguous US position on Taiwan. What did you do to make the United States change its position on this one? [...] Do you think it will change or influence the outcome of the elections and the referendum in Taiwan next week?*
- *Example 6*
- **Q:** *Mr. Prime Minister, Tibet is a focus these days. US Congress, the Obama administration and the European Parliament asked China to resume talks with Dalai Lama. Of course China answers that is an internal affair, but what is your position on this issue? Are you ready to restart talks with Dalai Lama and to work on his demand for real autonomy? And this issue has made a relation between China and France quite cold for a few months since last September [...] what do you concretely expect from France? Thank you.*

The questions in example 5 and 6 are posed by journalists with CNN and Le Figaro respectively in 2004 and 2009. These questions are potentially sensitive and face-threatening in nature as both have touched upon matters concerning China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity (Taiwan and Tibet). According to the government’s official position, these are sensitive issues which brook no external interference. Meticulous comparative analyses reveal that in both examples the word “所谓的” (so-called), which usually carries negative connotations in Chinese, is deliberately added before “referendum” and “real autonomy” by the interpreters. These additions are ideologically revealing in nature. On Taiwan, it is

the Chinese government's consistent position that there is but one China and both mainland China and Taiwan belong to the same China. The proposed referendum in Taiwan was strongly opposed to by the mainland as it was perceived by the PRC government as provocative and an exercise ultimately aimed for Taiwan independence, a precedent the mainland did not want to see.

In example 6, Tibet is an autonomous region considered to be an inalienable part of China's territory by the Chinese government and the Dalai Lama is believed to be inciting and fomenting "splittist" activities aimed at separating Tibet from the "motherland". The ideologically salient additions of "所谓的" in both cases are striking, suggesting that the "referendum" in Taiwan and the demand for "real autonomy" in Tibet are not recognized by the PRC government and are deemed wrong, groundless, illegitimate and perhaps even farcical. By intervening in the process and dismissing the Taiwan referendum and demand made by the Dalai Lama as unreliable and not factual, the interpreters seem to have taken a stern stance and made a very clear statement. This is done through choosing to distance themselves from the foreign journalists and position themselves with the government instead. Such small and seemingly insignificant tweaking, without doubt, signals the government interpreters' agency in safeguarding China's core national interests.

DISCUSSION

The CDA analysis based on transcribed corpus data shows that, while the majority of information is accurately rendered in the interpreted discourse, the government interpreters are far from being mechanical "voice boxes". As demonstrated in the salient examples above, interpreters do indeed mediate in the process as active agents. Such agency manifests itself in two major aspects: active engagement to help construct a more positive image of China and the government and also, if need be, the defending of China's core national interests. Such agency is realized in various linguistic and discursive means (e.g. synthetic personalization, modality, foregrounding, overlexicalization and ideologically salient additions). This seems to suggest that, in practice, interpreters affiliated with the Chinese government are usually able to strike a balance and negotiate their way through the seemingly conflicting metadiscourses evidenced on the official FMPRC website. As such, the triple responsibilities identified are not just reflective of the complexity of China's political interpreting culture but also, in actuality, afford interpreters sufficient institutional and practical wiggle room for some discretionary (ideological) tweaking through discursive means.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The CDA analysis, predominantly qualitative in nature, illustrates a range of discursive strategies in interpreters' mediation vis-à-vis the broader sociopolitical and cultural changes. The investigation of interpreters' agency, however, would stand to gain from the use of corpus linguistics tools for more systematic and (perhaps) objective analysis. It would also be interesting to examine the corpus data from a diachronic perspective to identify patterns over time or to investigate whether any gender differences might be observed between male and female interpreters for more refined studies.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the reform and opening up in 1978 has revolutionized the way China communicates domestically and internationally. Situated within such a period of drastic transformations in post-socialist China, this chapter, descriptive in nature, has firstly contextualized the interpreter-mediated premier's press conference, contending that its establishment was not idiosyncratic but highly reflective of China's political, economic and, resultantly, sociocultural changes towards increasing engagement and openness. Once established, such an institutional practice in turn serves as a useful platform to further advance China's diplomacy and facilitate China's continued openness and engagement with the international community.

This broader shifting culture highlights the need for a re-evaluation and re-definition of China's press conference interpreting and government interpreters' agency. With a view to revealing how the change towards openness and engagement is reflected in the metadiscourses in relation to interpreters, the official FMPRC website prescribing their expected roles is critically scrutinized. The metadiscursive analysis on the official document has identified triple perceived contradictions (faithful and impartial voice machines *versus* active promoters of China's global image and diplomacy *versus* staunch and loyal guardians of China's core national interests), thus bringing to the fore the necessity to examine empirically how their role is negotiated between these conflicting expectations in actual interpreting.

The empirical CDA-informed analysis focusing on careful comparisons between the ST and TT has shown that the majority of interpretations conducted by the interpreters, arguably the finest China has to offer, are relatively accurate. However, contrary to the traditional prescriptivist view, these interpreters are indeed far from being disinterested and neutral translating machines. As evidenced in the illustrative examples, signs of interpreters' agency are visible and abundant in the corpus data and are realized through various discursive means (synthetic personalization, addition, overlexicalization, modality and foregrounding *etc.*). On the one hand, these interpreters have actively facilitated China's international engagement and helped promote a more positive image of the Chinese government. On the other hand, they have also intervened in the process as guardians of China's core national interests (particularly when sensitive topics are touched upon and China's sovereignty and territorial integrity are potentially at stake). Rather than a drastic and conspicuous overhaul, the interpreters' agency can be viewed as discursive fine-tuning, which by and large is achieved in a remedial, cumulative and perhaps individually insignificant fashion.

From this perspective, the government interpreters are usually able to negotiate a way between the multiple and seemingly contradictory expectations. Instead of being solely an institutional constraint, the multifarious and *prima facie* conflicting metadiscourses to some extent provide the discretionary leeway for interpreters to function as active co-constructors of China's discursive formulations in this triadic interpreting encounter. Therefore, if government-affiliated interpreters in Mao's era served more or less as ideological mouthpieces in conveying tough propagandist messages in the (mutual) antagonism between China and the West, these interpreters of today must be understood differently. While the interpreters are still very much mouthpieces of the government, they should be re-defined as well-trained and highly competent interpreting professionals with the added responsibilities to project a better image for China in its global engagement and to safeguard China's core national interests, when necessary. As such, against the backdrop of the post-1978 sociopolitical and cultural changes, a certain degree of agency and discursive engineering, I argue, can be deemed as of strategic importance and something part and parcel of China's increasing engagement and interaction with the outside world.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Critical Discourse Analysis: An interdisciplinary approach to the critical investigation of discourse (language use). The aim of CDA analysis is to make explicit the otherwise hidden power and ideology enacted in discourse.

Discourse: Language use as a form of social practice that is both socially shaped and socially constitutive.

Discursive Event: A (public) event which enables the discursive formulations of certain social actors (e.g. political parties and social groups) to be articulated and transmitted.

Interpreter's agency: Interpreter's active involvement in the interpreting process in relation to certain sociopolitical or institutional settings. Interpreter's agency can be realized in various forms.

Metadiscourse on interpreters: The language used in describing interpreters' expected roles and responsibilities often in a prescriptivist manner. Such metadiscourse can be found in the codes of ethics and other similar documents, for example, in organizations like AIIC or NAATI.

Post-Socialist China: A period in China marked by the Reform and Opening up initiated by Deng Xiaoping in 1978. China in this period actively pursues 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' and is increasingly integrated into the global market.

Premier-Meets-the-Press conference: An interpreter-mediated event held in Beijing towards the end of each year's "two sessions". At the press conference, a wide range of questions are posed to the Chinese premier by Chinese and international journalists.