

## RESEARCH NOTE

# What is Lost in Translation? Differences between Chinese Foreign Policy Statements and Their Official English Translations

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Targeting different audiences, Chinese foreign policy statements and their official English translations differ significantly. For this research note, I compare the English and Chinese versions of ninety-one foreign policy statements issued by the People's Republic of China and catalog all minor differences, differences in degree, and substantive differences. More than half of the statements contain differences between the Chinese original and the official English translation. I find significant variation in how prominent the three types of differences feature over time as well as across document types and policy-making levels. Most importantly, the majority of substantive differences and differences in degree alter the intentions that China signals. The extent and depth of these differences make it necessary to consider both versions of a document. Fortunately, my analysis also shows that automatic translation can pick up most of the identified differences.

Las declaraciones de política exterior china y sus traducciones oficiales al inglés se dirigen a públicos diferentes y difieren de forma significativa. Para esta nota de investigación, comparo las versiones inglesa y china de 91 declaraciones de política exterior emitidas por la República Popular China (RPC) y catalogo todas las diferencias menores, diferencias de grado y diferencias sustanciales. Más de la mitad de las declaraciones contienen diferencias entre el original chino y la traducción oficial al inglés. Encuentro una variación significativa en el grado de prominencia de los tres tipos de diferencias a lo largo del tiempo, así como entre los tipos de documentos y los niveles de elaboración de políticas. Lo más importante es que la mayoría de las diferencias sustanciales y de grado alteran las intenciones que señala China. El grado y profundidad de estas diferencias hacen necesario considerar las dos versiones de un documento. Afortunadamente, mi análisis también muestra que la traducción automática puede dar cuenta de la mayoría de las diferencias identificadas.

Ciblant des publics différents, les déclarations de politique étrangère de la Chine et leurs traductions officielles en anglais diffèrent considérablement. Pour cet exposé de recherche, j'ai comparé les versions anglaise et chinoise de 91 déclarations de politique étrangère publiées par la République populaire de Chine (RPC) et j'ai répertorié toutes les différences mineures, les différences de degré et les différences de fond. Plus

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de la moitié des déclarations comprennent des différences entre l'original chinois et la traduction anglaise officielle. J'ai constaté des variations significatives de l'importance des trois types de différences dans le temps ainsi que dans les types de documents et les niveaux d'élaboration des politiques. Le plus important, c'est que la majorité des différences de fond et de degré modifient les intentions que la Chine signale. L'étendue et la profondeur de ces différences rendent nécessaire l'examen des deux versions d'un document. Heureusement, mon analyse montre également que les outils de traduction automatique permettent de déceler la plupart des différences identifiées.

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### Introduction

The Chinese government provides official English translations for most of its foreign policy statements. However, targeting different audiences, the English and the Chinese versions of many documents differ significantly. If students of Chinese foreign policy are unaware of these differences, they cannot account for them and risk introducing systematic bias into their analyses. While this is particularly pertinent for scholars working on the domestic factors of Chinese foreign policy who need to consider internal and external messaging, anybody trying to gauge the Chinese government's intentions from its official foreign policy statements should be aware of discrepancies between the English and Chinese versions. In this research note, I examine to what extent and how official English translations of People's Republic for China (PRC) foreign policy statements differ from the original Chinese version and what implications this has for research practice.

Translation's purposeful and, in the Chinese context at least, inherently political nature (Pan, Kim, and Li 2020) suggests differences between the English version of a foreign policy statement targeting international audiences and a Chinese version targeting domestic audiences. While research on Chinese foreign policy rhetoric acknowledges that the Chinese government sends different signals to different audiences (Breslin 2013; Pu 2019), and while scholars debating China's "discourse power" have long been concerned with how best to translate China's intentions without drawing other states' suspicions (Wang 2015; Zhao 2016), translation scholars documented tangible differences between Chinese source texts and their official English translations. For example, in their analysis of government work reports, Yu and Wu (2018) find that the Chinese versions portray the government as modest and inclusive, whereas the English versions portray it as competent and responsible (Yu and Wu 2018). In addition, Gu (2018) finds that interpreters at the Premier's annual press conferences frequently use the past perfect in English. According to him, this helps "(re)construct a more positive image of the Chinese government being efficient, proactive, and responsive" (Gu 2018). These differences are by no means accidental. Wang (2004), a translator working at China's Ministry for Foreign Affairs, explains that fidelity is the basic requirement for translators and that every word has been thoroughly, repeatedly weighed before it is finalized (Wang 2004). China's foreign policy statements are translated by civil servants associated with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Department of Translation and Interpretation. They are graduates from China's top universities who have undergone a strict selection process and are usually Chinese Communist Party (CCP) members (Gu 2018).

Researchers interested in Chinese foreign policy and China's position in the international system should consider its official foreign policy statements because they reveal a lot about its intentions. This is important because as Goddard (2018) shows how a great power perceives the intentions of a rising powers shapes the great power's strategic response. Given that "determining the intentions of a rising power

is a process fraught with uncertainty,” she argues that “great powers look not only to what the rising power does” but also “listen to what a rising power *says*—how it justifies its foreign policy” (Goddard 2018, 2, emphasis in the original). While researchers have relied heavily on China’s foreign policy statements as their primary sources (see, e.g., Smith 2021), so far, among “Western”/non-Chinese International Relations (IR) scholars at least, there is hardly any reflection on possible differences between the Chinese statements and their official English translation, let alone an engagement with potential implications for making inferences from these statements. If there are considerable differences between the two document versions, but researchers only consider the English version, they risk misjudging the Chinese government’s intentions.

In this research note, I systematically compare selected passages on world views, foreign policy goals, and means<sup>1</sup> from a wide range of official Chinese foreign policy statements issued between 2013 and 2019. My analysis starts when Xi Jinping took power and ends shortly before the COVID-19–pandemic, with it at the time of writing still unfolding geopolitical consequences hit around March 2020. First, I examine how prevalent minor differences, differences in degree, and substantive differences are. Second, I identify patterns based on different document types and policy-making levels and document changes over time. Finally, zooming in on policy substance, I detail how the two versions differ and what these differences imply for the intentions that the Chinese government signals through its foreign policy statements.

My results establish four key findings. First, more than half of the analyzed foreign policy statements contain differences between the Chinese original and the official English translation. The majority of these differences are either substantive differences or differences in degree. Second, I detect differences in how prevalent different types of differences are, based on document type and policy-making level. While minor and substantive differences are distributed equally, I find significant variation in how prominent differences in degree feature across document types. Substantive differences dominate the strategic level, and minor differences feature much more prominently on the policy-planning level. Third, there are significant shifts in how prevalent minor differences are and serious shifts in the frequency of substantive differences over time. Fourth, most identified substantive differences and differences in degree alter the intentions that China signals. The Chinese versions tend to signal more ambitions that are inconsistent with the existing norms and rules. Substantive differences relate mainly to multilateral cooperation, depictions of the international environment, and descriptions of China’s role in the world.

The findings from this research note have important implications for any research on the foreign policy rhetoric of a country whose primary language is not English and therefore provides its foreign policy statements in at least two different languages. Before engaging in an in-depth analysis of these documents, researchers should compare the two versions of a document with each other. If no differences between the two versions can be detected, then she can work with either version. However, if there are differences between the two versions, she needs to account for them in any subsequent analysis.

### Data and Analysis

Statements about China’s foreign policy appear in Chinese leaders’ speeches in front of domestic and international audiences, policy papers, statements at press conferences, and authoritative commentaries in party-state media (Gitter and Fang 2018). I adapted Robertson’s framework to the Chinese context to identify and classify relevant sources that reveal the Chinese government’s medium-term

<sup>a</sup>My definition of foreign policy is based on Charles Hermann’s (1990).

intentions. The “strategic level” refers to the most authoritative level of policy-making. It describes broad, conceptual, and long-term directions. In the PRC, the strategic level covers the CCP General Secretary’s report to party congress and his speeches in front of domestic and international audiences. The “policy-planning planning level”<sup>2</sup> describes more focused communication related to an immediate context, for example, ministerial speeches (Robertson 2017). In the Chinese context, it covers the annual government work reports, the five-year plan, and policy papers, including the defense white paper in the Chinese context. It also includes speeches by other Chinese leaders, including the State Councilor for Foreign Affairs and the Foreign Minister. Table 1 provides an overview of the selected documents.<sup>3</sup>

The following section describes how I identified differences between the Chinese original and the official English translation and how I categorized them. I compared the two versions of a foreign policy statement to identify differences by carefully reading the original Chinese version and the official English translation. Whenever I identified a difference, I first determined its magnitude: Minor differences describe semantic differences that do not alter the meaning. An example of a minor difference was that the document spoke about the “international situation” in Chinese, whereas the document spoke about “world” in English. Differences in degree convey essentially the same meaning but to a different extent. For example, the English version would describe the Chinese government as promoting the building of a community of shared destiny, whereas the Chinese version would describe the Chinese government as *insisting* on promoting the building of a community of shared destiny. Last, substantive differences express significant differences in meaning. Often, the Chinese version contains details that the English version omits. A more concrete example is that the Chinese version called upon other countries to live up to “the spirit of the United Nations (UN) Charter,” whereas the English translation called upon others to adhere to the UN Charter as such. Following Goddard’s conceptualization of intentions, I then assessed which implications for the signaled intentions each difference in degree and each substantive difference have. She distinguishes between legitimate ambitions that reinforce the existing international rules and norms and illegitimate ambitions that are inconsistent with the prevailing rights and norms (Goddard 2018, 2). The Chinese version could signal more legitimate or more illegitimate ambitions than the official English translation.

Combining a qualitative with a quantitative assessment of the identified differences allows me to examine their extent and depth. Quantitatively, I examine how frequently discrepancies appear in the documents and how prevalent each of the three types of difference is. Besides, I also assess whether there are patterns based on the different document types and whether there are changes over time. In my qualitative assessment, I zoom in on the differences in degree and the substantive differences to see in what issue areas differences are particularly pronounced. Finally, I reflect upon the implications these discrepancies have for scholarship based on these sources.

## Results

In the following section, I first document the overall prevalence of differences between Chinese and English versions of Chinese foreign policy statements. Then, I examine how prominent the differences are, based on the various document types

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<sup>2</sup> I find this to be a more accurate label for what Robertson calls the contextual level.

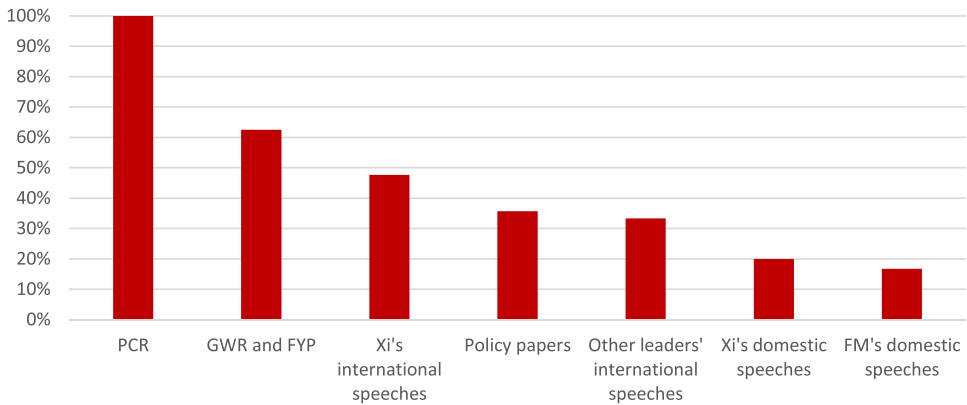
<sup>3</sup> Since many of these documents and speeches only partially deal with foreign policy, I excluded text passages that do not contain elements of Hermann’s foreign policy definition. Excluded were, for example, descriptions of the state of China’s domestic economy or descriptions of what international institution such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank were supposed to do. In the policy papers, proposals on politics, international affairs, peace and security were considered because they relate to foreign policy. Passages that deal with other areas of cooperation, such as environmental protection or social issues, were excluded.

**Table 1.** Overview of selected documents<sup>a</sup>

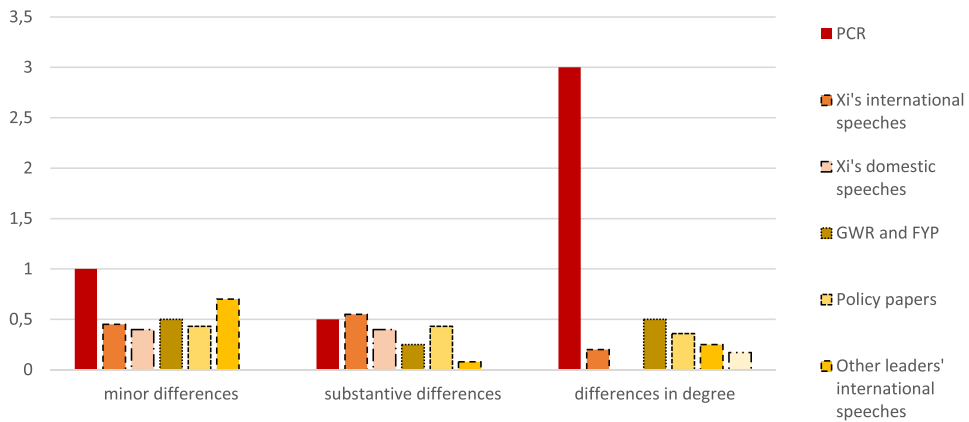
Level	Document type	Issuing institution	Frequency	Primary audience	N
Strategic level	CCP General Secretary's Political Work Report to Party Congress	Synthetic document reflecting party leadership's consensus across party organs	Every five years	Domestic	2
	CCP General Secretary's international speeches	CCP General Secretary	Regularly, no fixed schedule	International	46
	CCP General Secretary's domestic speeches	CCP General Secretary	Regularly, no fixed schedule	Domestic	7
	Government work reports	Premier	Annually	Domestic	7
Policy planning level	Five-year plan	CCP Central Committee, State Council	Every five years	Domestic	1
	Policy papers	State Council Information Office	Regularly, no fixed schedule	International	14
	Other leaders' international speeches	Foreign Ministry	Regularly, no fixed schedule	International	12
	Foreign Minister's domestic speeches	Foreign Ministry	Annually	Domestic	7

<sup>a</sup> My definition of foreign policy is based on Charles Hermann's (1990).

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**Figure 1.** Percentages of documents that contain differences.

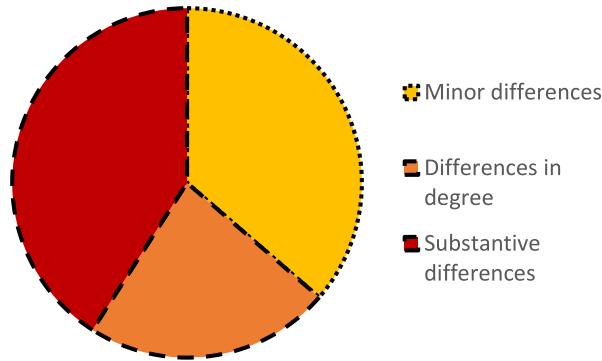


**Figure 2.** Average number of occurrences of differences per document.

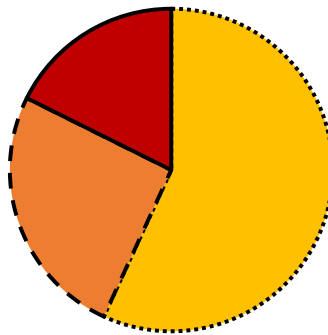
and policy-making levels. Finally, after documenting changes in how frequently the differences appear over time, I detail discrepancies in policy substance between the original Chinese version and the official English translation.

Overall, I detect 117 differences in the selected passages of the 91 foreign policy statements. 57 percent of the analyzed foreign policy statements contain at least one difference. While minor differences are a significant part of these differences (fifty-three differences), the majority are either substantive differences (thirty-six differences/31 percent) or differences in degree (twenty-eight differences/24 percent). Almost half of all foreign policy statements (43 percent) contain at least one difference in degree or one substantive difference. [Figure 1](#) shows that the identified differences are not spread equally across document types. For example, while all reports to party congress contain differences, most domestic speeches by the General Secretary and the Foreign Minister and policy papers do not contain any differences. On the other hand, many government work reports and Xi Jinping's international speeches contain differences, albeit not as frequently as the reports to the party congress.

While substantive and minor differences are equally distributed across all document types, there is significant variation in how prominently differences in degree appear in the different document types, as [figure 2](#) illustrates. On average, there is one substantive difference in every two documents. Other leaders' international



**Figure 3.** Differences between English and Chinese versions on the strategic level.



**Figure 4.** Differences between English and Chinese versions on the policy-planning level.

speeches are an exception because hardly any differences can be found in this document type. On the other hand, there are considerable differences in degree between the different types of documents: the reports to party congress feature three differences in degree on average per document. On the other end of the spectrum, Xi Jinping's domestic speeches do not contain any differences in degree. In the other documents, this type of difference appears once every two documents. Minor differences also occur fairly regularly; most of the time, one difference appears every two documents. In policy papers and other leaders' international speeches, there are slightly more minor differences.

I find considerable variation in how prevalent the three types of differences are, based on the policy-making level. Figure 3 shows that substantive differences feature far more prominently on the strategic level than on the policy-planning level. On the other hand, minor differences feature more prominently on the policy-planning level, as figure 4 demonstrates. Differences in degree feature equally prominent in both policy levels.

Figure 5 shows how frequently the three types of differences appear in Chinese foreign policy statements over time. The most significant changes occur regarding minor differences. Initially, there are, on average, two minor differences per document. At the end of the time frame, there are hardly any minor differences in the documents. The average amount of substantive differences per document also shifts over time, while the average amount of differences in degree remains relatively stable. Regarding substantive differences, an increase is visible until 2014, followed by

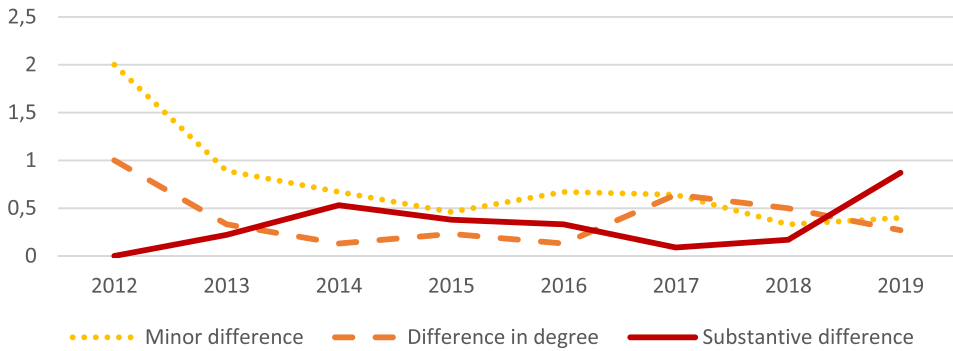


Figure 5. Occurrence of types of difference over time.

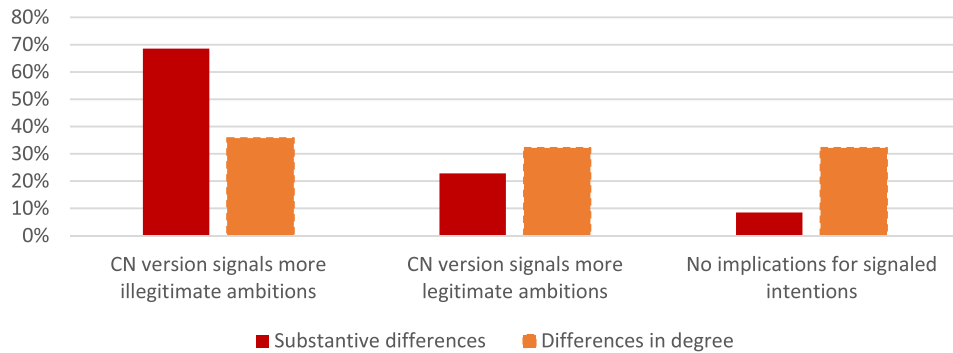


Figure 6. Differences' implications on signaled intentions.

a drop until 2017, before a sharp increase in 2019.<sup>4</sup> Regarding differences in degree, there is a sharp drop between 2012 and 2013. Then it remains constantly on a low level before it spikes again around 2017. For minor differences, there is a sharp drop between 2012 and 2013. Finally, after hardly any changes, there is another drop between 2017 and 2018.

The following section details discrepancies between the English and the Chinese versions and discusses what these discrepancies imply for the signaled intentions. Most importantly, most of the identified substantive differences and differences in degree impact the intentions that China signals. Overall, 91 percent of substantive differences and 68 percent of differences in degree alter the signaled intentions. As figure 6 shows, the Chinese version tends to signal more illegitimate ambitions, that is, intentions that are inconsistent with the existing rules and norms than the English version. This is particularly the case for the substantive differences. In 70 percent of substantive differences, the Chinese version of the document signals more illegitimate ambitions than the English version. For the differences in degree, this is the case for 36 percent. The Chinese version signals more legitimate ambitions in a fourth of substantive differences and a third of differences in degree.

The following two trends emerge when looking closely at the policy substance of the identified differences in degree. First, the Chinese version tends to use stronger

<sup>4</sup> A closer look at the data reveals that two documents drive the sharp increase in 2019. Out of the twelve substantive differences that were identified in 2019, five were in the lengthy China in the World White Paper and six were in Xi Jinping's speech at the Sino-French Symposium on global governance issues. Since no full English translation of the latter is available, many details are omitted in the English version.



verbs when advocating for China's initiatives, such as the transformation of the global governance system, a new type of international relations, or the establishment of a community of shared destiny. Second, the Chinese version highlights China's role in the solution of global problems, in particular, its contributions to conflict resolution more. [Table 2](#) provides an overview of selected differences in degree and their implications for signaled intentions.

When examining the policy substance behind the identified substantive differences, it becomes apparent that the Chinese versions tend to be more detailed. For example, in many instances, the Chinese versions contain more detailed descriptions of threats in the international environment. In other instances, the Chinese versions contain more details on Chinese proposals or name concrete areas for international cooperation and list specific global and regional mechanisms. Lastly, the Chinese versions contain more details that indicate a slightly different emphasis. For example, at the UN General Assembly 2014, the Chinese version calls upon others to follow the "spirit of the UN Charter," whereas the English version speaks about the UN Charter as such. [Table 3](#) provides an overview of selected substantive differences and their implications for signaled intentions.

In terms of policy substance, substantive differences feature most prominently in the issue areas of multilateral cooperation, international environment, and China's self-description ([figure 7](#)). In the latter two, the Chinese version signals more illegitimate ambitions; in multilateral cooperation, the Chinese version signals more legitimate intentions. Most differences in degree appear regarding the international order, the international environment, and multilateral cooperation ([figure 8](#)). The differences do not impact the signaled intentions except for the international order, where the Chinese versions signal more illegitimate intentions.

### Implications for Research Practice

The fact that differences between the original Chinese documents and the official English translations are so widespread and so considerable that they impact the signaled intentions makes it necessary to pay close attention to them. It should be best practice to identify such differences by comparing the two versions of a document before engaging in any in-depth analysis. As my analysis shows, any researcher who wants to understand the Chinese government's intentions and only considers the English version of a document risks misjudging their intentions. Besides, for research into the domestic factors of China's foreign policy, a close reading of both versions of a document is necessary to account for differences in internal and external messaging. Finally, researchers need to be aware of these differences when developing explanations for changes in China's foreign policy rhetoric and account for them.

Automatic translation tools such as Google Translate or Deep L Translator can capture most of the identified differences. I translated the official Chinese text with Google Translate and Deep L and then compared the automatic translations with the official translations provided by the Chinese government. The translation tools were able to pick up all differences in degree between the original Chinese text and its official English translation that I had identified. Of the substantive differences, the translation tools could pick up between 94.7 percent (Google Translate) and 97.4 percent (Deep L). There was only one substantive difference that none of the translation tools was able to pick up: the English version of the "China in the world" policy paper described China as "a country that suffered abuse and humiliation in the past." The Chinese version contained the same description but referred to China as a great power (大国). Hence, these automatic translation tools can be of great use when comparing the different versions.

Table 2. Selected differences in degree

Signaled intentions	Official English translation	Official Chinese version and author's own translation	Description of difference	Document
CN version signals more illegitimate intentions	<p>... and has <i>encouraged the evolution</i> of the global governance system</p> <p>It makes clear that major country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics <i>aims to foster</i> a new type of international relations (...).</p> <p><i>Promote</i> the building of a community with a shared future for mankind</p> <p>The Chinese nation will become a <i>proud and active member of the community of nations</i>.</p> <p>We hope this "five-no" approach could <i>apply to other countries</i> as they deal with matters regarding Africa.</p>	<p>(...) 促进全球治理体系变革。 (<i>accelerate the transformation</i> of the global governance system)</p> <p>明确中国特色大国外交要推动构建新型国际关系, (...) (<i>push forward</i> a new type of international relations)</p> <p>坚持推动构建人类命运共同体 (<i>insist on pushing forward the establishment of a community of shared future for mankind</i>)</p> <p>(...) 中华民族将以更加昂扬的态度屹立于世界民族之林。(The Chinese nation will <i>stand in the world with a more vigorous attitude</i>)</p> <p>中国希望各国都能在处理非洲事务时做到达“五不”。(China hopes that <i>all countries</i> will adopt these "five nos" when dealing with African affairs)</p>	<p>Accelerating the transformation of the global governance system (CN version) challenges the existing rules and norms more than encouraging its evolution (EN version).</p> <p>Pushing forward a new type of international relations (CN version) challenges the existing rules and norms more than aims to foster it (EN version).</p> <p>Insist on pushing forward the establishment of a community of shared future for mankind (CN version) challenges the existing rules and norms more than promote its establishment (EN version).</p> <p>Only focusing on China and not describing it as a member of the international community (CN version) challenges the existing rules and norms.</p> <p>The Chinese version challenges the existing norms more because it tells all countries how they should change their relations with African countries.</p>	<p>PCR 2017</p> <p>PCR 2017</p> <p>PCR 2017</p> <p>PCR 2017</p> <p>FOCAC 2018</p>

Table 2. Continued

Signaled intentions	Official English translation	Official Chinese version and author's own translation	Description of difference	Document
CN version signals more legitimate intentions	We respect Africa, <i>love</i> Africa, and support Africa. (...) and <i>helped resolve</i> international and regional hotspot issues. We welcome <i>continued participation</i> by all countries for mutually beneficial outcomes. (...) a <i>significant</i> contribution on China's part to world peace and development	(...) 始终尊重非洲、热爱非洲、支持非洲 (...) ( <i>always</i> respect Africa, <i>adore</i> Africa, support Africa) (...) 推动解决国际和地区热点问题 (...) ( <i>push forward the resolution</i> of international and regional hotspot issues) 中国欢迎各国继续积极参与, (...) ( <i>China welcomes the continued active participation</i> of all countries) (...) 更是中国对世界和平与发展 的巨大贡献。(what's more, it is China's <i>great</i> contribution to world peace and development)	Chinese version is stronger worded and reinforces the existing norm of international cooperation more. The Chinese version underlines China's role in conflict resolution more, hence reinforcing an existing norm. The Chinese version reinforces the existing norms more by speaking about continued active participation by all countries. The Chinese version describes a great contribution to world peace and development, which supports the existing rules more than a significant contribution. Slightly different wording	FOCAC 2018  GWR 2013  Asia-Pacific Security 2017  CN in the world 2019
No implications for signaled intentions	(...), and its [the global economy's] recovery remains elusive. However, international security system and order are <i>undetermined</i> (...).	(...) 整体复苏艰难曲折 (...) (overall recovery faces difficulties and setbacks) (...) 国际安全体系和秩序受到冲击。(international security system and order are <i>under attack</i> )	Chinese version is stronger worded than the official English translation.	Boao 2013  DWP 2019

CN, Chinese language; EN, English language.

**Table 3.** Selected substantive differences

Signaled intentions	Official English version	Official Chinese version and author's own translation	Description of difference	Document
CN version signals more illegitimate intentions	<i>Omitted in English version</i>  UN is at the core of the global governance system  All parties should uphold the UN Charter	(...) 打造全面均衡的中拉整体合作网络。(create a <i>comprehensive and balanced network of overall cooperation</i> between China and Latin America)  联合国在当代全球治理体系中处于核心地位。(the United Nations is at the core of the current global governance system)  各方各派要践行联合国宪章的精神 (all parties must live up to the spirit of the UN Charter)	The Chinese version slightly challenges existing rules by emphasizing its network approach to international relations.  The Chinese version slightly challenges existing rules because it describes the global governance system as "current" which implies that it could change.  The English version is more in line with existing rules because it speaks about the UN Charter instead of the more vague expression of the "spirit of the UN Charter."	CELAC 2014           CN in the world 2019           UNGA 2014

**Table 3.** Continued

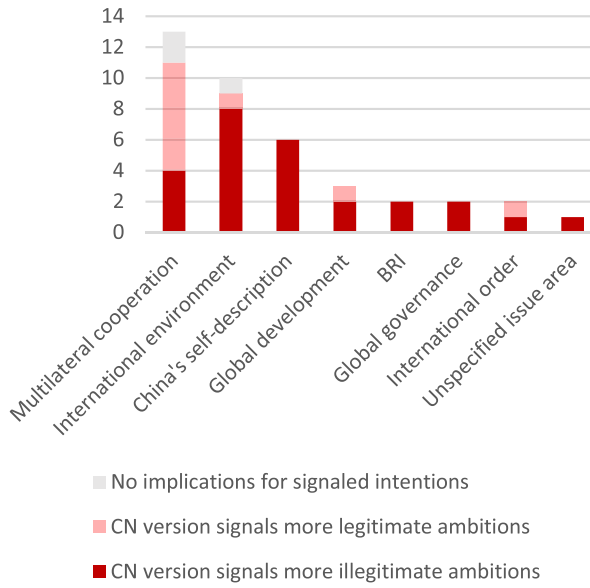
Signaled intentions	Official English version	Official Chinese version and author's own translation	Description of difference	Document
	<i>Omitted in English version</i>	<p>当前,世界经济复苏势头仍然脆弱,全球贸易和投资低迷,大宗商品价格持续波动,引发国际金融危机的深层次矛盾远未解决。一些国家政策内顾倾向加重,保护主义抬头,“逆全球化”思潮暗流涌动。地缘政治因素错综复杂,传统和非传统安全风险相互交织,恐怖主义、传染性疾病、气候变化等全球性挑战更加凸显。(at present, the momentum of world economic recovery is still fragile, global trade and investment are sluggish, commodity prices continue to fluctuate, and the deep-rooted conflicts that triggered the international financial crisis are far from being resolved. The tendency of some countries to increase their inward-looking policies, the rise of protectionism and the undercurrents of proliferate “anti-globalization” thinking. Geopolitical factors are complex, traditional and non-traditional security risks are intertwined, and global challenges such as terrorism, infectious diseases, and climate change have become more prominent)</p>	<p>The detailed descriptions of problems in the international environment signals that the Chinese government is not satisfied with the status quo and might be inclined to change it.</p>	G20 2016

Table 3. Continued

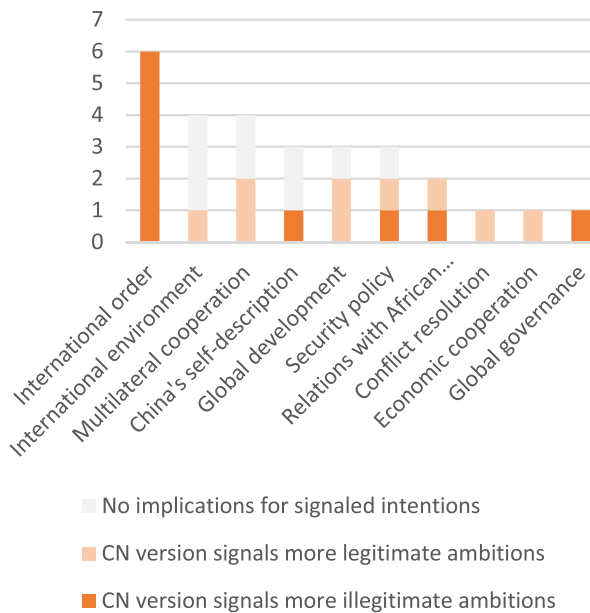
Signaled intentions	Official English version	Official Chinese version and author's own translation	Description of difference	Document
	<i>Omitted in English version</i>	通过南南合作相互输送动力, 增强了自身实力和自主发展能力, 为后国际金融危机时期的世界经济注入新的动力 (by channeling power to each other through South-South cooperation, have strengthened their own strength and capacity for independent development and injected new impetus into the world economy in the post-international financial crisis period)	The Chinese version challenges the existing rules more because it provides details on how developing countries strengthened their position in international politics, hence changed the international distribution of power.	CELAC 2015
CN version signals more legitimate intentions	China is willing to make use of this platform with Latin America to carry out collective dialogues, improve the cooperation level, and promote common development.	中方愿同拉方充分利用中拉论坛这一合作平台, 在政治、经贸、人文、社会、外交等领域开展集体对话, 创新合作方式, 挖掘合作潜力, 扩大合作规模, 提高合作水平, 实现优势互补, 促进共同发展。(China is willing to make full use of the China-Latin America Forum as a cooperation platform with the Latin American side to carry out collective dialogues in political, economic and trade, humanities, social and diplomatic fields, innovate ways of cooperation, explore the potential of cooperation, expand the scale of cooperation, improve the level of cooperation, achieve complementary advantages and promote common development)	The Chinese version reinforces the existing rules more strongly because it provides more details on international cooperation by listing specific fields for dialogue, by speaking about innovating cooperation and about achieving complementary advantages.	CELAC 2014

Table 3. Continued

Signaled intentions	Official English version	Official Chinese version and author's own translation	Description of difference	Document
<p>We care for the people of the world and strive for the greater good while pursuing our own development</p> <p>Giving full play to the constructive role of global and regional multilateral mechanisms</p>	<p><i>Omitted in Chinese version</i></p> <p>充分发挥世界贸易组织、国际货币基金组织、世界银行、二十国集团、欧盟等全球和区域多边机制的建设性作用 (give full play to the constructive role of global and regional multilateral mechanisms such as the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the G20, and the EU)</p>	<p>Chinese version reinforces the existing norms by stating that they cared for other people and strive for the greater good while pursuing their own development.</p> <p>The Chinese version is more in line with existing rules because it names specific global and regional multilateral mechanisms.</p>	<p>CN in the world 2019</p>	
<p>No implications for signaled intentions</p> <p>To fulfill the common mission and deal with the challenge of national rejuvenation, we should promote the Silk Road spirit, boost the mutual learning between civilizations, respect each other's development path, stick to win-win cooperation, and advocate dialogue and peace.</p>	<p>实现民族振兴的共同使命和挑战, 需要我们弘扬丝绸之路精神, 为发展增添活力, 为合作添活力, 不断深化全面合作、共同发展的中阿战略伙伴关系。(to achieve the common mission and challenges of national revitalization, we need to carry forward the spirit of the Silk Road, increase the momentum for development, add vitality to cooperation, and continuously deepen the comprehensive cooperation and common development of China—Arab strategic cooperation relations)</p>	<p>Each version emphasizes different areas, but no clear patterns emerge.</p>	<p>Sino-Arab 2014</p>	
<p>We should increase intercivilization exchanges to promote harmony, inclusiveness, and respect for differences</p>	<p>我们要促进和而不同、兼收并蓄的文明交流 (we need to promote harmonious, diverse, and eclectic exchange of civilization)</p>	<p>The Chinese version describes the nature of these exchanges, that is, harmonious and eclectic. The English version describes the goal of these exchanges as promoting harmony, inclusiveness, and respect for differences</p>	<p>UNGA 2015</p>	



**Figure 7.** Substantive differences based on issue areas.



**Figure 8.** Differences in degree based on issue areas.

### Conclusion

This research note documents to what extent and how official English translations of Chinese foreign policy statements differ from the original Chinese text. The systematic analysis of ninety-one foreign policy statements reveals that more than half of the analyzed foreign policy statements contain differences between the Chinese original and the official English translation. I traced variation based on document type and policy-making level. Over time, I found significant shifts in how prevalent



minor differences are and serious shifts in the frequency of substantive differences. Most importantly, the overwhelming majority of identified substantive differences and differences in degree alter China's signaled intentions. Overall, the Chinese versions tend to signal more ambitions that are inconsistent with the existing norms and rules.

Future research should assess whether the phenomenon is a particularity of the Chinese context or whether it also appears in other contexts where English is not the primary language, and hence the official foreign policy statements are provided in the country's official language as well as in English. If the phenomenon is also prevalent in other states, a comparative approach might allow researchers to understand governments' motivations behind translating their statements differently. For the Chinese context, future research should attempt to reveal the motivations behind the differences between foreign policy statements issued in Chinese and their official foreign policy statements. Since the phenomenon is not limited to foreign policy statements, exchanges with translation scholars, especially proponents of critical discourse analysis, with their understanding of translation as a social practice, might be a fruitful starting point.

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### Supplementary Information

Supplementary information is available at the *Foreign Policy Analysis* data archive.

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