The State of Translation in China: Appraisal of the French Version of President Xi Jinping’s *The Governance of China*

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**Abstract:** As part of China’s propaganda machine, the doctrinal book *The Governance of China* (2014b), which compiles speeches from President Xi Jinping, has special significance in that it has been specifically formulated to be translated and supplied to the foreign mass readership. In this article, we will apply tools from discourse analysis and rhetoric (*logos*, *ethos*, *pathos*) onto three texts from this corpus about the Middle Kingdom’s defence policy in order to assess in what way the effective translation strategies pertain to the unquestionably displayed proselytisation function. Across this comparative analysis of the Chinese original and its French version, we will see notably how Xi Jinping’s figure is distorted through the translators’ language choices to appear more attractive to French-speaking readers.
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1. INTRODUCTION

Since he seized power in 1949, the communist regime in China has engaged in relentless propaganda to galvanise the nation and spread the good word through the country. However, Xi Jinping’s rise to prominence as CCP General Secretary in 2012 and as President of China in 2013 has been followed by the amplification and expansion of ideological indoctrination in various formats: books, school curriculum, TV spots, or even pop songs. This assertive and proactive policy falls within the personality cult established around Xi Jinping.

Following as an obvious corollary, the Communist authorities’ proselytisation efforts towards the foreign mass audience is another trend that has accelerated in Continental China since 2012. Indeed, as the Middle Kingdom has restored its status as a world major power – not without arousing some fears among its partners about its long-term intentions, – it now fully endorses «soft power» and tries to charm the globe by bringing the richness and success of its culture to the fore, and by trumpeting the achievements of its political and ideological model.

In that perspective, the publication of Xi Jinping’s doctrinal book «习近平谈治国理政» The Governance of China (La Gouvernance de la Chine in French) in 2014, i.e. two years after his nomination as top party leader, perfectly exemplifies the vigorous ongoing propaganda campaign launched by China towards foreigners. The Foreign Language Press (外文出版社), the Beijing-based publishing house that manages the collection, is forming part of the China Foreign Languages Publication and Distribution Administration (中国外文出版发行事业局), itself an organisation monitored by the...
Publicity Department of the CCP Central Committee (中共中央宣传部). Although the book has been designed for foreign readers specifically, a point to note is that all the articles included are individual discourse transcriptions, allocutions, communiqués or interviews originally, which partly explains a certain lack of coherence. The identity of translators must also be emphasised: even if they remain anonymous (no name in the book, except a mention of 法文翻译组 «French-language translating team» at the very end), it is clear that the translators are not English or French native speakers, but a group of Chinese individuals trained in foreign languages working for the Institute for Party History and Literature Research of the CCP Central Committee (中共中央编译局). As we will see, this translation direction strategy can also explain the stylistic and idiomatic heterogeneity within the book.

In this article, we intend to examine the rhetorical devices in the French version of The Governance of China with the tools of discourse analysis (Amossy 2006, Charteris-Black 2014, Chilton 2004), as well as in the framework of translational (preliminary and operational) norms (Toury 2012). At a time when China is investing massively and is implementing radical reforms in its armed forces, we found appropriate to choose and explore three texts dedicated to its military policy. In particular, we will investigate how the translators attempted – with varying success – to balance nationalist fervour with an asserted willingness to promote appeasement on the international scene.

2. CORPUS

The three articles on which we will focus are included in Chapter IX, dedicated to «national defence» (推进国防和军队现代化, «La Défense nationale» in French, pp. 257–268):

– The first text, entitled «De l’édification de la défense nationale et de l’armée» (〈把国防和军队建设不断推向前进〉, pp. 259–261, «Build up Our National Defence and Armed Forces» in English), is a written version of a speech given by Xi Jinping on 16 November 2012 at the enlarged meeting of the Central Military Commission – the supreme authority in China that guarantees the pre-eminence of political and civilian power over the army, – as indicated in a footnote. What the book does not reveal is that this speech was made the day after Xi Jinping’s appointment as head of the Commission at the end of the 18th CCP Congress: it was therefore a kind of programmatic statement announcing the orientations that the new head of the Chinese armed forces intended to set for his first five-year term. This clarification is of great importance, as this was the first time since 1989 that the new General Secretary of the CCP had
immediately and simultaneously taken over the chairmanship of the Central Military Commission.

The second text in the chapter, entitled «Pour une défense nationale plus solide et une armée plus puissante» (〈努力建设巩固国防和强大军队〉, pp. 262–262, «Build Strong National Defence and Powerful Military Forces» in English) is a transcript of a speech delivered by Xi Jinping during an inspection tour he conducted from 8 to 10 December 2012 in the «zone de guerre de Guangzhou» («Guangzhou [Canton] War Zone»), as mentioned in the note. In addition to the misinterpretation that transforms the Guangzhou «army theatre command» (战区) into a «war zone», the publisher said nothing about the massive anti-corruption campaign launched by Xi Jinping’s team upon its arrival in power, which also affected the army to the highest level, nor about the major reforms planned from 2013 (and implemented in early 2016) aimed at a radical rationalisation of military structures. However, knowledge of these two elements would make it possible, as we will see, to assess the arguments of the president in a completely different light.

The last text, entitled «Construire une armée populaire fidèle au Parti, invincible et dotée d’un style de travail exemplaire» (〈建设一支听党指挥、能打胜仗、作风优良的人民军队〉, pp. 265–267, «Build People’s Armed Forces That Follow the Party’s Commands, Are Able to Win Battles and Have Fine Conduct» in English), is an account of the statement delivered by Xi Jinping on 11 March 2013 «during the plenary session of the APL delegation to the 1st session of the 12th National People’s Congress». While this indication is very detailed, it is fair to assume that it will remain quite cryptic for the reader who is less familiar with Chinese political structures. Apart from the fact that the sign APL, which stands for «Armée populaire de libération» (People’s Liberation Army), is not explicated, it would undoubtedly have been useful if the following facts had been mentioned: that the National People’s Congress (全国人民代表大会), a national parliament with nearly 3,000 members, is the official legislative body in the People’s Republic of China (but in reality it serves rather as a chamber for recording decisions taken within the CCP); that it meets once a year in March for a ten-day session; that it elects every five years the President of the Republic (since 1989 the person holding the office of Secretary General of the CCP); and that the APL is represented by a delegation of about 9 % of the seats (exactly 268 out of 2,987 in the 12th National People’s Congress). These clarifications help to understand that this speech was delivered by Xi Jinping as he was about to be confirmed as Head of State by the members of Parliament. His speech must therefore once again be interpreted as a statement of a general line of action and policy, in this case concerning the future of the army.
As we can see, the analysis of the paratext of the articles studied – or rather the omissions made therein – provides a first insight into how the subtle blurring of the spatiotemporal context can help give Xi Jinping’s declamations a more general scope than can be achieved with speeches presented directly as statements of a programmatic nature.

3. ANALYSIS OF THE CORPUS

Our translation appraisal will be structured around three major items of Aristotle’s rhetorical appeals or modes of persuasion:

- The ethos, which touches on the disposition, character or fundamental values the presenter must embody to capture the attention of the public and gain its trust, to look affable, credible and qualified;
- The logos, which refers to the underlying logic and reasoning in the speaker’s argumentation, thus being directed to the rational mind of the interlocutor; and
- The pathos, i.e. the device encompassing all the techniques to appeal to the emotions, passions and desires of the audience, thus exploiting its sensibility.

3.1. Adapting the audience and constructing «ethos»

Before delving into the Chinese president’s rhetoric, examining the argumentative structure of his speeches and their translation into French will already enable us to get an idea of the strategies implemented to meet the target audience’s expectations.

We must first point out the clarity of the overall presentation of the book in general. First of all, a table of contents at the beginning of the book reveals its chapter structure, with the name of each document followed by the corresponding pages. At the end of the volume, an index (Xi 2014a: pp. 539-552) includes a whole series of anthroponyms, place names, book titles, organisations and other general concepts cited in the book. As already mentioned, footnotes are systematically added to each article to explain their spatial and temporal context. Endnotes also provide information on elements that are supposed to be less known to readers.

One of the most interesting features, which directly strikes the reader, is the visual typesetting of the articles. Indeed, the orality of the original speeches as well as the Chinese discursive style could lead us to fear some confusion in the argumentation. On the contrary, we were surprised to find in Xi Jinping’s book easily apprehensible texts with a simple but efficient page layout (justified, indented paragraphs). Moreover, very complex sentences were sometimes cut down in individual, short paragraphs. This
reordering in effect enhances the author’s ethos, i.e. it boosts his credibility before a primarily suspicious audience, as he appears more rational and coherent. This rhetorical device is perfectly illustrated by the following extract:

[...]

Kevin H enry
The State of Translation in China: Appraisal of the French Version of President Xi Jinping’s The Governance of China

We can see here how graphic restructuring contributes to intensifying the flow of ideas: the emphatic repetition with an instance of anaphora in Chinese (一一是要牢记 比须毫不动摇坚持党对军队的绝对领导, 任何时候任何情况下都坚决听党的话、跟党走。) was replaced by a seemingly methodical dialectic relying on newlines and an array of verba dicendi («Je souligne», «je répète»). The translators favoured thus a methodical dialectic over truculent repetition.

As we have alluded to in the above example, lexical and syntactical variety is one of the multiple techniques the Chinese team of translators applied to spruce up Xi Jinping’s address. While Mandarin Chinese orators definitely do not worry to reiterate the same terms ad nauseam, the French writing tradition loathes mere repetitions or, at
least, strongly advises on a careful use of this highly marked stylistic device. As a matter of course, the translators were concerned to not reproducing this feature in the French version of Xi Jinping’s talks, as in the following example:

军委班子和军队高级干部在领导国防和军队建设中肩负着重大历史责任。我们要始终保持清醒头脑，倍加珍惜一代代官兵不懈奋斗取得的巨大成就，倍加珍惜长期实践中积累的宝贵经验，倍加珍惜当前军队建设发展的大好局面，忠心耿耿为党和人民工作，努力把国防和军队建设不断推向前进。


Example 2: Mitigation of repetitions (Xi 2014: 259)

Another easily adopted strategy is to suppress infelicitous expressions altogether. In our corpus, the best occurrence of this phenomenon involves the verb 坚持 «persevere, keep doing», whose equivalent is nearly always absent from the French translation despite appearing 17 times in the source texts.

In any case, all these manipulations unmistakably contribute towards accommodating the Chinese ornamentation to the more analytical, polished French style. In that way, the Publicity Department of the CCP Central Committee achieved the tremendous feat of making Xi Jinping put on the air of distinction of an idealised ruler à la française: a powerful orator mastering his communication but keeping moderate and unostentatious. In other words, the Chinese establishment worked hard to make its leader move closer to the prototypical representation of the book’s expected French intellectual readership.

3.2. The modulation of «pathos» and figures of speech

In order to convince the audience that one’s argumentation is relevant, orators resort, besides the conventional logico-rhetorical devices, to pathos: they try to stir emotions within the public to make it acquiesce in their views.

As The Governance of China have originally been conceived to persuade a non-Chinese-speaking readership of the rightfulness of Xi Jinping’s thought, the team of
translators had to face the difficulty of transmitting heterogenous speeches towards French-speaking readers whose identities and motivations are evidently totally different from the source texts’ addressees. Should they then choose a faithful rendition of the original spatiotemporal context, i.e. foreignization, with the risk of alienating the final reader, or favour domestication and adaptation to the target public? This dichotomy put forward by Venuti (1995) can be linked to the distinction made by Nord between «documentary» and «instrumental» translation (Nord 1997: 47-52):

**Documentary Translation**: Type of translation process which aims at producing in the target language a kind of document of (certain aspects of) a communicative interaction in which a source-culture sender communicates with a source-culture audience via the source text under source-culture conditions. […] (Nord 1997: 138)

**Instrumental Translation**: Type of translation process which aims at producing in the target language an instrument for a new communicative interaction between the source-culture sender and a target-culture audience, using (certain aspects of) the source text as a model. According to the degree of functional invariance we may distinguish between equifunctional, heterofunctional and homologous instrumental translations (Nord 1997: 139).

Concerning the three texts we are examining, we will suggest that their French translations can be qualified as «heterofunctional instrumental translations», because they perform functions (referential, expressive, appellative, phatic) comparable but not identical to those in the source texts, due to cultural differences.

The main issue in analysing the three addresses dedicated to «national defence» in The Governance of China will be to examine in what way Xi Jinping’s confrontational, bellicose – and thus menacing – stance has been expressed in French. In the preceding section, we have seen how the translators succeeded in rationalising the President’s speeches by reorganising the argumentative structure, enriching the vocabulary and suppressing repetitions in his speeches. The same rhetorical apparatus participated in making Xi Jinping sound less peremptory, dogmatic and intimidating. Accordingly, bombastic style and grandiloquent hyperboles were notably toned down in the French version, as in the following example (the third column is our literal translation of the Chinese original):
To gain popular support, relying on the doxa, i.e. common sense, or the presumed shared opinions of the audience, is essential. To do this, the skilful speaker will not hesitate to use ready-made stylistic figures and formulae: the former, by their potentially original nature, capture the public’s attention; the latter, which rely heavily on stereotypes, acquire their truthfulness from repetition. Political discourse is known to exploit these two strategies, especially the second, which is the cornerstone of «newspeak». Xi Jinping confirms this trend: since his inauguration, he has multiplied...
announcements by reasserting the same slogans to all intents and purposes. Often the fixed expressions used by the president take the form of *chengyu* 成语, a certain type of phrase specific to Chinese one of whose essential characteristics is its quadrisyllabic rhythm, often with an allusive tone; the succession of several of these sequences or of semi-fixed expressions following a similar pattern (what it sometimes called «quasi- *chengyu*» 准成语) then produces a particular rhythmic cadence (Henry 2016). Invariably, we noticed that the translation ignores this gnomic and prosodic value. In Example 4, the ternary structure underlying the speech is articulated around a trio of suchlike four-syllable phrases:

>全军要高举中国特色社会主义伟大旗帜, 以邓小平理论、 «三个代表» 重要思想、科学发
>展观为指导, 深入贯彻国防和军队建设主题主线, 认真落实党的十八大关于国防和军队
>建设的战略部署, 记住坚决听党指挥是强军之魂, 能打仗、打胜仗是强军之要, 依法治
>军、从严治军是强军之基, 全面加强革命化现代化正规化建设。

> L’armée chinoise doit porter haut l’étendard du socialisme à la chinoise, se laisser guider par
> la théorie de Deng Xiaoping, la pensée importante de la « Triple représentation » ainsi que le
> concept de développement scientifique, et appliquer en profondeur le thème et la ligne directrice
> destinés à l’édification de la défense nationale et des forces armées. Elle doit également mettre
> en œuvre les dispositions stratégiques définies par le XVIIIe Congrès du Parti en la matière et
> retenir ceci par cœur : obéir scrupuleusement aux commandements du Parti constitue le devoir
doit s’acquitter ; savoir combattre et vaincre est son rôle fondamental ; se soumettre à des exigences
> rigoureuses et être administrée en vertu de la loi sont la clé pour atteindre les objectifs susmentionnés.
> Notre armée doit accentuer son caractère révolutionnaire, sa modernisation et sa conformité aux
> normes internationales.

**Example 4: Use of four-syllable phrases (Xi 2014a: 262)**

Here, Xi Jinping reminds his troops of a dogma that cannot be challenged: 强军之魂 «the soul of a strong army», 强军之要 «the duty of a strong army» and 强军之基 «the foundation of a strong army». This triad is further highlighted by the fact

1. The definition of *chengyu*, and therefore the inclusion of particular expressions in that
linguistic category, remains highly controversial (see Henry 2016). In Example 4, we believe that,
while normally not included in *chengyu* dictionaries, the quadrisyllabic items 强军之魂, 强军之要
and 强军之基 may qualify as «coined *chengyu*», or at least as «quasi-*chengyu*» (although
the distinction between *chengyu* and «quasi-*chengyu*» seems somewhat misleading and super-
fluous to us).
that it is reinforced later in the same text by a series of three other structurally similar expressions, 召之即来, 来之能战 and 战之必胜, quite well translated as «présentes au premier appel», «aptes au combat» and «sûres de vaincre». The parallelism of the four-syllable phrases is therefore dissolved here in a more verbose and less powerful formulation. In any case, the flattening of doxa and the stylistic reduction we are observing here are the results of a domestication process.

3.3. The imperfections

Although the translators of The Governance of China used domestication strategies to give Xi Jinping an ethos of trust and seriousness, including by stressing the logos, mitigating the pathos and erasing the original Chinese doxa, we must nevertheless acknowledge that their effort is undermined by several shortcomings that could jeopardise the CCP’s proselytising endeavours.

A serious point concerns the mistakes that run through the three texts. Sometimes errors reflect the clumsy attempt to find an equivalent to a vague and ill-defined term; in this situation, when a solution was found, it was generally maintained consistently in all three texts. This applies to the expression 优良作风, which admittedly literally means «excellent [work] style» («style de travail excellent»), but which would be more appropriately rendered here by «exemplarity». One of the most disturbing examples of this phenomenon is the term 建设 (47 items). Used in architecture to mean «build» or «erect», this verb has an extremely elusive significance when applied to a human group such as an army: it oscillates between «train» (including politically) on the one hand, and «strengthen» or «consolidate» on the other. However, the French text speaks of «construction» or «édification», ambiguous terms that ring a little hollow.

Sometimes, the failure is the result of incorrect sentence structure breakdown. Deficiencies of this type can be found in the following excerpt, where the translators have completely disrupted the grammatical structure by apparently overlooking punctuation²:

2. According to Chinese punctuation rules, the ideographic comma 、is used in enumerations, while the comma , is used to join together clauses that deal with a certain topic or line of thinking.
Il faut procéder à une planification d’ensemble de l’édification de l’économie nationale et de la défense nationale, en vue de réaliser une parfaite unité entre la prospérité du pays et la puissance de l’armée. Il faut continuer à consacrer une grande partie de nos efforts à un développement militaire, qui soit caractérisé par une interaction coordonnée entre l’armée et le peuple. Par ailleurs, nous devons aussi insister sur une croissance tirée par la demande du marché et guidée par le gouvernement, afin de former une structure de développement marquée par une profonde intégration civilo-militaire, dans le cadre des infrastructures et des domaines importants. Il faut développer un esprit de vie simple et de travail acharné, être diligent et économe, lutter contre les dépenses excessives et le gaspillage, et enfin, gérer correctement le budget militaire, afin d’assurer une utilisation optimale des ressources dans la défense nationale. Il faut faire rayonner la tradition glorieuse du soutien au gouvernement, de l’amour du peuple, du soutien à l’armée et de l’aide aux familles des militaires. Il faut organiser des activités dans le cadre de la « solidarité entre civils et militaires pour la promotion des valeurs essentielles socialistes », et entreprendre la création d’une société harmonieuse. Les comités Il faut élaborer un plan global pour développer l’économie et renforcer la défense nationale et s’appliquer à allier la prospérité économique à une armée forte. Il faut continuer à œuvrer sur le grand dossier du développement conjoint du civil et du militaire, toujours sous l’impulsion de la demande et sous la direction des autorités publiques, en établissant systématiquement des liens étroits entre les infrastructures civiles et militaires de base et entre les secteurs principaux de ces deux pôles. Il faut manifester son esprit de combativité et sa capacité de résistance, faire preuve de dynamisme et de tempérance, lutter contre les dépenses excessives et le gaspillage, et enfin, savoir gérer et utiliser correctement les fonds de l’armée, de sorte qu’on puisse retirer les plus grands fruits des investissements réalisés dans la défense nationale. Il faut mettre en valeur cette histoire glorieuse où l’armée, placée sous l’égide du gouvernement et favorisée par lui, lui apportait en retour son soutien en prouvant son amour pour le peuple. Pour ce faire, des activités doivent être organisées pour célébrer l’action conjointe des civils et des militaires pour la construction nationale et l’établissement de l’harmonie sociale. Les comités du Parti et les gouvernements locaux à tous les échelons doivent accorder toute leur attention et apporter leur soutien à la construction des
Some passages take this a step further by departing from the argumentative structure of the original text:

要坚持以思想政治建设摆在部队各项建设的首位, 始终保持部队建设坚定正确的政治方向。坚持不懈用中国特色社会主义理论体系武装官兵, 持续培育当代革命军人核心价值观, 大力弘扬我军光荣传统和优良作风, 进一步打牢官兵高举旗帜、 听党指挥、 履行使命的思想政治基础。当前和今后一个时期, 加强思想政治建设最重要任务是学习宣传贯彻党的十八大精神。要注重联系实际, 坚持学以致用, 切实把党的十八大精神贯彻落实到部队建设各个方面。 // Dans l’immédiat et pour la période à venir, comprendre, diffuser et appliquer l’esprit du XVIIe Congrès du Parti est et demeurera la tâche primordiale de la construction politico-idéologique. // Dans l’immédiat et pour la période à venir, l’étude, la diffusion forces armées et de la défense nationale, ainsi qu’à sensibiliser davantage les civils à la défense nationale, afin que l’ensemble de la société prenne conscience de cette question et se mobilise pour chérir, renforcer et préserver notre armée.
到推进部队建设、遂行军事任务的实践中。要坚持用打仗的标准推进军事斗争准备，不断强化官兵当兵打仗、带兵打仗、练兵打仗思想，坚持从实战需要出发从严训练部队，坚持以军事斗争准备为龙头带动现代化建设，全面提高部队以打赢信息化条件下局部战争能力为核心完成多样化军事任务能力。要不折不扣落实依法治军、从严治军方针，培养部队严守纪律、令行禁止、步调一致的良好作风。要始终把工作重心放在基层，把部队建设和战斗力的基础打得更加牢固。

Most other instances create divergent connotations through the use of awkward wording or through inaccuracies that are sometimes on the border on the ridiculous. For example, the formula «全面提高信息化条件下威慑和实战能力», which means «globally increasing our dissuasion and combat capabilities in the era of information technology», becomes «augmenter de manière générale nos capacités en termes de dissuasion et de combat cybernétiques» («[…] our dissuasion and cybernetic combat capabilities») (Xi 2014a: 260), which is significantly different.

Even if we should expect that many of these errors stem from the fact that the French translation is the work of non-native speakers who operated in a quasi-autonomous manner for a government agency in a distant country, nevertheless some translation proposals come near to deception. It remains to be determined whether this was deliberate or (more likely) unintentional, but then at the detriment of the promotion campaign launched abroad through this publication. In fact, these problems can probably be explained either by a lack of coordination within the translation team or by insufficient proofreading.

4. OPEN CONCLUSION

While reiterating the importance of *The Governance of China* in the new ideological positioning that Xi Jinping wishes to enforce in his home country and beyond, we will conclude by underlining the growing professionalism shown by official bodies in their proselytising activities. Indeed, for anyone who does not know Chinese, *The Governance of China* appears, despite the errors we have detected, to be written in a relatively correct and polished language.

Notwithstanding the obvious attempts to smooth out as much as possible the asperities of a redundant, grandiloquent and allusive style, one may legitimately wonder whether the French-speaking reader will be able to overcome his mistrust towards such a book that no longer seeks to hide its propagandist nature.
5. REFERENCES


