

Translating Power: How China’s White Papers Are Read Around the World

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26-03-2025



“The report is still completely honest, trustworthy, and ethical, even though the data are fabricated and measurements are falsified.”

In “GHG Emissions”; *Wild Wise Weird* [1]



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How do translated political texts shape global perceptions? In their 2025 study, Zhao and Wang [2] investigate this question through the lens of China’s English-language white papers on China–U.S. economic and trade frictions. Using a critical discourse analysis (CDA) framework [3], they argue that translation in political contexts is far from neutral—it is a socially situated practice deeply influenced by national identity, ideological negotiation, and media representation.

Central to their analysis is a framework built on three dimensions: national consciousness, intersubjectivity, and social context. National consciousness is reflected in the deliberate selection of translators and in lexical choices that portray China as a reasoned, sovereign actor committed to negotiation but firm in defending its interests. Strategic choices—such as preferring “defend” over “protect” or “engaged in” rather than “conducted”—underscore a calculated effort to project a principled national image.

Zhao and Wang also incorporate Dual Narrative Progression Theory (DNPT) [4], which distinguishes between overt narratives—clear, surface-level messages—and covert narratives, which carry deeper ideological, cultural, or contextual meanings that subtly shape audience interpretations. This dual-layered approach helps explain how translation choices, such as reframing metaphors or adapting idioms, maintain political intent while aligning with the cultural expectations of international readers.

However, once these translations enter the Western media landscape, their narrative is often reinterpreted. Media outlets tend to emphasize assertive or uncompromising language—such as “China will never give in”—while downplaying readiness for dialog. This selective framing shapes public perception. A corpus analysis of 13,877 social media comments on Facebook and YouTube revealed that a majority of English-speaking users expressed support for the U.S. position, likely influenced by these media portrayals.

Ultimately, Zhao and Wang’s study reveals that translation is not merely the transfer of words across languages but a complex, negotiated, and power-infused process—one with tangible effects on international discourse and public sentiment [5].

References

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