

1 Introduction: Translation as State Action

In the final days of 1978, as Chinese and American diplomats negotiated the Joint Communiqué on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations, a moment of decision turned on the translation of a single verb. The English version stated that ‘The Government of the United States of America acknowledges the Chinese position that there is but one China and Taiwan is part of China’ (U.S. Department of State, 1978). In the authorised Chinese text, however, ‘acknowledges’ was rendered as *chengren*, a term that conveyed the force of formal recognition. This choice marked a deliberate departure from the 1972 Shanghai Communiqué, which had used the weaker *renshidao* (‘to be aware of’ or ‘to take note of’). Officials at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, after consulting dictionaries and debating internally, judged *chengren* to be both defensible and strategically useful (Shi, 2004). American counterparts later stressed that only the English text was binding, but the incident illustrates how translation itself enabled compromise. What diplomats call ‘constructive ambiguity’ was, in this case, produced through translation: the agreement could be signed precisely because the two versions did not mean the same thing. Translation was not ancillary to the process – it was the instrument that made agreement possible.

This episode invites a broader question. Why do states commit political, financial, and intellectual resources to translation on such a scale? And how does state authority transform translation from a technical service into an instrument of governance, even a component of power? The pattern is not confined to modern diplomacy. Ancient empires, from the trilingual inscriptions of the Achaemenids to the multilingual administration of Rome, relied on interpreters and translators to project rule and manage diversity (Delisle & Woodsworth, 2012; McElduff & Sciarrino, 2011). Rendering an imperial decree into a local idiom was an assertion of sovereignty as much as a communicative act. From the Zhou dynasty’s (c. 1046–256 BCE) use of *xiangxu* (regional interpreters) to contemporary investment in multilingual broadcasting and technical terminology, states have consistently treated translation as a strategic resource (Meylaerts, 2018). The durability and scale of this commitment suggest that translation in state hands cannot be understood as mere facilitation.

This Element argues that translation, when initiated and controlled by a sovereign authority, should be understood as a state act. In legal–political usage, a state act is an action carried out by an organ of the state, under its authority, and for its objectives (Chen, 2015). Translation that meets these criteria – state-initiated, politically salient, and purposive – ceases to be a secondary service. It becomes a performance of power. The 1978 communiqué exemplifies this: the Chinese version was not a neutral rendering but a calculated

move, designed to create what might be called ‘workable dis-equivalence’ – a textual condition in which the same treaty could sustain divergent readings, allowing both Washington and Beijing to claim satisfaction. Agreement was possible not despite, but because of, the non-equivalence.

To analyse this phenomenon, the Element introduces the concept of the State Translation Programme (STP). The STP framework treats the state as an active, self-interested agent that deploys translation to govern. It provides a way to trace how translation is mobilised to extend authority inward through law, schooling, and administration, and outward through treaties, technical standards, and the projection of national image.

While China offers unusually long and continuous evidence for this argument, the STP is not unique to the Chinese polity. To demonstrate the framework’s universal validity and to distinguish the specific characteristics of the Chinese model, we introduce a Strategic Function Typology that categorises state translation into three distinct modes. We examine ‘The Architects’ – states such as Meiji Japan (Uchiyama, 2018) and Republican Türkiye (Aksoy, 2010; Seçkin, 2021) – which utilised translation to build national capacity and identity during crises of modernisation. We analyse ‘The Influencers’ – such as the United States (Cheng, 2025) and South Korea (Choi, 2022) – who deploy translation to project soft power or manage national reputation. Finally, we consider ‘The Administrators’ – exemplified by Canada (Delisle & Otis, 2016) and Poland (Biel, 2023) – where translation functions as a mechanism of internal cohesion and legal compliance.

China’s distinctiveness, we argue, lies in its ‘sovereign maximalism’: whereas the cases we examine from other states illustrate how a given STP may be oriented primarily towards one strategic function – nation-building, soft-power projection, or administrative cohesion – the Chinese state attempts to operate as Architect, Influencer, and Administrator simultaneously. This integrated approach characterises the contemporary People’s Republic of China (since 1949), building on deep historical precedents in the Architect and Administrator modes. By ‘simultaneously’, we mean that the state sustains multiple workstreams oriented towards different strategic functions in parallel, and occasionally combines functions within a single project – not that every translated text performs all three functions at once. References to *xiangxu* as official interpreters appear in Zhou texts, showing that translation was embedded in statecraft from the earliest recorded periods (Cheung, 2006). Dynasties sponsored large projects, often at moments of political transition. The Tang dynasty (618–907) used translation to absorb Buddhist texts; the Qing dynasty (1644–1912), faced with military and technological pressure, founded the *Jingshi Tongwenguan* (School of Combined Learning) to translate Western

science, technology, and international law (Biggerstaff, 1961). These shifts – from confident cultural assimilation in the Tang to defensive modernisation in the late Qing – differ in context but not in agent or purpose: the state translated in order to govern and survive.

A brief note on the method is in order. This study draws on diplomatic communiqués and treaties, bilingual statute compilations, yearbooks, gazettes, official translations (including Foreign Languages Press in Beijing), archival material from imperial and Republican eras, and memoirs or oral histories of officials and translators. These primary sources are read alongside scholarship in translation studies, political science, and Chinese history. Case selection follows three criteria: significance for governance (instances where translation shaped law, diplomacy, or administration), availability of sources (especially extant bilingual texts), and comparative value across functions and regime types. Claims are built by cross-checking rival language versions and independent records, and, where gaps remain, by triangulating published evidence with explicit caveats. The non-Chinese cases are treated as illustrative episodes selected to operationalise the typology, not as comprehensive accounts of each country's overall translation governance.

If translation is indeed state action, it must be identifiable as such – by who initiates it, who controls it, and whose interests it advances. From imperial edicts to contemporary state publications, a recurring pattern can be observed. Section 2 defines the STP and the Strategic Function Typology. Section 3 examines the mechanisms that render the programme operative. Section 4 situates these mechanisms in historical perspective. Section 5 applies them to the People's Republic of China (PRC). The Conclusion considers transferability and limits. Translation in this sense is not reducible to 'institutional translation' (cf. Koskinen, 2014; Schäffner et al., 2014). It is a claim about sovereignty and control, offering a compact coding language for comparative work, including cases that begin reactively but consolidate into state programmes.

2 The State Translation Programme: A Theoretical Framework

Translation becomes state action when a sovereign actor initiates it and takes responsibility for it. This is the basic premise of the STP: translation carried out in the name of the state, for state purposes, and under state authority. The idea is easy to state; its value lies in what it allows us to see. It enables us to treat treaty wording, minority-language editions of laws, textbook series, and termbanks as belonging to a single set of practices – and to ask how these practices organise authority, channel resources, and produce effects.

Three attributes do most of the explanatory work: who starts the project, whose interests it serves, and who ultimately controls it. These do not describe a perfect model; they mark recurring tendencies that can be traced in documents, budgets, and approval chains. Seen in this way, the STP is not a slogan but a research framework. In what follows, we set out the attributes more precisely, show how they appear across periods and regimes, and introduce a Strategic Function Typology to operationalise these attributes across different national contexts. The aim is not to spin out a long theoretical discussion but to keep the framework clear and usable. Later, when the Element turns to questions of workflow and personnel, those details are included only when they help us decide whether a project counts as state action – and why that classification matters for explanation.

2.1 Defining the State Translation Programme

At the heart of our theoretical contribution is the STP. The first author of this Element, Dongsheng Ren, first proposed the concept of *guojia fanyi shijian* (state translation practice) and subsequently developed it with colleagues into a systematic framework (see, e.g., Ren & Gao, 2015). From the outset, our aim has been to capture something that existing categories such as ‘government translation’ (Mossop, 2014) or ‘institutional translation’ could not: that a sovereign state is not merely a sponsor or regulator of translation but a purposive agent. In this capacity, the state initiates, manages, and controls translation as part of its strategic activity. The STP was therefore designed to explain translation as a form of state behaviour, carried out in the state’s name and under its authority, and directed towards its political and strategic interests.

We encapsulate this in a formal definition:

A State Translation Programme is translation initiated and controlled by a sovereign actor, in the state’s name and for state aims.

This definition is deliberately concise, but it is dense with meaning. Each component requires careful unpacking in order to reveal the framework’s interdisciplinary foundations. We argue that the STP conceptualises translation as a type of ‘state act’, a purposive and systematically organised practice of governance. To understand this logic, we must first examine its three constituent concepts: the state, translation, and programme.

2.1.1 State

The ‘state’ is the cornerstone of the STP framework. We adopt ‘state’ in its political-science sense: a sovereign organisation that holds a monopoly on

the legitimate use of physical force over a defined territory and population (Weber, 1978). This choice gives the framework both analytical power and historical reach. At the same time, research in political sociology – especially Joel S. Migdal’s (2001) ‘state-in-society’ approach – reminds us that Weber’s ‘ideal type’ can be limiting. Migdal emphasises that the state is not a single, monolithic actor but a fragmented *field of power* composed of multiple, sometimes competing parts. In practice, the ‘image’ of the state as a unified sovereign coexists with the dispersed and sometimes contradictory ‘practices’ of its constituent institutions. These practices are often permeated, resisted, or redirected by local elites, interest groups, kinship networks, or informal norms, which means that state strategies are frequently contested and adapted in their implementation.

The Chinese term *guojia* is often ambiguous, as it can conflate the political entity with cultural or geographical notions (Bol, 2023). By deliberately choosing the English term ‘state’, we sharpen our analysis to focus specifically on the sovereign political actor. This distinction is not trivial. As political theory makes clear, the state must be distinguished from the nation, which refers to a cultural or ethnic community, and from the government, the administrative apparatus that manages the state at a given time (Flint & Taylor, 2007).

Crucially, the state represents the permanent sovereign entity – the locus of legitimacy and continuity – whereas the government represents the transient administration. While governments change (e.g., the transition between presidential administrations in the US, or from the Qing dynasty to the Republic in China), the state’s infrastructure for translation – its bureaus, laws, and standard terminology – often endures across these political cycles. The ‘nation-state’, which emerged in nineteenth-century Europe (Sischy, 2007), tied legitimacy to the alignment of a state apparatus with an ethnic nation. To define the STP in relation to ‘nation’ would be to limit it anachronistically, making it incapable of accounting for the long history of state-led translation in pre-modern, multi-ethnic empires such as the Tang or Qing, or of analysing contemporary non-nation states. By contrast, the ‘state’ is a universally applicable category: a political structure that exercises sovereignty, traceable from ancient city-states to modern empires and republics (Strayer, 2005).

Sovereignty is the defining feature of the state: ultimate and independent authority. Political science further equips the STP by modelling the state as a rational, purposive actor capable of formulating and pursuing goals. Within this discussion, we distinguish autonomy from capacity. *Autonomy* refers to the locus of legal-administrative control – which sets agendas, defines standards, and grants final approval – through which translation becomes a state act. *Capacity* refers to the resources and competence that make this authority

operative: budgets, institutions, personnel, and technologies (Skocpol, 1985). The two often move together, but they should not be collapsed. A state may possess high autonomy – for instance, full approval authority over translation – while still suffering from low capacity because of shortages of trained staff or tools.

Migdal's perspective adds a crucial dialectical point: state autonomy and capacity are not permanent possessions but are dynamically generated through the state's ongoing interaction with society. We stress here that *language capacity*, which includes the ability to manage multilingualism through translation, is a crucial yet often overlooked component of overall state capacity. Without this capacity, a state's ability to govern internally and act externally – and thus its very autonomy and statehood – may be compromised. The STP framework, therefore, begins with the premise that the state is not a passive context but an active, sovereign agent whose actions, including translation, are driven by a strategic calculus of interest and power. At the same time, we must recognise that the formulation and implementation of any STP, as a form of 'state act', will itself be embedded in what Migdal calls a 'field of power.' Shaped by internal tensions and social forces, its final outcomes may diverge from the strategic intentions of central decision-makers.

2.1.2 Translation

The second component, 'translation', is understood within the STP not merely as an act of interlingual transfer but as a form of social and productive practice. This view aligns with the sociological turn in translation studies, which conceives of translation as a socially situated, goal-oriented activity rather than a purely textual operation. Ren (2007: 27) defined translation as 'a cross-cultural cognitive activity and productive practice mediated by different linguistic symbol systems to meet human communicative needs.' The STP extends this definition to the level of the state, yielding the concept of *state translation practice*.

This perspective is enriched by sociological theory, particularly Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of field, habitus, and capital (Bourdieu, 1993). When the state orchestrates translation, the practice is embedded in the political field of power. In that field, the state mobilises both its symbolic and coercive capital to direct the translational process towards its own ends. Translation in this context becomes a site for the production and dissemination of official discourse, the construction of national narratives, and the exercise of ideological control.

2.1.3 Programme

The third component, ‘programme’, implies a systematic, coherent, and goal-oriented undertaking that extends across time. This term differentiates the large-scale, strategic translation activities of the state from isolated, ad hoc, or purely commercial translation tasks. A ‘programme’ presupposes deliberate planning, resource allocation, institutional organisation, and a connection to wider strategic objectives.

Of course, not every state translation project is part of an explicitly articulated, centrally managed master plan. Nevertheless, we argue that the consistent, recurring, and strategically aligned nature of these activities permits us to analyse them as constituting a coherent programme. Whether we consider the centuries-long tradition of ‘government translation’ in China (Mossop, 2014) or a modern state’s multi-decade effort to translate its political and literary classics, the concept of ‘programme’ captures their sustained, systematic, and intentional nature.

2.1.4 State Act

When these three concepts – state, translation, and programme – converge, translation is elevated to the level of a state act. This step is crucial to the STP framework’s logic. In public law, an activity qualifies as a state act when it meets three conditions (Chen, 2015). First, it must be initiated by a state subject, that is, an actor with the authority to act formally in the state’s name. We acknowledge, with Migdal, that such ‘state subjects’ may not be internally homogeneous: different ministries or levels of the bureaucracy may hold their own interests and agendas, leading to divergent interpretations or preferences in implementation. Second, the activity must take place under conditions that warrant state intervention, such as matters of diplomacy, national security, constitutional law, or other areas of high political salience. Third, it must bear the distinctive marks of state authority: serving a clear state interest, producing legal or political effects, and being guided by sovereign intentionality rather than private or commercial motives.

We emphasise that ‘state interest’ and ‘sovereign intentionality’ are seldom singular or unambiguous. In practice, they are forged through struggle, negotiation, and compromise among the diverse components of the state itself as well as with external social forces. Analyses employing the STP must therefore remain alert to the possibility that behind the unified *image* of state translation lie multiple, and even contradictory, *practices*.

When a translation activity meets these criteria, it ceases to be a simple service and becomes a performance of state power. The STP framework is