

Translation Matters

Problems of Inference in the 2020 State Department Policy Planning Report “The Elements of the China Challenge”

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Abstract

As the United States gears up for “great power competition” with the People’s Republic of China (PRC), accurate translation of Chinese sources is increasingly important. Different translations can lead to different inferences about intentions, which in turn can affect policy analysis. As an example, this article looks at the November 2020 study on China by the Department of State’s Policy Planning Office, which made key inferences about China’s long-term intentions based, in part, on a problematic translation and decontextualization of key phrases in a speech by China’s leader, Xi Jinping. This same translation has also been invoked by influential analysts and pundits to argue that there is no need to debate China’s long-term intentions anymore. This article suggests that a more accurate translation of these phrases does not support any particular inference about long-term goals and thus does not support the claim that debate over China’s intentions should end.

Introduction

Inferring another state’s strategic intentions is rarely easy, even when a lot of information is available.^[1] It is especially hard when analysts are examining an opaque political system. Problems include determining the authoritativeness of multiple sources of information, resolving contradictions among them, assessing the degree to which there are internal debates, and testing alternative theories about where preferences come from (i.e., should we privilege the external material or social structures in which actors operate or privilege the agency—and thus idiosyncrasies—of particular individuals?). On top of all this, the evidence for interpreting intentions often comes in a foreign language, and translation will affect its meaning—which, in the end, is most consequential for policy. Despite progress in machine learning, accurate translation remains a daunting task. Similar terms can have different meanings depending on their context and the ways individuals invoke them. Sarcasm and humor are both notoriously difficult to detect. And, in the case of discussions about public policy, terminology may be used in a ritualistic fashion as political top cover to protect the advocates of novel or controversial ideas.

As the “great power competition” and associated security-dilemma dynamics intensify in U.S.-China relations, the translation of key statements, concepts, and ideas will be increasingly important in discerning intentions. This puts a greater premium on the careful contextualization of language, including setting up systematic mechanisms for checking the translations of key concepts. Without such care and contextualization, certain problematic translations may lead to premature inferences. The purpose of this article is to make the case for more routinized consultation among experts about translation. I use a recent case as an example of how one translation of a Chinese phrase has had a critical effect on analytical conclusions. Specifically, I look at the November 2020 Department of State Policy Planning Staff document on the China challenge.^[2] It uses a particular translation of some terms in a 2013 speech by Xi Jinping—a portion of which was reproduced in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) publication *Qiushi* in 2019—to buttress certain conclusions about the long-term intentions of the PRC.^[3] The report quotes Xi as saying (in translation), “Most importantly, we must concentrate our efforts on bettering our own affairs, continually broadening our comprehensive national power, improving the lives of our people, building a socialism that is superior to capitalism, and laying the foundation for a future where we will win the initiative and have the dominant position.” Particularly relevant is the phrase rendered as “*a future where we will win the initiative and have the dominant position.*” The State Department links this quote to a conclusion that the PRC intends to seek global hegemony, “the dominant position,” whereby it can restructure “world order to conform to the CCP’s distinctive way of empire.”^[4]

In addition to the State Department report, this translation of Xi’s words has had considerable influence in the discourse about China inside Washington and elsewhere. It has been cited by some analysts and pundits to declare that the debate over the PRC’s long-term intentions is settled. The implication is, to mix metaphors, that this phrase is not just a smoking gun but the slam-dunk evidence that removes doubt about these goals. As one example, under a headline urging the end to debate over China’s intentions, Johns Hopkins University professor Hal Brands concludes that such discussions are “growing stale” and, to make his point, cites the translation used in the State Department report that China’s goal is “a future where we will win the initiative and have the dominant position.”^[5] Former director of the American Institute in Taiwan William Stanton, drawing on an essay by a British journalist, also invokes the phrase “a future where we will win the initiative and have the dominant position” to describe China’s intention to impose its version of socialism around the globe.^[6]

I argue here that this is not an accurate translation of the original Chinese and that a more linguistically precise and contextualized translation is most likely not a reference to China seeking a “dominant position” in global affairs. To this end, the first section of this paper addresses problems in the grammar and usage of the State Department translation. The second section argues that the context of the key phrase does not refer to spreading socialism around the globe but to showing its superiority within China. The third section explores why the CCP reproduced Xi’s 2013 speech; contextualizing the document itself suggests that it is not likely a statement of strategic intentions. In the conclusion, I posit that this problematic translation is not a minor point in a larger intellectual

argument—it actually plays an important role in constituting the report’s claims about China’s imperial ambitions.

Problems in Translation: Grammar and Usage

The first reason the State Department report does not provide an accurate translation of the crucial passage by Xi Jinping has to do with grammar and usage. The original Chinese phrase translated as “a future where we will win the initiative and have the dominant position” appears in a speech Xi Jinping gave in 2013 a part of which was later reproduced in part in 2019. The phrase in Chinese is 赢得主动、赢得优势、赢得未来. A literal translation is “win the initiative, win the advantage, win the future” (for convenience I will refer to these as the “three wins”). Grammatically, this is a list, not a clear causal sequence. Each “win” is separated by a uniquely Chinese punctuation mark, the enumeration comma (literally a “pause mark” 顿号, also called a “sequence mark”) that usually “serves to count off items in a list or sequence.”^[7] In English, these might be separated by “and”—for example, “win the initiative and win the advantage and win the future.” The State Department translation implies there is a causal hierarchy of building blocks wherein initiative leads to a future of dominance. But grammatically, these are not necessarily hierarchical, nor are they ordered in the way the State Department translation puts them.^[8] In the original Chinese, the end of this sequence is winning the “future,” not a “dominant position.” Technically, using the State Department sentence structure, the phrase should read something like, “laying the foundation where we win the initiative, win the dominant position, and win the future.”

But even if the State Department report had used this more accurate sequencing, the translation took a great deal of literary license in rendering “winning [the] advantage” (赢得优势) as “dominant position” in terms of global status. To be sure, one translation of 优势 is “dominant position”—though it should probably have the characters for “position” (地位) after the reference to “dominant” (优势). One finds this in standard Chinese-English dictionaries. But, like many Chinese terms, it has other meanings in different contexts, such as “preponderance”, “superiority”, a situation that is more favorable to you than to someone else (比对方有利的形势)^[9], an “excellent situation” (优越的形势)^[10] and “advantage” (e.g., 竞争优势 “competitive advantage”).

Indeed, authoritative English-language Chinese publications tend to translate the “three wins” using “advantage,” not “dominant position.” Back in 2013, when reporting on the goal of achieving a moderately prosperous society by 2020, the English-language *China Daily* translated the phrase as “gain initiative and advantages to win the future.”^[11] It seems this became the accepted translation. For example, this is how the phrase appeared in the official English version of the 18th Party Congress Report^[12]—as well as in the English version of senior intelligence analyst Yuan Peng’s summary of the report.^[13] It is also the translation used in the English version of comments by Zheng Bijian, former deputy head of the Central Party School of the CCP, in reference to achieving a moderately prosperous society by 2020.^[14]

Other Chinese sources present the “three wins” as more of a list, closer to a literal translation. For example, the official translation of the “three wins” in volume 2 of *The Governance of China*, a collection of Xi Jinping’s statements, renders a slightly differently ordered list of the “three wins” as “to gain competitiveness, win the initiative, seize the future.”^[15] It is worth noting that this ordering in both the Chinese and English versions suggests that it doesn’t matter so much which of the “three wins” goes first because they are a list, and they are not conceptually connected the way the State Department translation implies. Indeed, a survey of newspaper articles since 2000 in the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database shows that about 25 percent of them use “win the advantage, win the initiative, win the future” (赢得优势、赢得主动、赢得未来), while the rest use “win the initiative, win the advantage, win the future (赢得主动、赢得优势、赢得未来). It does not appear to matter much. Xi mixes the order up, too.”^[16]

In short, the State Department translation is not accurate or grammatically correct, nor is it consistent with official English translations as used in China.^[17]

“Three Wins” in Context

In Chinese language publications, the “three wins” show up in many different contexts, most of which have little to do with China’s strategic intentions. A partial list of these contexts dating back to 2010 (with representative examples) includes discussions about:

1. cheering on the development of Hunan province through the application of high technology such that Hunan can “win the initiative, win the advantage, win the future”^[18]
2. achieving a moderately prosperous standard of living by 2020 through “winning the initiative, winning the advantage, and winning the future”^[19]
3. the importance of education, self-improvement, and developing skills in the training of Party cadres, whereby this training will enable these individuals to (vaguely) “win the initiative, win the advantage, and win the future”^[20]
4. enhancing CCP discipline through Party building and Party unity so that members can “win the initiative, win the advantage, and win the future”^[21]
5. taking advantage of the period of strategic opportunity (a phrase in 2010 referred to maintaining reasonably stable relations with the United States so China can achieve rejuvenation) to “win the initiative, win the advantage, and win the future”^[22]
6. cheerleading the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation^[23]
7. suggesting that taking advantage of opportunities and promoting development has been critical for states in general to “win the initiative, win the advantage, win the future”^[24]
8. relying on Party leadership to overcome (unstated) problems, thereby “winning the initiative, winning the advantage, winning the future”^[25]
9. using the Belt and Road Initiative and the idea of a community of common destiny to achieve the long-term ideals of communism^[26]

10. developing science and technology^[27]
11. the importance of education so students can eventually “win the initiative, win the advantage, win the future” in their own lives^[28]
12. the importance of being “people-centered” in the development of Hohhot, the capital city of Inner Mongolia, so it can “win the initiative, win the advantage, win the future”^[29]
13. summarizing Xi’s views on how increasing a state’s power and preserving its sovereignty, security, and interests allows it to “win the initiative, win the advantage, and win the future” (a realpolitik, not Marxist-Leninist, take on the “three wins”)^[30]

Perhaps, however, there is a clear and specific context for the “three wins” as directed toward Party officials? If so, its usage should be consistent across training and guidance documents for senior Party members. Not long after the State Department report appeared, I searched for the “three wins” phrase on the Central Party School’s webpage, with the assumption that content posted there is largely for the purpose of training senior CCP leaders. There were 24 hits, most of which were reproductions of articles from Party media outlets such as the *People’s Daily*. The topics of the articles were wide-ranging, just as they are in society writ large. The articles that used the phrase referenced a variety of topics, including building a moderately prosperous society, curing the three “illnesses” in lazy young cadres, fighting the Covid-19 pandemic, improving manufacturing, relying on the Party to overcome (vaguely defined) challenges and take advantage of opportunities, and whether or not China can rejuvenate. In most cases, the “three wins” were used as an exhortation—namely, to suggest that if these problems are overcome, then we “win the initiative, win the advantage, win the future” in a particular field. Translating the phrase to mean creating a future where China takes the initiative and wins the dominant position globally does not fit most of these contexts.

Of these 24 hits on the Central Party School’s public site, one was to the *Qiushi* article from which the original State Department translation comes. One notable element of the *Qiushi* article is its focus on “building a socialism that is superior to capitalism” (建设对资本主义具有优越性的社会主义) (hereafter “superior socialism”). The link between superior socialism on the one hand and China achieving “the dominant position” on the other is core to the State Department translation of the “three wins.” Put differently, the State Department report implies that this connection essentially constitutes an authoritative formulation (提法) for talking about global dominance. It is therefore important to linger a bit on what “superior socialism” means in Xi’s 2013 speech as reproduced in *Qiushi*.

There are at least four reasons to conclude that building a “superior socialism” and the “three wins” in Xi’s 2013 speech are not a politically coded reference to global dominance. For one, the reference to building a “superior socialism” originally comes from comments made by Deng Xiaoping in 1987 about improving living standards in China. According to Deng, building a “socialism that is superior to capitalism” first and foremost requires eliminating poverty in China.^[31] So, its first use had nothing to do with building superior socialism around the world. Moreover, according to the CNKI database, the vast majority of newspaper and journal articles that refer to building superior socialism also refer

to Deng's quote about first eliminating poverty. This includes articles published as late as 2020.^[32]

Second, in Xi's 2013 speech, when the "three wins" are used in conjunction with the "superior socialism," the context is the superiority of socialism *within* China, not globally. The superiority of socialism and the "three wins" leads from the exhortation to "handle our own affairs well" (办好自己事情)—that is, to build socialism in China.

Third, beyond the *Qiushi* document, it is very rare to find a connection between the phrase "superior socialism" and the "three wins" in China's open sources. A recent search of the CNKI database returned only a few hits across all Chinese newspaper articles where "superior socialism" (优越性的社会主义) appears in the same paragraph as the "three wins." The same pattern appears for journal articles. Only a tiny percentage of hits place "superior socialism" and the "three wins" in the same paragraph or sentence. Specifically, 36 journal articles used these phrases in the same paragraph or sentence, out of over 2000 articles that mentioned superior socialism and 692 articles that mentioned the "three wins." All co-appearances have occurred since Xi came to power. Almost all were quoting Xi's 2013 speech. Thus, if linking "superior socialism" and the "three wins" is political code for a long-term CCP grand strategic goal, it is apparently used very infrequently—and not by previous leaders. In short, "superior socialism" is rarely linked to the "three wins"; the "three wins" are used in many different contexts that do not refer to "superior socialism." This is not what one might expect if this were a political code about intertwined global strategic goals. And, as noted, in Xi's 2013 speech "superior socialism" is a reference to building socialism in China, not around the globe.

Finally, it is not surprising that professed Marxist-Leninists would stress that socialism will eventually demonstrate its superiority to capitalism. They can hardly say the opposite, or even nothing at all, if they are to display their ideological purity. As such, the reference to "superior socialism" in Xi's 2013 speech is likely more of a domestically targeted political signal than a reference to external strategy.

The Significance of the Reproduction of Xi's Speech: Unclear

Perhaps the answer to what the "three wins" means lies in the reason for reproducing Xi's 2013 speech in *Qiushi* in 2019? Was it published to send a specific signal to the CCP about gearing up to compete for global domination? This is the claim implied in the State Department report's translation of the "three wins." The problem with this hypothesis—even if one accepts the State Department translation—is that this is not the first time portions of this speech were quoted in a major Party outlet.

For example, a large portion of the relevant paragraph used in the State Department report was published in a *People's Daily* article in November 2015. The article refers to the inevitable victory of socialism, but this assertion is made in the broader context of confidence in China following its own

path of development and making contributions to humanity's progress. This is hardly remarkable and is consistent with the rhetorical boosterism that typifies the common usage of the "three wins" in Party media. In the *People's Daily* article, the excerpts from Xi's 2013 speech are not part of a case for pursuing global domination.^[33]

Other excerpts from the speech were reproduced in the *PLA Daily* in February 2018, about a year before *Qiushi* published its chunk of the text. The *PLA Daily* article does not identify the original speech but does include the same references to the need for long-term cooperation and competition between socialism and capitalism, the importance of China focusing on handling its own affairs well, and building a socialism that is superior to capitalism. Although it indicates that these efforts should lay a solid foundation for "winning the initiative, winning the advantage, and winning the future," the article is clearly about the ways China can contribute to the further realization of a "community of common destiny."^[34] Its language and content is not about seeking a "dominant position."^[35]

Possibly the earliest article to quote the "superior socialism" and "three wins" section of Xi's speech appeared in 2013. It was written by Yan Shuhan, a Central Party School cadre and member of a Marxist theory research group. Yan argues that China will remain situated in the primary stage of socialism for a long time, and its slow progress will be compared against that of developed capitalist countries. In the face of this, Yan quotes Xi's "superior socialism" and "three wins" paragraph as part of an exhortation to be confident in the superiority of China's socialist road. The article basically notes the "three wins" are a "state of mind" (精神状态) that will ensure ideological unity. In short, in this early Central Party School gloss on Xi's speech, the "three wins" are (as they are in so many sources) a rhetorical flourish urging CCP cadres to keep the faith. They are not a reference to achieving a "dominant position" globally.^[36]

The *Qiushi* piece came out in early 2019. According to the CNKI database, it was then reproduced in full in five publications shortly after that. Prior to November 2020 (when the State Department document was released), several more articles cited the speech. The contexts of these articles varied. One focused on the importance of Party cadres improving their level of knowledge and capabilities so they can think more strategically about a range of questions, and only then could they "win the initiative, win the advantage, win the future." Basically, the "three wins" was again a vague rhetorical flourish.^[37] Other articles citing the *Qiushi* piece focused on improving the ideological quality of senior Party officials, including one by a Central Party School analyst about how leading officials need to study Marxism more deeply. The author highlighted the contradictions and dilemmas that capitalism created for building a "socialism with Chinese characteristics." The crux of this process, the article noted, is not to waver on the basic principles of scientific socialism—in other words, to remain ideologically steadfast. The article quoted the "three wins" paragraph as part of a discussion of the ideological challenges that come from internal and external market forces. It is in the context of these threats that Xi urged the Party to build a superior socialism in China.^[38] In short, the occasions on which the *Qiushi* article was subsequently cited do not indicate that Xi's speech was reproduced to

signal or reveal the grand strategic goals of the PRC.

A more careful review of the version of Xi's 2013 speech that *Qiushi* published illuminates another central point. The "three wins" phrase appears in a paragraph about upholding the ideals of communism, reflecting a concern—as other Party materials indicate—that Party members are insufficiently committed to the CCP's ideology. This is a theme Xi has repeatedly expressed since coming to power. The victory of socialism is, of course, one of the core elements in Marxist-Leninist ideology. But, arguably, Xi's repeated endorsement of Chinese socialism is not a statement of grand strategic intent, as much as its part of his ongoing effort to avoid the fate of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and prevent the collapse of the CCP regime. The concluding passage of the *Qiushi* reproduction of Xi's 2013 speech underscores that its purpose is to focus on the "question of the road" (道路问题)—emphasizing that China's rejuvenation cannot follow the Western capitalist "road" and that building socialism in China is the superior "road". Thus, the whole thrust of the "three wins" passage in this speech is about the superiority of socialism in China and the need for ideological self-strengthening.

Even more telling was Xinhua's packaging of the *Qiushi* piece. Xinhua often publishes articles to guide how audiences should read major leadership statements. Its commentary on the *Qiushi* version of Xi's speech stressed that the core ideas were the "question of the road" and the need to uphold communist ideals. Xinhua's exegesis did not have anything to say about socialism defeating capitalism, putting China in a "dominant position," or "winning advantage." There was no reference to the "three wins" at all in the Xinhua summary.^[39]

Perhaps the State Department translation makes more sense if the "three wins" phrase is more specifically linked in Xi's diplomatic or foreign-policy thinking? If the "three wins" were reproduced to reveal grand strategic goals, one might expect them to be included in speeches about the international situation, the nature of the epoch, or China's security. But this does not appear to be the case either. As noted above, the phrase from his 2013 speech has been used for a range of purposes. It has not been exclusively used to explicate some long-term goal of global domination or achieving a "dominant position." Indeed, it appears not to be linked to Xi's foreign-policy thinking at all. I recently searched for articles in CNKI that explicate "Xi Jinping's diplomatic thought" (e.g., that use 习近平外交思想 in the abstract, title, or keywords). I found 381 articles, only one of which includes the "three wins" phrase.^[40] If one broadens the search to references to Xi Jinping's diplomatic thought in the full text (not necessarily the main topic of the article), there were 1312 results, only three of which used the "three win" phrase. These data do not seem consistent with the notion that the phrase is a central concept in Xi's thinking about foreign policy or grand strategy.

Finally, it is worth noting that the "three wins" do not show up frequently in Xi's other speeches or

writings. If the “three wins” were central to understanding strategic intentions, it is odd that the phrase does not appear in a three-volume collection of internal-circulation speeches to the Chinese military from 2012–2016^[41] and that it only appears twice in a two-volume, 2700-page collection of Xi’s public speeches from 2012–2020.^[42] He did use the “three wins” in a speech in 2017, but this was to urge Party leaders to use Marxist theory in their work:

Only by taking Marxism as one’s special ability, thinking about problems with a broader vision and a longer-term perspective, constantly improving the ability to use Marxism to analyze and solve practical problems, and constantly improving the ability to use scientific theory to guide us to respond to major challenges, resist major risks, overcome major obstacles, and solve major contradictions can we win the advantage, win the initiative, and win the future.^[43]

Once again, his use of the “three wins” was a rhetorical flourish to urge officials to be better Marxists. The State Department translation of the “three wins” would make little sense in this context.^[44]

Additional analysis of the context and translation of the “three wins” phrase might yield different insights or emphases. It is possible there are internal circulation materials that provide an exegesis closer to the State Department translation—but, as far as I am aware, none has surfaced. That, of course, is the point. As this study of the grammar, common usage, and context for the “three wins” suggests, it is at best premature to claim that this phrase is a definitive statement of China’s grand strategic goals. It should not be the basis for cutting off important research into China’s long-term international intentions.

Conclusion

Translation is important—and it is hard. All of us who work with Chinese sources get things wrong or miss nuances. In this instance, however, the translation used in the State Department Policy Planning Staff report (and in other reports by the Department of Defense) is a probably not an accurate rendition, misses traditions of usage, and has been shaped to make certain claims about the CCP’s strategic intentions that probably can’t be sustained by the “three wins” phrase.

Of course, one might ask, why worry about this particular problematic translation? It may be that there is other incontrovertible evidence for the claim that the CCP’s long-term strategic intentions are clear and indisputable. Indeed, the State Department report provides additional examples that it believes also make its case for the CCP having global imperial goals. Much of the evidence cited comes from public CCP texts and Xi’s speeches. In particular, the “dominant position” translation is a prominent part of this overall argument. The report puts a great deal of stock in the claim that China is striving to spread a “superior socialism” around the globe and to put itself in the globally

“dominant position,” from which it will implement its “distinctive way of empire.”^[45] The translated term “dominant position” appears within the document’s first major quote at the beginning of the report, framing the findings of the entire report. Moreover, a discussion of the phrase “dominant position” appears in a section on the intellectual origins of China’s behavior, in which Xi’s speech is the primary evidence used to claim that China is trying to impose socialism on the rest of the globe and replace the United States as the global hegemon.^[46] One assumes, therefore, that the authors of the report believe Xi’s speech is important evidence of China’s intentions, otherwise why cite it so prominently? Indeed, in principle, a high-profile translation such as this can become a lens through which other data is interpreted. Behavior that could also be analyzed as less coordinated, occasionally reactive, driven by competing domestic interests, or less radical is instead filtered through this particular reading of Xi Jinping’s language.^[47] As I suggest here, a more accurate translation of Xi’s speech does not provide textual support for the case that the State Department report tried to make in the rest of the document.

A more contextualized reading of this passage in Xi’s speech could easily be that China will demonstrate socialism’s superiority at home by handling its “own affairs” well (an inference closer to that in the Department of Defense’s 2020 report on Chinese military power). In short, the “three wins” is not likely to be a key to the code. It is a relatively common phrase used in a wide range of contexts, from education to sports to ideological training to economic development, often as a rhetorical fist pump.

Given the stakes in the U.S.-China rivalry, translation is going to be more important and consequential than ever. How might we, as analysts, reduce the error rate in our translations? Here are three suggestions. Analysts should consider setting up a review process whereby potentially analytically significant and policy-relevant translations are subject to double-blind peer review—something akin to an academic product. This way, analysts with and without area knowledge will be better able to assess the significance of CCP phrases and texts.^[48] Another possibility is to set up a wiki process where a translation can be posted and a pool of language experts provide input. Political scientists have been successful in using this method to code polities according to various political features. Finally, sometimes translations can be tentative even after rigorous analysis. So perhaps we need to develop a norm where, as authors, we provide a note or appendix in our articles with alternative translations, with an assessment of the validity of particular key terms, and with an explanation as to why we are using a particular translation rather than another.^[49]

^[1] Keren Yarhi-Milo, *Knowing the Adversary: Leaders, Intelligence, and Assessment of Intentions in International Relations* (Princeton University Press, 2014).

^[2] U.S. Department of State, Policy Planning Staff, *The Elements of the China Challenge* (Washington

DC: Department of State, November 2020),

<https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/20-02832-Elements-of-China-Challenge-508.pdf>.

^[3] The translation used in the report originally came from Tanner Greer, “Xi Jinping in Translation: China’s Guiding Ideology,” *Palladium*, May 31, 2019, <https://palladiummag.com/2019/05/31/xi-jinping-in-translation-chinas-guiding-ideology/>.

^[4] U.S. Department of State, *The Elements of the China Challenge*, 7. The 2020 and 2021 Department of Defense (DOD) reports on Chinese military and security developments also use this translation, but DOD is more restrained in making inferences from the quote, suggesting it is mainly referring to the goal of “rejuvenation” by mid-century. See Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China, 2020: Annual Report to Congress* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2020), <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Sep/01/2002488689/-1/-1/2020-DOD-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT-FINAL.PDF>: 7, and Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China, 2021: Annual Report to Congress* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2021), <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Nov/03/2002885874/-1/-1/0/2021-CMPR-FINAL.PDF>: 6.

^[5] Hal Brands, “What Does China Really Want? To Dominate the World,” American Enterprise Institute, May 20, 2020, <https://www.aei.org/op-eds/what-does-china-really-want-to-dominate-the-world/>. National Intelligence University professor Daniel Tobin also uses this quote in congressional testimony under a title that suggests the debate over intentions should be over. See Daniel Tobin, “How Xi Jinping’s ‘New Era’ Should Have Ended U.S. Debate on Beijing’s Ambitions,” testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, March 13, 2020, <https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/testimonies/SFR%20for%20USCC%20TobinD%2020200313.pdf>.

^[6] William A. Stanton, “US Relations with PRC and Taiwan in a Time of ‘Plague:’ What Will it Take for the US to Confront the PRC?” Taiwan News, April 1, 2020, <https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/3908597>. Stanton cites Charles Parton, “China Has a Strategy and Britain Doesn’t,” *Standpoint*, March 25, 2020, <https://standpointmag.co.uk/china-has-a-strategy-and-britain-doesnt/>. For other examples, see Neil O’Brien, “Beijing’s Belligerence Should be a Wake-up Call,” Conservative Home, May 18, 2020, <https://www.conservativehome.com/thecolumnists/2020/05/neil-obrien-why-conservative-mps-have-set-up-the-china-research-group.html>; Michael Clarke, “Is China Heading Towards Revolutionary Revisionism?” Australian Institute of International Affairs, *Australia Outlook*, September 4, 2020, <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/is-china-heading-towards-revolutionary-revisionism/>; and Sophia Besch, Ian Bond, and Leonard Schuette, “Europe, the US and China: A Love-hate

Triangle?” Center for European Reform, *Policy Brief*, September 21, 2020, <https://www.cer.org.uk/publications/archive/policy-brief/2020/europe-us-and-china-love-hate-triangle>.

^[7] Valerie Pellatt and Eric T. Liu, *Thinking Chinese Translation: A Course in Translation Method: Chinese to English* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2010), cited in Caiwen Wang, “Decoding and Encoding the Discourse Meaning of Punctuation: A Perspective from English-to-Chinese Translation,” *Babel* 64, no. 2 (August 2018): 230.

^[8] “It indicates a shorter pause compared to the comma (,) and it must be used instead of the regular comma when separating words constituting a list.” Chu Hong Heng and Toh Ling Ling, “Interactive Character Learning Model (ICLM)—Chinese Character Learning Using WhatsApp for Malay L3 Learners,” *US-China Education Review* 4, no. 11 (November 2014): 782.

^[9] <https://www.zdic.net/hans/%E4%BC%98%E5%8A%BF>。

^[10] http://www.dacihai.com.cn/search_index.html?_st=1&keyWord=%E4%BC%98%E5%8A%BF

^[11] 李雁 [Li Yan] “我国英文媒体报道中政治常用语及翻译策略研究 ——以《中国日报》为例” [“Study on Common Political Terms and Translation Strategies in China’s English Media Reports —the *China Daily* as an Example”] 出版广角 [View on Publishing]. No. 1, 2016): 51.

^[12] Xinhua, “Full Text of Hu Jintao’s Report at 18th Party Congress,” People’s Daily Online, November 19, 2012, <http://en.people.cn/102774/8024781.html>. See also 吴静 [Wu Jing] “基于“政治等效”的中国政治新词翻译策略解析” [Analysis of supplement and omission of Chinese political neologisms translation], 兰州文理学院学报(社会科学版) [Journal of the Lanzhou University of Arts and Science] 31, no. 1 (2014): 97.

^[13] Yuan Peng, “China’s Grand Strategy Seen from the Report to the CPC 18th National Congress,” *Contemporary International Relations* 23, no. 4 (2013): 6.

^[14] Zheng Bijian, “China’s Peaceful Development Road in the Second Decade of the 21st Century,” *China International Studies* 3 (2013): 21.

^[15] Xi Jinping, *The Governance of China* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2017), 2:70.

^[16] Indeed, in an online collection of over ten thousand of Xi’s statements and comments, seven use “win the initiative, win the advantage, win the future” and ten use “win the advantage, win the

initiative, win the future” 习近平系列重要讲话数据库 [Database of a series of Xi Jinping’s Important Speeches] <http://jhsjk.people.cn/>. This suggests that the phrase is not used as a set formula about China’s grand strategic goals.

^[17] One could argue that English translations in official political media are designed to influence foreign opinion and may not reflect how the term is used in the original Chinese. As I show in the next section, in many of the contexts in which the “three wins” is used, the State Department translation would not make any sense. In addition, one can find more literal English translations of the “three wins” in spheres or domains that have nothing directly to do with the strategic aims and intent of the regime. For example, translation of comments by Wang Tiankai, chair of China’s textile federation, on brand development in China’s textile industry cites the 18th CCP Congress’s use of the “three wins” to describe the achievement of a moderately prosperous society, noting that the textile industry can help achieve this goal. See “Wang Tiankai: President of China Textile Industry Federation: Brand Development,” Haiyan Golden Gate Socks Industry Co., August 11, 2017, <https://www.goldengatesocks.cn/news/shownews.php?lang=en&id=17>. To be sure, the translators may be using an official English translation of the 18th CCP Congress language, but this may also be a direct translation of the Chinese made by the Haiyan Golden Gate Socks Industry Company. In any event, the State Department translation of the “three wins” would not really make sense in Wang’s speech about selling more textiles to help achieve a moderately well-off society by 2020.

^[18] This use of the ‘three wins’ by a Hunan party official preceded Xi’s coming to power. “周强同志在中共湖南省第十次代表大会上的报告” [Report by Comrade Zhou Qiang at Hunan Province’s 10th Peoples Congress] 湖南日报 [Hunan Daily] (November 28, 2011)

^[19] Hu Jintao, “胡锦涛在中国共产党第十八次全国代表大会上的报告” [Hu Jintao’s report at the 18th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party], People’s Daily Online, November 8, 2012, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n/2012/1118/c64094-19612151-3.html>.

^[20] 姚茜 [Yao Qian], “领导干部学习观初探” [A preliminary exploration of the learning concept of leading cadres] 黑龙江档案 [Heilongjiang Archives] no. 3 2020; 习近平 [Xi Jinping], “在中央党校建校80周年庆祝大会暨2013年春季学期开学典礼上的讲话” [Speech at the celebration meeting of the 80th anniversary of the founding of the Central Party School and the opening ceremony of the spring 2013 semester], Chinese Central Party School, March 1, 2013, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n/2013/0303/c64094-20656845.html>. A 2020 article in the *PLA Daily* argued that if party members used self-study and self-improvement to resolve problems while social distancing during Covid-19, they could “win the initiative, win advantage, and win the future.” 戴学志 [Dai Xuezhi], “把隔离时间利用好” [Make good use of the time in isolation], 解放军报 [PLA Daily] March 17, 2020.

^[21] 颜晓峰 [Yan Xiaofeng], “在百年未有之大变局中打好战略主动仗” [During the period of ‘once in a hundred years’ change, fight the war of strategic initiative well] 红旗文稿 [Red Flag Manuscripts] No. 4 (2019).

^[22] 刘德喜 [Liu Dexi], “‘战略机遇期’，不容错失的关键点” [‘Period of strategic opportunity,’ the key point that cannot be missed] 刊授党校 [Publication Party School] No. 12 (2010).

^[23] 国纪平 [Guo Jiping], “世界潮流浩浩荡荡不可阻挡——评美国一些人战略迷误的危险” [The world current is mighty and unstoppable — comments on the dangers of the strategic errors of some Americans] 人民日报 [People’s Daily] June 14, 2019; Xi Jinping, *The Governance of China*, 2:70; 习近平 [Xi Jinping] “在纪念马克思诞辰200周年大会上的讲话” [Speech at meeting in commemoration of the 200th anniversary of the birth of Marx], in 习近平总书记系列讲话(公开发表讲话) [Secretary General Xi Jinping’s series of speeches (public speeches)] (n.p.; n.d.), 355.

^[24] “Regardless whether viewed from the history of China’s development or from the history of development of other countries in the world, whether or not they are able to grasp opportunities and advance development is the crux of ‘winning the initiative, winning the advantage, and winning the future.’” 杨士龙 [Yang Shilong] “坚持韬光养晦 积极有所作为” [Uphold ‘sheathing brightness and cultivating obscurity,’ ‘actively make some accomplishments’] 瞭望 [Outlook] No. 45 (2010), text also available at <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2010-11-06/152421425821.shtml>. For a similar generalization, see 本报评论员 [People’s Daily Commentator] 正确认识我国发展的重要战略机遇期 — 三论贯彻落实中央经济工作会议精神 [Correctly recognize the period of strategic opportunity for China’s development — on implementing the spirit of the central economic work meeting] 人民日报 [People’s Daily] December 25, 2018, 1.

^[25] Xi Jinping, *The Governance of China*, 2:70; Xi Jinping, “Speech at meeting in commemoration of the 200th anniversary of the birth of Marx,” 355.

^[26] 李永贤 [Li Yongxian] “‘共产党宣言’与共产党人的历史使命” [The Communist Manifesto and the historical mission of the Communist Party members] in 工作指导 [Work Guidance] No. 3 (2020): 192.

^[27] One article uses the “three wins” in the context of Xi’s ideas to urge China not to lag behind in the development of key technologies for the economy and national defense. See 韩保江 [Han Baojiang], “中国经济中高速增长 “多元动力” ——论习近平经济发展思想的基本内核与逻辑框架” [The pluralistic impetus for the high-speed growth in China’s economy — on the basic core and logical framework of Xi Jinping’s thought on economic development], 中共中央党校学报 [Communist Party Central Party School Journal] 19, no. 6 (December 2015): 9.

^[28] 向贤彪 [Xiang Xianbiao], “学贵日新, 政贵日进” [Learning prizes daily innovation, government prizes daily progress] 人民日报 [People’s Daily] November 18, 2016, 4.

^[29] “始终坚持以人民为中心的发展思想 ——论学习贯彻市委十二届十一次全会精神” [Always adhere to people-centered development thought — on studying and implementing the spirit of the 11th session of the 12th plenary of the municipal party committee], 呼和浩特日报 [Hohhot Daily] July 3, 2020, 1.

^[30] 张齐 [Zhang Qi] “论新中国成立前夕毛泽东对中美关系的认识——基于毛泽东对《美国与中国的关系》白皮书的评论” [On Mao Zedong’s understanding of Sino-US Relations on the eve of the founding of new China — comments on the ‘White Paper on Relations between the United States and China’ based on Mao Zedong], 理论月刊 [Theory Monthly] No. 11 (2019): 24. Zhang is citing an earlier article from 2014 in which Xi refers to both the realpolitik *and* the Marxist-Leninist route to the “three wins.” 孙业礼 [Sun Yeli] “担当·定力·规矩——学习习近平系列讲话中的新概念、新韬略” [Responsible, strong, disciplined: studying the new concepts and strategies in Xi Jinping’s series of speeches] 党的文献 [Party documents] No. 2 (2014): 83.

^[31] 邓小平 [Deng Xiaoping] “社会主义必须摆脱贫穷” [Socialism must eliminate poverty], in 邓小平文选 [Deng Xiaoping’s selected works] (Beijing: People’s Publishing House, 1993), 3:225.

^[32] For example, see 周栋 [Zhou Dong] “摆脱贫穷真正体现社会主义优越性——重温邓小平 ‘社会主义必须摆脱贫穷’” [Eliminating poverty genuinely embodies the superiority of socialism — revisiting Deng Xiaoping’s ‘Socialism must get rid of poverty’] 学习时报 [Study Times] (September 23, 2020), 5.

^[33] 朱佳木 [Zhu Jiamu] “理论反映时代新要求、体现时代新特征、利用时代新条件 —— 中国道路是顺应时代发展潮流的选择” [Theory reflects the new demands of the times, embodies the new characteristics of the times, and uses the new conditions of the times — China’s road is a choice that adapts to the development trend of the times], 人民日报 [People’s Daily] November 22, 2015, 5.

^[34] The massive body of official speeches and statements on the “community of common destiny” suggests it blends traditional Westphalian concepts such as the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence with ideas of reforming certain international institutions, references to Confucian platitudes, myths about China’s historical peacefulness, traditional anti-hegemonism, liberal notions of economic interdependence, and standard realpolitik ideas about the defense of national interest.

^[35] 石云霞 [Shi Yunxia] “人类命运历史发展的哲学思考” [Philosophical thoughts on the historical development of humanity’s destiny], 解放军报 [PLA Daily] February 14, 2018, available at <http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2018/0214/c40531-29823601.html>.

^[36] 严书翰 [Yan Shuhan] “习近平“两次讲话”的思想深意——坚持和发展中国特色社会主义需要阐明的三大问题” [The deep thought in Xi Jinping’s ‘two talks’ — the three major issues that need to be clarified in adhering to and developing socialism with Chinese characteristics], 人民论坛 [People’s Tribune], March 2013, 13.

^[37] 李松涛 [Li Songtao] and 李玉敏 [Li Yumin] “新时代党员干部战略思维运用路径探析” [Exploration of the ways Party members and cadres apply strategic thinking in the new era], 理论建设 [Theory Construction] 4 (2019): 84.

^[38] 陈文通 [Chen Wentong] “领导干部要深入学习马克思主义基本理论——学习习近平总书记关于加强马克思主义理论学习的重要论述” [Leading cadres must study basic Marxist theory in depth — studying General Secretary Xi Jinping’s important exposition on strengthening the study of Marxist theory], 中国浦东干部学院学报

[Journal of the China Pudong Cadre Academy]13, no. 4 (July 2019): 27-28.

^[39] “《求是》杂志发表习近平总书记重要文章《关于坚持和发展中国特色社会主义的几个问题》” [Qiushi magazine publishes Secretary General Xi Jinping’s important essay, ‘A few problems concerning upholding and developing socialism with Chinese characteristics’], <http://politics.people.com.cn/n1/2019/0331/c1024-31005168.html>.

^[40] 赵剑英 [Zhao Jianying], “习近平外交思想的哲学基础探析” [Exploration of the philosophical basis of Xi Jinping’s thought on diplomacy], 世界经济与政治 [World Economics and Politics] 8 (2020): 6.

^[41] 中央军委政治工作部 [Central Military Commission Political World Department] 习近平关于国防和军队建设重要论述选编 [Selection of important analyses by Xin Jinping on national defense and military construction], vols. 1, 2, 3 (Beijing: PLA Press, 2014, 2015, 2016).

^[42] 习近平总书记系列讲话(公开发表讲话) [Secretary General Xi Jinping’s series of speeches (public speeches), July 3, 2017-January 29, 2020] (n.p.; n.d.).

^[43] “新华社评论员：永远保持与时俱进的理论品格——学习习近平总书记在中央政治局第四十三次集体学习时重要讲话” [Xinhua commentator: Always make sure theoretical qualifications keep up with the times — study General Secretary Xi Jinping’s important comments at the 43rd collective study session of the Politburo], October 1, 2017, <http://www.rmzxb.com.cn/c/2017-10-01/1827460.shtml>.

^[44] Similarly, Xi is quoted in education studies urging students to raise their knowledge of all types of science and culture, because otherwise they will not “win the initiative, win the advantage, win the

future.” His use of the “three wins” here has nothing to do with taking the initiative to put China in a position of dominance, that is, the State Department’s interpretation. See “习近平在中央党校建校80周年庆祝大会暨2013年春季学期开学典礼上的讲话” [Xi Jinping’s speech at the celebration of the 80th anniversary of the founding of the Central Party School and the opening ceremony of the 2013 spring semester], 人民日报 [*People’s Daily*] March 1, 2013, cited in 龚剑飞[Gong Jianfei] “中国共产党百年学习观：认识论、方法论、实践论的视角” [The Chinese Communist Party’s centennial view of studying: epistemological, methodological, and practical perspectives], 山东社会科学 [*Shandong Social Sciences*], 12 (2021): 20.

^[45] U.S. Department of State, *The Elements of the China Challenge*, 7.

^[46] *Ibid.*, 38.

^[47] Perhaps the authors of the State Department report used the translation of Xi’s speech to summarize conclusions they reached based on their analysis of the PRC’s behavior toward the “liberal rules-based order.” But, if so, the constant reproduction of this particular translation of Xi’s speech could lead consumers of the translation to miss other empirical evidence that a single rules-based order may not actually exist, that China’s behavior toward different orders (e.g., human rights, information, arms control, environment, trade, and sovereignty) varies widely from strong opposition to moderate or strong support, and that the claim China seeks to replace the United States as global hegemon (as opposed to the regional hegemon) is more speculative than the report’s authors are willing to admit. For more granular analyses of the variation in China’s approach to different international norms and institutions see, for example, Rosemary Foot and Andrew Walter, *China, the United States, and Global Order* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Andrew Nathan, “China’s Rise and International Regimes: Does China Seek to Overthrow Global Norms?” in Robert S. Ross and Jo Inge Bekkevold, eds., *China in the Era of Xi Jinping* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2016), 165–95; Evelyn Goh, “Contesting Hegemonic Order: China in East Asia,” *Security Studies* 28, no. 3 (June–July 2019): 614–44; Courtney J. Fung, *China and Intervention at the UN Security Council: Reconciling Status* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Scott L. Kastner, Margaret M. Pearson, and Chad Rector, *China’s Strategic Multilateralism: Investing in Global Governance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Deborah Brautigam, “A Critical Look at Chinese ‘Debt-Trap Diplomacy’: The Rise of a Meme,” *Area Development and Policy* 5, no. 1 (2020): 1–14; and Alastair Iain Johnston, “China in a World of Orders: Rethinking Compliance and Challenge in Beijing’s International Relations,” *International Security* 44, no. 2 (Fall 2019): 9–60.

^[48] Subjecting draft translations to review could also help determine the degree of consensus within China over how to gloss key terms used in CCP discourse. For example, the signature Xi Jinping concept of “great changes unseen in a century” (百年未有之大变局) has been interpreted by different influential Chinese analysts in different ways. Some Chinese analysts use the phrase as an optimistic assessment of China’s challenge to U.S. primacy. Others gloss the phrase in more ambiguous—even

pessimistic—ways, highlighting the severe risks and challenges China faces in achieving rejuvenation. Indeed, there has been a dramatic increase in discourse in media and academic work in China that links the “great changes” term to “risks” and “severe challenges”. This suggests a less sanguine assessment of displacing U.S. primacy. That there seems to be no obvious consensus in China in interpreting this phrase suggests that analysts in the United States should be cautious about inferring long-term intentions from the concept. For examples of more pessimistic interpretations of the term, 袁鹏 [Yuan Peng], “世界 ‘百年未有之大变局’ 之我见” [My views on the world’s great changes unseen in a century], 现代国际关系 [*Contemporary International Relations*], 1 (2020); and 门洪华 [Men Honghua], “百年变局与中国战略机遇期的塑造” [Century of change and the shaping of China’s period of strategic opportunity], 同济大学学报 31, no. 2 (April 2020): 30–38. Yuan is the president of the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (Ministry of State Security). Men is a former professor at the Central Party School.

^[49] As one model for this, see

<https://www.newamerica.org/cybersecurity-initiative/digichina/blog/lexicon-wanluo-qiangguo/>.

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