

# Reproducing Cultural Imagery in Allusions in Political Texts: A Transitivity Perspective

Jing Liang

School of Foreign Languages, Dalian University of Technology, Dalian, China

Jianjun Ma

School of Foreign Languages, Dalian University of Technology, Dalian, China

**Abstract**—Transitivity is a lexico-grammatical system for construing experiential meaning through both grammatical structure and lexical choice. This study investigates how the experiential meaning is reproduced in translating cultural imagery in allusions in Chinese political texts, with particular attention given to its structural realization. Drawing on a parallel corpus of 449 instances from *Xi Jinping: The Governance of China (Volumes I to IV)*, it examines how imagery, in translation, is grammatically realized as participant or circumstance through different processes, together with lexical choices. A strong preference is observed for structural equivalence, especially when the imagery conveys universal or ideological significance. Shifts in structural role or process type are employed to clarify abstract reasoning, foreground general principles, or facilitate intercultural understanding. Material and relational processes are predominant, and shifts often signal rhetorical movement between action and evaluation. As to lexical choices, a strong preference is also observed for retaining the original image rather than rendering its sense or omitting it. These results indicate that the selection of imagery reflects the diplomatic principle of proximity, and its retention in translation aligns with harmony-oriented institutional norms. This study offers a replicable model for analysing cultural imagery in political translation from a transitivity perspective.

**Index Terms**—cultural imagery, allusions, political text, experiential meaning, transitivity

## I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Chinese political leaders have frequently employed figurative allusions in diplomatic discourse to articulate foreign policy positions and comment on internationally sensitive issues. These allusions have drawn significant attention, primarily owing to their rich cultural imagery, which refers to the figurative language employed in texts, especially metaphors and similes (Baldick, 2001). Such metaphorical expressions transcend mere rhetorical devices; they function to convey ideological stances, serve ideological purposes, and project political attitudes and national identity (Akrivoulis, 2015; Musolff, 2020; Song & Zhang, 2024). Therefore, as Schäffner (2004) points out, they pose significant challenges in translation, as linguistic and cultural differences can impede their effective transfer across languages and cultures. Recent research has concentrated on the translation choices of imagery or metaphors with Chinese characteristics (Lin & Lin, 2016; Gao & Wang, 2024; Yang et al., 2025), mostly atypical diplomatic expressions or newly coined terms. Translation choices are primarily discussed in terms of how to deal with the imagery itself (Wang & Tu, 2025), i.e., whether to preserve it, interpret its underlying sense, shift its position, or adopt a hybrid strategy such as literal translation with an additional explanatory image. However, attention is limited to how to effectively reproduce the experiential meaning of the culturally-bound imagery in allusions; when translators preserve the image or interpret its sense, how is the experiential meaning realized at the lexico-grammatical level? And further, should the structural roles of imagery be retained?

According to Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), the experiential meaning relates to human experiences; it is our interpretation of all that goes on around us and within us (Halliday & Matthiessen, 1999, p. 511). As imagery (metaphor) comes in clusters (Lakoff & Johnson, 2002) and creates meanings and organizes our perception of the world by highlighting some aspects and hiding others (Guldin, 2016), the meaning created by imagery, in essence, is the experiential meaning, which needs to be reproduced in translation. In SFL, experiential meaning is lexicogrammatically realized through the transitivity system, which construes the world experience through different types of processes (actions or events), with associated participants (entities involved) and circumstances (background details) (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). As experiential meaning is the innate meaning of all types of texts, transitivity system has been widely applied in the analysis of both literary and political texts. Existing studies primarily focus on the choices of process, the central element of the transitivity system, including choices of structural equivalence or shift and choices of process types. For example, Liu and Li (2022) examined the use of ancient Chinese poetry and prose in political texts and concluded that structural shifts, such as the compression or expansion of process types, can lead to changes in information density, while the shifts in process types are often motivated by textual features and different language habits. And Cabrejas-Peñuelas (2023) found that the choice of process type illustrates the politicians' ideological

positions, i.e., mental desiderative processes can be used for expressing desires and showing the active role of ‘us’ to bring about positive changes, while relational, verbal and existential processes can be employed to construct a particular picture of reality.

This study therefore aims to investigate how to reproduce the experiential meanings of cultural imagery in allusions in political texts from a transitivity perspective. It examines the structural roles of such imagery (as participant or circumstance), the processes involving the imagery, and the translation choices of equivalence or shift adopted in rendering them. For the research material, *Xi Jinping: The Governance of China (Volumes I to IV)* (hereinafter *Governance*) is selected, as it stands as a paradigmatic example of Chinese political texts, characterized by its broad international circulation and frequent use of allusions. This study focuses on how the translators handle the cultural imagery in allusions in *Governance*, which serve both expressive and informative functions. The following research questions guide the study:

1. In *Governance*, what translation choices are adopted for cultural imagery in terms of their structural roles, structural equivalence or shift?
2. In *Governance*, what translation choices are adopted for the processes involving cultural imagery, equivalence of process types or shift?

## II. STUDIES ON TRANSLATING CULTURAL IMAGERY

Imagery, or cultural imagery, which is widely found in both political and literary texts, refers to figurative or sensory language that conveys experience and a political stance. In this study, the term “imagery” is used to describe culturally loaded figures, especially in allusions, that combine a perceptible image and its underlying sense (Hou, 1996). While literary studies often define imagery as an aesthetic device (Baldick, 2001), rhetorical and cognitive approaches focus more on metaphor, a key mechanism for constructing imagery.

Metaphor theories provide critical insights into how imagery conveys meaning. Black (1955) challenges the classical view of metaphor as simple comparison or substitution, proposing instead an interaction theory where meaning emerges from the interplay between metaphorical “focus” and contextual “frame”. Building on this, cognitive linguists such as Lakoff and Johnson (2003) argue that metaphors are conceptual mappings from a source to a target domain. These mappings are grounded in bodily experience but vary in their cultural salience, ranging from universal to culture-specific (Lakoff, 2003). In Chinese political discourse, many allusions rely on culturally embedded images drawn from the natural world, which makes their translation particularly complex.

Translation studies on imagery, often grounded in Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) or Conceptual Blending Theory (CBT), typically focus on metaphor types or strategy classification. Researchers have proposed strategies such as image retention, sense conversion, or hybrid solutions such as metaphor replacement or annotation (Liang & Chen, 2020; Qiu, 2023; Yin & Li, 2024). However, these strategies rarely account for how imagery is realized in lexico-grammatical structure. More importantly, embodied approaches tend to emphasize cognitive universals while underestimating the variability of metaphor across cultures (Allan, 1995), which limits their explanatory power for allusions grounded in Chinese classical wisdom.

Therefore, this study views imagery as both a cultural and structural phenomenon. Beyond the choice between image and sense, the realization of imagery through structural roles and process types plays a central role in conveying experiential meaning. In SFL, experiential meaning is realized through the transitivity system, which encodes experience via processes, participants, and circumstances (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Given that metaphor often reorganizes clause structure and that imagery is frequently embedded as participants or circumstances, transitivity analysis offers a complementary lens for examining how cultural imagery is rendered in political texts.

## III. METHODOLOGY

### A. Corpus Building

Data were retrieved from *Xi Jinping: The Governance of China (Volumes I to IV)* to ensure institutional authoritativeness, which are compiled by the State Council Information Office of China, the CCCPC Party Literature Research Office, and the China International Publishing Group (Standard and Norms Drafting Group, 2023). The translation team consists of senior political officials (Chinese final reviewers), native English-speaking experts, intermediate translators, and junior assistants, and the translation follows a set of guiding principles and fundamental strategies to ensure linguistic accuracy and political fidelity.

To address the above-mentioned research questions, we first constructed a parallel corpus of figurative allusions, identifying 172 instances by searching double quotation marks in e-books, verified against print versions. It should be noted that in this study, only figurative allusions that have imagery in them were considered, while maxims which are memorable statements of general principles (Baldick, 2001, pp. 148–149) were excluded. Here is an example of maxim in the *Governance*:

Example 1:

ST: 非知之难，行之惟难。(Xi, 2018, p. 220)

Gloss: Not knowing it is difficult; only carrying it out is truly difficult.

TT: It is not knowledge but action that is difficult to acquire. (Xi, 2017, p. 243)

In order to extract cultural imagery embedded in culturally-loaded expressions, we compiled a corpus of culturally-loaded words and identified 442 cases. From this basis, the corpus of cultural imagery was built, comprising 449 cultural images. Table 1 presents the three-step extraction process of cultural imagery.

TABLE 1  
EXAMPLES OF THE EXTRACTION OF CULTURAL IMAGERY

Extraction	ST	TT
Allusion	山重水复疑无路， 柳暗花明又一村。	When one doubts whether there is a way out from the endless mountains and rivers, one suddenly finds a village shaded by soft willows and bright flowers.
Cultural-loaded words	山重水复 柳暗花明 路 村	the endless mountains and rivers soft willows and bright flowers a way a village
Cultural imagery	重山 复水 暗柳 明花 路 村	the endless mountains the endless rivers soft willows bright flowers a way a village

### B. Data Annotation

The cultural imagery was coded manually following three procedures. First, imagery in both ST and TT was annotated for transitivity (participant, process, circumstance). Second, image/sense choices in TT were coded. Finally, process types were identified. Assisted by Excel, the manual coding of cultural imagery in ST and TT was conducted by two trained coders. In cases of disagreement, a third expert was consulted to resolve the inconsistency through discussion. The inter-coder reliability reached an acceptable level ( $r = 0.92 > 0.80$ ). Based on the annotation results, we calculated the frequency of each translation choice and conducted a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the translation choices of cultural imagery and their realization through transitivity patterns.

### C. Data Analysis

The analysis of cultural imagery and the processes involving it is grounded in Catford's (1965) theory of translation equivalence and shift. In this study, equivalence refers specifically to formal correspondence rather than textual equivalence. That is, a target language (TL) category (unit, class, structure, element of structure, etc.) is considered equivalent if it occupies, as closely as possible, the same position within the 'economy' of the corresponding source language (SL) category (Catford, 1965, p. 27). Conversely, translation shifts are defined as "departures from formal correspondence in the process of transferring from the SL to the TL" (Catford, 1965, p. 73).

Based on the annotation, the analysis of cultural imagery itself started from a transitivity perspective, where equivalence refers to the equivalence of structural roles, either as participant or circumstance, and shift includes shift between participant and circumstance, shift from participant and circumstance to process, and omission of participant and circumstance. And for each case of structural equivalence or shift, it is further broken down into three subtypes: image (preserving the ST image or replacement of another image), sense (rendering the sense), and null (omission of the image). And since it is the type of process that makes major contributions to the construal of experience in texts (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014, p. 219), here the equivalence of process refers to the equivalence of process type, and shift refers to the shift among different process types. Tables 2 and 3 show the analytical schemes for the lexico-grammatical choice of imagery and process involving imagery.

TABLE 2  
ANALYTICAL SCHEME FOR IMAGERY AS PARTICIPANT/CIRCUMSTANCE

Equivalence/shift		Image/sense/null
Equivalence	(P)→P	image
		sense
	(C)→C	image
		sense
Shift	(P)→C	image
		sense
	(P)→Pr	sense
	(P)→0	null
	(C)→P	image
		sense
	(C)→Pr	sense
(C)→0	null	

Note: P: Participant; C: Circumstance; Pr: Process; Brackets ( ) mean in ST

TABLE 3  
ANALYTICAL SCHEME FOR PROCESS INVOLVING IMAGERY

Equivalence/shift		
Equivalence	Equivalence of process types	(Material)→Material
		(Relational)→Relational
		(Mental)→Mental
		...
Shift	Shift among different process types	(Material)→Relational
		(Relational)→Material
		(Mental)→Relational
		...

Note: Brackets ( ) mean in ST

#### IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

##### A. Overall Distribution of Choices in Transitivity

Table 4 displays the choices of participant and circumstance in TT with respect to imagery in allusions. Structurally, with a few of them as circumstance (9.13%), most of the images in ST (90.87%) function as participant, the central element of the clause, confirming that they are the vehicles for thought. It can also be observed that the translators of the *Governance* tend to maintain the original structural role as participant or circumstance ((P)→P + (C)→C = 80.62%). Notably, the shift between participant and circumstance constitutes a significant proportion in structural shift, including shift from participant to circumstance (10.92%) and circumstance to participant (1.56%). As for choosing image or sense as participant or circumstance in TT, preserving the image (72.61%) is prioritized over rendering the sense (22.05%) or removing the image (5.35%).

TABLE 4  
CHOICES OF PARTICIPANT/CIRCUMSTANCE IN TT

Transitivity		Image	Sense	Null	Total
(Participant)	(P)→P	266 (59.24%)	68 (15.14%)	0 (0%)	408 (90.87%)
	(P)→C	35 (7.80%)	14 (3.12%)	0 (0%)	
	(P)→Pr	0 (0%)	7 (1.56%)	0 (0%)	
	(P)→0	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	18 (4.01%)	
	(C)→C	21 (4.68%)	7 (1.56%)	0 (0%)	
(Circumstance)	(C)→P	4 (0.89%)	3 (0.67%)	0 (0%)	41 (9.13%)
	(C)→0	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	6 (1.34%)	
	Total	326 (72.61%)	99 (22.05%)	24 (5.35%)	

Note: P: participant; C: circumstance; Pr: process; Brackets ( ) mean in ST

Table 5 shows the process types involved in ST and more importantly, the choices of process equivalence or shift in TT. Among the six process types, only four process types involve the imagery in ST, with material process used the most (68.28%), relational the second (21.84%) and mental the third (7.36%), which correlates with Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) contention that material, mental, and relational clauses constitute the three principal types that occur more often in many discourses.

As to process equivalence or shift in TT, translators are more likely to choose process equivalence (68.04%) rather than process shift (31.96%). The degree of process equivalence, however, varies across process types; equivalence of material process is the highest (51.26%), while no equivalent case is identified in existential process. And process shift (31.96%) occurs more frequently in material (17.01%) and relational processes (9.20%).

TABLE 5  
CHOICES OF PROCESS EQUIVALENCE/SHIFT IN TT

Process type	Equivalence	Shift	Total
Material	223 (51.26%)	74 (17.01%)	297 (68.28%)
Relational	55 (12.64%)	40 (9.20%)	95 (21.84%)
Mental	18 (4.14%)	14 (3.22%)	32 (7.36%)
Existential	0 (0%)	11 (2.53%)	11 (2.53%)
Total	296 (68.04%)	139 (31.96%)	435 (100%)

##### B. Imagery as Participant

When imagery occurs as a participant, translators tend to preserve its structural role (74.38%), whereas a smaller portion involves shifts, mainly to circumstance (10.92%) and occasionally to process (1.56%) (Table 4). Image retention is favoured over sense conversion, even for culturally specific imagery. Converting image to sense appears only as a last resort in our corpus.

###### (a). Participant Equivalence

Images involved in allusions come mostly from nature, including plants, heavenly body, waters, and animals, which

constitute the traditional Chinese political philosophy of the Water-Boat relation between people and governors, the Root-Leave relation, etc. Therefore, when imagery occurs as participant, this structural role tends to be maintained in the target text. As for the choices of image or sense, it is presumable that shared images that would invoke a similar effect in TT can be preserved, while for cultural-specific images, a compromise solution should be employed, such as converting image to sense (Newmark, 1981). However, some cultural-specific images that may invoke negative emotions are still retained in TT. Take the WATER/LIQUID image as an example:

Example 2:

ST: 水能载舟，亦能覆舟。(Xi, 2018, p. 53)

Gloss: The water can carry the boat, and it can also sink the boat.

TT: *The same water* that keeps *a ship* afloat can also sink *it*. (Xi, 2017, p. 55)

In the ST culture, “水” (water) and “舟” (boat) represent the governor and the public respectively, while in the TT political context, the WATER/LIQUID image is conventionally associated with “immigrants”, and is shown to have been more unfavourable (Taylor, 2021). Specifically, as WATER is dangerous if not controlled (Santa Ana, 2002, p. 76), it is frequently used to signal control and release of control (Taylor, 2022). But as shown in Example 2, this image of water is retained in TT.

This unconventional choice can be explained from a cultural perspective and the institutional behavior. Culturally, the TT should be “the site where a different culture emerges, where a reader gets a glimpse of a cultural other” (Venuti, 1995, p. 306). Considering the institutional features (Song & Zhang, 2024) of Chinese political translation, it is reasonable that translators often consciously or unconsciously present a high degree of faithfulness to ensure the authority of the ST (Hu & Zhao, 2023).

As for culturally-bond imagery, rendering the sense directly is a common strategy. Typical representatives are the FISHING NET imagery, the TREE imagery and the SKY imagery.

Example 3:

ST: 秉纲而目自张，执本而末自从。(Xi, 2018, p. 402; Xi, 2020, p. 517)

Gloss: Grasp the main line of a fishing net, then the net’s meshes open; hold the root, then the twigs follow.

TT1: Once *the key link* is grasped, *everything else* falls into place; once the horse is before the cart, the cart will follow. (Xi, 2017, p. 436)

TT2: When the line of a fishing net is held up, all the meshes will be open. When *the fundamental principles* are upheld, *all work* will fall in place. (Xi, 2020, p. 599)

The four images in the ST are typical concepts in traditional Chinese philosophy: “纲” (the main line of a fishing net), “目” (meshes), “本” (root of a tree), “末” (treetop). “纲” and “本” symbolize the central parts, while “目” and “末” the subordinate ones. Then “纲” and “目” can be handled as “the key link” and “everything else” in TT1, and “本” and “末” as “the fundamental principles” and “all work” in TT2. It is worth emphasizing that images, be them the original or the replaced in TT, are preferred for vividness in both of the versions. For example, in TT1 the translators choose to replace the images in ST; two images “the horse” and “the cart” are borrowed from the English idiom “put the cart before the horse” to convey the primary-subordinate relationship.

Another strategy to maintain participant equivalence is recontextualization when handling imagery with multiple senses. For instance, a nuanced imagery SKY, including “天” (the sky) and “天下” (under the sky), is more tricky to handle for its multiple senses when situated in different political contexts, and the preferred strategy is recontextualization. Recontextualization allows meanings to shift discursively across contexts (Fairclough, 2003). Reflections from Yu (2024), an institutional translator, also justify this choice: “The defining feature that differentiates the translation of classical allusions in political texts from literary translation is the balancing historical-literary contexts with contemporary realities and the political connotation is of more importance”. For example:

Example 4:

ST: 天下之势不盛则衰，天下之治不进则退。(Xi, 2020, p. 112; Xi, 2022, p. 483)

Gloss: The momentum under the sky either flourishes or declines; the governance under the sky either advances or regresses.

TT1: If *a dynasty* cannot continue to rise, it will fall; if *a country* cannot improve its governance, the state of order will deteriorate. (Xi, 2020, p. 138)

TT2: The momentum of *the world* either flourishes or declines; the governance of *the world* either progresses or regresses. (Xi, 2022, p. 561)

Although the image “sky” is removed in both of the versions, the political connotation of the SKY imagery is retained through recontextualizing it into “a dynasty”, “a country” and “the world”. The different choices lie in the tenor, as TT1 comes from the 4th Plenary Session of the 19th CPC central Committee and TT2 is employed in the speech at a virtual session of the 2022 World Economic Forum. As Table 6 shows, eight versions of the SKY imagery are identified in our corpus. When it occurs in domestic speeches, SKY represents national governance (the country/the people), whereas internationally, it takes on a global perspective (the world/across the land), thereby demonstrating the world or bilateral relationship (across the land).

TABLE 6  
CHOICES OF THE SKY IMAGERY IN TT

Imagery	Political connotation	Translation	Number
SKY	national governance	the country	11
		(all/ land) under heaven	10
		the people	4
		on earth/ on the earth	2
		the dynasty	1
	global outlook	/	4
		the (whole/just) world	5
		across the land	2
		the whole land	1
		the land under heaven	1
Total			41

### (b). Participant Shift

Participant shift includes shift from participant to circumstance, participant to process, and omission of participant. Among them, shift from participant to circumstance is the most frequently used strategy while reserving or replacing the original image, as seen in Example 5.

Example 5:

ST: 志之所趋，无远勿届，**穷山距海**，不能限也。志之所向，无坚不入，**锐兵精甲**，不能御也。(Xi, 2018, p. 413)

Gloss: Where ambition leads, no distance is too far to reach; even remote mountains and distant seas cannot hinder its pursuit. Where ambition is directed, no hardness is too solid to penetrate; even sharp weapons and fine armor cannot resist its advance.

TT: Aspirations can reach any place however far it is, even over *mountains and seas*; and it can break through any defense however tough it is, even as strong as *the best armor and shield*. (Xi, 2018, p. 463)

In this example, the four participants “穷山” (remote mountains)”, “距海” (distant seas), “锐兵” (sharp weapons) and “精甲” (fine armor) are shifted into circumstances, from direct participants into indirect participants. The contrast between them is that the latter refers to the status of a nominal group that is inside a prepositional phrase (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014, p. 312). Functionally, they are shifted from the Actor into concession circumstantials construing frustrated cause, with the sense of “although” (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014, p. 323). Such shift emphasizes the notion that “aspirations are capable of overcoming any form of hindrance, be it natural or human-made”. Another notable point is the replacement of “锐兵” (sharp weapons) with “shield”. A possible reason could be maintaining consistency in logic. As the ST emphasizes that no defense can stop aspirations and the image of “weapon” in TT is more associated with attack instead of defense, it is reasonable to replace “sharp weapon” with a typical weapon used for defense.

As for the shift from participant to process, only seven instances are identified in our corpus. Such strategy is used mainly for changing the focus and explicating the logic, as shown in Example 6.

Example 6:

ST: 物有甘苦，**尝之者**识；道有夷险，**履之者**知。(Xi, 2022, p. 101)

Gloss: Things have sweetness and bitterness, and those who taste them know this; ways have smoothness and danger, and those who walk on them know this.

TT: To know a flavor of a thing, one must *taste* it; to know what lies ahead on a path, one must *walk* it. (Xi, 2022, p. 115)

The shift from participant to process is employed when the Participant is inherently associated with input of energy, which can be interpreted as either a compressed clause (尝之者: someone tastes it, 履之者: someone walks it) or a conscious Actor (尝之者: a taster/ one who tastes it, 履之者: a walker/ one who walks on it). ST emphasizes the importance of action, that is, cognition must be realized through practice; therefore, TT shifts the focus from “someone” (Participant), an element close to the centre, to “the necessity of action” through the Material Process like “taste” and “walk” which is the most central element. In this way, the hypotactic relation of cause is created in TT to reproduce the relation of projection in ST.

### C. Imagery as Circumstance

Similarly, when imagery occurs as circumstance, as is shown in Table 4, structural equivalence (6.24%) is favoured over shift (2.89%). Shifts include conversion to participant (1.56%) and omission (1.34%). In terms of image or sense, the original images are generally retained, especially for circumstantials of Location, which indicate time or space, such as “淮南” (south of the Huaihe River) and “孟夏之日” (early summer). In contrast, circumstantials of Role are often translated by replacing the image or rendering its sense.

#### (a). Circumstance Equivalence

The structural role of circumstantials of Location are usually retained in TT with their images preserved. Possibly because most of the images are indefinite and relative Location which rely on shared experience to convey meanings rather than regional characteristics. Here is an example of Space:

Example 7:

ST: 山重水复疑无路，柳暗花明又一村。(Xi, 2018, p. 344)

Gloss: Where mountains layered and waters serpentine, one doubts no path exists; where willows dim and flowers bright, one finds a village.

TT: When one doubts whether there is a way out from *the endless mountains and rivers*, one suddenly finds a village shaded by *soft willows and bright flowers*. (Xi, 2018, p. 379)

In this example, the ST employs “重山” (layered mountains) and “复水” (serpentine waters) to symbolize the formidable challenges that confront the Asia-Pacific region, whereas “暗柳” (dim willows) and “明花” (bright flowers) metaphorically represent the region’s promising economic prospects. The translation faithfully preserves these imagery while implementing adjectival compensation: “重” and “复” (endless) compensate for the implied difficulties, while the “暗” (soft) and “明” (bright) convey the symbolic meaning of a ray of hope in a desperate situation.

In contrast, circumstantials of Role are either replaced with another image or converted into sense. Such shift is reasonable considering their inherent Location feature, as demonstrated in Example 8.

Example 8:

ST: 处江湖之远则忧其君。(Xi, 2018, p. 318)

Gloss: When dwelling in the distant rivers and lakes, one then worries about one’s sovereign.

TT: Though living at *grassroots level*, one is concerned for his state. (Xi, 2018, p. 347)

Seemingly, the image “江湖” (rivers and lakes) functions as the circumstantial of Location as it involves the place where the process unfolds. However, it actually serves as the circumstantial of Role and construes the meaning of “be”, since in Chinese political texts, it represents people at grassroots level, the opposite of “庙堂” (the halls of power).

Another common case of circumstantials of Role is thematic circumstantial of Role which may indicate a period of time in a person’s life (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014, p. 326). It is typically associated with the HAIR imagery in the traditional Chinese culture, such as “垂髫” (early childhood, literally hanging hair), “白首” (old age, literally white hair) and “黄发” (old age, literally yellow hair). This tendency is reflected in Example 9.

Example 9:

ST: 青春虚度无所成，白首衔悲亦何及。(Xi, 2020, p. 336)

Gloss: When youth is spent in vain, nothing is achieved; when one is white-haired, lamenting is of no use.

TT: If you idle away your youth and achieve nothing, it’s no good lamenting in *old age*. (Xi, 2020, p. 390)

Instead of retaining the image “白首”, converting the image into sense is employed in TT. “白首”, the circumstantial of Role in ST, is reproduced through the circumstantial of Location, specifically, the Time (“in old age”). In this way, the image is shifted into a more direct and universally comprehensible temporal reference. This strategy is particularly suitable in the context of political discourse, where the emphasis lies in delivering a clear and audience-oriented message.

#### (b). Circumstance Shift

Circumstance shift includes shift from circumstance to participant and omission of circumstance. The former is usually employed to align the linguistic structure with the communicative goal of emphasizing certain element. Such shift is often observed in circumstantials of Location, as illustrated in Example 10.

Example 10:

ST: 浩浩行无极，扬帆但信风。(Xi, 2018, p. 349)

Gloss: On the endless sea we sail afar, we hoist the sails and follow the wind.

TT: Boundless is *the ocean* where we sail with the wind. (Xi, 2018, p. 385)

The shift of “浩浩” (the ocean) from circumstance to participant is employed to change the focus. “浩浩” in ST serves as the circumstantials of Location, the background information, while it becomes the carrier with image retained in a relational clause, thus construing “the ocean” as an active, central entity rather than a mere setting. In the keynote speech at the APEC CEO Summit, Xi Jinping compared the Asia-Pacific region to the boundless sea and emphasized that the Asia-Pacific region offers enough space for every APEC member to make progress together (Xi, 2018, p. 385).

Conversely, circumstantials of Role are converted into sense, and a corresponding shift occurs in their structural roles. This shift is reasonable because in Chinese the spatial nature is inherently embedded in role-related expressions. For example:

Example 11:

ST: 朱门酒肉臭，路有冻死骨。(Xi, 2018, p. 317)

Gloss: At red doors, wine and meat rot with stench; on the roads, there are bones of those frozen to death.

TT: *The rich* wine and dine, *the poor* starve and die. (Xi, 2017, p. 346)

Functionally, “朱门” (red doors) and “路” (the roads) serve as circumstantials of Role. Just as the image “江湖” (grassroots level) in Chinese political discourse seems to be a spatial location but actually functions as the

circumstantial of Role, “朱门” and “路” stand for social categories rather than literal spaces. In order to highlight the contrast between the rich and the poor, the circumstantial of Role is shifted into the participant. Meanwhile, converting image into sense is reasonable considering that “朱门” is the symbol of aristocracy, wealth, and elite power in traditional Chinese culture, whereas in Western cultures, “red doors” may carry positive or religious connotations. Historically, they also denoted a place of sanctuary, offering legal and divine protection to those seeking refuge, as can be seen in the Red Door Family Shelter in Toronto (Siemiatycki, 2021).

#### D. Process Involving Imagery

Process is the most central element in the configuration, and it is different types of processes that make distinctive contributions to the construal of experience (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014, p. 219), which is directly or indirectly related to imagery as participant or circumstance; therefore, the choices of process equivalence or shift deserve discussion. Generally, process equivalence is preferred over process shift in translation (Table 5). Process equivalence is observed to decrease progressively from material to relational, mental, and finally existential processes. This indicates that the closer a process type is to concrete experiential representation, the more likely it is to be retained in translation without a shift. Process shift, however, is more functional-driven, which aims to foreground general truths through shifts from material to relational process, simplify overly abstract reasoning through shifts from relational to material process, and explicate implicit ideas.

##### (a). Process Equivalence

Among the four types of processes found in our corpus, material processes are generally retained in translation. A possible reason is that most of the processes involved are transformative, which means the participant exists prior to the onset of the unfolding of the process and is changed in some way through the unfolding of the process (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014, p. 232). For example:

Example 12:

ST: 合抱之木，生于毫末；九层之台，起于累土。(Xi, 2018, p. 294)

Gloss: A tree that requires multiple people to embrace grows from a sprout; a nine-layered terrace begins with the accumulation of soil.

TT: A tall tree **grows** from a small seedling; and the building of a nine-story tower starts with the first shovel of earth. (Xi, 2018, p. 322)

“生” (grow), a transformative process, is generally retained in the TT with the images of its participants “合抱之木” (a tall tree) and “毫末” (a small seedling) being preserved. Since various categories of participants are involved, different types of verbs are used and most of them are transformative, expressing size, operation, make-up and so on, as is shown in Table 7.

TABLE 7  
EXAMPLES OF TRANSFORMATIVE VERBS IN MATERIAL CLAUSE

Type of verb	Example
Transformative: size	ST: 新松恨不 <b>高</b> 千尺，恶竹应须斩万竿。 TT: Young pines should <b>grow</b> a thousand feet high, while poisoning bamboos should be cut down one by one.
Transformative: operation	ST: <b>治</b> 天下也，必先公，公则天下平矣。 TT: To <b>govern</b> the country, the priority is to realize equality, and then stability will follow.
Transformative: make-up	ST: 积羽 <b>沉</b> 舟，群轻 <b>折</b> 轴。 TT: Falling feathers <b>submerge</b> a boat and an excess load <b>breaks</b> a cart axle.

Like material processes, relational processes, especially those in intensive clauses, are generally preserved. Intensive clauses are realized by the structure of ‘x is y’, and in Chinese they are realized by ‘x 是 y’, ‘x, y’ and ‘x 若 y’. For example:

Example 13:

ST: 治大国**若**烹小鲜。(Xi, 2018, p. 409)

Gloss: To govern a big country is like cooking a small fish.

TT: Governing a big country **is** as delicate as frying a small fish. (Xi, 2018, p. 457)

Both of the ST and TT are intensive-attributive clauses, with “治大国” (governing a big country) functioning as the carrier, “烹小鲜” (as delicate as frying a small fish) the attribute, and “若” (is) the relational process. Notably, through the use of Qualitative Attribute, realized by the nominal group with Epithet (delicate) as the head and submodified by the comparative adverb (as), the phrase “as delicate as frying a small fish” maintains the comparative logic of the ST, while overtly stating the implicit quality (delicate) that the ST suggests. Verbs frequently employed in this case are to express identity, attribute or time, as is shown in Table 8.

TABLE 8  
EXAMPLES OF VERBS REALISING PROCESS IN INTENSIVE CLAUSES

Type of verb	Example
Neutral: identifying	ST: 尚贤者, (是)政之本也。 TT: Exaltation of the virtuous <i>is</i> fundamental to governance.
Neutral: attributive	ST: 君子之过也, 如日月之食焉。 TT: When a gentle man errs, his mistake <i>is</i> as visible as a solar or lunar eclipse.
Phase: time	ST: 人间正道是沧桑 TT: Seas <i>become</i> mulberry fields.

As to mental processes, they are usually retained despite of their subjective feature. Unlike material processes that construe the experience of the material world, mental processes are concerned with experience of our own conscious world. Among the four types of mental process, only perceptive and cognitive mental processes are involved in our corpus. The following is an example of cognitive mental process:

Example 14:

ST:

吾心信其可行, 则移山填海之难, 终有成功之日; 吾心信其不可行, 则反掌折枝之易, 亦无收效之期也。(Xi, 2020, p. 268)

Gloss: If my heart believes it can be done, then even the difficulty of moving mountains and filling seas will one day see success; if my heart believes it cannot be done, then even the ease of turning over a hand or snapping a branch will never see achievement.

TT: If I *believe* I can do it, then I am able to complete any difficult task - even moving a mountain or filling up a sea; if I don't *think* I can do it, then I may not succeed in even the easiest tasks like flipping over my hands or breaking off a twig. (Xi, 2020, p. 290)

The mental processes “信” (believe) and “信” (think) are both retained because they are used to express how inner conviction shapes outcomes. This choice preserves the ST's emphasis on subjective evaluation as the driving force behind success or failure. More examples of verbs realizing mental processes are given in Table 9, including verbs realizing perceptive mental processes.

TABLE 9  
EXAMPLES OF VERBS REALISING MENTAL PROCESS

Type of verb	Example
Perceptive	ST: 以天下之目视, 则无不 <sub>见</sub> 也; 以天下之耳听, 则无不 <sub>闻</sub> 也。 TT: If you use the eyes of all those under Heaven to <i>see</i> , there is nothing you cannot <i>see</i> . If you use the ears of all those under Heaven to <i>hear</i> , there is nothing you cannot <i>hear</i> .
Cognitive	ST: 亲望亲好, 邻望邻好。 TT: Neighbors <i>wish</i> each other well, just as family members <i>do</i> .

### (b). Process Shift

Process shift may also occur even though there is no shift in the imagery, and the shift from material process to relational process is the most common case. Material processes reflect external actions and events, whereas relational processes generalize or link fragments of experience (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Therefore, the shift from material to relational process means the shift from subjective action (a quantum of change) to objective attribute (static features), as seen in Example 15.

Example 15:

ST: 求木之长者, 必固其根本; 欲流之远者, 必浚其泉源。(Xi, 2018, p. 356)

Gloss: If one wants the tree to grow tall, one must secure its roots; if one wants the stream to flow far, one must dredge its source.

TT: For a tree to grow tall, a strong and solid root *is* essential; for a river to reach far, an unimpeded source *is* necessary. (Xi, 2018, p. 393)

“固” (secure) and “浚” (dredge) are both material processes, but they are shifted into relational processes “be” in the TT. Such shift reveals a corresponding shift in experiential focus: from emphasizing concrete and goal-directed actions enacted by human agency, to highlighting inherent qualities or necessary conditions that define the nature of a phenomenon. Functionally, this process shift backgrounds the cause-effect relationship and foregrounds the logical necessity between the participants. It transforms the exhortation into a more neutral and objective statement of principle, which may enhance its universality and formal tone.

Shift from relational process to material process is also observed in our corpus. Such shift is often used to simplify highly abstract reasoning through concrete and observable actions. For example:

Example 16:

ST: 从善如登, 从恶如崩。(Xi, 2018, p. 53)

Gloss: Progress towards good is like climbing a mountain; decline towards bad is like a landslide.

TT: Virtue *uplifts*, while vice *debases*. (Xi, 2018, p. 57)

The ST is a relational-intensive-attributive clause where the carriers are “从善” (progress towards good) and “从恶” (decline towards bad), the attributes are “登” (climbing a mountain) and “崩” (a landslide), and the process “如” (is like) creates a comparative effect. The shift from relational process to material process reflects a shift from being to doing, then the comparative meaning is replaced with causality: virtue causes uplifting and vice causes decline.

## V. CONCLUSION

This study examined the translation of cultural imagery in Chinese political texts through the transitivity system, focusing on how imagery is realized structurally as participants or circumstances and what processes are involved. A parallel corpus from *Xi Jinping: The Governance of China (Volumes I to IV)* revealed a strong tendency to preserve both the structural roles and lexical choices.

Most imagery in the source texts serves as participants, and this role is usually maintained in translation. This reflects the function of imagery in Chinese political philosophy as vehicles of thought. Structural shifts are infrequent and typically used to clarify abstract logic or highlight rhetorical focus. In terms of process types, material and relational processes dominate and are largely retained, supporting causal and evaluative structures. Mental processes are also preserved, emphasizing stance and internal reasoning. When shifts occur, they typically simplify abstract logic or clarify agency.

At the lexical level, translators generally favour retaining the image rather than rendering its sense or omitting it. This preference is linked to multiple factors. Many allusions are built on images with universal resonance, aligning with the diplomatic principle of proximity, which favours perceptible and accessible expressions (Zhao & Yang, 2022). Even culturally specific images are often retained, reflecting the harmony-oriented philosophy of Chinese discourse, which values indirectness and rhetorical balance (Song & Zhang, 2024). In such contexts, image preservation serves not only linguistic but also ideological purposes, reinforcing cultural identity and avoiding direct confrontation. Institutional norms further contribute to this tendency. Political texts are produced under official oversight, and translators are expected to ensure both linguistic accuracy and ideological fidelity. Retaining imagery helps maintain the authority of the original discourse.

Overall, transitivity analysis offers a useful framework for examining how imagery is recontextualized in political translation. By considering grammatical structure and lexical choices, this approach reveals how experiential meaning is preserved, adjusted, or reinterpreted in line with ideological goals.

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**Jing Liang** is a Master's student in English Translation at the School of Foreign Languages, Dalian University of Technology, China, and is expected to graduate in 2026. Her academic fields include corpus linguistics and Systemic Functional Linguistics. She may be contacted at [lydialiang@mail.dlut.edu.cn](mailto:lydialiang@mail.dlut.edu.cn)



**Jianjun Ma** is a professor of linguistics at Dalian University of Technology. She got the doctorate in 2012 at Dalian University of Technology in China in the field of machine translation of IT. Her research interests include systemic functional linguistics, corpus translation, and computational linguistics, with a particular focus on translation studies and academic writing using systemic functional grammar.