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“Peaches and plums do not speak”: On understanding China through translation

How do Westerners make sense of the official discourse by which the People’s Republic of China addresses them? Much depends on the way the Chinese is translated. Ongoing work by Hu Bei on reader’s comprehension and image-building is showing that different kinds of translations are read in many different ways by different groups of people. This wide variation is not foreseen by the norms under which translations are produced in China. That is, China’s translators are producing foreign-affairs discourse as if it were for domestic consumption, which means that some foreign readers struggle to construe the translations and maintain predominantly negative images of the People’s Republic.

At the same time, other readers display greater “tolerance of ambiguity”, in the sense that they are able to construct positive images from the discourse without presuming to reach a correct construal. This tolerance has been studied since the 1990s as a feature of translators’ cognitive processes; here it is applied to the reception of translations, with the supposition that some translations foster this attitude more than others.

This talk will analyze receptions of a speech by Xi Jinping in which the Belt and Road initiative is justified in terms of the Chinese idiom 桃李不言, 下自成蹊, where something is happening between peaches and plums, but does anyone really know?

As China becomes a dominant world power, it is investing huge resources in the promotion of its language, culture, and world view. But without analyzing actual receptions of its translations, it may perhaps not understand why it is not always loved.