Constituting institutional identity in political discourse: The use of the first-person plural pronoun in China's press conferences

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A B S T R A C T

The discursive construction of institutional identity concerns how speakers, through their verbal conduct, perform actions as incumbents of particular institutional roles. This can be accomplished through the first-person plural pronoun, a salient marker of the ongoing displays, expressions, and constructions of institutional identity. Drawing on the Chinese premier's press conferences, this study investigates how politicians, journalists, and interpreters constitute their institutional identities through their use of the first-person plural pronoun (English *we*; Mandarin 我们 *wǒmen*). Relying on qualitative analysis and bivariate analysis, this study shows that Chinese journalists and interpreters tend to constitute their identities as aligned with the Chinese authority. This stands in contrast to patterns identified in independent press systems, in which journalists confront politicians, and interpreters serve as impartial facilitators. The findings illustrate the bounded fluidity of identities in political discourse and provide insight into the workings of the political communication system in an authoritarian context. (Political discourse, identity, personal pronoun, press conference, journalistic norm, mass communication, interpreter-mediated interaction, China, authoritarianism)*

I N T R O D U C T I O N

Identity as a field of inquiry has become increasingly central within sociocultural linguistic studies. Research on the intersection of identity and discourse primarily takes a constructionist approach, theorizing identity as an emergent construction that is locally constituted through text, talk, and interaction rather than as a stable structure situated in the individual psyche or in fixed social categories (Zimmerman 1998; Bucholtz & Hall 2005; Benwell & Stokoe 2006; De Fina, Schiffrin, & Bamberg 2006). In other words, identity is not something that people HAVE but rather something that people DO.

Previous discourse research has extensively investigated how people do identity work in various contexts, including in institutional settings. The discursive construction of institutional identity concerns how speakers, through their verbal conduct, perform actions as incumbents of particular institutional roles

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(Drew & Heritage 1992). This can be accomplished by explicit categorizations (e.g. "the UNION MEMBERS demand"), actions conventionally bound to institutional tasks (e.g. asking questions and then evaluating students' responses AS TEACHERS), and particular linguistic markers, such as personal pronouns. For instance, by analyzing how speakers manage their use of the first-person plural pronoun, research on political discourse has demonstrated that the construction of *we* is a central mechanism for producing and presenting political identities (Maitland & Wilson 1987; Wilson 1990; Zupnik 1994; De Fina 1995; Fairclough 2000; Bramley 2001; Skarzynska 2002; Van Dijk 2010; Proctor & Su 2011; Fetzer & Bull 2012; Ho 2013; Reyes 2015; Kranert 2017).

The present study examines the discursive construction of institutional identities in the political domain. While identity in political discourse has received considerable academic attention, prior studies primarily focused on politicians' pronominal choices in their speeches. This has left underexplored interactions involving other institutional roles, such as journalists and interpreters in political press conferences. Drawing on the Chinese Premier's Press Conference (CPPC), an annual interpreter-mediated political event, this study investigates how participants, namely the Chinese premiers, journalists, and interpreters, constitute their institutional identities through their use of the first-person plural pronoun (English *we*; Mandarin 我们 *wǒmen*), a salient marker of institutional identity and alignment.

In what follows, I review prior work on identity formation in political discourse. After a description of the data and method used in this study, I examine the uses of the first-person plural pronoun in the CPPCs, including their specific referents and the local interactional contexts of their productions. The analysis reveals that Chinese journalists and interpreters tend to constitute their identities as aligned with Chinese authority when performing their institutional tasks in press conferences. Specifically, Chinese journalists tend to distance themselves from the general public and display an alignment with the Chinese authority when voicing critical opinions of authority. This differs from the conduct of international journalists affiliated with non-Chinese media in the same press conferences and independent press systems elsewhere in the world. The analysis also shows that although interpreters in CPPCs do not produce utterances on their own behalf, through their translations of *we*/*wǒmen*, they imply an orientation to aligning with authority while distancing themselves from both the press and the general public.

While prior research on the discursive construction of institutional identity tends to presume that a speaker's institutional identity remains consistent throughout the course of interaction, this study illustrates the bounded fluidity of the construction of institutional identity in political discourse. In addition, since prior research has predominantly focused on liberal press systems, the findings yield insight into the workings of the political communication system (see Blumler & Gurevitch 1995) in an authoritarian context and the special role that journalists and interpreters play in that system.

The first-person plural pronoun as an index of identity

Pronouns as linguistic devices are traditionally accounted for in terms of their referential and anaphoric properties, yet their functions as encoding social relations and constructing identities have long been recognized. One of the pioneering works in this field was Brown & Gilman's (1960) analysis of how the pronouns derived from the Latin *tu* and *vos* in European languages are used to signal the positioning of speakers towards one another and thereby constitute social hierarchy and solidarity. Subsequent studies along this line also illustrate how pronouns systematically encode social relationships between speakers in terms of formality, status, power, class, and gender (Levinson 1983; Mühlhäusler & Harré 1990). These orientations thus frame a speaker's pronoun usage in particular ways.

In addition to these conventional usages, a speaker's pronominal choice is also locally contingent upon the speaker's role and the goal of the interaction in the immediate environment. For instance, in institutional interaction, the use of the first-person plural pronoun is commonly understood as a reference to the institution that the speaker is associated with and thus functions as a marker of the speaker's institutional identity. Drawing on a call to the emergency services for paramedic assistance, Drew & Heritage (1992) showed that the caller's use of *we* invokes an institutional rather than personal identity, indexing that he is calling on behalf of the shop in which the victim fell ill. The call-taker, likewise, uses *we* to invoke his identity as a representative of the emergency service rather than a personal provider of this service. Speakers' reliance on the pronominal system to be heard as performing identity work as incumbents of their institutional roles is also observed in courtrooms (Maynard 1984), medical consultations (West 1990), and political communication.

Constituting identities in political discourse

Given that pronominal forms can be utilized to implicitly convey alignment with (or distance from) certain roles in institutional settings, it is not surprising that politicians consistently rely on the pronominal system to do identity work. Specifically, the first-person plural pronoun is central to the ongoing displays, expressions, and constructions of political identity since it can be designed to be understood in context as referring to a range of individuals, from the speaker to the whole of humanity, and can be used to invoke a certain identity that the speaker intends to manifest at a given moment (Wilson 1990; Zupnik 1994). For instance, Urban (1986) identified a differential set of *we* that Caspar Weinberger, then US Secretary of Defense, used as a rhetorical device, from the most restricted 'the President and I *we*' to the most general 'the United States *we*'. Maitland & Wilson (1987) analyzed how Margaret Thatcher, in her speeches, shifted between the use of *I*, which indexed her personal identity, and the use of *we*, which indexed her institutional identity as the representative of the British government. In so doing, she distinguished her personal attitude toward wars from the governmental view. These

studies illustrate how politicians strategically make use of the first-person plural pronoun to reveal ideologies and indicate, accept, or distance themselves from responsibility for political actions (see also Wilson 1990; Fairclough 2000; Bramley 2001; Proctor & Su 2011; Fetzer & Bull 2012; Ho 2013).

Pronominal forms can also invoke contrasting or opposing identities in political discourse. As Maitland & Wilson (1987) documented, Margaret Thatcher often constituted the ideology of *us* versus *them* as a distancing strategy. By establishing a contrast between *we* and "those who for sinister political reasons wish to undermine the institutions and values upon which we depend", Thatcher worked to distance *those* from herself and her audience, thereby fostering solidarity among her supporters. Van Dijk (2010) also addressed how Tony Blair used *we* and *others* to distinguish between members of democracy and members of dictatorship. Similar practices of designating supporters (with *us*) and enemies (against *us*) by using the first-person plural pronoun are identified in other linguistic communities as well (e.g. De Fina 1995; Skarzynska 2002).

While researchers have extensively explored how politicians constitute identities through the use of pronouns in their speeches, the identity work in interactions involving other institutional roles has not received enough academic attention. In political press conferences, journalists undertake the institutional task of questioning politicians on behalf of the general public (Clayman 2002). The design of their questions has proven to afford insight into journalistic norms, political accountability, and press-state relations (Clayman & Heritage 2002a, b). However, there has been little systematic investigation of how journalists employ linguistic resources to index their institutional identities. The identity work that interpreters perform when rendering messages in a target language in international, cross-linguistic events also remains underexplored. Even though they undertake specific institutional tasks, journalists and interpreters, like all individuals, may identify with various social and political groups, and thus the constitution of their identities in political discourse may be complex, hybrid, and even contradictory. Therefore, the puzzles are: how do journalists and interpreters construct their identities when performing institutional tasks? In particular, since prior research has predominantly focused on liberal press systems, how do journalists and interpreters act as incumbents of their institutional roles in an authoritarian political communication system?

China's political press conferences

China, one of the world's remaining communist regimes, has an extremely restrictive media environment, where the media is regarded as a resource for facilitating political and social control. Even though privately owned media outlets have begun to emerge during the past decades, Chinese authority continues to maintain tight reins on the press and the media through licensing, regulating, and allocating resources to state-owned media (Winfield & Peng 2005). In this authoritarian context, government officials typically avoid public, immediate, and spontaneous

communication with journalists (Chen 2003). Nonetheless, the Chinese Premier's Press Conference (CPPC) is an exception as it allows the Chinese authority to dominate news coverage and build public support (see Kernell 2006; Eshbaugh-Soha 2013). Since its inception in 1993, the annual CPPC provides domestic and international journalists a public avenue to directly address their questions to the premier of the State Council, that is, the head of the Chinese government and the second-ranked party-state leader (after the general secretary of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party). This highest-ranked political event attracts over 500 journalists to Beijing every year, allowing the Chinese authority to deliver its policy, stance, and decision-making to domestic and international audiences.

The role of journalists in the Chinese context is fundamentally distinctive from the patterns found in liberal press systems. Although the CPPC appears to be an unscripted event, it is well-documented that journalists' questions are subject to a meticulous prescreening process, through which excessively critical or sensitive questions are filtered out (Denyer 2016; Yi 2016). Moreover, the body of press members in CPPCs is heterogeneous, consisting of three subgroups based on their affiliations: (i) domestic media in China, most of which are owned by the party-state; (ii) international media in the Chinese diaspora (e.g. Taiwan and Singapore), which typically take a friendly stance toward the Chinese authority; and (iii) non-Chinese international media, the most aggressive subgroup. In contrast to non-Chinese international journalists who often work to confront the premier within the constraints of censorship, Chinese journalists are significantly less adversarial and typically pose softball questions in CPPCs (Du & Rendle-Short 2016; Wu, Cheng, & Chao 2017). It is therefore of interest whether Chinese journalists constitute identities in alignment with authority when performing their institutional tasks.

In CPPCs, government interpreters offer Mandarin-English consecutive interpreting services to facilitate communication between Chinese premiers and non-Chinese international journalists. The interpreters' impact extends beyond the press conference room as their renditions are widely cited as an official source of information across various platforms, including news reports, social media sites, and scholarly work. Whereas interpreters' impartiality is expected and emphasized in liberal systems (Kadrić, Rennert, & Schäffner 2021), government interpreters in China, as members of the Communist Party and employees of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, do not practice impartiality. Recent translation studies are virtually unanimous in recognizing that the work performed by government interpreters in China's political press conferences is 'not only a site for interlingual, cross-cultural and international communication but also a venue for re-contextualisation and manipulation of values, power and ideology' (Wang 2020:10; see also Gu 2018; Wang & Munday 2020). However, as prior research tends to focus on how Chinese interpreters modify messages in their renditions for ideological motivations, it remains unclear whether and how interpreters locally enact their institutional identities through their pronominal translations. Focusing on how the first-person plural

pronoun (English *we*; Mandarin 我们 *wǒmen*) is produced and translated, the present study investigates the institutional identities of and relationships among the Chinese premiers, journalists, and interpreters in CPPCs.

DATA AND METHOD

The present dataset draws on ten televised CPPCs from 2007 to 2016 hosted by former Premier Wen Jiabao and former Premier Li Keqiang. Since the CPPC is an annual event, the dataset is comprehensive, including all events held over the decade. The video recordings were retrieved from public media websites (e.g. YouTube). Each event ranges from 100 to 180 minutes, bringing the corpus to approximately twenty-three hours of spoken data. The data were transcribed verbatim for analysis.

In the tradition of research on the discursive constitution of identity, this study focuses on the first-person plural pronoun as a marker of the speaker's institutional identity. The current dataset yields a total of 750 tokens of first-person plural pronouns (English *we*; Mandarin 我们 *wǒmen*) produced by the premiers and journalists. Guided by the principles of conversation analysis (see Sidnell & Stivers 2013), I relied on case-by-case analyses of the local context of action in which each token of *we/wǒmen* was deployed, including who produced it, how it was produced, and where it was produced. These analyses then led to generalization across cases. For example, the premiers were found to use *wǒmen* to refer to a range of referents, such as *the Chinese government*, *the Communist Party of China, Chinese people*, *China and the US*, among others. These references converged into three categories: Chinese authority (the government and/or the Communist Party), China (the people, the society, and/or the nation), and China and others (the US, Russia, etc.). A similar analytic process was conducted for journalists' use of *we/wǒmen*.

For each production of *we/wǒmen* in the original utterance, its corresponding translation provided by the government interpreter was also examined. I reviewed all cases with respect to similarities and differences and then subdivided these cases for further analysis. In order to test whether interpreters invoke different pronominal choices when rendering utterances of the premiers and journalists, I augmented my qualitative analysis with a quantitative analysis of the bivariate relationship between the case types I identified and the speaker of the original utterance.

ANALYSIS

This analysis focuses on how the premiers, journalists, and interpreters constitute their institutional identities through using or translating the first-person plural pronoun (English *we*; Mandarin 我们 *wǒmen*) in CPPCs. I show that the premiers consistently enact their identities as embodying Chinese authority. International journalists affiliated with non-Chinese media constantly enact their identity as the representative of the general public, whereas Chinese journalists display a hybrid

of identities—they often present themselves as aligned with the public but tend to distance themselves from the public when articulating critical opinions of authority. Government interpreters, through their translations of *we/wǒmen*, imply an alignment with authority while distancing themselves from both the press and the general public.

The premiers' use of wǒmen

As the political leaders of China, both Premier Li and Premier Wen speak Mandarin throughout the CPPCs and use *wǒmen* overwhelmingly to refer to Chinese authority (the government and/or the Communist Party) and China (the people, the society, and/or the nation). In a small number of cases, *wǒmen* is used anaphorically to refer to China and other institutions (e.g. the Chinese and the US governments). Extract (1) exemplifies Premier Li's use of *wǒmen* as a reference to the Chinese government. This segment is part of his response to a journalist's question regarding China's economic growth and financial risk. The premier's original utterance in Mandarin, transliterations, linguistic glosses,[1] and idiomatic English translations are provided in the transcript.

(1) 2015 Premier Li

今年	我们	就	要	出台	存款	保险	条例
jīnnián	**wǒmen**	jiù	yào	chūtái	cúnkuǎn	bǎoxiǎn	tiáolì
this year	1PL	INTE	will	introduce	deposit	insurance	regulation

'This year, **we** are going to introduce deposit insurance regulations.'

Premier Li's use of *wǒmen* can be identified as a reference to the Chinese government, the agent who introduces the new policies. Similarly, in the following extract, Premier Wen refers to the Chinese government with his use of *wǒmen* when addressing a journalist's question about housing market regulation.

(2) 2012 Premier Wen

其实	我们	在	03 年	已经	提出	了	六	条	调控	措施
qíshí	**wǒmen**	zài	nián	yǐjīng	tíchū	le	liù	tiáo	tiáokòng	cuòshī
in fact	1PL	PREP	year	already	propose	PRF	six	CL	regulate	measure

'In fact, **we** have already proposed six regulating measures in 2003.'

The premiers also routinely use *wǒmen* as a reference to China in terms of the people, the society, and/or the nation. In extract (3), when responding to a journalist's claim that China has supposedly become the largest economy in the world, Premier Li uses *wǒmen* as a reference to China as a nation regarding its per capita GDP.

(3) 2015 Premier Li

按	人均	GDP	**我们**	是	在	八十	位	以后
àn	rénjūn		**wǒmen**	shì	zài	bāshí	wèi	yǐhòu
regard	per capita		1PL	COP	PREP	eighty	rank	behind

'Regarding per capita GDP, **we** rank lower than eighty.'

Extract (4) illustrates a similar use of *wǒmen* by Premier Wen. In his rebuttal against a journalist's statement that 'inflation has become an acutely-felt problem in China's society', Premier Wen uses *wǒmen* as a reference to China in terms of the nation and/or the society.

(4) 2011 Premier Wen

我们	目前	出现	的	通货膨胀	其实	是	国际
wǒmen	mùqián	chūxiàn	de	tōnghuòpéngzhàng	qíshí	shì	guójì
1pl	at present	appear	ASSO	inflation	in fact	COP	international

性	的
xìng	de
quality	NOM

'The inflation **we** currently have is in fact international.'

As these examples show, the referents of *wǒmen* in this subset of data are not always clear-cut—the government and the Communist Party are hardly separable in the Chinese party-state, and the distinction between the people, the society, and the nation is often ambiguous. Nonetheless, the overall pattern indicates that the premiers use *wǒmen* to invoke the Chinese government, the Communist Party, and China almost synonymously and interchangeably to accomplish local interactional goals. While the specific identity work performed in each utterance may vary, all instances of *wǒmen* produced by the premiers point to their institutional identity as the representative of China in terms of the government, the party, and the nation. This overall pattern is consistent with previous findings on political leaders' use of the first-person plural pronoun in other political and linguistic environments (e.g. Maitland & Wilson 1987).

Journalists' use of we/wǒmen

As previously noted, journalists in CPPCs can be categorized into three subgroups based on their affiliations: (i) domestic media in China, (ii) international media in the Chinese diaspora, and (iii) non-Chinese international media (see the appendix for a full list of media affiliations in the current dataset). Journalists from China and the Chinese diaspora exclusively speak Mandarin and use *wǒmen* when raising questions, whereas non-Chinese international journalists mostly speak English and use *we* or its grammatical derivative forms. As opposed to the premiers' homogeneous usage of *wǒmen* throughout their talk, qualitative analysis reveals that

journalists use *we/wŏmen* in three distinctive ways: (i) as a reference to the press and/or the general public, (ii) as a reference to the press in contrast to the general public, and (iii) as a reference to Chinese authority.

The most common usage is *we/wŏmen* as a reference to the press and/or the general public, which accounts for 83% (n = 73) of the cases in this subset of data. Extract (5) illustrates a non-Chinese international journalist's use of *we* as referring to the body of press members. In this question concerning the Tibetan protest in 2008, the journalist begins with "many of the people in this room", which is hearable as referring to the journalists attending the CPPC, and then shifts to "we".

(5) 2008 AFP (France)
     Many of the people in this room would love to get on an airplane to Lhasa right now to see what's going on up there. **We** are hearing that foreigners are not being allowed into Tibet and some journalists have already been expelled. This comes despite increasing calls overseas for foreign media and independent observers to be allowed in there to assess what has really happened. What's your response to these calls to let independent eyes in there?

Here, *we* may be identified as anaphorically referring to 'many of the people in this room', yet it is also hearable as referring generally to journalists of foreign media and independent observers, and even more broadly, their audiences. This is in accordance with the journalistic norm established in independent press systems—in political press conferences, the main institutional task of journalists is to question politicians on behalf of the general public (Clayman 2002). In fact, in most cases falling under this category, the press and the general public cannot be unequivocally identified as separate referents. For instance, in extract (6), the journalist contrasts *you*, referring to the premier and his administration, with *us*, referring to the press and the general public that they represent.

(6) 2007 Wall Street Journal (US)
     On another topic related to investment, the government has announced plans for a new agency to manage the diversification of China's foreign exchange reserves. Can **you** tell **us** what kind of assets this agency will invest in?

Journalists affiliated with Chinese media also use *wŏmen* as a reference to the press and/or the general public. Extract (7) presents a similar construction of the contrast between 您 *nín* (honorific second-person singlular pronoun) and *wŏmen*.

(7) 2013 China Daily

刚才	您	谈	到	了	很	多	改革	的	目标	和	举措
gāngcái	**nín**	tán	dào	le	hěn	duō	gǎigé	de	mùbiāo	hé	jǔcuò
just now	2SG	mention	PRF	PT	very	many	reform	ASSO	goal		and initiative

我们	也	一直	十分	关注	中国	劳	教	制度
wǒmen	yě	yīzhí	shífēn	guānzhù	zhōngguó	láo	jiào	zhìdù
1pl	also	always	very	pay attention	China	labor	education	system

的	改革
de	gǎigé
ASSO	reform

'Just now **you** mentioned many goals and initiatives of reform. **We** have also paid close attention to the reform of China's re-education system.'

This dominant usage signals journalists' institutional identity as the representative of the press and the people. In the current dataset, all the tokens of *we/wǒmen* produced by non-Chinese international journalists fall into this category, suggesting that their institutional alignment is consistent throughout the political event. Journalists affiliated with Chinese media, however, also deploy *wǒmen* in two other ways. Although these two usages produced by Chinese journalists are less common overall, they provide empirical evidence of how the Chinese press system differs from independent press systems. First, *wǒmen* as a reference to the press in contrast to the general public accounts for 10% (n = 9) of the cases in the dataset. Extract (8) exemplifies how a journalist affiliated with China's state media positions *wǒmen* in contrast to 老百姓 *lǎobǎixìng* (lit. 'old hundred surnames'; commoners or ordinary citizens as opposed to the ruling class) when voicing growing public complaints about air pollution.

(8) 2014 China National Radio

我	的	问题	是	关于	雾霾	天气	现在	**我们**	看	到	**老百姓**
wǒ	de	wèntí	shì	guānyú	wùmái	tiānqì	xiànzài	**wǒmen**	kàn	dào	**lǎobǎixìng**
1sg	GEN	question	COP	regard	smog	weather	now	1PL	see	PRF	commoner

对	这个	雾霾	的	抱怨	可以	说	越来越	多
duì	zhègè	wùmái	de	bàoyuàn	kěyǐ	shuō	yuèláiyuè	duō
PREP	FILL	smog	GEN	complaint	allow	say	more and more	many

'My question is about the smog weather. Now **we** see that **commoners**' complaints about the smog, (we) can say, have increased a lot.'

This construction of reporting something 'we have observed regarding others' is to be distinguished from the first subset of *we/wǒmen* as a reference to the press and/or the people given that the journalist is not hearable as endorsing the critical viewpoint—this formulation has a twofold implication: (i) *wǒmen* are not commoners, and (ii) it is commoners who made the complaints, not *wǒmen*.

In extract (9), a Chinese journalist draws an even more explicit boundary between the press and the general public with her construction of *us* versus *them* when articulating a public concern about corruption. She first positions *wǒmen*

in contrast to 观众 *guānzhòng* 'audience', 大家 *dàjiā* 'everybody', and 人们 *rénmen* 'people', and then uses the third-person plural pronoun 他们 *tāmen* to anaphorically refer to *rénmen* 'people'.

(9)　2007 China Central Television

最近	陈良宇	郑筱萸	等	案件	的	查处	和	披露
zuìjìn	chénliángyǔ	zhèngxiǎoyú	děng	ànjiàn	de	cháchǔ	hé	pīlù
recent	(name)	(name)	etc.	case	ASSO	investigation	and	disclosure

带来	很	大	的	反响	**我们**	也	听	到	了	来自
dàilái	hěn	dà	de	fǎnxiǎng.	**wǒmen**	yě	tīng	dào	le	láizì
bring	very	big	ASSO	reaction	1PL	also	hear	PRF	PT	come from

观众	的	声音	一	方面	**大家**	觉得	特别	的	欣慰
guānzhòng	de	shēngyīn.	yī	fāngmiàn	**dàjiā**	juéde	tèbié	de	xīnwèi
audience	GEN	voice	one	aspect	everybody	feel	especially	PT	reassure

因为	加大	反	腐	力度	一直	是	**人们**	的	期待
yīnwèi	jiādà	fǎn	fǔ	lìdù	yīzhí	shì	**rénmen**	de	qīdài
because	increase	anti-corrupt	force	always	COP	people	GEN	expectation

而	另	一	方面	**人们**	很	忧虑
ér	lìng	yī	fāngmiàn	**rénmen**	hěn	yōulǜ
and	another	one	aspect	people	very	worry

为	**他们**	看	到	的	腐败	现象	忧虑
wèi	**tāmen**	kàn	dào	de	fǔbài	xiànxiàng	yōulǜ
for	3PL	see	PRF	ASSO	corrupt	situation	worry

'Recently, the investigation and disclosure of the cases of Chen Liangyu and Zheng Xiaoyu have brought forth very big reactions. **We** have also heard voices from **the audience**. On the one hand, **everybody** feels especially reassured because increasing the force of fighting corruption has always been **people**'s expectation. On the other hand, **people** are very worried, for **they** see the situation of corruption.'

Similar to the previous example, this formulation of 'we have heard from others' implies that *wǒmen* are not the same as the people, and it is the people, not *wǒmen*, who are worried about corruption.

In these cases, Chinese journalists, through their pronominal choices, convey that they are not members of *lǎobǎixìng* 'commoners' or *rénmen* 'people' and present themselves as merely delivering the messages on behalf of the people but not necessarily endorsing such perspectives. It is worth noting that eight out of the nine cases of this type of *wǒmen* were produced in the context of critical public opinions (e.g. air pollution in extract (8), corruption in extract (9)). This marked practice thus reveals these Chinese journalists' hybrid identities: as

members of the press, they are required to perform their institutional task of questioning politicians on behalf of the people; as employees of state-owned media, they tend to refrain from articulating negative opinions and criticizing authority.

In 7% of cases (n = 6), Chinese journalists use *wǒmen* to refer to Chinese authority, indexing an identity associated with the state rather than the press as a separate entity. Extract (10) is taken from a question concerning China's GDP growth target; the authority just announced that the new target is 7%, which is 0.5% lower than the previously set target.

(10)   2011 People's Daily (China)

我们	主动	调低	经济	增长	速度	的	这麽
wǒmen	zhǔdòng	tiáodī	jīngjì	zēngzhǎng	sùdù	de	zhème
1pl	take initiative	lower	economic	growth	speed	ASSO	DEM

一	个	选择	是	出于	什麽	考虑
yī	gè	xuǎnzé	shì	chūyú	shénme	kǎolù?
one	CL	decision	COP	based on	what	consideration

'The decision that **we** take initiative to lower the economic growth speed is based on what consideration?'

Here, *wǒmen* can be identified as a reference to Chinese authority, the only agent that has the legitimate power to set China's GDP growth target. This is distinct from the other two types of *we/wǒmen* produced by journalists since the decision to 'take initiative to lower the economic growth speed' was clearly not made by the press or the general public. It is a policy introduced by the Chinese government, and thus the premier is held accountable for explaining the rationale behind it. Consider that if the journalist formulated the agent as *wǒmen de zhèngfǔ* 'our government', the *wǒmen* would be identified as a reference to the Chinese people rather than a reference to Chinese authority.

A similar example is shown in extract (11). When questioning Premier Li about political corruption, the Chinese journalist uses *wǒmen* to refer to Chinese authority who 'discovered and investigated corrupt officials'.

(11)   2014 People's Daily (China)

去年	我们	也	查	出	了	不少	贪	官
qùnián	**wǒmen**	yě	chá	chū	le	bùshǎo	tān	guān
last year	1PL	also	investigate	discover	PRF	many	corrupt	official

这	是	否	说明	中国	在	制度	方面	还	存在	着
zhè	shì	fǒu	shuōmíng	zhōngguó	zài	zhìdù	fāngmiàn	hái	cúnzài	zhe
this	COP-NEG	indicate	China	PREP	institution	aspect	still	exist	PROG

某	些	缺陷
mǒu	xiē	quēxiàn?
certain	PL	flaw

Language in Society (2023)

TABLE 1. *Distribution of journalists' uses of* we/wǒmen *by affiliation.*

	PRESS AND/OR PUBLIC	PRESS IN CONTRAST TO PUBLIC	CHINESE AUTHORITY	TOTAL
Domestic Chinese	32 (70%)	8 (17%)	6 (13%)	46 (100%)
International Chinese diaspora/Hong Kong	28 (97%)	1 (3%)	0 (0%)	29 (100%)
International non-Chinese	13 (100%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	13 (100%)

Fisher's exact test $p < .05$

> 'Last year **we** also discovered and investigated many corrupt officials. Does this indicate that China, in the institutional aspect, still has certain flaws?'

This practice of using *wǒmen* as a reference to Chinese authority is infrequent but nonetheless documents that Chinese journalists can rely on this resource to constitute their identities as aligned with authority. Since only journalists affiliated with China's state media use *wǒmen* in this particular manner, this marked practice suggests that even though the press and the state are formally independent institutions in democratic societies (Blumer & Gurevitch 1995; Clayman & Heritage 2002b), in the Chinese context, the press is not always regarded as separable from the state.

Table 1 presents the distribution of journalists' use of *we/wǒmen* by their affiliation. Their practices of constructing *we/wǒmen* index how they do identity work when questioning the premiers. Non-Chinese international journalists consistently enact their identity as aligned with the general public, which conforms to the journalistic norm of serving as 'tribune of the people' in independent press systems (Clayman 2002). In contrast, Chinese journalists, while frequently using *wǒmen* as referring to the press and the public, work to distance themselves from the public when voicing critical issues and present themselves as aligned with Chinese authority.

This contrasting pattern ($p < .05$, Fisher's exact test) adds to existing research on China's political press conferences, which shows that Chinese journalists are significantly less adversarial than their counterparts in free press systems (Jiang 2006; Du & Rendle-Short 2016; Wu et al. 2017). Chinese journalists' deferential posture, as this analysis suggests, is likely informed by their institutional identity as aligned with the authority.

Interpreters' translation of we/wǒmen

To investigate how government interpreters constitute their institutional identity in CPPCs, their translations of the 750 utterances produced by the premiers and journalists that contain *we/wǒmen* were examined. Based on comparisons between their translations and the original utterances, three translational forms that government interpreters use to render *we/wǒmen* into a target language were identified.

(i) Literal translation (67%, n = 507): rendering *we/wǒmen* into the literal corresponding form or its grammatical derivative form in a target language, that is, translating *wǒmen* in Mandarin as *we* in English, and vice versa.

(ii) Nonliteral translation (19%, n = 140): rendering *we/wǒmen* into a nonliteral corresponding form, such as translating *wǒmen* in Mandarin as *China* in English.

(iii) No translation (14%, n = 103): rendering the whole utterance without a corresponding form of *we/wǒmen*.

An example of literal translation is presented in extract (1) (reproduced below), in which the government interpreter renders Premier Li's use of *wǒmen* in Mandarin as *we* in English.

(1) 2015 Premier Li

今年	**我们**	就	要	出台	存款	保险	条例
jīnnián	**wǒmen**	jiù	yào	chūtái	cúnkuǎn	bǎoxiǎn	tiáolì
this year	1PL	INTE	will	introduce	deposit	insurance	regulation

'This year, **we** are going to introduce deposit insurance regulations.'

Government interpreter's translation:
'This year, **we** are going to introduce this deposit insurance system.'

The literal translation is arguably the most intuitive and straightforward practice for converting the first-person plural pronoun into a target language since *wǒmen* in Mandarin and *we* in English are equivalent lexical items (see Li & Thompson 1981).

The second translational form, nonliteral translation, is rendering *we/wǒmen* into a corresponding form that is not a personal pronoun in the target language. Departing from the default literal translation, a nonliteral translation specifies the referent of a particular *we/wǒmen* in a particular interactional context. Interpreters can make use of this strategy to clarify an ambiguous usage of a personal pronoun and thus facilitate cross-linguistic communication, yet this relies on the interpreter's own judgment of the original message, which may or may not be consistent with what the speaker of the original message intends to convey. See extract (12) below for an example, in which Premier Li addresses China's economic development.

(12) 2016 Premier Li

我们	正	在	工业化	城镇化	的	推进	过程
wǒmen	zhèng	zài	gōngyèhuà	chéngzhènhuà	de	tuījìn	guòchéng
1pl	PROG	PREP	industrialization	urbanization	ASSO	advance	process

当中
dāngzhōng
during

Language in Society (2023)

'**We** are now in the process of advancing industrialization and urbanization.'

Government interpreter's translation:
'**China** is still at a stage of industrialization and urbanization.'

The referent of Premier Li's *wǒmen* is ambiguous: it can be hearable as referring to China as a nation or as referring to the Chinese government as the agent who pushes forward the process. The government interpreter renders *wǒmen* as *China*, a non-literal correspondent form, while also modifying 推进过程 *tuījìn guòchéng* 'advance process' as *stage*. Her interpreting strategy reflects a conceptualization of the current state of the nation as a step toward a natural change rather than a consequence of a particular agent's political decision, which may or may not be consistent with Premier Li's intention.

The third translational form is rendering the whole utterance without a corresponding form of *we/wǒmen*. Deleting *we/wǒmen* entails an even greater departure from the original utterance, usually involving major deletions or reformulations of the original message. This practice also carries an additional interactional implication as it allows interpreters to distance themselves from the speaker's stance by not speaking in first person at all. In extract (13), when answering a journalist's question about China's emerging financial risks, Premier Li designs his statement in active voice, asserting that *wǒmen*, hearable as referring to Chinese authority, allow the occurrence of individual cases of financial risks. In other words, he assures the audience that such risks are under the government's control.

(13)   2015 Premier Li
这裡 我 要　表明
zhèlǐ wǒ yào biǎomíng
here   1SG want declare

我们　允许 个　　 案　性　 金融　　风险　 的　 发生
wǒmen yǔnxǔ gè   àn   xìng jīnróng fēngxiǎn de   fāshēng
1pl   allow individual case quality financial risk   ASSO occurrence

'Here I would like to declare: **we** allow the occurrence of individual cases of financial risk.'

Government interpreter's translation:
'Individual cases of financial risk will be allowed.'

The interpreter, however, reformulates the syntactic structure and renders the utterance in passive voice in English. Although the overall meaning of the original message is conveyed in the translation, the presence of Chinese authority is minimized. Similar interpreting practices are applied to *we/wǒmen* produced by journalists as well.

(14)   2016 Caijing (China)
我们　　注意 到　今年　　 的　 政府　　　 工作　　 报告
wǒmen zhùyì dào jīnnián de   zhèngfǔ   gōngzuò bàogào
1pl   notice PRF this year ASSO government work   report

首先	出现	了	新	经济	这	一	概念
shǒuxiān	chūxiàn	le	xīn	jīngjì	zhè	yī	gàiniàn
first	appear	PRF	new	economy	this	one	concept

'**We** have noticed that in this year's government work report, for the first time, the concept of the new economy appears.'

Government interpreter's translation:
'In this year's government work report, for the first time, the concept of the new economy was put forward.'

As extract (14) shows, deleting the first-person plural pronoun along with the entire question frame in the translation downplays the agency of the press since the question is no longer grounded in the journalist's observation but simply presents a known fact. With such deletions and reformulations, this practice works to deliver the overall meaning of the original message, but the details are often substantially modified.

While the choice of a translational form regarding a particular case of *we/wǒmen* may be accounted for by reasons unrelated to identity, such as the local interactional goal (e.g. using a nonliteral form to specify an ambiguous referent) and the interpreter's incompetence (e.g. failing to memorize the design of the original message), the overall pattern across the 750 cases reveals government interpreters' systematic orientations to their institutional identity in CPPCs. Table 2 below depicts the distribution of the three translational forms that government interpreters use to render *we/wǒmen* produced by the premiers and journalists.

Consider how far each type of form departs from the original message in terms of its lexical and syntactical structure, the pattern of translating the premiers' productions of *wǒmen* seems to be the default: the most straightforward, equivalent literal translation accounts for the vast majority (73%) of translations; far fewer cases (18%) are rendered into nonliteral forms that require additional work; only 9% are translated without a corresponding form of *wǒmen*, thus involving substantial deletion and reformulation of the original utterance. This pattern may be reinforced by the demand for accuracy when rendering the premiers' talk at such high-profile diplomatic events. That is, interpreters are likely prompted to render the premiers' talk as close to its original form and structure as possible.

In contrast to how interpreters translate *wǒmen* produced by the premiers, the ways that they translate *we/wǒmen* produced by journalists show a strikingly different distribution: only 28% of *we/wǒmen* are rendered in the literal form, whereas the majority (50%) are not translated. While one may argue that deleting the subject is inevitable when rendering non-Chinese international journalists' utterances in English into Mandarin, a null-subject language, all forty-four cases in the 'no translation' category involve substantial deletions and/or reformulations of the original utterance rather than simply dropping the subject, which cannot be explained by the topic pro-drop feature of Mandarin.

TABLE 2. *Distribution of translations of* we/ wǒmen *by original speakers.*

	LITERAL	NONLITERAL	NONE	TOTAL
Premier	482 (73%)	121 (18%)	59 (9%)	662 (100%)
Journalist	25 (28%)	19 (22%)	44 (50%)	88 (100%)

$\chi^2(2, N = 750) = 118.59, p < .001$

TABLE 3. *Distribution of translations of journalists' *we *by referent.*

	LITERAL	NONLITERAL	NONE	TOTAL
Press and/or public	18 (25%)	14 (19%)	41 (56%)	73 (100%)
Press in contrast to public	6 (67%)	0 (0%)	3 (33%)	9 (100%)
Chinese authority	1 (17%)	5 (83%)	0 (0%)	6 (100%)

Fisher's exact test $p < .001$.

A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the bivariate relationship between the interpreting practice and the original speaker. The result (χ^2 (2, $N = 750$) = 118.59, $p < .001$) is statistically significant, indicating that the interpreting practices vary depending on who the original speaker is. Given that journalists use *we/wǒmen* in three distinctive ways, I further examine whether interpreters also employ different practices based on the referents of *we/wǒmen*. The distribution of the translational forms of the three types of *we/wǒmen* produced by journalists—(i) the press and/or the general public, (ii) the press in contrast to the general public, and (iii) Chinese authority—is presented in Table 3.

The distribution of translations of journalists' most common usage, *we/wǒmen* as a reference to the press and/or the general public, is similar to the overall pattern: literal translation accounts for only 25% of the cases, whereas the majority (56%) are not rendered in a target language. This pattern suggests that government interpreters are likely to resist speaking in first person on behalf of journalists and thereby distance themselves from both the press and the general public.

The second usage, *wǒmen* as a reference to the press in contrast to the general public, shows a different distribution—most cases (67%) are rendered in the literal corresponding form, suggesting that interpreters are more likely to speak in first person on behalf of journalists when they position themselves in contrast to the people. Given that these instances were all produced by Chinese journalists, this pattern is likely an indication of interpreters showing alignment with journalists who identify themselves as associated with China's ruling elite.

Lastly, translations of *wǒmen* as a reference to Chinese authority present yet another pattern. Five out of the six instances of *wǒmen* (83%) are rendered as

'the government', a nonliteral corresponding form, such as extract (10) (reproduced below).

(10) 2011 People's Daily (China)

我们	主动	调低	经济	增长	速度	的	这麽
wǒmen	zhǔdòng	tiáodī	jīngjì	zēngzhǎng	sùdù	de	zhème
1pl	take initiative	lower	economic	growth	speed	ASSO	DEM

一	个	选择	是	出于	什麽	考虑
yī	gè	xuǎnzé	shì	chūyú	shénme	kǎolǜ?
one	CL	decision	COP	based on	what	consideration

'The decision that **we** take initiative to lower the economic growth speed is based on what consideration?'

Government interpreter's translation:
'What is the consideration of **the government** in taking the initiative to adjust downward the GDP growth target?'

The remaining one case, albeit categorized as a literal translation in Table 3, is distinct from other literal translations in the dataset since the referent of *wǒmen* is shifted in the translation. As shown in extract (11) (reproduced below), although *wǒmen* is rendered in the literal form *we* in English, the interpreter redesigns the action and thereby shifts the referent from Chinese authority (who dealt with corrupt officials) to the press and/or the general public (who *saw* corrupt officials be dealt with).

(11) 2014 People's Daily (China)

去年	我们	也	查	出	了	不少	贪	官
qùnián	**wǒmen**	yě	chá	chū	le	bùshǎo	tān	guān
last year	1PL	also	investigate	discover	PRF	many	corrupt	official

这	是	否	说明	中国	在	制度	方面	还	存在	着
zhè	shì	fǒu	shuōmíng	zhōngguó	zài	zhìdù	fāngmiàn	hái	cúnzài	zhe
this	COP-NEG		show	China	PREP	institution	aspect	still	exist	PROG

某	些	缺陷
mǒu	xiē	quēxiàn?
certain	PL	flaw

'Last year **we** also discovered and investigated many corrupt officials. Does this show that China, in the institutional aspect, still has certain flaws?'

Government interpreter's translation:
'**We** saw many corrupt officials be dealt with, but does this show there exist some institutional flaws in China?'

The overall pattern suggests that, while Chinese journalists seem to obscure the boundary between the press and the state by using *wǒmen* as a reference to Chinese authority, interpreters tend to distinguish between these two institutions by specifying the referent as 'the government' or shifting the referent.

The association between the translational form and the type of *we/wǒmen* shown in Table 3 is statistically significant ($p < .001$, Fisher's exact test). The findings of the bivariate analysis indicate that interpreters use different translational forms to render *we/wǒmen* depending on who the speaker is and what stance the speaker takes. Such systematic patterns cannot be explained by local interactional goals or accidental usages, even though they may account for some individual cases in this dataset. Overall, when speaking on behalf of the premiers, interpreters keep close to the original utterances and mostly render literal translations. In contrast, interpreters appear to resist speaking on behalf of the press and the general public as they frequently delete *we/wǒmen* when journalists use it in ways that align with the general public. Although interpreters partially align with Chinese journalists when they position themselves as associated with authority, interpreters seem to draw a clear boundary between the press and the state, treating them as two separate entities.

DISCUSSION

The use of the first-person plural pronoun *we/wǒmen* explicated in this study addresses the reflexive relationship between the sense of constituting *we* and the speaker's local identity, and more importantly, the fluidity of both. While previous studies on institutional discourse have widely examined institutional identity and alignment through the use of the first-person plural pronoun, they tended to presume that a speaker's institutional identity is static, affiliated with one particular institution throughout the entire course of interaction (e.g. the call-taker as the representative of the emergency medical service throughout the call; Margaret Thatcher as the representative of the British government throughout her speech). The present study illustrates that a speaker's institutional identity is an emergent construct that may shift from moment to moment. Even though speakers typically undertake specific tasks in institutional settings, their identities are not inevitably fixed. Rather, the constitution of a speaker's institutional identity may be complex, hybrid, and even contradictory. It is shaped by the local context of the speaker's action—what the speaker is doing, whom the speaker is addressing, and what goal the speaker is aiming to accomplish at the particular point of action.

The variation of a speaker's institutional identity, however, is not unlimited. While speakers in ordinary interaction may briefly occupy a temporary position and then abandon it with great fluidity as they act and respond to the contingencies of unfolding discourse (Bucholtz & Hall 2005), identity formation in institutional settings is constrained by the particular nature of each institution. In the present

study, the three major actors in CPPCs—premiers, journalists, and interpreters—all enact identities that are relevant within the political communication system. The premiers present themselves as embodying Chinese authority. Non-Chinese international journalists adopt an institutional role as the representative of the people, whereas Chinese journalists also constitute an identity more aligned with the ruling class in contrast to the general public, especially when voicing criticisms of the authority. Government interpreters consistently align with Chinese authority while distancing themselves from the press and the general public. That is, while the premiers, Chinese journalists, and government interpreters show some variations in terms of their identities and local institutional goals within the political communication system, they all orient to an alignment with Chinese authority.

Through examining a specific linguistic marker at the microlevel, the findings provide empirical evidence bolstering a structural view of the Chinese political communication system as opposed to that found in democratic societies at the macrolevel. In the US, for instance, while press-state relations may change over time and across different contexts (e.g. Clayman & Heritage 2002a; Clayman, Heritage, Elliot, & McDonald 2007), the press and the state are formally independent institutions, each with its own function, legitimacy, and autonomy (Blumler & Gurevitch 1995). This is not the case in China. As this study shows, the difference between Chinese journalists and their counterparts in independent press systems lies not only in the level of adversarial questioning (Jiang 2006; Du & Rendle-Short 2016; Wu et al. 2017) but also in the identities that inform their actions. In their perspective, the press is not an institution independent from the state, and journalists' main task in political press conferences is not to serve as the 'tribune of the people' (Clayman 2002). Rather, they position themselves as aligned with Chinese authority and merely deliver what they have observed regarding public viewpoints without endorsing them.

This study also provides methodological implications by demonstrating that identities are constituted not only through the USE of personal pronouns but also through the TRANSLATION of personal pronouns. Although government interpreters do not directly enact their identities, they nonetheless orient to align with Chinese authority and the ruling class when rendering messages in political press conferences. The implicit identity work that interpreters do in interaction tends to be overlooked because people usually treat interpreters as 'voice boxes' (Goffman 1981; see Davidson 2002) whose messages are strictly determined by the linguistic particulars of the original message, especially in extremely constrained, high-profile settings like CPPCs. The analysis shows that interpreters, just like other active speakers in political press conferences, perform institutional tasks in ways that are guided by their identities. While the 'voice box' model generally accounts for translations of the premiers' utterances, government interpreters depart further from the original messages when rendering journalists' questions and thereby distance themselves from the press and the general public.

APPENDIX: OVERVIEW OF JOURNALISTS' AFFILIATIONS IN
CPPCS (2007–2016).

CHINA (DOMESTIC)	CHINESE DIASPORA (HONG KONG SAR/INTERNATIONAL)	NON-CHINESE (INTERNATIONAL)
Beijing News (1)	Hong Kong - Asia Television (1)	Austria - ORF (1)
Caijing (2)	Hong Kong - Cable Television (1)	France - AFP (3)
China Business News (1)	Hong Kong - Commercial Daily (1)	France - Le Figaro (2)
China Central Television (10)	Hong Kong - Economic Times (2)	France - Le Monde (1)
	Hong Kong - Phoenix TV (3)	France - Le Point (1)
China Daily (5)	Hong Kong - Sing Tao Daily (1)	Germany - DPA (2)
China National Radio (7)	Hong Kong - TVB (1)	Germany - Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (1)
	Singapore - Lianhe Zaobao (5)	
China News Service (4)	Singapore - The Straits Times (1)	India - Times of India (1)
	Taiwan - China Times (1)	Japan - Asahi Shimbun (1)
China Radio International (2)	Taiwan - CITI (1)	Japan - NHK (2)
	Taiwan - CNA (1)	Japan - Nikkei (1)
Farmer's Daily (1)	Taiwan - Commercial Times (1)	Korea - KBS (1)
People's Daily (10)	Taiwan - ETTV (2)	Korea - MBC (1)
Xinhua (8)	Taiwan - TVBS (2)	Netherlands - RTL 4 (1)
TOTAL: 51	Taiwan - UDN (2)	Qatar - Al Jazeera (1)
	TOTAL: 26	Russia - Interfax (1)
		Russia - Russia Today (1)
		Russia - TASS (2)
		South Africa - SABC (1)
		Spain - Agencia EFE (1)
		UK - Financial Times (6)
		UK - Reuters (5)
		US - Associated Press (3)
		US - Bloomberg (3)
		US - CNBC (1)
		US - CNN (3)
		US - HuffPost (1)
		US - NBC (2)
		US - Newsweek (1)
		US - Wall Street Journal (4)
		US - Washington Post (1)
		TOTAL: 56

*Number in parentheses indicates the number of questions raised by journalists affiliated with the given media outlet during 2007–2016.

NOTES

[1]Grammatical glosses in the extracts are as follows: 1PL: first-person plural pronoun; 1SG: first-person singular pronoun; 2 SG: second-person singular pronoun; 3 PL: third-person plural pronoun; ASSO: associative; CL: classifier; COP: copular verb; DEM: demonstrative; FILL: filler; GEN: genitive; INTE: intensifier; NEG: negation; NOM: nominalizer; PL: plural; PREP: preposition; PRF: perfective aspect; PROG: progressive aspect; PT: particle.

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