This study explores the role Chinese government in-house interpreters have played at several high-level annual press conferences hosted by the Chinese government. By analyzing their interpreting choices for elements of MOOD, defined in the Systemic Functional Linguistic as a discourse analysis tool and using data from a self-built corpus consisting of multiple video clips of the events, this study has discovered that the interpreters realize a level of interpersonal alignment with only one party in interpreter-mediated communication, and that the choices of alignment are heavily affected by the interpreter’s evaluation of the power relationship. The findings also suggest that although greatly constrained by their institutional roles, these interpreters remain as linguistic professionals. However, their grammatical choices demonstrate a tendency of their shifting social positions between the speaker and the addressees, betraying their deliberate efforts in embracing two roles in interpreting for the press conferences - one as inseparable part of the institution with allegiance pledged to the government, and the other as individual interpreters adhering to the norms of the profession.

Keywords: Chinese in-house interpreters, grammatical choice, interpersonal alignment, interpreter’s role and social positioning

1. Introduction

This study explores the role of Chinese in-house interpreters in practice at the Premier’s press conferences of both China’s National People's Congress (NPC) and
the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC)). Abbreviated as “the two-session conference”, this annual dual conference is one of the most important political events in China.

Interpreting is fundamentally a language-based activity, in which the interpreter’s role has to be enacted through his or her use of language in line with the dynamics of a situated context. To respond to dynamic social and contextual variables, the interpreter has to constantly make linguistic choices in order to adjust his or her social positioning. This decision-making process is predominantly shaped by his or her self-perception of interpreter’s interpersonal functions (e.g. Leanza, Boivin and Rosenberg 2010; Rosenberg, Seller and Leanza 2008; Setton and Guo 2009); his or her selfhood, a tot-up of his or her professional background, cultural and social allegiance, ideological commitment (e.g. Le et al. 2009; Takeda 2009; Sun 2014); and the setting and nature of the communicative activity (e.g. Katan & Straniero-Sergio 2001; Wadensjo 2008a, 2008b). By going through this vigorous process, the interpreter’s identity as a social agent is realized (Angelelli 2004; Wolf & Fukari 2007; Inghilleri 2005). Therefore, interpreting, as language in use, is a sociocultural resource.

In fact, the so-called interpreter’s role is a relational concept about a social position (Pochhäcker 2004). Since identity is constructed by and reflected in language use (Bucholtz and Hall 2005; Danesi 2014; Schiffrin 1996; Van Dijk 2011), the manifestation of interpreter’s role will inevitably be identified from linguistic choices he makes in mediated communication. Since it is important to acknowledge that discursive social action is the locus where culture and social identities take shape, it is also imperative to understand that discursive acts need to be studied in particular social contexts. In other words, linguistic choices in interpreter-mediated communication deserve being analyzed and understood in the situated context.

This study, therefore, uses Systemic Functional Linguistic (SFL) as the means of discourse analysis for comparing source and target texts. In reference to the ‘function-rank matrix’ in SFL (Halliday and Matthiessen 2014), language consists of meaning-making resources that include sets of options available to language users.