

**Faculty of Humanities**

**Beyond Translation: Chinese Online Translation  
Communities and Cultural 'Newness'**

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# Author's Declaration

To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledge has been made.

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university.

The research presented and reported in this thesis was conducted in accordance with the National Health and Medical Research Council National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007)-updated March 2014. The proposed research study received human research ethics approval from the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee (EC00262), Approval Number HRE2016-0087.

Signature:

Date: 8/10/2019

# Abstract

In China, translation and translation practices have undergone considerable and rapid change over the past decade: modern translation is set apart from its predecessors by the mediation of the internet and the emergence of user-generated translation (UGT). The practice of UGT embodies distinctive features in its selection of content, strategies and objectives, as well as its pluri-subjectivity and co-constitutive relationship with technology.

The concepts of translation and dialogue figure prominently in the ‘semiosphere’, a term introduced by the Russian semiotician Yuri Lotman to denote a sphere incorporating all forms of communication. Lotman holds that translation and dialogue activate the semiotic exchanges between inter-cultural and cross-cultural systems, thereby leading to cultural change and evolution. Thus, the mechanisms through which translation produces, mediates and transforms the relational encounters within and between groups, cultures and systems can shed light on the dynamics of culture.

This thesis examines the operation and dynamics of this current translation phenomenon through case studies of three Chinese online translation communities. This research presents a comprehensive contextual analysis by examining the shifting relationships between the forces of globalization, government policies, technology, models of traditional translation practice, and participatory citizenship, arguing that user translation communities in China have become an important driving force behind cultural newness in the digital age.

**Key Words: Translation, UGT, Semiosphere, Online Translation Communities, Cultural Newness**

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# Chapter 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Introduction

Today, the internet and cutting-edge information and communication technologies such as broadband transmission and fibre optic cables have made the global communication environment more connected and integrated than ever before. We are immersed in a global communication mediasphere in which, although it has not reached the level of ‘a globally dispersed phenomenon in which geography becomes irrelevant’, as described by McPhail (2010, p. 331), wireless internet connections have expanded international communicative interactions and information dissemination to an unprecedented level. The accelerating development of a global communication mediasphere is evident in the ever-expanding population of Chinese families with access to the internet. According to a statistical report released by the China Internet Information Centre, by the end of December 2016, China reported 731 million internet users with a penetration rate of 53.2%.<sup>1</sup> For many Chinese, the Internet serves as the springboard to understanding and communicating with the outside world, as proclaimed in the first email successfully sent from China to a German university on 14 September 1987: ‘Across the Great Wall we can reach every corner of the world’.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, before reaching the outside world, Chinese internet users who are monolingual or have low foreign language proficiency must still overcome a wall: that of a language barrier, which cannot be achieved without the mediation of translation. The emergence of user-generated-translation (UGT) embodies a timely, community-led initiative that has emerged at a grassroots level to meet this demand. The user’s participation in the production and dissemination of meaning speaks to the extension of the source of meaning towards consumers or users (Hartley, 2004). However, this is not the case I want to make here. What interests me is how this type of cultural activity is evolving in the socio-cultural context of contemporary China and what cultural implications this process of change has for society.

China became much more open to the outside world as a result of the implementation of ‘reform and opening-up’ policies introduced by Deng Xiaoping after 1978. However, until recently external communications via business, travel, or education remained a privilege for a very small proportion of the population, who tended to occupy elite economic or political positions within society. As an English major studying at a Chinese university in the late

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www1.cnnic.cn/hlwfzyj/hlwzxbg/hlwtjbg/201701/t20170122\\_66437.htm](http://www1.cnnic.cn/hlwfzyj/hlwzxbg/hlwtjbg/201701/t20170122_66437.htm)

<sup>2</sup> See <http://tech.sina.com.cn/i/c/2003-07-17/0947210358.shtml>

1990s, I had no access to any western mainstream news other than listening to international programs of Voice of America and the British Broadcasting Corporation via a radio set. For most Chinese people, bits and pieces of information and understanding obtained about foreign cultures beyond borders were mainly based on what was allowed through a few official media outlets including newspapers, TV channels and theatres. The early 2000s saw dramatic changes in this situation when the Internet started to penetrate every aspect of people's daily lives. The internet soon became a powerful tool for my own university students: allowing them to acquire information and knowledge about the world beyond China with ease that had been unavailable to me. A wealth of English-language media, including foreign magazines and newspapers like *The Economist* and *The Guardian*, were just clicks away.

Given the interactive and open environment enabled by digital networks, how have Chinese internet users communicated with the outside world, especially in terms of accessing, assessing, disseminating and creating meaning with a view to carrying out dialogues with each other and with the outside world? And how have their efforts helped shape their identities and introduce cultural change? These questions become even more interesting when considered within the shifting and complex socio-political environment of China, where there is an ongoing tug of war between state control of information and market-supported information production, between state ideological constraints and expressive and connective digital communications, together with the easy accessibility to all kinds of materials, including copyrighted works, on the internet. This research is also interested in how UGT communities negotiate with internal and external factors, including the state and other players in the media field, in an effort to maintain and expand their discursive space.

Centred on the research inquiries mentioned above, this thesis uses three online Chinese translation communities as focus cases to examine the trajectories and new models of Chinese community-led UGT practices. It also uses these cases as an opportunity to explore the ways in which grassroots initiatives have influenced and been influenced by the digital media culture in a specific socio-political context of China. Moreover, this research may help shed light on the dynamics of mass digital culture and the mechanisms of cultural dynamics generally.

Drawing on the description of user-generated content (UGC) given by Flew (2008, pp. 35-36), O'Hagan (2009) uses the term 'UGT' to 'mean a wide range of Translation, carried out based on free user participation in digital media spaces where translation is undertaken by unspecified self-selected individuals'. Following this definition, this research aims to analyse the practices and the potentialities of cultural newness of UGT in China as embodied by

Chinese online translation communities. These communities undoubtedly have much in common with other, non-Chinese UGT initiatives on the internet in terms of objectives, concrete practices and the mechanism of community construction. However, they do present a different picture from their foreign counterparts, especially those in the Anglosphere, owing to historical and current factors in the socio-political context of China.

What is worth noting here is that the necessity of translation varies with different countries. For example, at the 1884 Berne meeting<sup>3</sup>, a Swedish-speaker voiced concerns over seeing translation as reproduction subject to the intellectual property regime, because he believed Sweden was a ‘culture of translation’ (Hemmungs Wirtén, 2011, p. 102), meaning that the country depended greatly on translation for its cultural and economic development. On the other hand, some countries like the United States belonged to the category of a ‘culture of reprinting’, where the systematic copying of foreign works during the antebellum period played a dominant role in developing a national literature (McGill, 2007).

Seen from this angle, there is no doubt that China falls under the first category in today’s English-centred global mediasphere. This is attested by its persistent trade deficit of about 1:10 in the import and export of books for many years.<sup>4</sup> Another social fact that must be considered is China’s centralised media system. Despite the liberalising efforts within the economic and social spheres in the past quarter-century, the Party still keeps the Chinese media system under its control. The Central Publicity Department and its branches at the provincial, district, and county levels monitor content over both print and broadcast media and can stop programs that do not conform to the orthodox ideological framework at any time. The centralised media culture has played a key role in constructing and shaping a culture which is instrumental to legitimating the government of the Party. Alongside this trend, the Chinese media system has become more ‘commercialized, conglomerated and increasingly globalized’ under the influence of various intertwined forces including the state, the market and selective foreign and private media capital (Zhao, 2004), while the spaces in which ordinary people are able to express their voice and understand the outside world remain limited. Under these circumstances, the emergence and development of the Chinese UGT culture, although not free from governmental supervision and regulation and the infiltration of commercial entities, takes on different cultural and social implications than its western counterparts. This development can thus only be explicated on its own terms, and certainly adds a complementary perspective to the cultural phenomenon beyond China.

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<sup>3</sup> It refers to the international conference for the protection of authors' rights which was convened in Berne, Switzerland, 8 to 19 September 1884.

<sup>4</sup> See [http://www.gov.cn/jrzg/2007-04/06/content\\_574202.htm](http://www.gov.cn/jrzg/2007-04/06/content_574202.htm)

Another aspect to consider is the history of translation in modern China prior to the proliferation of the internet. Around the turn of the new millennium, translation was largely embodied by the practices of the ‘old-generation’ translators who usually confined themselves to their studios for years before turning out unsurpassable translations of some iconic work of world literature. The translator was expected to have a spiritual affinity with the author and be a comparable literary talent. Today, translation has become increasingly professionalised, requiring specialised educational courses and training in China. *Dear Translator/Interpreter*,<sup>5</sup> the first TV series shedding light on the life of translators, was released in China in May 2016. The series was a romantic drama involving two translators and presented a message to the public about how intelligent, knowledgeable, flexible, resolute and strong-minded one needs to be in order to enter the profession. Therefore, generally speaking, the public discourse has tended to enshrine translation, whether profitable or not, in a lofty sanctuary, elusive and off-limits for ordinary people.

In light of this context, the emergence of UGT signifies a point of departure in defining the identity of translators. Armed with ever-advancing technologies, ordinary internet users demonstrate that they can contribute to cross-cultural communication in their own way. While professionals funnel their expertise and energy into institution-commissioned and market-oriented translation, grassroots translators find their ground in meeting the ‘lively demand’ of other internet users by providing renderings of digital content that are fragmented, unsystematic, spontaneous and entertaining. In other words, the volunteer collaborative initiative tends to be more closely related to the daily life of common people, and for most of them, it is a dialogic space of daily lived experience, which in turn foregrounds another aspect of translation— namely, translation is not all about the dialogue between the author and translator.

With these observations in mind, the bottom-up UGT space presents an interesting subject for study of the dynamics of a cultural form in relation to methods of navigating the shifting media space and negotiating with various environmental variables through both discourse and practice in the context of contemporary China. Its influence among Chinese internet users has already attracted much international attention. In 2009, *The Guardian*<sup>6</sup> began a cooperative project with the Chinese community translation website Yeeyan.com to make available a selection of *Guardian* stories in Chinese. Other news media outlets like *The New York Times*<sup>7</sup> and CNN<sup>8</sup> also reported on how Chinese subtitle teams competed with each

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<sup>5</sup> See the TV series at <http://kan.sogou.com/player/180854588/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://en.yeeyan.org/#/1>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/08/09/world/asia/09china.html>

<sup>8</sup> <http://edition.cnn.com/2009/BUSINESS/06/15/china.underground.translate/>

other to provide domestic viewers subtitled foreign visual works, especially U.S. television shows, against a restrictive and tepid Chinese media culture. This was echoed by Shirk (2010, p. 233), who described Chinese internet users as ‘not satisfied with the news and information they get from newspapers and televisions alone’. Therefore, empowered by digital technologies, they go online to find and produce materials using their own initiative, related not only to news but also to literature, movies, education and other areas. Translation becomes not only the bridge for them to reach out to the outside world but also the common ground to form knowledge groups which to varying degrees shape their understanding about the outside world and themselves.

In this sense, the meaning and function of translation, as part of the ontological existence of UGT culture, goes far beyond the epistemic implications of linguistics. It reveals the mechanism of dialogue and auto-communication in a culture (semiosphere) and how meaning, value and knowledge are produced, repurposed and managed by a knowledge group or a population (Lotman, 1990, 2009). The generative potential of the online translation community lies in its boundary-crossing, group-shifting, and public-discourse construction, rather than as an aggregate of translation and social media content.

Accordingly, this thesis, based on an empirical analysis of Chinese online translation communities, explores the dialogical and generative interactions enabled by knowledge groups as a social form and how this contributes to ‘cultural newness’ which is ‘a propensity to peel off new meanings out of existing semiosis, and the diffusion of these through cultural units or demes’ in the context of contemporary China (Hartley & Potts, 2014a, p. 126).

## 1.2 Chinese Online Translation Communities

User-generated translation reflects the creative potential of ordinary internet users, enabled by employing Web 2.0 technologies and tools for translation purposes. Such translation is often realised by means of mass collaboration through social networking. The research in this thesis is based on online translation communities providing UGT content in three categories: news and posts (including comments), books and films, and television programs. However, before presenting an informative overview of online translation communities in China in this section, it is important to clarify the concept of ‘online translation community’ used here.

First, the term is considered a subcategory of the hypernym-online community (or virtual community), defined and characterised in the early studies of online social networking. Given the lack of consensus defining the term ‘virtual community’, I tease out primarily

those defining components and categories that are relevant to this research. Of particular relevance are the characteristics of interpersonal interactions, shared interest, technology-mediation and virtual public space (Rheingold, 2000; Porter, 2004; Blanchard, 2004). Incorporating these characteristics into the UGT cultural form, this research defines the online translation community as a fluid, heterogeneous and limited group of individuals and institutions who organise, interact and produce around a shared interest in translation, at least partially through the mediation of technology, and voluntarily within the frame of some norms.

A point to note here is that the relationship between ‘individuals’ and ‘institutions’ is not ‘either/or’, in contrast to the categorisation of virtual communities by Porter (2004, Para. 18). Porter identifies two kinds of virtual communities based on how they are formed and managed: a member-initiated community, which ‘was established by, and remains managed by, members’; and an organisation-sponsored community, which is ‘sponsored by either commercial or non-commercial (e.g., government, non-profit) organizations’. In the case of the online translation communities under study in this project, all were initially formed by individual internet users, but gradually their statuses diverged, with some remaining the same as they were, others transformed into or sponsored by organisations, and a further group taking on a hybrid identity managed by both members and organisations. This dissonance speaks to the dynamics and complexity of the online translation communities contextualised in the fast-developing and shifting economic, social and political environment, explicated on a case-by-case basis later in this thesis.

The efforts to define the new model of translation production have not prevented confusion. For instance, Pym (2017, p. 128) prefers the term ‘volunteer translation’, because he believes being involuntary is its ‘most innovative element’, whereas O’Hagan (2011) opts for ‘community translation’, because for her what is important is the collaboration among people enabled by technologies. In addition to these terms, other scholars and researchers adopt terms of their choice to prioritise other aspects of this cultural activity, such as ‘collaborative translation’, ‘translation crowdsourcing’, ‘the non-professional online community’ and ‘amateur translation’.

The definition of online translation community used here is chosen not as an umbrella term to cover all kinds of collaborative translation initiatives on the internet but to highlight its community feature, which essentially positions it as a knowledge group. As indicated above, the cases of online translation communities present a diverse, evolving and complex picture which defies the description framed by such binary pairs as ‘amateur vs. professional’, ‘profit vs. non-profit’, ‘bottom-up vs. top-down’, ‘offline vs. online’. Since this is the case,

cultural dynamics and complexity will be missed if these communities are treated as a uniform whole. Accordingly, the plural form ‘online translation communities’ is preferred over the singular form ‘the online translation community’ in this thesis. This aligns with the reasoning given by Fraser (1990) for using the term ‘public spheres’ rather than the generic term ‘the public sphere’, as adopted by Habermas.<sup>9</sup>

Given the rapid development of internet-mediated translation communities in the past decade, academic research is lagging behind, in the fields of both cultural studies and translation studies. There is a shortage of systematic theoretical conceptualisation and taxonomical description. Practically speaking, no extensive description of online translation communities exists, even regarding one of its most prominent subgroups—the anime fansub communities that demonstrate such a kaleidoscope of ludic practices (Schules, 2012). Among the few attempts at classifying community translation that have been made are Kelly et al. (2011) and Bey et al. (2006). The former (2011, p. 89) presents a typology in line with three different environments: ‘The first is driven by a cause (often charitable), the second is geared toward a for-profit product or service, and the third is centred on outsourcing’. The latter (2006, p. 49) reveals two categories: (1) mission-oriented – ‘strongly-coordinated groups of volunteers involved in translating clearly defined sets of documents’; (2) subject-oriented – ‘translation communities who translate online documents such as news, analyses, and reports and make translations available on group web pages’. To these O’Hagan (2009, p. 100) adds a third category: fandom-oriented – ‘mainly represented by subtitling groups of animations, movies or sitcoms’. Obviously, there are overlaps between and among categories in these two classification systems. For example, while the practice of fansubbing groups fits in quite well with the fandom-oriented category, it is also a cause-driven type of collaborative translation, especially when members engage in translating open courses. Additionally, in considering some large community translation initiatives conducted on Wikipedia or Facebook, categorisation becomes a bit tricky since such initiatives are subject-oriented according to the second classification and both cause-oriented and outsourcing-oriented through the lens of the first classification. At the same time, it does not appear far-fetched to place it in the mission-oriented category.

In the circumstances of community translation in the past decade in China, fandom-driven translation (especially fansubbing) has formed a very strong trend in the content flows of internet spaces. Subject-centred translation (news translation) functions as a magnetic field

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<sup>9</sup> Challenging the exclusiveness of a universal public sphere, Fraser put forward the concept of ‘a subaltern counter public or counter-public’ to account for the public spheres formed by marginalized groups.

of ideas and knowledge for millions of internet users. Mission-centred translation projects (book translation), meanwhile, have given rise to a model different from the traditional one in terms of workflow, management and publishing. Nonetheless, most online translation communities fall on a spectrum or continuum rather than fitting within distinctive boundaries, and many—including the cases in this research—assume a hybridity of orientations. In light of this fluidity, this research adopts the second classification system as an expedient starting point for providing a rough overview of online translation communities across the three categories, but does not apply the system rigidly.

(1) Mission-oriented:

While Bey et al. (2006, p. 49) list the technical documentation translation community as a typical case study of mission-oriented translation, volunteer translator communities in China are engaged in translation of various genres ranging from open educational resources to best-selling books and public welfare information. One of the important sources is Opencourseware, the initiative undertaken by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 2001 to post its educational resources for the world to share. However, not until 2010 did this wealth of knowledge come to the attention of the Chinese people, and it would not have happened even that soon without the endeavours of the subtitling group RRYs<sup>10</sup>. This group produced the first subtitled open course, *Justice*, one of the most famous courses taught at Harvard College, in mainland China and catalysed the trend of introducing and promoting open educational resources.<sup>11</sup> By the end of 2011, NetEase, a leading China-based internet service company, had posted 1700 subtitled courses on its video platform.<sup>12</sup> Although the achievement was a result of the concerted efforts of various agents, it was RRYs and other grassroots translation communities such as Edu-infinity<sup>13</sup> that pioneered the arduous effort and made up the backbone of the project along the way. Another typical example of a mission-oriented translation project is the Gutenberg Project initiated and organised by

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<sup>10</sup> RRYs is the acronym of the subtitling group named Renren Yingshi in Chinese Pinyin that literally means everyone's movies and TV shows.

<sup>11</sup> The first team effort to translate into Chinese open courses provided by prestigious universities like Stanford and Harvard was led by Lucifer Chu, a Chinese translator of *The Lord of the Rings*, who in 2004 helped found in Taiwan the Opensource Opencourseware Prototype System (OOPS), a volunteer organization which is engaged in translating the MIT OCW materials into Chinese.

<sup>12</sup> See <http://tech.sina.com.cn/i/2011-12-01/16046410385.shtml>

<sup>13</sup> Edu-infinity is a volunteer translation group focusing on the introduction and translation of education resources. Its website: <http://www.edu-infinity.org>



Yeeyan.com, which has published hundreds of works translated by community translators within the domain of creative commons licenses.<sup>14</sup>

(2) Subject-oriented:

Under this category are online communities which engage in the translation of some specific subjects or genres, such as Longtengwang<sup>15</sup> and Songshuhui.net.<sup>16</sup> The focus of the former is foreign readers' posts and comments on news and current affairs, especially those related to China, while the focus of the latter is information and knowledge on science and technology. Bey et al. (2006, p. 49) described this type of community as composed of people who 'have similar opinions about events (anti-war humanitarian communities, report translation, news translation, humanitarian help, etc.)'. The current study, by contrast, reveals that although the translators and users of an online translation community generally have a common interest in some subjects and share similar goals like promoting the dissemination of scientific knowledge and gaining access to more information about what is going on in the outside world, this does not guarantee that they will have similar opinions about specific events beyond some less disputable issues such as those in the humanitarian field. In fact, differing opinions and arguments to some extent function as the lubricant to facilitate communication which is the mechanism of survival for any community.

(3) Fandom-oriented:

Fandom-inspired translation communities, as the first-of-type amateur translation practice, have been acclaimed as 'the reborn Prometheus who are stealing the fire of knowledge for Chinese netizens' (Jia, 2012; Rong, 2012). As a whole, they are called 'fansubbing groups'. This internet cultural practice started in China around 2002 and started to draw public attention in 2006, when the subtitled American TV series *Prison Break* became a major hit in China (Li, 2013).

Formerly, Chinese fansubbing groups were mainly represented by the four most popular subtitling groups—YDY, Fengruan, Ragbear and YYeTs (predecessor of RRYS)—which usually provided netizens with subtitled video products of various films, sitcoms or programs

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<sup>14</sup> Yeeyan Gutenberg Project focuses on translating public-domain books from foreign languages into Chinese. By adopting a translation crowdsourcing model, it allows the community translators to work together to produce more books in a time-efficient way. Its establishment is inspired by Project Gutenberg and has tapped into the latter's resources but there is neither formal nor informal relationship between the two.

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.ltaaa.com/>

<sup>16</sup> <https://songshuhui.net/>

featuring distinctive translation styles. However, in 2014 the government launched a web-cleansing campaign, and since then most fansubbing groups have seen a downturn, either being disbanded or recruited by commercial video platforms due to the issue of intellectual property rights (Xiao, 2014). Among the scenes of lamentation on the internet, some in the media believed that this marked the end of the era of unauthorised video publishing ('Closure of YYets.com and Shooter.com.cn', 2014).

Did the shutdown herald the end of fansubbing netculture? Absolutely not. Although fandom has cooled in terms of the number of fansubbing groups, the inter-group competition and public, attention-grabbing, fansubbed visual products are still very important resources many Chinese internet users rely on to watch and appreciate foreign works on the internet. The group RRYS, for example, has far surpassed its predecessor YYeTs in every respect, from operation to accessibility to influence. However, there is a clear divergence in development trajectories among various groups, reflecting their differing strategies for adapting to the complex and shifting social contexts of China, a topic that will be revisited later in this thesis.

### 1.3 Focus and Concern of Thesis

This doctoral dissertation focuses on examining cultural dynamics brought about by the convergence of translation and media in the digital context of China, embodied by Chinese online translation communities. Internet-mediated translation is no longer a new research topic, especially concerning fansubbing initiatives. A literature review of the existing scholarship reveals the following focuses: linguistic analysis (translation strategies) (Lv & Li, 2015); social discourse analysis (how to interweave subtitle translation with social activism) (Burkett, 2009; Tao, 2011); procedure or operation analysis (the process of translation and cooperation of group members) (Díaz-Cintas & Muñoz Sánchez, 2006; Perrino, 2009; Salzberg, 2008); technology-enabled new subtitling practice (Cronin, 2010; O'Hagan, 2012; Schules, 2012); fandom's role in the globalisation of screen culture (González, 2007; Leonard, 2005).

Most of these past studies have either examined translation communities more or less as a homogenous whole or based the research on some specific aspects of some specific cases, often subject to text-centrism. In either case, the context in China has usually been excluded. When academic attention has been turned to specific situations in China (Hsiao, 2014; Lee, Lin & Curtis, 2007; Zhang & Mao, 2013), translation practices other than subtitling have seldom been investigated, and still less have the dynamics of this cultural form and its

cultural implications been considered as it evolves under influence from both internal and external factors. Rather than simply adding to the existing studies with the analysis of another specific case or genre, the present study aims to achieve a comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon of online translation communities in China by adopting a diachronic and systematic approach. Its concerns focus on how those communities create dialogic spaces across semiotic boundaries at different levels by means of translation and beyond translation and how they navigate the socio-cultural contexts (often unfriendly) of structure, rule and power. It identifies dialogic and constructive interactions between and among different cultures, groups and texts as a mechanism of dynamics out of which cultural adaptation, reflection and renovation arise.

In contrast to previous studies, the importance of this research lies partly in the specific context it is embedded in. China's single-party political system has given rise to a government-controlled media culture incorporating news rooms, TV stations, theatres and the publishing industry. For example, according to Article 8 of the 'Administrative Provisions on Internet News and Information Service'<sup>17</sup> released on 25 September 2005, it is a prerequisite for any website or platform to be registered with the governmental information office at either the state, provincial, municipal or county level before providing any news service, and it shall be staffed with at least ten full-time news editorial personnel, five of whom shall have work experience of no less than three years in a news work unit. This means that the government has literally set up a threshold that makes it almost impossible for ordinary web-user communities to enter the field, since the contributors are largely amateurs who have no professional qualification certificates and most work temporarily with no remuneration. However, the Chinese digital media landscape is complex, intricate and flexible, subject to the interplay between the government's restrictions and citizens' pushback, not necessarily taking the form of anti-power counterculture, but seeking valuable opportunities in the semiotic peripheries. The same holds true for other media areas like book publishing, broadcasting, films and social media services.

This being the case, it is very interesting to observe how translation communities have evolved and brought about cultural changes as a disruptive generative force in China's media landscape, especially considering the backdrop of China's tightening regulation of internet content as well as its increasing integration into the world mediasphere. The three case studies selected for this research are Longtengwang,<sup>18</sup> a subject-oriented community

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<sup>17</sup> See [http://www.gov.cn/flfg/2005-09/29/content\\_73270.htm](http://www.gov.cn/flfg/2005-09/29/content_73270.htm)

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.ltaaa.com/>

focusing on social media posts and news comments; Yeeyan,<sup>19</sup> a mission-oriented community focusing on books and commercial translation; and RRYS,<sup>20</sup> a fandom-oriented community focusing on subtitles.

This research is not discipline-specific. With cultural dynamics as its core theme, the project turns to various disciplines with an intention to locate epistemological tools applicable to its empirical investigation. It draws on cultural semiotics, media studies and culture studies in addition to translation studies, especially internet-oriented translation studies, for specific theoretic and conceptual concepts to structure the study. First, the conceptual framework depends heavily on cultural semiotics, developed by the Tartu-Moscow School, which has broadened the notion of translation and used it as an analytic tool to explain cultural dynamics. The implication of the semiotic approach to translation is well captured by the statement of Sütiste and Torop (2007, p. 202), that ‘as the concept of translation broadens, it approaches the concept of understanding - through translation and understanding the translation itself. To understand different kinds of translation means to understand both communication and understanding autocommunication processes [...]’. Today, advanced digital technologies have tremendously expanded and complicated the ensemble of semiotic formations in the contemporary world, which in turn spurs the growth of meaning and knowledge. In this respect, the cultural science approach proposed by Hartley and Potts (2014a, p. 103) helps this study make a more applied analysis. They believe that ‘[t]he creative-associative conceptualisation of media or cultural citizenship is at the core of a cultural science approach’ to examining the evolutionary dynamics of culture and knowledge. In addition, in the field of media and other cultural fields, Hartley has undertaken a wide scope of research in an effort to exemplify the notion that cultural dynamics is driven by ‘the web of meaning develop[ing] not by internal growth but by productive encounters (not always friendly) between different systems’ (p. 127), with topics ranging from YouTube (2008b), to creative industries (Hartley, 2009; 2015) and fashion (Hartley & Montgomery, 2009b), among others. This project has been inspired by Hartley’s work.

This thesis examines translation as an intrinsic part of society: on the one hand, translation functions as a cultural mechanism and is seen as a particular act of communication between semiotic systems where cultural adaptation, reflection and renovation arise; on the other hand, it is a fundamentally social activity fully conditioned and prompted by the environment in the particular society where it takes place and is shaped. Therefore, the

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<sup>19</sup> <http://g.yeeyan.org/>

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.zmz2019.com/>

concepts of descriptive translation studies (Hermans, 2014; Toury, 2012), the sociology of translation (Heilbron, 1999; Wolf & Fukari, 2007), the teleonomy of translation (Bassnett, 1998; Tyulenev, 2009, 2012; 2010) and the exploratory account of the paradigms of western translation theories by Pym (2003) are among the inspirations behind this research as it explores the functioning mechanism of translation and its role as the starting point of identity-construction at various levels of culture.

Therefore, this thesis aims not only to examine online translation communities as semiotic spaces that are situated, dynamic, and reflective but also constitutes a step towards providing a tentative theoretical framework for understanding the phenomenon of translation communities as a culture of cultures, semiosphere of semiospheres.

## 1.4 Research Questions and Significance

How have Chinese online translation communities evolved, and how have they contributed to the emergence of cultural ‘newness’ in the digital context of contemporary China? This is the main question posed in this thesis. This question is addressed by investigating three sub-questions:

RQ1: How have Chinese online translation communities emerged and fitted into the contemporary Chinese context as user-generative and participatory communities of meaning-making, especially in relation to the tightening regulations governing the internet in China?

RQ2: What new features have developed in the discursive practices of UGT as represented by Chinese online translation communities?

RQ3: What cultural newness have Chinese online translation communities brought to the mediasphere in China and the culture and society as a whole?

Translation is a cultural and social phenomenon and key to self-maintenance and evolution of a culture. This has been demonstrated by various schools of thought from different perspectives in cultural and translation studies. Among the advocates on the cultural studies side are Homi Bhabha (2004), Walter Benjamin (2012), and G.C. Spivak (1992), and on the side of translation studies, Susan Bassnett (1991, 2011), Andre Lefevere (1992), and Lawrence Venuti (2004, 2012), to name only a few. Despite the fact that the trailblazing efforts of those scholars constitute significant steps towards conceptualising the interrelation between translation and cultural dynamics, there are three limitations to the existing studies: they prioritise literature translation over other non-literary genres; they lean toward product-

oriented research, which focuses on the translation product rather than treating translation as a social activity; and they generally disregard medium and technology as a conditioning element of translation. In contrast, this thesis examines how different categories of online translation communities in relation to different textual genres such as literature, news, movies and sitcoms have emerged and developed as digital semiotic spaces in China and how they have negotiated and conflicted with other semiotic spaces and environmental variables technologically, culturally, economically and politically. Translation in this sense is no longer confined to linguistic transfer but acts as an enabler, connecting sign, text, meaning and culture as a unifying whole-of-life semiosphere. Thus, the purview of this investigation extends beyond the evolving features of translation to the dynamics of culture.

Theoretically, this thesis relies primarily on cultural semiotics pioneered by Yuri Lotman to develop its conceptual underpinnings and analytic tools. Also greatly inspiring have been the efforts devoted to expanding the applicability of semiotics to translation studies by discussing, among others ideas, the role of translation in shaping cultural structure (Monticelli & Lange, 2014), identity-formation actualised through translation as an encounter with others (Cronin, 2006; Petrilli & Ponzio, 2006, 2012) and translation as a semiotic act of interpretation (Eco, 1979; Eco & McEwen, 2008). However, generally speaking, these studies have been committed to an epistemological orientation weak in empirical analysis. In addition, to understand the role of translations within the dynamics of culture, it is by no means sufficient to analyse them only as a semiotic act open to various contextual variables. It is essential to consider them as part of broader systems in ongoing interactions with other spheres of political, economic and symbolic dimensions. This research may shed some light on this under-explored aspect.

Additionally, this research positions the relationship between the information and communication technologies and translation as co-constitutive rather than discounting the former only as instrumental and auxiliary. Without the technological affordances enabled by the internet and other digital technologies, translation would surely lose much of its playing-field and prowess.

This research also contributes to the understanding of Chinese online translation communities by directing attention to the agency of ‘media citizenship’ or ‘cultural citizenship’ with a focus on lived communication events and the actions of ordinary people. The study helps provide an understanding of how internet users form their communities around the media content of their common interest, reach out to interact with other individuals and demes (groups) and enable the generation of cultural newness via translating, mashing up, reproducing, archiving, curating and commenting. This provides meaningful

glimpses into the digital daily life of ordinary people in China and how they take the initiative to change the media landscape, especially against the backdrop of disputable tightening regulations on intellectual property rights and waves of escalating pressure from the government's censorship.

## 1.5 Theoretical Framework

As mentioned above, the theoretical framework that grounds this research draws on theories and conceptions across different disciplines, each of which helps in gaining a complementary understanding of the subject under study—Chinese online translation communities and their contribution to cultural newness. Decisions regarding the construction of a theoretical framework have been determined by the research subject and questions, which are closely related to the fields of culture, media and translation studies. The following sections provide a brief presentation of the theories and conceptions that are used as tools and methods in this study.

### 1.5.1 Cultural Semiotics

For theoretical support, this research draws largely on cultural semiotics as developed by the Tartu School in Estonia. Inspired by his ultimate interest in the complexity of cultural dynamics, Yuri Lotman led the attempt to develop cultural semiotics as an independent discipline in the 1990s. The fundamental notion underlying Lotman's theory is the semiosphere, a heterogeneous conglomerate of semiotic spaces with different functions, which enmeshes and constrains all the meaning-making processes (Lotman, 1990, 2009). For the Tartu-Moscow School, the notion of the semiosphere marked a shift from a static structuralist thinking, which regarded culture as a bundle of primary and secondary modelling systems, to a dynamic model addressing interactional relations of cultural systems (Kotov & Kull, 2006; Żyłko, 2001). And at the base of this notion is 'the crisis of identity: for its own existence every semiotic entity (sign, text, mind, or culture as a whole) needs the other' (Lotman, 2002, p. 35). In this sense, within the semiosphere, 'dialogue mechanism' is central to all layers of semiotic structures ranging from an individual's cerebral hemisphere to cultural contacts on the national or international scale. For Lotman, translation functions as a cultural catalyst and is seen as the fundamental mechanism of dialogue embedded in a specific culture and semiosphere.

A point to emphasise is that a semiosphere does not refer to a static conglomerate of meaning-making systems but to the dynamic, complex relationships between and among its

subsystems and its semiotic environment (Ibrus, 2015). In this research, online translation communities are evolving semiospheres of heterogeneity and complexity that cannot be understood without examining the internal interactions between and among the various agents and the external interactions with other semiotic spaces in the mediasphere of China and the world. Furthermore, those interactions are neither linear nor one-dimensional. Lotman uses sub-categorical concepts such as ‘boundary’, ‘central vs. peripheral’, ‘dialogue’, ‘communication and auto-communication’ as analytical tools to account for the evolution of a given semiosphere and cultural changes therein.

Any translation practice, whether intended as a nation-wide drive to rejuvenate a culture or as a camouflaged tool to disturb the established order or, like the cases examined in this study, as a grassroots initiative to navigate the mediasphere, is not an isolated instance and should be viewed in the broad social-cultural system (semiosphere), especially its relations with other related semiotic spaces. Only in this way can researchers demonstrate how translation not only contributes to knowledge production but also shapes the dynamics of social and power relations. In view of this, the notion of semiosphere and its subcategories provide the current study with very useful theoretical guidance for achieving the objectives described in the previous section.

## 1.5.2 Cultural Science

Hartley and Potts (2014a) present cultural science as a new theoretical and methodological approach to the study of knowledge, culture and meaningfulness. They demonstrate how it differs from extant cultural studies both as a theoretical framework and an analytic tool. The notion underlying cultural science is that culture is not a public reservoir of the ideas, customs, and social behaviours of a particular people or society accumulated throughout history. Rather, it is ‘a productive, innovative mechanism’, an in-use, future-facing group ‘survival vehicle’ (p. 37). The core task of cultural science is to examine what evolves with respect to cultural evolution—that is, the ‘replicator’, something closer to meaningfulness, which is ‘an action not a thing, and (like sexual reproduction), meaningfulness is the ‘newness’ that arises from collisions at the intersection of two or more systems’ (p. 126). Along this line of reasoning, it is groups (demes) that produce knowledge and make newness through engaging in semiotic interaction within and with other groups (demes); it is culture that makes groups and preconditions the formation of groups as demes that are motivated, productive and purposeful. In contrast to the *a priori* theoretical presumption that culture is affected and even determined by political and economic context, cultural science is a new model for interpreting what culture does and how it evolves, with a special focus on popular



culture of ordinary people. Therefore, it is reasonable to claim that cultural science is comparable to the concept of the semiosphere, especially regarding its theoretical orientation, and is more directly related to this research thanks to its engagement with contemporary digital culture.

### 1.5.3 New Media Studies

This study investigates the potential for cultural newness to be produced by online translation communities under the assumption that the relationship between translation and media represents that of a structural coupling—that is, they co-constitute each other and cannot be treated as two discrete components. Media (here mainly referring to the internet) plays a very crucial role in uplifting translation ‘beyond translation’, as alluded to in the title of this thesis, and the factors that boost the dynamics of the ‘mediasphere’, ‘a smaller “sphere” within the semiosphere’ (Hartley, 2012b, p. 142), interweave with the generative potential of translation and together can exert a profound influence that would have been unimaginable in the pre-internet age.

Therefore, to complement the perspectives offered by cultural semiotics, cultural science and translation, and more importantly to ground this research in its immediate digital context, some theoretical concepts derived from the field of media studies are also employed, especially those used to expound the dynamics and creative destruction demonstrated on the platform of media culture as a semiotic space.

This aspect of the research is especially inspired by Hartley’s alternative approach to media and cultural studies and his theoretical concepts that have reoriented our understanding about the epistemic concepts of ‘meaning, identity, power and “the human”’ and their relational encounters (Hartley, 2012a, p. 3). Although recognising technology and individuals (often represented as talented geniuses) as enabling agents, Hartley holds that it is the dialogic relationship that is evolving in dynamic cultural and media systems and gives rise to disruptive renewal. Therefore, the analytical lens of media and cultural studies should be shifted from a linear model to a dialogic one through which ““meaningfulness”, “social networks”, and “relationships” surface as crucial components of the process’ (p. 2). The dialogic model underpins not only Hartley’s arguments about ‘mediasphere’ (Hartley, 1996; Hartley, Montgomery, & Li, 2017), ‘messaging humanity’ (Hartley, 2010), ‘consumer entrepreneurship’ (Hartley & Montgomery, 2009b) and ‘creative citizenship’ (Hartley, 2008a; Hartley & Montgomery, 2009a), but also his development of a theory of the evolutionary dynamics of culture and knowledge—‘cultural science’, which is itself a

dialogue of evolutionary economics and cultural studies as discussed above (Hartley & Potts, 2014a). In addition, the dialogic model is the very force behind the new form of cultural distribution that is driven by a hybridised mechanism characterised by the incorporation of bottom-up and top-down initiatives (Hartley, Wen, & Li, 2015).

Translators have shown themselves to be crucial contributors to the production and diffusion of user-generated content. In the semiotic space, most of them have experienced and are experiencing the hybridisation of roles as both amateurs and professionals, users and producers. Their evolving identity is the result of the structural relations between agents involved in the media field, and in turn shapes that field. The relationship between the factors at work in a translational action, such as translators, agents, readers and social poetics as pinpointed in the Skopos theory (Nord, 1997, 2005; Vermeer, 1989), has been reconfigured in the context of the cooperative and generative mediasphere. In this shifting landscape, the translation recipients, no matter whether they are users, readers or viewers, have come to the fore. In the past, they are mostly neglected in the translation process except in theory; now they connect and interact to exert a critical influence on the work of translation that they want to produce, read, watch or comment on as an intelligent community which, thanks to technological affordances, no longer needs to be imagined as described by Anderson (2006). Our understanding of the agency of readers and commissioning agents as well as of what is good translation needs new perspectives to stay abreast of the evolving features of the landscape. In light of this need, what is the communication model carried on across different categories of online translation communities? And how does this shift a culturally and historically specific social discourse, especially in terms of identity-building, hierarchies in the production of knowledge and cross-cultural communications? To put these questions in perspective, this study examines the conversation carried on within the communities as well as outside of them, especially with other socially institutionalised structures involved in the network of relationships directly or indirectly, such as government, publishing, video websites and newspapers.

### 1.5.4 Translation Studies

Translation is inseparable not only from the concept of culture but also in relation to what culture does to survive. In other words, translation is the mechanism of cultural performance, because ‘only by the inclusion of new texts into culture can the culture undergo innovation as well as perceive its specificity’ (Torop, 2002, p. 593). The cultural turn of translation studies beginning in the 1990s opened up the field of translation studies to non-western discourses especially from developing countries like India and Brazil. Post-colonial studies

has collaborated with translation studies to challenge the western legacy concept-the primacy of the writer or the original culture, thereby advocating the agency of translator and the target culture (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 2003; Bassnett & Trivedi, 2012). Alongside the trend, feminism is another concept to articulate the autonomy of the translator, by which a group of Canadian feminist scholars explore how gender exerts a subjective and ideological influence on translation within a broad social-cultural context in a given society (Simon, 2003; Von Flotow, 2016). However, these concepts are, in one way or another, related to the ‘identity forming power of translations’, which refers to the capacity of translation to maintain the stability and coherence of a culture as well as to catalyse its creative processes on a macro-level (Venuti, 1998, p. 68), or reflects translation as our interface with the world in the sense that we use it as a medium of narration to mediate and construct reality (Baker, 2006, 2013).

As mentioned above, translation and media in the case of online translation communities are coupling structures engaging in ‘a dance of agency’ (Olohan, 2011). The driving force derived from this reciprocity consists partly in translation as a particular mediating subsystem of society. On a system level, Hermans (2007, pp. 66-67) ascribes the status of translation as a social autopoietic system to two aspects: its potentialities to ‘extend society’s communicative range’ and its innate constitutive norms and expectations. The concept of ‘norms’ entered the field of translation studies because of Toury’s effort (1980; 2012). Resonating with the views of Hermans, Toury sees norms as social-cultural phenomenon evolving and functioning in a dialogic process between and among different agents and implicated in a concrete social-cultural context. Norms are prescribed on the one hand by extra-textual factors such as publishing policies, social poetics, cultural mores and customs, and on the other hand by the cognitive factors affecting translators in practice. This means that frequently there is no ready correlation between norms and behaviours in translation. The deviance, then, is one source of newness.

The questions thus arise: how have the norms of translation in the information age been shaped, especially when we direct our attention to the rising army of amateur translators? How do the agents concerned interact with each other to negotiate their expectations and positions, and what are the impacts of their interactions on the production and reception of translation? Thanks to the more transparent and open discursive context facilitated by the internet, we are able to witness the ongoing interactive relations between and among agents, which were either unrealisable, limited or hidden away as security codes prior to the age of digital literacy. This point of view is made more cogent by Cronin’s (2013b) urge to redefine and renegotiate the roles and aptitudes of people involved in the process of translation

against the background of globalisation and intensification of economic and cultural exchanges. On this point, the current study is also inspired by previous literature pertaining to the shifting scenarios and transformative features of online cooperative translation, including prosumers, pluri-subjectivity and post-print translation literacy (Cronin, 1996, 2006, 2012; O'Hagan & Ashworth, 2002; O'Hagan, 2009, 2011, 2012). These studies add more credence to the importance of online translation communities against the backdrop of globalisation and localisation.

In addition to the above-mentioned fields of study, this research also turns to community studies to utilise concepts like 'virtual community' (Rheingold, 2000) and 'communities of practice' (CoP) (Wenger, 1998) to help put the object of research in perspective. With a focus on social interaction and the culture of everyday life, this research certainly cannot dispense with concepts and theories drawn from sociology as well. The theoretical perspectives included are 'social imaginaries' by Taylor (2004), 'the public sphere' by Harbemas (1991) and 'forms of capital' by Bourdieu (1997), among others. In summary, the thesis has incorporated a range of diverse and yet complementary theories and concepts advocated across various disciplines including cultural studies, media studies, translation studies and sociology. In so doing, this research has the potential not only to sort out connections in perceptions and perspectives from these fields but also to identify the intersections where they can complement each other, thereby synthesising them into a practice-oriented research methodology more adapted to the exploration of cultural newness catalysed by online translation communities.

## 1.6 Methodology

To explore the generative potentials inherent in online translation communities, this study examines both the new features of translation practice that these communities have developed, and the interactions between the various agents involved in these processes. This approach has been chosen in order to elucidate the trajectory of evolution of these communities, and to allow for investigation of the contributions to cultural newness made by online translation communities in China. To undertake this examination, and to address the questions presented above, additional research methods are needed.

It was Denzin (1973) who first proposed a triangulating typology including data, investigator, theory and methods. He expounded mixed-methods research as a triangulation: 1) the researcher employs more than one type of research method; 2) he/she works with different types of data; 3) there is more than one researcher in the project; and/or 4) the

researcher employs different theories to answer his/her research questions. The belief is that mixed-methods research can provide a variety of perspectives on the research subject, thereby avoiding being pigeonholed by a biased point of view, which can result if only one theory or method is relied upon (Mertens & Hesse-Biber, 2012). This variety of perspectives is what the current research strives to achieve.

This research employs various qualitative methods to obtain complementary perspectives on the environmental variables and shifting patterns associated with online translation practices as well as on the effects produced for the community of users and for the culture as a whole. Since there have been debates among scholars regarding whether a researcher should combine qualitative and quantitative methods in one research project (R. B. Johnson, Onwuegbuzie & Turner, 2007; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009), it should be pointed out here that the significance of this research consists partly in examining a new cultural phenomenon with a new model of theoretical framework; therefore, it is largely exploratory. In light of this, the research adopts only qualitative approaches.

### 1.6.1 Case Studies

Case studies were employed as a research method to explore the heterogeneous and dynamic scenario of online translation communities as an emergent cultural form. Case study research is appropriate here because this semiotic space has presented a kaleidoscope of forms and content, as a result of not only its intrinsic features but also the interaction with the cultural, political and economic environment. Therefore, ‘the context is hypothesized to contain important explanatory variables about the phenomenon’ (Yin, 2011, p. 31).

As mentioned above, this study utilises cases across the three categories of online translation communities as identified by Bey et al. (2006) and O’Hagan (2009). The cases included are RRYS (fandom-oriented), Yeeyan (mission-oriented) and Longtengwang (subject-oriented). Typical and popular as these cases are, they cannot epitomise every aspect of the structural relations and dynamic changes enabled by the dialectical relationship between and among translation, digital technologies and socio-cultural norms. Thus, to complement these cases when collecting and analysing data, the study refers to other cases when necessary to expand the scope or make a comparative analysis.

In adopting case studies as a research method, it is advisable to choose those cases which can complement and contrast each other and thereby provide multiple perspectives on particular issues (Stake, 1983). With this in mind, the research cases chosen here have the following advantages:

1. The cases are all popular communities of influence in China: Yeeyan was claimed to be the largest online translation community in 2009 and at present is the only one engaging in the publishing of translated books; RRYS is one of the earliest and now the largest fansubbing groups; Longtengwang is the most popular news comment translation community and is a source of quotation for other similar communities.
2. The cases show variety in the following aspects: function, genre and operation mechanism. For Yeeyan, the function is publishing, the genre is news articles and literature, and the operation mechanism is a mixture of community and business. For Longtengwang, the function is information, the genre is news and comments, and the operation mechanism is community. For RRYS, the function is entertainment, the genre is subtitles and entertainment news, and the operation mechanism is a mixture of community and business.
3. The cases have comparative dimensions: Yeeyan, previously a news translation community, forms a contrast with Longtengwang particularly in terms of how they navigate the internet with the heavy presence of Chinese web censors in regard to their discursive and operational strategies. Yeeyan and RRYS form two comparative cases in the aspect of entrepreneurship: How does the community function help build business? What is their operation mechanism? What new models have they developed or been developing in their respective fields?
4. Their trajectories of development and particularities at certain points of time provide excellent data for both synchronic and diachronic analysis. This manifests the dynamics of UGT culture as a whole as well as variations among different forms constituting it.

In summary, the cases have been selected to present a large but not absolute picture of the culture of online translation communities in China. By delving into the pursuits, identity-forming and interactions embodied by these knowledge groups, this research aspires to shed light on the dynamics of digital media culture and enrich extant studies by adding a Chinese perspective.

## 1.6.2 Participant Observation

Participant observation is another strategy for obtaining an understanding of the context and phenomenon under study (Kawulich, 2005), especially regarding ongoing operations, activities and communications. Online participation observation enabled me as a researcher

to access abundant textual and visual materials including community notices and statements, cooperative and crowdsourcing projects and communication between and among different participants. I registered as a user on each of the three communities' platforms and their designated Weibo<sup>21</sup> accounts and participated in translation activities and comment posting.

According to Curtin's guidelines for ethical research, participant observation must be undertaken in a manner that is ethical and honest. As such, From June 2015 to October 2019, I identified myself as a researcher on these platforms and introduced my research project, in order to ensure that others were aware of my status when communicating with me. As an observer, I focused on three tasks: becoming familiar with the operation mechanism of the communities; observing the communication enabled through translation between and among users with the same or different status; recording the changes and dynamics along the trajectory of the communities' development.

While conducting online observation, I was aware of the pros and cons of my blended status both as a researcher and as a user. My first-hand experience enabled an up-close look at the phenomenon I wished to explore. At the same time, there was also potential for my pre-conceptions and inevitable biases to influence my subjective interpretation of the communities I participated in. However, as Dwyer and Buckle (2009) argue, in qualitative research, the researcher, being always part of his/her research process, should occupy a position of both insider and outsider instead of insider or outsider. There is no denying that personal biases prevent participation observation from being a wholly objective research methodology. However, I took care to address this, to the extent possible, by ensuring that participant observation was supplemented with data collected through other methods such as interviews and document analysis. Furthermore, I worked consciously to ensure reflexivity in relation to my choices of data and their representativeness to alleviate my subjectivity, as encouraged by DeWalt, K. M., DeWalt, B. R., and Wayland, C. B. (1998).

### 1.6.3 Interviews

Interviews formed another important strategy for data collection. Interviews with community managers and moderators provide insight into not only the operation and structuring mechanisms involved in this cyber cultural form but also its dynamics and contextual variables. Interviews with translators and users help me understand how they approach

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<sup>21</sup> Weibo is a type of mini-blogging service used in China, including social chat sites and platform sharing. But in this research, it refers to Sina Weibo which is launched by Sina Corporation on August 14, 2009, is one of the biggest social media platforms in China.

translation as user-generated content, how they interact with each other, and how they understand this cultural form. At the same time, interviews with outside agents such as professional translators and people involved with video platforms and publishing houses provide perspectives on both the influence and limitations of grassroots community translation and the future trends potentially driven by it.

Interviews were carried out in compliance with Curtin University's ethical guidelines, including disclosure of the purpose of the interview and ensuring that informed consent was obtained. More detailed information about steps taken to ensure ethical practice are provided in section 1.6.5, below. Interviews were conducted through various means contingent upon circumstances. If face-to-face conversation was not feasible, I adopted telephone, email or Wechat interviewing at the convenience of the interviewees. On all occasions, the interviews were semi-structured. All the conversations were recorded and all the emails were archived. All the interviewees were anonymised and referred to as 'I1, 2, 3...' In order to give credence to my research, some interviewees' names have been retained with permission from those involved.

## 1.6.4 Document Analysis

Document analysis was adopted in this research to provide secondary materials as well as complementary perspectives. The materials and documents accessed come primarily from three sources. The first is formal reports, statistics and documents issued by governmental institutions especially pertaining to cultural policies and internet regulations. The Chinese government exercises a larger influence on the internet than its western counterparts. The trajectory of these translation communities' development has revealed a close link to the government's policies and regulations. Therefore, through analysing relevant official documents, this research identifies some functioning contextual factors involving with those communities.

A second source lies in media coverage and articles relating to UGT communities. Community translation as a burgeoning cultural form has attracted much media attention either as the winner of public acclaim or as the target of the government crackdown. Such media coverage provided this research project with supplementary data on community founders' views and their commercial trials, as well as insight into expert perspectives, which are otherwise difficult to access. The third source of documentary material for the project mainly consists of Zhihu, a topic-based Q&A social media platform, and Douban, an interest-based community platform. On these two platforms, I found relevant posts and



comments that revealed more information about how ordinary users as well as contributors use, support and evaluate the translation spaces. It is worth mentioning that in the past decade, the online translation community has presented itself as a new but rapidly changing sphere. As a whole, its temporality and variability make it difficult to keep track of its development. Because of this difficulty, the above-mentioned sources provide an alternative source of information, albeit not an ideal one.

### 1.6.5 Data Collection and Storage and Ethical Issues

It is axiomatic that each cultural form emerging in the internet space is embroiled in the dynamics of the whole mediasphere characterised by spontaneity and temporality. However, scholars with a research interest in the media culture of China have even more to consider. In its early stages, the internet had presented itself as a space where ideas and knowledge could flow, thrive and grow exponentially. Later, the Chinese government increased its regulation of the internet with various measures such as the installation of a national firewall restricting access to international websites, policies requiring self-censorship by both online media outlets and ordinary internet users, as well as waves of forced shut-downs of websites and platforms. This means that the cases investigated here are subject to an even more fickle and changeable environment. However, since this investigation focuses on cultural dynamics, moments of change, whether they are positive or negative, provide opportunities for insight into a dynamic system, to be examined without being marked with ideological values.

Nevertheless, the changing, often contentious landscape of China's digital media sphere made capturing the data needed to carry out this research challenging. To address this issue, I follow the example of Michel Hockx's (2015), who was confronted with the same problem while researching online literature in China. If the webpages I have consulted are no longer accessible on the live web, readers can access some of them through the Internet Archive Wayback Machine (IAWM, <http://web.archive.org>). In cases where the pages are not preserved by IAWM or other web archives, I have saved all the documents, articles and websites I have used in this research either by downloading them or taking screenshots. All this data will be sorted and organised by chapter and note number, then filed in the digital library of Curtin University. This means that readers will be able to access all the materials I have used even if they have disappeared from the internet.

I have striven to conduct my research according to the guidelines on research ethics set out by Curtin University's Human Research Ethics Committee as well as the NHMRC National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007). I took the following steps to avoid

any possible ethical controversies or problems implicating the concerned communities, interviewees or myself. Before conducting the fieldwork, I prepared a project outline as well as consent forms for different categories of interviewees. The outline informed interviewees about the objective and abstract of my research as well as their rights and obligations, together with providing contact information such as the email address and telephone number of both myself and my supervisor. I first contacted the potential interviewees through email, telephone or some social media platform and provided the electronic versions of the documents via an official Curtin email account. Having gained permission, a few days before the interview I sent them the semi-structured questions approved by the ethics committee at Curtin University. When carrying out the interviews, I presented interviewees with printed versions of all the relevant documents and required them to sign the consent form afterwards. For telephone or Wechat interviews, the interviewees sent me a scanned consent form with their signature.

Except for some public figures who were willing to reveal their names, most interviewees have remained anonymous. Concerning participation observation, as previously mentioned, although most of the time I remained an ordinary user, I revealed my research status in my personal profile and informed other users of this when talking with them about anything related to my research.

## 1.7 Chapter Outline

This dissertation consists of seven chapters:

Chapter 1 provides the contextual background to the thesis and presents the research questions, main concerns and the major concepts employed. In addition, methodological issues and research ethics are also included in this chapter. Chapter 2 is a literature review. By synthesising a number of concepts from various disciplines such as cultural semiotics, cultural science, translation studies, media studies and sociology, the theoretical approach taken here is itself a practice of translation to creolise, mash-up and remix across separate disciplines so as to create hermeneutic tools meaningful to this research. Chapter 3 is a detailed analysis of the socio-cultural environments contextualising translation in China both diachronically and synchronically. This chapter aims to provide a critical understanding of the unique translation contexts in China for readers who are not familiar with them. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 present three case studies of online translation communities, namely Longtengwang (news comments translation), Yeeyan (book translation and publishing) and RRYS (subtitling). Through both textual and contextual analysis, these three chapters offer

critical examinations of the trajectory, operating mechanisms, innovations and problems facing these initiatives. Based on empirical evidence, I provide an in-depth view of how each of these communities contributes to meaning-making and knowledge production through negotiation, conflict and interaction with its environments and other semiotic spaces. The idea underpinning this effort is to conceptualise what culture is through an interpretation of what culture does. Finally, Chapter 7 is the conclusion and discussion of the thesis. In this chapter, I bring together the major findings across the three case studies to present an inter-case comparative analysis with a view to highlighting the sources of cultural newness brought about by UGT cultural practice in the contemporary context of digital citizenship. The main point developed here is also a core theme entire study: translation is a fundamental mechanism of cultural dynamics. The final chapter also includes the theoretical contributions and limitations of the research. It concludes with some indications for future research agendas based on the findings of this thesis.

# Chapter 2. Translation as a Semiotic Mechanism of Culture: A Theoretical Framework

## 2.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on an interdisciplinary dialogue between different domains of knowledge. Beginning with a critical review of existing studies on online translation communities and the concepts and theories used in those studies, it illuminates the scarcity of explanatory theoretical tools suitable for the analysis of this emergent cultural practice as a whole. Based on the existing literature on the convergence of translation studies and culture studies, this chapter takes a further step in arguing that cultural semiotics is applicable to the study of translation events and phenomena. The core argument here is that by recognising translation as a mechanism of cultural performance, cultural semiotics not only broadens and shifts existing concepts and perspectives on translation, but also arms scholars with a new way to approach the essence of cultural dynamics. Complementarily, this chapter draws on cultural science to contend that translation as a medium of structural association catalyses the emergence of meaningfulness and in this sense constitutes an exemplary and empirical phenomenon that can shed light on cultural mechanisms. In addition, other disciplines such as media studies and sociology are mined for more explicatory perspectives. During the process of constructing a theoretical framework, my task as a translator-researcher has been to explore the ‘boundaries’ between disparate conceptual areas, identifying gaps and connections. This chapter thus builds a dialogic and integrated approach that is effective in explaining how online translation communities emerge as knowledge-making groups and form and expand the web of meaningfulness in the context of contemporary China.

## 2.2 Internet-Mediated Volunteer and Cooperative Initiatives

### 2.2.1 Digital Technologies and Translation

Social and cultural development cannot be decoupled from the mediation of technologies of every kind, from counting and measuring to education and communication. The famous

motto of Marshall McLuhan (1964), ‘the medium is the message’, makes a strong argument that media (tools) extend our perceptions and meaning-making space, thus generating changes. Along similar lines, Krämer and Bredekamp (2013) have proposed the turn of cultural technique within cultural theory, believing that culture and technique are constitutive of each other. These concepts sound more pertinent when we consider how the internet has brought profound changes to all facets of life in the modern world. The changes occurring in translation are a manifestation of this wide social trend, where digital technologies function not as ‘mere tools that assist us in overcoming certain limitations’, but as ubiquitous ‘all-encompassing environments’ where, thanks to computer networking and digital interactivity, media users are more empowered than ever before to participate and collaborate in content creation and dissemination across various channels and platforms (Aleksandra, 2010, p. 27).

At this point, the digital technologies relevant to this study should be clarified. With the increasing availability of tools and resources designed for the purpose of translation, translation-related computer applications are no longer limited to machine translation and computer-assisted translation, the adoption of which at the present stage is mainly limited to professionals working in an institutional environment. Considering the current practices of cooperative translation communities and the research objectives of this study, I focus primarily on one category of translation technologies—the communication and documentation tools defined by Alcina (2008, p. 23)—without dismissing the importance of other components.

#### Communication and documentation tools:

These components include the concepts, tools and resources that translators use to interact, through the computer and networks, with their actual or potential clients, with other translators or specialists, or to obtain information and data from other computers or servers.

A diachronic examination of the relationship between translation practices and media cultures at different historical stages convinces Karin (Littau, 2015, p. 90) that there is an intrinsic link between the two and that ‘translation bears the traces of its particular technological environment’. Currently, empowered by the Web 2.0, translation has increasingly become ‘a decentred process conducted by teams of people linked electronically through technological systems’ (Tymoczko, 2005, p. 1089). Olohan (2011) conceptualises the interaction between translators and translation technologies as a ‘dance of agency’, displaying a dialectic relationship between resistance and accommodation. To understand the changing landscape of translation, Michael Cronin (2010) advances three key concepts,

namely prosumption, post-print literacy and pluri-subjectivity, which speaks to the interactive practice pervasive in the digital space of translation today where translation must be completed as a team effort among various players so as to suit the increasingly fragmented demands of readers and their changing reading patterns. To Cronin, all this points to a technological turn in the field of translation.

## 2.2.2 Fansubs

Among the various cultural forms digital culture materialises across various aspects of human life, user-generated content (UGC) gained currency in the mid-2000s to indicate the special and unprecedented role played by users. Based on this concept, Minako O'Hagan (2009) coined a sub-term user-generated translation (UGT) to conceptualise the confluence of translation and social networking technology. The same phenomenon is referred to by DePalma and Kelly (2008) as CT<sup>3</sup>, namely 'community translation', 'collaborative technology and processes' and 'crowdsourcing'. The earliest form of UGT was fan-produced Japanese animation, and the pioneer participants formed fansubs to produce subtitled anime for like-minded fans. Although fansubbing culture can be traced to the 1980s, it only began to attract scholarly attention two decades later, largely from scholars in the field of audio-visual translation (AVT), as indicated by Risku and Dickinson (2009, p. 50): '[I]ittle material was available on professional (extra-organisational) virtual communities and few references could be found to translation communities'. Generally, researchers share a common interest in the interaction of translation and media technology and the disruptive effects that arise from this cultural practice. In a joint study, Díaz-Cintas and Sánchez (2006) investigated the fansubbing process and reflected on the unique features on display. Ortabasi (2007) illuminated the adoption of 'thick translation'<sup>22</sup> by some fansubs and the possibility of forming a new viewing protocol in the visual space. In his PhD thesis, Schules (2012) explored how the medium facilitates a ludic negotiation between text and fan, thereby giving fans more room to exert autonomy. There are some conservative views about the development of this cultural practice, especially in relation to the issue of copyright infringement (Kirkpatrick, 2002), uneven translation quality and deteriorating employment environment for professionals brought about by the rise of amateur translators (Dodd, 2011; Dolmays, 2011; Flanagan, 2016). Despite these reservations, the emergence of fansubs is largely believed to have the potential of creative destruction, and fansubbing will likely

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<sup>22</sup> Thick translation aims to help audiences understand the original text in a specific and rich cultural and linguistic context by resorting to annotations and glosses.

change the fundamental understanding of translation in the West and lead to a global reconfiguration of audio-visual culture (Leonard, 2005; Pérez-González, 2007b, 2012b).

Nevertheless, the studies that have been completed to date reveal a clear inclination towards textual analysis or medium-centrism (DePalma & Kelly, 2008). This bias was made obvious when Facebook filed a US patent for its purpose-built translation application in August 2009. This invention was named Community Translation On A Social Network and was explained as follows: ‘embodiments of the invention provide techniques for translating text in a social network’.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, scholarly attention has largely been oriented towards Japanese animation fansubs in the global context, while the situation in China has been excluded. In Chinese academic circles, a search on CNKI<sup>24</sup> reveals that the majority of studies undertaken by Chinese scholars have a theoretical or conceptual basis derived from textual translation studies such as Skopos theory and dynamic/functional equivalence. Therefore, Chinese subtitling is underexplored and should be a point of interest if approached from a more holistic perspective.

### 2.2.3 Online Translation Communities

The past ten years have witnessed more and more volunteer translators joining the initiative and contributing to the production of UGT in a range of genres other than subtitles, including news, gaming and literature. Some social networking websites such as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn have successfully tapped into the productive force of average consumers to multiply their networking potentials, which in turn has drawn more scholarly attention to this cultural practice as a whole. The boom in online translation communities has driven scholars to search for an appropriate nomenclature for such communities (O’Hagan, 2011; Pym, 2011a), and efforts have also been undertaken to classify these communities, as addressed in Chapter 1. Nevertheless, the heterogeneous nature of these communities means that no one-size-fits-all term is applicable, and this is the very reason that the practice is referred to by various names like ‘community translation’, ‘volunteer translation’, ‘collaborative translation’ and ‘crowdsourced translation’.

Some academics and scholars (Désilets, 2007; Cronin, 2010) believe that online translation initiatives as a whole have propelled a paradigm shift in the domain of translation. Another research interest is the creative potentialities of this cultural practice from a socio-cultural

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<sup>23</sup> See <https://patentscope2.wipo.int/search/en/detail.jsf?docId=WO2009073856>

<sup>24</sup> CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure, 中国知网) is national research-related information construction project of China that is supported by the state under the lead of Tsinghua University. See <http://www.cnki.net/>

viewpoint. For example, Risku and Dickinson (2017) have examined how virtual translation communities function as platforms for users to keep in touch with like-minded individuals. In the field of education, the crowdsourcing translation model has been used to increase the accessibility of open education, especially for disadvantaged people (Beaven, Comas-Quinn, Hauck, De los Arcos, & Lewis, 2013). In the media field, a study on Global Voices, an influential global citizen media project, indicates that open translation-based communities can meet the need for local voices to fill in the gaps of global news and bridge global perspectives (Salzberg, 2008). Another focus has been on examining to what extent such initiatives have been leveraged to exert political influence on a society—in other words, to promote the cause of activism (Baker, 2006, 2013; Tymoczko and Gentzler, 2002; Tymoczko, 2014). In this aspect, researchers have identified both limitations and possibilities. For example, translation-mediated activism in China has met great impediments owing to harsh governmental regulations (Hsiao, 2014), while ad hoc activists in Spain have demonstrated their strength in building narrative and challenging the dominant institutions of society through the mediation of audio-visual translation (AVT) (Pérez-González, 2010).

Other perspectives have also been explored in an effort to deepen the understanding of this translation act. Some researchers have used Wenger's concept of 'communities of practice' (CoPs) (Wenger, 1998) as an analytic tool for examining the operation mechanism and power relations imbedded in specific translation communities like ProZ.com (Risku & Dickinson, 2009) and the open source Opencourseware Prototype System (OOPS) (Lee et al., 2007). Others have investigated motivations behind volunteers' participation (Costales, 2012; Olohan, 2014) and revealed that there are extrinsic motivations in play in addition to the spirit of sharing and goodwill, such as potential career benefits and greater access to resources. Still others turn to other conceptual frameworks for inspiration. For example, Tao (2011) has examined the determinants of online community user participation from the perspective of social influence theory. Nevertheless, in the available accounts of online translation communities, there is a shortage of systematic investigation into how online translation communities evolve in a given socio-cultural context where they form, interact with and are shaped by multiple structures of association. This is especially true in China, where the emergence and development of the UGT culture is deeply immersed into the evolving social, economic and political contexts. To my knowledge, no academic studies have been conducted in this area. One possible barrier is the circumspect attitude towards the topics of censorship and piracy which have become too delicate and sensitive to be discussed openly in Chinese academic circles—the majority of Chinese researchers have adopted self-censorship.



Moreover, financial factors have seldom been considered in extant studies. This is largely attributed to the low cost of internet access, which enables not only the rich but also the less fortunate to avail themselves of communication resources and participate in the production and expansion of such resources. In the case of volunteer translation communities, non-remuneration has been a point repeatedly elaborated by many researchers to demonstrate the altruism of volunteer translators (Olohan, 2014; Pérez-González & Susam-Saraeva, 2012). In the same vein, Hu (2012) pointed out that fansubbers in China have created new value by following a combined work ethic of neoliberalism and altruism.

In reality, however financial factors are key to the development and evolution of online translation communities as a whole, especially fansubbing groups. For example, RRY5 had asked its users to donate money several times, citing the annual cost of bandwidth, high-performance web servers and maintenance as the main reasons for fundraising.<sup>25</sup> The financial pressure has pushed some groups to close or downsize their initiatives since most of their members are students without sources of income. This has also been one of the driving forces behind some groups' involvement in business. Thus, financial factors play a role in the development and evolution of those communities that should not be neglected.

The past decade has seen online translation communities adapt and evolve in accordance with the changing social and technological context in China. During the process, they have followed divergent trajectories of development, and as a result, the defining features such as amateurism, non-profit nature, and fan-for-fan principle, which were distinctive at the early stages of the cultural practice, are no longer compatible with its current condition. We see amateurs becoming more and more professional, and a blend of for-profit and non-profit enterprises now exists. Moreover, the goal is no longer only to feed the passion of fans or avid readers but to achieve sustainable development. This means that this cultural form has been undergoing a dynamic and evolving process instead of assuming a fixed identity.

Also worth mentioning is the role played by the users of online translation communities and how they have shaped the dynamics of this cultural practice, which is a blind spot in research on this phenomenon. Translation must be considered as a process of mediation during which different intermediaries including translators, commissioners, gatekeepers and users reframe both the form and meaning of the finished product and the development of the community.

C.S. Peirce (1991, p. 253–259) provides an evolutionary concept of signs according to which a sign is something that, by knowing it, allows us to know something more. This concept

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<sup>25</sup> <https://36kr.com/p/5231291>

distances itself from the traditional understanding of signs as that of closed and fixed identities determined by dyadic relations between signers and signified. In Peirce's triadic relationship, the equivalent sign created in the mind of readers (users) is an interpretant which also functions as a generative sign, thus recognising the active role played by readers (users) in generating meaning and interpretation. Following this line of argument, while undertaking an exploration of how technology affects translation, Anthony Pym (2007, p. 5) asks aptly:

Whatever the power relations or ethical obligations, the game is played between those two (a translator and an author). Why is it that none of the philosophers consider the translator's relation with future readers or users in the same terms? Why should the only ethical relation be with an author, rather than with a receiver?

As a matter of fact, in the digital setting users can do more than affect the interpretation of signs. Their dialogic engagement, collective intelligence and financial support not only has an influence on the choice of source material from the very beginning but also shapes the development of the translation group they are attached to. To shed light on this aspect, this study traces and analyses user-related activities and interactions on translation websites and other social networking platforms and examines them as an integral part of the translation act rather than as outsiders.

## 2.3 Translation Studies: An Interdisciplinary Approach

Currently, translation is no longer conceptualised merely as a product or an act of linguistic transfer between different cultures. The understanding of translation as a purposeful cultural and social action has become axiomatic among academics in the field of translation and culture studies. However, this change in understanding came only with much scholarly work. Susan Bassnett and Andre Lefevere (1990) proposed the core concept of the 'cultural turn' via their co-edited book *Translation, History and Culture*, which was intended as a manifesto to extend translation studies beyond the confines of the discipline of linguistics and bring it into contact with social and cultural studies. The 1990s saw many scholarly studies in that direction. Among these studies, the perspective of politics was incorporated as a research angle. Lefevere (1992) expounded that translation in the literary system is swayed by an asymmetrical balance of power exercised by the 'patrons' who restrain literary production by keeping it within a political and ideological framework.

In addition, the cultural turn has expanded the horizon of translation studies by integrating other notions like feminism, cannibalism and post-colonialism. Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (2004) illustrates the ongoing identity-formation that arises from collisions and interactions between the colonised and colonisers and provides a sophisticated and influential formulation of the concept of cultural translation. In her seminal essay *The politics of translation*, Spivak (2012, p. 179-200) argues that translation is an important strategy in the pursuit of a larger feminist agenda of achieving women's 'solidarity'. In terms of translation practice, Venuti (1995, p. 20) advocates a foreignising translation strategy to resist 'ethnocentrism and racism, cultural narcissism and imperialism'. In regard to cannibalism, its translational aspect started to take centre stage in Haroldo de Campos' translation activities and re-evaluation in 1980s. Using cannibalism as a metaphor of translation, Haroldo De Campos calls translators to devour, masticate and digest the original culture in order to feed, nourish and rediscover the local culture. In this way, cannibalistic translation is used as a symbolic and empirical struggle against Brazilian dependency on neo-colonial culture (Cisneros, 2012; Guldipeetdn, 2008). Acknowledging the translator's political autonomy advocated by the de Campos brothers, Bassnett (Bassnett & Trivedi, 2012, pp. 95-113) perceives the term of "cannibalism" as "a post-modern and non-eurocentric approach", thereby demonstrating its coincidence with the concept of the post-colonial turn of literary translation. These approaches and perspectives have made headway towards transcending the text-centrism which has long hindered the development of translation studies. While these pioneering works deserve recognition, their foci are nevertheless mainly textual analysis and 'the "styles" of writing, thus to a great extent perpetuating the "cult" of the text' (Buzelin, 2007).

On the other hand, the boundaries of translation studies have been greatly advanced through its confluence with semiotics and later cultural semiotics, developed by the Tartu-Moscow School of semiotics, headed by Lotman. This interdisciplinary approach has gained support from many academics and scholars. According to Susan Bassnett (1991, p.13), 'translation belongs most properly to semiotics,' since the latter's core foci are the structures, processes and functions of signs. Advocating translation semiotics as a new theoretic approach, Peeter Torop (2008a, p. 257) holds that its ontology 'rests on the recognition that culture works in many respects as a translation mechanism [...]'. Likewise, Sela-Sheffy (2000) states that '[t]he study of translation can serve [...] as a perfect laboratory for the study of cultural dynamics (and not just linguistic behaviour) in general'. In Yuri Lotman's view, it is translation between distinctive signs, texts, individuals and cultures that brings about new meanings—in turn the source of cultural change. While stressing the role of translation in cultural development, Lotman first advanced the concept of the 'semiosphere' in his article

‘On the semiosphere’ (2005) and then refined it in his works *Universe of the Mind* (1990) and *Culture and Explosion* (2009). In Lotman’s view, a semiosphere, as a space of semiosis, is constantly flooded and restructured by the ‘foreign’, ‘asymmetrical’, and ‘peripheral’ signs and texts that are imported into the ‘central’ culture.

Although Lotman’s concept of translation (1990, p.143) is largely a loaded metaphor, especially when he claims that ‘the fundamental act of thinking is translation’ and ‘the fundamental mechanism of translation is dialogue’, his interdisciplinary approach emphasising the importance of space, heterogeneity and the interconnectivity of sign systems foregrounds the interactional relations of cultural elements and also addresses some key issues encountered in translation studies. His ideas have had a strong impact on the works of some literary translation scholars, including Toury and Evan-Zohar of Tel Aviv University. Both have seen translation as the performative nature of cross-cultural communication embedded in the broad framework of cultural semiotics (Toury, 1986, 1987; Evan-Zohar, 1997).

In practice, Lotman has in fact drawn on translation both as a cultural mechanism and as an analytic method to analyse the evolution of Russian culture, especially in the light of its relationship with French. However, the extant studies have always focused on literature as the preferred object of research among the heterogeneous aggregate of cultural texts. I have encountered only one study that applies Lotman’s concept of the semiosphere to the phenomenon of non-literary translation between different verbal languages—a PhD dissertation titled *Lost in Translation? Language Policy, Media and Communication* (Podkalicka, 2007), in which Lotman’s theory of translation is utilised as part of the theoretical framework to analyse the practices of the Special Broadcasting Service (Australia’s multicultural and multilingual broadcaster). The author argues that mediated lingual exchange is a more successful translation policy for engaging with multilingual ordinary citizens in the form of cross-cultural communication. Apart from this, to the best of my knowledge, no scholarly research has been conducted in this direction, especially regarding translation activities in the digital context.

Despite this, the heuristic potential of the notion ‘semiosphere’ for a better understanding of our increasingly interconnected world cannot be overestimated. This research is an endeavour to apply it to the research of UGT in the context of digitalisation. Among Lotman’s core semiotic concepts, the subcategories ‘dialogue’, ‘centre vs. periphery’, ‘boundary’, ‘communication and auto-communication’, ‘translation’ and ‘explosion of meaning’ provide unique analytic tools for conducting research into translation activities and interactional relationships between and among different systems and cultures. This is

especially pertinent against the backdrop of digitalisation and globalisation, when ordinary internet users can create or expand the cross-cultural dialogic space via translation and build up communities that function as linguistic contacts for unexpected groupings decentred across lines of social differentiation. It is not simply about transferring existing information and knowledge; for ordinary people, UGT provides ‘other ways of seeing, interpreting, reacting to the world’ (Cronin, 2013b, p. 70). Translation opens up a linguistic ‘contact zone’ (Conway, 2017) not only between the foreign and target cultures but also within the latter. In addition, translation enables internet users to break through the physical boundary they live in and reshape the cultural boundary aligned with institutional or official ideology. Meanwhile, they create a semiotic space at the periphery where their individual agency comes into play, counterbalancing the regulation of the central culture and engaging in interactions with other semiotic spheres, thus generating cultural newness.

## 2.4 Critical Understanding of Dynamics of Mediasphere

### 2.4.1 The Rise of Users

‘You’ was named ‘Person of the Year’ by *Time* in 2006<sup>26</sup> for the transformative influence user-generated content exerted on the dissemination and creation of meaning and knowledge and on digital democracy. In the field of translation, the emergence of digital UGT has been hailed as a symbol of ‘the rise of amateurs’, who engage in collaborative initiatives, outdoing professional norms (Gee and Hayes, 2011, p. 44; Borodo, 2017, p. 185). In fact, the practices of both amateur translation and collaborative translation have their correlates in history embodied by the practices in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century of Britain when amateur translators undertook translation for the love of it and collaborative translation was deployed as an expedient way to cope with the proliferation of information (Littau, 2016, p. 916). What makes the translation practice of the 21<sup>st</sup> century different and interesting is its medium—the internet—which levels the chances of accessing and creating communication transactions and stimulates people’s desire to translate. The technological affordances enable users to take control of how they create and disseminate information and knowledge, thus breaking the elite-dominated regime. The transforming translation landscape undoubtedly fits into Jenkins’ (2006a) ‘convergence culture’, representing a shift where internet users are no longer passive consumers. Instead, they take the media into their own hands and shape media

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<sup>26</sup> See <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1570810,00.html>

content; they learn how to contribute and disseminate knowledge outside of a formal educational and institutional setting.

It is precisely the mutually constitutive relationship between this structural dimension of technology and the generative potential of human cognition that changes the translation landscape. User-generated translation would not be so visible and transformative without the social networking mechanism embedded in the internet. On networking platforms, groups of like-minded individuals are able to exploit the potential of networked communication, utilise their ‘collective intelligence’ (Lévy & Bononno, 1997) and create a semiotic space of their own interest. As ‘agency’ in the digital context, in Robinson’s words, ‘becomes loosely collectivized and subjectivity becomes deterritorialized’ (Robinson, 2003, p. 380), it is very crucial to explore fellow members’ affiliations and identify narratives that most members of the community subscribe to in the process of grouping. In other words, this is also a process of seeking meaningfulness, which is ‘a condition of seeking meaning in the context of society and identity in the process of interacting with the internal and external worlds of imagination, information and perception’ (Hartley & Potts, 2014a, p. 131).

According to Hartley (2009), the changing roles of citizen-consumers are embodied in new ways of forming identities, as externalised in consumption patterns, which includes (re)creating content products such as those in the field of media and journalism. Now with the ever-increasing penetration of the internet into modern life, most of us are overwhelmed by an overload of digital information and content. It is in this context of uncertainty and risk that the choice of peers or the ‘social network market’ enters and exerts an influence over individual decision-making (Potts et.al. 2008, p. 19). This reflects the basic model of cultural science—‘demic concentration’, by which a ‘we-community’ is formed around valorising meaningful identities, redrawing demic boundaries and producing new sources of meaningfulness (Hartley & Potts, 2014a).

All of the above ideas and concepts can provide very useful perspectives for the current study. For instance, in opposition to industry practice in the field of film and television, anime fans interact via social media in their manifold capacities as patrons, producers, distributors and viewers of the subtitled products. Concomitantly, among the fans, “we” beliefs evolve out of an ongoing rational discourse in which human individuals mutually influence their preferences and end up with enhancing interdependence and shared identity’ (Herrmann-Pillath, 2017, p. 179). As a result, within the interconnected digital environment, the number of both fansubbers and viewers continues to rise dramatically in synch with the increasingly user-friendly and affordable access to audio-visual technologies. In this sense, fansubbing groups have cultivated audiences through translation, and this in turn shaped the

domestic taste and market for foreign visual fares. In this context, Gambier (2005, p. 10) anticipated that '[t]hose who actually control circulation of AV [audio-visual] products will have greater power than the producers [in the future], since no one will want to invest in a project for which there is no guarantee of satisfactory distribution'.

In respect to the collective creativity of networked users, a balanced understanding cannot be reached without due attention paid to contextual factors. In contemporary China, the practices of online translation communities are making 'a dual dodge or evasion, of state rules for electronic information, and of the commercial logic of original producers' (Yeh & Davis, 2017). It is undeniable that digital technologies have given ordinary users the power to initiate, produce and disseminate content. Categorising technology as a kind of cultural capital, Bourdieu (1997, p. 50) asserts:

However, it should not be forgotten that it exists as symbolically and materially active, effective capital only insofar as it is appropriated by agents and implemented and invested as a weapon and a stake in the struggles which go on in the fields of cultural production (the artistic field, the scientific field, etc.) and, beyond them, in the field of the social classes-struggles in which the agents wield strengths and obtain profits proportionate to their mastery of this objectified capital, and therefore to the extent of their embodied capital.

Nevertheless, it is more convincing to substitute 'discursive power relations' for Bourdieu's 'social classes-struggles' given the context of contemporary China. In the mediasphere, the crucial issue is 'the allowable degrees of freedom of articulation of that interpretive agency and the possible degrees of freedom for emancipatory participation in public discourse—in the public sphere—in civil society' (Birch, 2000, p. 143). This is especially true in China, where content-creators' participation is restricted or even hindered by the government's censorship. However, the relationship between participants and the government should not be viewed as opponents in a tug of war. Most popular groups exercise discretion to be good citizens—that is, they shun sensitive political programs or pornography and intend the translated products to be educational materials rather than profit-drivers. On the other hand, there is also a dimension of compatibility to the relationship with industrial agents. In practice, those translation-based demes have helped industry producers increase audience bases in China and even enabled an 'economy of attention' ready to be exploited by the latter (Lanham, 2006). This is what happened to Japanese anime. In addition, the operation mechanism and specific practices of fansubbing have been appropriated by their industry counterparts to maximise the efficiency and impact of localisation initiatives.

Given this situation, online translation communities have become an even more interesting object of study in the way they act internally as demic-semiotic spaces and the way they interact with other systems, thereby generating cultural newness during the process.

## 2.4.2 The Mediasphere

The semiosphere is envisioned by Lotman (1990, 2005) as the condition of existence for all the active cultural processes where so many languages, texts and signs interact and intermingle in many layers of semiosis. From this line of thought, Hartley (2008a, p. 67, original italics) derived the notion of the mediasphere:

Like the semiosphere it expresses the various *forms, relationships and structural conditions for existence and interaction* of a worldwide system of media communication. The mediasphere is ‘multiplatform’, not confined to one medium [...]. It cannot be understood without the global interactive system that has shaped it and allows it to operate in any given local instance.

One aspect of the prospect projected by the concept of the mediasphere is that it helps expand the substrate of the semiosphere, because the converging media technology has the capability of aligning past and present, old and new, rich and poor. Therefore, many frontiers of the semiosphere that were not navigable before are explored as new possibilities of signification, for good or for bad (Bruni, 2011). Another aspect is that while immersed in the mediasphere, we enact and interact in the virtual cultural process of the worldwide web with our ideas, thoughts, beliefs, likes, dislikes and emotions being represented via multimodal medium forms and languages like never before. The in-the-making and permuting mediasphere preconditions the formation of a variety of internet user communities that in turn shape the development of mediasphere by actively engaging in creation and dissemination of media content.

The dynamics of culture consist in ‘how culture evolves through the evolution of meaningfulness, shaping the evolution of knowledge, within and between groups (demes) that are themselves dynamic, scale free and ephemeral’ (Hartley & Potts, 2014a, p. 120). Meaningfulness is dialogic and semiotic and can only be understood through the analysis of ideas, languages, content and communication. Therefore, the analysis of content, narratives and discursive devices should not be neglected in the endeavour to examine the dynamics of culture. At the same time, the pervasive and interactive virtual environment has undoubtedly transformed modern life, including the process and function of perception and cognition. Cognitive technologies and digital devices allow us, no matter who we are or where we



come from, to mediate, translate, reproduce, and collage content and texts; therefore ‘enable us to open the doors of the semiosphere, which is a world of semiotic freedom, intersubjective meaning and intelligibility, and not simply of sensations, perceptions and neural correlates’ (Bruni, 2015, p. 109). Media (technology) not only defines message it transmits but mediates perception, cognition and life meaningfulness of its users. To understand the dynamics of mediasphere, we must consider the mutual constitution of media (technology) and meaning in the process of semiosis.

## 2.5 Chinese Online Translation Communities

In the history of China, translation has played a strategic role in invigorating the country via the importation of advanced knowledge of science and technology and the introduction of western ideologies to native culture. One historical initiative was the cooperative translation between foreign missionaries and Chinese intellectuals during the late Ming dynasty and early Qing dynasty around the 17th century, which helped lay the foundation for the later construction of industrial civilization in China (Xia, 2014). Another often-cited example is the May 4th Cultural Movement (1915-1923). Most of its champions and advocates had the experience of studying abroad, and translation was adopted as an effective medium to spread western ideas and concepts with a view toward enlightening the Chinese people.

Now China is becoming more connected to the outside world than ever before, largely thanks to the high penetration rate of the internet. Having long been the passive receivers of the communication chain monopolised by the centralised exclusive official media, Chinese internet users have eagerly embraced the internet to quench their thirst for information and knowledge. The changing situation calls for more input and investment into the service of localisation.

As might be expected, the work of online translation communities as discussed in Chapter 1 has received nationwide plaudits, and the role of a translator has been compared to that of Prometheus, who brought light to human beings by stealing fire from Zeus and the other gods in ancient Greek mythology. These online communities display the spirit of ‘citizenship’ as ‘*demic association that makes knowledge*’ (Hartley & Potts, 2014a, p. 100, original italics). In the digital context, ‘citizens create their own forms of “association among strangers” using the affordances of digital and interactive media, social networks, and their experiences and practices as audiences and consumers, within a market environment and what could previously have been understood as private life (pp. 102-103)’. The dialogic mechanism built in the semiotic space at different levels breaks the unitary monologic

discourse dominated by authorities and elite circles, enabling ‘a management of meaning across spatial and cultural distances’ (Hannerz, 1996, p. 13). Concurrently, this reshapes our social imaginary and allows us to break through the ‘social embeddedness’ that constrains and structures our important actions (Taylor, 2004). In light of these notions, Chinese online translation communities constitute a very interesting object of research for investigating how translation functions as a dialogic meaning-making mechanism in the context of contemporary China.

Moreover, every kind of communication is socially embedded. The examination of a practice initiated at the grassroots level requires us to situate it within the evolving socio-cultural context of contemporary China. The dialectic, ongoing relationship between its internal structure and external influences is a typical feature of a semiosphere. According to Yuri Lotman (2009, p. 65), ‘the history of any population may be examined from two points of view: firstly, as an immanent development; secondly, as the result as a variety of external influences’. This also holds true for the population of Chinese online translation communities. As part of the mediasphere, these communities have to navigate the complex semiotic space and negotiate a position for themselves. One type of interrelating space is online video platforms. The relationship between user translation communities and video platforms in the internet has been one of conflict and cooperation on the basis of the economic, cultural and social capital they have (Bourdieu, 1997). Another key external influence comes from governmental policy on the internet, which often boils down to censorship in the case of China (Bamman, O’Connor, & Smith, 2012; Chen & Yang, 2018; Kou, Kow, & Gui, 2017). The authorities’ crackdowns and upgraded regulations have not exterminated citizen-led online translation communities but rather have reshaped the landscape and driven it to become more divergent in terms of operation and identity. However, there has been a lack of scholarly attention in this direction owing to both neglect of the Chinese context within international academic research and the self-censorship adopted by domestic researchers. In this sense, this study examining how online translation communities have evolved and been affected by the tensions of power relations with other semiotic spaces is a necessary attempt to fill the gap.

# Chapter 3. The Socio-Cultural Context of Chinese Online Translation Communities

## 3.1 Introduction

The rise and development of Chinese online translation communities as semiotic spaces of discursive practices is embedded in a specific socio-cultural context (system/semiosphere) of contemporary China, where various textual and structural factors including technological, social and political factors, interact and shape their formation and operation. This chapter does not provide a comprehensive overview of all the socio-cultural factors contextualising this translation phenomenon as a whole, which would blur the focus of the project and turn it into a portrait including a bit of everything. Instead, this chapter dwells on those aspects which empower and foreground translation as a cultural mechanism for change not only synchronically but diachronically. These factors are also those which make UGT a distinctive cultural form different from previous practices in the history of translation in China, which in turn calls for new theories and concepts to put it into perspective.

## 3.2 The Historical Role of Translation in Socio-Cultural Change in China

In response to the 2014 round of forced closure of some subtitling websites by the government, Yan Feng, a professor of Chinese literature at Fudan University, stated in a Weibo post<sup>27</sup> that the current grassroots-initiated translation endeavour represents the fourth wave of translation activities in the history of China, and its socio-cultural significance can be aligned with the previous three waves: the translation of Buddhist scriptures starting in the early 3rd century AD, of western literature towards the end of the 19th century and of the works on humanities and social sciences after the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976).

We do not need to agree on Yan's delimitation of the peak periods in the translation history of China, since other scholars are usually more or less divided on the cut-off points, which vary with their different interpretations and evaluations of historic translation events (cf. Ma,

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<sup>27</sup> The original Weibo post cannot be accessed, but his remark has been quoted by several online news websites including Huangshengzaixian: <http://hszz.voc.com.cn/view.php?tid=655&cid=7>; Beiwei40du: <http://www.bw40.net/1621.html>

1999; Ge, 1984; Fang, 2005). Not unexpectedly, some internet users thought Yan overvalued users' translation endeavours by assigning them such historical significance. However, this to some extent serves as a reminder of how translation has been interwoven within China's history, and a historical perspective must be incorporated into the exploration of the present digital translation movement.

The history of translation in China parallels to a degree the trajectory of the country's openness and innovation. In the contemporary period in China, revolutionary harbingers like Cai Yuanpei<sup>28</sup> and Chen Duxiu<sup>29</sup> utilised translation as a powerful weapon in advocating western values in the May 4th Cultural Movement (1915–1923), and only through their efforts did concepts such as 'democracy' and 'science' first become known by Chinese intellectuals and then spread to the wider public. Besides its ideological impact, translation has helped drive the linguistic shift of legitimating the language of literature from classical Chinese to vernacular Chinese in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and some scholars believe the translation-driven 'Europeanisation' or 'modernisation' is one of the defining features of the modern Chinese language (Xiong, 2013; Wang, 2008; Xie, 1989, 1995). The vernacularisation of the Chinese literary language, in turn, helped to expand the possible readership of literary works from the privileged elite to every literate citizen. For around two decades from the 1920s to 1940s, before the founding of the People's Republic of China, hundreds of intellectuals and writers joined in the translation endeavour to bring in intellectual and literary works from abroad, hoping to spark a domestic enlightenment. During this period, the fragile governmental administration and the transitional social system left the cultural space full of uncertainty and at the same time provided a fertile space for the foreign concepts and values to develop and prosper.

Luhmann (1995, p. 118) considers translation as the mechanism that makes operationally closed systems interactionally open and enables and mediates the relational encounters between a 'we' deme and a 'they' deme. Those interactions are not always viewed positively by a culture, since the general identity formula is to view a 'they' deme as 'savage', 'chaotic' or 'bizarre', and a 'we' deme as 'civilized', 'logic', or 'normal'. This presumption calls for the deployment of regulatory measures to shun, censor and ban the unwelcome elements of

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<sup>28</sup> Cai Yuanpei (Chinese: 蔡元培; Jan. 11, 1868 – March 5, 1940) was a Chinese educator and reformer. He was a passionate advocate for synthesis of Chinese and Western thinking. He was an influential figure in the New Culture and May Fourth Movements when he was president of Peking University.

<sup>29</sup> Chen Duxiu (Chinese: 陈独秀; Oct. 8, 1879- May 27, 1942) has been remembered by his contributions in various respects including social reform, education, philosophy and writing. Chen played a leading role in the Xinhai Revolution that overthrew the Qing dynasty and in the May Fourth Movement that advanced scientific and democratic developments in early Republic of China.

‘they’-culture. Contemporarily, translation in China faced difficulties during the reign of Mao Zedong, who imposed very strict regulations on the production and dissemination of literature and art works for fear of the ideological erosion of his people plotted by western forces. The dominance of nationalism plus the cultivation of cult of Mao successfully put the Chinese people within the ideological and structural confinement approved and advocated by the Communist Party of China, and any effort to access and disseminate foreign values and concepts was considered a crime. As a result, for the nearly three decades of Mao’s reign (1949–1976), translation was pushed to the very periphery and reached a state of near stagnation apart from works on communist ideologies such as Marxism and Leninism approved by the central culture (Guo, 2017).

The implementation of the open-door policy beginning in 1978 freed China of most of the shackles imposed in the era of Mao, and translation regained its foothold in society. For most Chinese people, translation became the intermediary to help them understand the outside world and become part of the efforts of reform and opening-up. Huang Youyi, the first vice-president of the Translators Association of China, once commented: ‘The 30 years of reform and opening up has made the translation cause a story of prosperity and success in China; at the same time, translation has functioned as a leading force to boost the reform and opening up drive and played a significant role in advancing the modernist construction in the new age’ (Huang, 2009). The upsurging in translation occurring during this period can be best attested by the annual statistics on translated publications. The number of translated work titles published in 1978 was 14,987 per year; the number in 2003 was 190,000; in 2017 it reached 512,487.<sup>30</sup> Translation has swept into every corner and crevice of Chinese life, from the economy to entertainment, and introduced a kaleidoscope of new concepts as well as exotic lifestyles that have opened the eyes of Chinese people and shaped their ways of living. Literature creation is a typical example. The Chinese Nobel laureate Mo Yan once admitted the influence of translation on his writing and remarked: ‘When some people said that Mo Yan’s language was influenced by the Colombian novelist Concordia Garcis Marquez, I put it right by saying I was influenced by the translator’ (‘Mo Yan’s view on translation’, 2016).

Therefore, the correlative relationship between translation and history requires us to put translation in the context of history and history in the context of translation. Translation has long been used as an avenue to stimulate creativity and social change, but it has also been considered a threat to the ruling regime in some periods of China’s history. Although a forward-looking approach is needed when we examine the new developments of translation in the digital age, it will be more rewarding to look back to relevant situations and tease out

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<sup>30</sup> <http://data.stats.gov.cn/search.htm?s=%E7%BF%BB%E8%AF%91%E5%87%BA%E7%89%88>

the evolutionary dynamics than to assume that everything in vogue now is innovative and revolutionary. Another point to note is that it is undeniable that the systemic involvement of translation as a communication act provides knowledge and social energy to a culture. However, not all communication acts mediated through translation have the same social resonance in a given society. Social constraints and various social factors undoubtedly leave their inscriptions in the materiality of translation work and its entire practice. One prominent factor is power relations between different agents.

### 3.3 Dynamic Power Relations in the Translation Discourse

Translation is not a pure linguistic transferring activity. As a driving force behind cultural and social change, translation is not immune from the web of power relationships functioning either within the translation community or outside it. Translation is itself neutral, not a tool proprietary to some privileged class or people. However, those in power are better positioned to utilise translation to achieve their discursive sovereignty. In the case of the translation endeavour involving Buddhist scriptures that was institutionalised to a great extent in China during several historical periods including the Donghan dynasty (25–220 AD), Southern and Northern dynasties (420–589 AD) and Tang dynasty (618–907 AD), translation was mostly directed under the patronage and control of several imperial courts. This governmental involvement was not motivated by an interest in translation per se or in cultural change but by the political importance attributed to translation (Li, 2009, p. 17), since Buddhism—which maintained a harmonious relationship with local Confucianism—was believed to be instrumental in consolidating the sovereignty of the ruling class. With regard to translation culture in China, translation without a doubt has played a role in consolidating rule and the ideological social identity sanctioned by authorities in different periods across history. At the same time, there is no lack of historical instances that demonstrate how translation has empowered translators to act either as a disguised or as an active agent committed to the cause of social rejuvenation.

In the arena of power discourse, translation has taken various forms and sometimes been so camouflaged that it cannot be recognised as translation per se. In 1898, the publication of the translation of T. H. Huxley's *Evolution and Ethics* by Yan Fu,<sup>31</sup> acted as a beacon for many

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<sup>31</sup> Yan Fu (Chinese: 严复; Jan. 8, 1854 - Oct. 27, 1921) was a Chinese scholar and translator who was devoted to introducing western thoughts and concepts, including Darwin's 'natural selection', to China in the late 19th century.

Chinese intellectuals and politicians in pointing the way forward after China's defeat in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895. The core concept of 'survival of the fittest' proposed by the author became a rallying call and motivated many Chinese intellectuals to participate in the social revolution movement of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. After reading Yan's translation, Hu Shi<sup>32</sup> was inspired to change his original name Hu Hongxing into Hu Shi (the Chinese character *Shi*/适 literally means *to fit, to adapt to*)' to demonstrate his aspirations, and later he became a key contributor to Chinese liberalism and made a great contribution to the popularisation of the written Chinese vernacular. However, not until forty years later was it discovered that Yan gave the original text a total makeover in order to deliver his call for social revolution. In the original version, Huxley actually argues strongly against the application of the theory of evolution, an amoral mechanism, to human societies that can only work through human energy and intelligence. With this disparity between the original and the source text, Yan clearly used translation as a means of disguising narrative to advocate social reform and transformation urgently needed at that time. Furthermore, in order to appeal to the poetic and ideological tastes of the scholar-bureaucrat at that time, Yan Fu tried to integrate Confucian doctrines into the translation, which was couched in a classical literary style. In this way, he attracted attention from the powerholders and stimulated a social trend towards revolution and reform.

Today, against a backdrop of globalisation and digitalisation, translation is an index to reveal not only how far China has become integrated into the world economic platform, but also how popular culture and the daily lives of ordinary Chinese people have interacted with that of the outside world. Alongside professionals and industry content-providers, user-translators have activated a semiotic sphere where they virtualise the 'distributed production' of translation—effective, manageable, task- segmented, with processes linearized like an assembly line (Hatcher, 2005, p. 558). Although still subject to governmental constraints, these tech-savvy translators are better empowered than their predecessors to use translation to defend and cultivate a cultural space of their own. Agency resides not only with those with political power but also with ordinary internet users.

At this point, it is apposite to evoke the conceptualisation of power by Foucault (1991), which shifts away from analysing power as a coercive instrument and a kind of structured agency toward an understanding that 'power is everywhere', distributed and constituted through discourse, knowledge and 'regimes of truth'. Foucault reminds us that power is not

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<sup>32</sup> Hu Shi (Chinese: 胡适; Dec. 17, 1891- Feb. 24, 1962) was a Chinese scholar, philosopher and essayist. Hu is widely recognized today as a key language reformer advocating the popularity of written vernacular Chinese. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hu\\_Shih](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hu_Shih)

concentrated in and possessed even by those in power, but it needs to be embodied and enacted through discursive engagement. Although the digital environment still has its limitation in expanding our discursive engagement as users and customers, the general cognizance is that the internet has enabled its users to become more powerful than before in engaging with narratives, discourses and languages. Therefore, translators in China, professional or not, have more room for articulation within the power discourse in contemporary China. Yuri Lotman has advanced this point. According to him (1990, p. 136), agency has not always been effected through counter-culture dissident activism, and the polysystemic peripheries can be spaces full of potential for individual or collective agents to exert their influence in a culture.

Seeing an analogue between Lotman's 'semiosphere' and 'Web semiosphere', Ibrus (2010, p. 90) argues that the semiotic space of the internet is activated by 'power asymmetries' and 'centre-periphery dynamics'. According to him (p. 241), the centre is dominated by 'infrastructure enablers' who 'determine the forms of the Web content'. This may be the case globally, but in the case of China, the power and intervention of the government to maintain and construct its long-established core culture must be considered. In this case, who are the agents at the periphery? In this study, I focus primarily on one category—the users or consumers of media content, especially 'prosumers' or user-translators. Lotman (1990, p. 141) describes the shift of the 'centre-periphery' as 'the periphery of culture moves to the centre, and the centre is pushed out to the periphery'. Hence, the question is how user-translators initiate and accelerate the semiotic processes and shape the power asymmetry of society. Moreover, the semiosphere has multiple centres with 'the diversity of elements and their different functions' (Lotman, 2005, p.212). This is even truer in the current digital context, where different semiotic systems and cultures have more possibilities to intersect and interact with each other. If anything can be predicted, UGT, as a bilingual (multilingual) semiotic space and a borderland between 'we' and 'they' groups, is a centre in its own sense.

### 3.4 The Mediation of Media Technology

Translation as a whole has undergone a transformation in the digital age, conditioned by the conflation of various emerging contextual factors. Among these factors, media technology is certainly crucial in that it not only conditions the evolution of translation culture but preconditions the formation of the UGT community in the first place (Gambier, 2014, 2016). McLuhan's (1967) oft-quoted 'the medium is the message' remains a contentious topic; however, there is no doubt that media technology today not only empowers translation but



also transforms its intrinsic features. This is one of the core arguments elaborated in the next several chapters.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, China sent its first email to Germany in 1987. Three decades later, China already boasted the largest number of internet users in the world in 2014. Paradoxically though, it was rated as the world's worst abuser of internet freedom in the Net Survey of 2015 (House, 2015), and this evaluation had not shown much change by 2019. There is an enormous body of literature on China's internet censorship mechanisms, including the Great Firewall,<sup>33</sup> which is criticised as an impediment to the flow of communication and free speech. However, one must not jump to the conclusion that the Chinese internet is isolated in a cocoon. First, although the government's rules guiding the censorship attempts are rather vague and sweeping, they mainly target content and information on sensitive topics to ensure nothing challenges the Party's leadership or disturbs its 'harmonious society'. Second, more and more Chinese netizens, especially tech-savvy young people, break through the Great Firewall to connect to websites they like, and many clever methods have been developed online to circumvent the web filter and avoid the notice of the censors. Third, as a new study from Northwestern University argues, 'the internet isn't that grand, global community that connects and equalizes everyone' ('China's Great Firewall', 2013). Instead, users actively select content to their preferences and largely stay connected to communities within their comfort zones (Taneja & Wu, 2014).

Online translation practice is certainly not immune to authorities' tightening control of the internet, as evidenced by several instances of shut-downs. But the flip side of the efforts to block information is that people's desire to know the outside world has been even more greatly incited than otherwise. As one Chinese blogger remarked in an interview with *The Times*, even the most modern technology cannot hold people back from expressing themselves: 'It is like a water flow-if you block one direction, it flows to other directions, or overflows' (James, 2009). The persistent efforts of grassroots-based online translation indicate that ordinary people are taking the initiative not only to navigate but to create the flow of information on the internet. Thus, the Chinese internet space is part of the world web semiosphere instead of being isolated from it. To some extent, for some Chinese internet users the internet takes on an extra dimension of meaningfulness exactly because of the dynamics of connection and separation, negotiation and conflict, blocking and

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<sup>33</sup> The Great Firewall of China (GFW) is a technology used by the Chinese authority to regulate its domestic internet and block selected foreign websites. Its effectiveness is enhanced by the force of law. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great\\_Firewall](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Firewall)

circumvention, perhaps more so than in other componential web semiospheres like those of the US, Japan, or Great Britain.

The conflation of technological affordances and human cognition has undoubtedly transformed the world of translation. Online translation communities are largely maintained and enlivened by the networks through which members act as a collective subject to engage in collaborative translation. Nevertheless, Littau (2016) argues that computer-mediated translation is a sum-up remediation of those historical practices influenced by other media such as oral, scribal, and print, while Garcia (2009) considers the practice of crowdsourcing translation as the ‘return of the amateur’, similar to the situation of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Therefore, we must bear in mind that the current translation landscape also appears on a continuum connected with its prehistory in various ways, as discussed in the first section of this chapter. The following sections address two other contextual factors: the mechanism of travel and the wide participation of amateurs.

### 3.5 Travel and Moving Boundaries

Yuri Lotman considers translation the elementary mechanism functioning at the semiotic boundary between cultures. The boundary filters the passage of texts and messages like a series of bilingual membranes. Moving away from his structuralist approach of the 1970s, Lotman (1990, p. 138) states:

In fact, the entire space of semiosphere is transected by boundaries of different levels, boundaries of different languages and even of texts, and the internal space of each of these sub-semiosphere has its own semiotic ‘I’ which is realized as the relationship of any language, group of texts, or separate texts, to a metastructural space which describes them, always bearing in mind that languages and texts are hierarchically disposed on different levels.

Historically, a cultural boundary has largely been identified with geographical borders or places, and this is the case with the Great Wall that was built as the historical northern border of China to protect the Chinese empires from invasions of the nomadic tribes of the Eurasian Steppe. When China was later forced to become more open to the outside world, some cities began to function as a cultural boundary with extrasemiotic spaces; for example, Beijing and Shanghai became the places where multicultural interactions took place during the May Fourth Movement. The ‘state’ or ‘sovereignty’ has long been an unsatisfactory way to define ‘border’, still less so in today’s interconnected world where numerous social media forums,

portals and websites are exposed to bicultural or multi-cultural norms and influences (Nail, 2016). Johnson et al. (2011, p. 67) astutely remind us: ‘... borders are woven into the fabric of society and are the routine business of all concerned’. Following this line of thought, I see online translation communities as a type of cultural borderland—they not only witness the encounters between different cultures or systems but also mediate and create the encounters.

We no longer live within the bounds of ‘our social imaginary’ that leaves us unable to ‘imagine ourselves outside a certain matrix’ (Taylor, 2004). ‘Connectivity’ and ‘openness’ are prominent motifs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, although there is also an opposing trend noticeable around the world, especially considering the pending exit of Great Britain from the European Union and the chaotic situation in the Middle East.

Here, I want to dwell particularly on the concept of ‘travel’ and its correlation with the current changes happening to translation culture in China. In a lecture on Russian culture, Lotman (2014) explained how travel was a complex and interesting form of communication in Russian history. When examining translation events in the history of China, we find that travel was a great contributor to several surges in translation activity, even though there is no unquestionable causal sequence between them. For example, the travel of the Buddhist monks An Shigao<sup>34</sup> and Lokaksin<sup>35</sup> during the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) from Central Asia and Scythia to Luoyang, the then-capital of China, helped to spur the endeavour of translating Buddhist scriptures on a state scale. Xuan Zang,<sup>36</sup> a Chinese monk of the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE) undertook a journey to India in order to access Buddhist scriptures and introduce them into China.

Moreover, if we turn our attention to those contemporary outstanding translators like Lu Xun,<sup>37</sup> Lin Yutang<sup>38</sup> and Fu Lei,<sup>39</sup> it is not a coincidence that study and travel abroad has

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<sup>34</sup>An Shigao was an early Parthian Buddhist missionary to China who came to Luoyang, the Chinese capital of the Han Dynasty and translated Indian Buddhist texts into Chinese from circa 148 to 180 CE.

<sup>35</sup> Lokaksin was an Indo-scythian Buddhist monk who travelled to Luoyang during the Han dynasty and played an active in translating Buddhist texts into Chinese between 178-189 CE.

<sup>36</sup> Xuan Zang was a Chinese Buddhist monk, scholar and translator who was most known for his contribution to the interaction between Chinese Buddhism and Indian Buddhism during the early Tang dynasty. His advocacy helped the development of Buddhism reach the peak in the history of China.

<sup>37</sup> Lu Xun (1881-1936), is widely recognised as one of most influential writers in modern China. His study in Japan during 1902-1906 opened his eyes to ideas and concepts of foreign countries mostly the west which he was passionate to introduce to Chinese people through translation.

<sup>38</sup> Lin Yutang (1895-1976) was a renowned bilingual (Chinese and English) writer and philosopher. He studied at Harvard University and later completed the requirements for a doctor degree in Chinese philosophy at Leipzig University.

<sup>39</sup> Fu Lei (1908–1966) who studied in France from 1928-1931, was China's most influential translator of French literature, most known for his rendition of Balzac and Romain Rolland.

helped establish translation as a core part of their careers. What they brought back to China was not only the knowledge of science and technology that was lacking in China at that time, but also the expansion of dialogic spaces across cultures and the interactive spaces in between. It is through their work that the Chinese people have become more exposed to other cultures and have reflected upon their own culture. In this sense, the deeds of these people are exemplary instances to show that travel is itself an act of cultural translation. It instantiates the movement of border-crossing and functions as a mechanism to connect different cultural and linguistic spheres. In other words, travellers are the ‘moving frontier(s)’ (Pireddu, 2006) and embody new lines of contact that redefine the notion of self-identity on the premises of alterity.

Studying abroad is one form of border-crossing, along with business travel, diplomatic pilgrimages, and so on. The Opium Wars with the British government in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century forced the Chinese government to face up to the fact that it lagged far behind its western counterparts in the development of technology and science. The rallying cry ‘learning from the foreigners in order to gain command of them’ pointed the way to rejuvenate China and defend itself from the western powers’ invasion. One of the approaches adopted was sending students abroad to learn from advanced foreign techniques and cultures. From the 1870s to the founding of the People’s Republic, China witnessed several waves of students studying abroad in Europe, Japan, the US and the Soviet Union, with different destinations as the most popular at different times.<sup>40</sup> Given the high expectations placed on these endeavours, those who were selected to study abroad were the cream of the crop in the eyes of the government or patrons, and they were highly motivated by the same glorious objective, namely to save the country. What interested them were primarily science and technology as well as the socio-political systems of the western world.

Interestingly, among the initiators and participants of online translation communities, many have had the experience of travelling abroad for the purpose of either study or work. For example, RRYS was first begun by a Chinese student who studied in Canada,<sup>41</sup> and Yeeyan was the brainchild of three Chinese engineers who worked in Silicon Valley in the US.<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, they are different from their predecessors in various aspects: First, there has been a drastic increase in numbers of students studying abroad: the 100 years before 1949 saw no more than 10,000 Chinese students studying abroad in total. In 2015 alone, the number was nearly 523,700, with a year-on-year increase of 13.9%. Second, studying or

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<sup>40</sup> See [http://www.xinhuanet.com/abroad/2017-05/31/c\\_129621667.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/abroad/2017-05/31/c_129621667.htm)

<sup>41</sup> See <https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E4%BA%BA%E5%BD%B1%E8%A7%86>

<sup>42</sup> See <https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E8%AF%91%E8%A8%80>

travelling abroad is no longer the privilege of the elite or the upper class. More and more common people have joined the trend, and what interests them may be more down to the earth, closer to the worldly affairs of the populace, rather than the sacred cause of making China strong and modernised. Third, unlike their predecessors who usually had to rely on official channels to disseminate the information and knowledge they acquired abroad, they can resort to digital technologies not only to undertake real-time transmission of information and content but also to establish and reach communities of like-minded individuals, thus reshaping the communication circuits unlike never before.

### 3.6 Digital Textual Culture

Throughout China's history, each specific era generally featured its own distinctive textual genre. For example, the dynasties of Tang, Song, Yuan and Qing had poetry, Ci, Qu<sup>43</sup> and novels as the dominant genre respectively. Each of these literary forms was the privileged means of signification in a given historical period and endowed some people with opportunities to have their voices heard in a given tempo-spatial context and in many cases throughout hundreds of years right up to today. Generally speaking, enshrined as part of high culture, literary writing has usually been dominated by the elite and literati and has reflected the hierarchical structure of the semiotic space between various cultural agents at different levels of the society. Correspondingly, literary translation has been considered socially essential, a mechanism for introducing revolutionary ideas and concepts in many cultures. In China, the aphorism of Liang (1902) rang very true in his time: 'The people of one country can't be enlightened without innovating its novels'. At the turn of the 20th century, some translated literary works enlightened thousands of Chinese people's lives like beams of light shining through a curtain of darkness. During that period, the translation of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*<sup>44</sup> inspired hundreds of Chinese intellectual women to fight for freedom and independence against the strangling constraints imposed by the patriarchal social system.

To shift the antithesis of high and low culture, cultural studies began to stake out its disciplinary territory in the 1950s, and two of its pioneers, Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams, went far in legitimising popular culture as an essential component of social

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<sup>43</sup> Tang Poetry, Song Ci and Yuan Qu are three typical modes of Classical Chinese poetry. Corresponding to Chinese dynastic eras, these poetic modes have their distinctive stylistic features in terms of line lengths, rhyme, rhythm and tone.

<sup>44</sup> *A Doll's House* is a three-act play written by Norway's Henrik Ibsen. Its setting is in a Norwegian town circa 1879. The play portrayed the fate of a married woman, who at the time in Norway were denied any opportunities for self-fulfilment by a male-dominated society. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A\\_Doll%27s\\_House](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Doll%27s_House)

culture, in parallel with ‘Culture’ with a capital C. This new school of cultural studies deconstructs the hierarchy of textual structures and considers all forms and models as equivalent, be it TV programs, radio broadcasts, films or photographs. In a sense, cultural studies marks a new scholarly approach which focuses on textual production and consumption as the lived experiences of common people. Its objects of study have grown exponentially in today’s digital context, where miscellaneous cultural texts crop up in vast numbers every day in forms of instant messages, blogs, electronic novels, hashtags, and video clips. This approach resonates with the all-encompassing description of the semiospheric text given by Lotman, which is ‘multimodal and polyglot’ and ‘transcends the limits of the literature, “acquiring semiotic life”’ (Semenenko, 2012, p. 75).

Currently, translation studies feels an urgent need to strengthen its descriptive and interpretative capacities to deal with the new frontiers brought about by the medium change from print to digital. Literary texts have been the focus of translation studies since it established itself as a discipline. Some of the early works to theorise translation, such as *After Babel* (Steiner, 2013) and *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (Nida & Taber, 2003), used literature as their object of research to explore the new grounds of translation as a discipline. Even now, literary translation is reluctant to release its dominant foothold in the disciplinary discourse. Literary translation is believed to demand more interpretive input and higher sophisticated expertise. Non-literary translation targeting technical, legal or commercial texts is considered more mechanical and more removed from the ‘proper’ translation domain. Still less desirable for professional translators is the translation of popular culture, such as films, TV programs, blogs, Facebook messages, YouTube clips, etc., which in turn puts these texts in ‘a state of *double marginalisation*’ (Mao, 2008, p. 156, original italics).

The digital mediasphere, however, does not favour one type of text over another and provides a semiosphere where all types of texts can have their own yet interdependent spaces. Here, the translation of literature is allowed to thrive alongside non-literary translation. Regarding preconditioning contexts, the following three points are important to note: First, the internet gives Chinese users more opportunities to create communication junctures and shape the media network on various scales, which has previously been monopolised by some mainstream media or a close-knit circle of the elite. A translation is a zone of contact between the translated culture and the translating culture; on the other hand, it is a site of communication within the latter. A community is drawn to a (type of) translation either by the values and beliefs inscribed by the authors or translators, by linguistic practice rendered therein, or by other incommensurable interests among the

members who would otherwise be dispersed across different linguistic or social strata. Media technology has enlarged the intersection between translation and society and furthered its integration into the dynamics of social life instead of being something transcendental and aesthetic. In this regard, literary translation alone cannot fulfil the demand, nor can any other type of texts. What is needed is cross-range textual translation. The integration of translation into popular culture is not only an outstanding feature of contemporary digitalised culture but also points to a new paradigm we must shift to in order to understand the evolution of contemporary culture in a given social system.

Second, for a community, the production of UGT is an outcome of ongoing dialogues among different agents including translators, coordinators, users and gatekeepers. The user's influence throughout the process of translation has especially been increasing owing to the interactiveness of the internet. Digital culture is a culture of attention. The user's response and comments more often than not can determine what to translate and how to translate and thereby influence the meaningfulness of translation to a community. What interests the user is more about content, creativity, and interactivity than the type of texts. It can be a piece of news, a cranky song or a hit movie. Here, I agree with Scott Kushner (2017) that all textual culture is 'worthy of being reread'. What we need is to find the appropriate perspective for capturing its significance in representing and shaping cultural structures and creating meaning and knowledge.

Third, the digital environment has greatly increased the pervasiveness and visibility of translation. Translation is no longer regarded as an unreachable terrain reserved for legendary translators such as Lu Xun, Fu Lei as mentioned above. The desire to communicate and share has motivated thousands of professional and non-professional translators to join online translation. In China, subtitling groups are acclaimed as heroes by internet users. In Russia and Turkey, some activists use translation as a powerful tool for gaining more ground in the tug war of political discourse. More and more people are beginning to engage in and think about translation. Translation is the mechanism driving the current of globalisation. Except for competent bilinguals or polyglots, most people, even if they are not always aware of it, rely on translation to transcend the social imaginary and make sense of the outside world. In this sense, we can say that translation produces cultural encounters and is the site of cultural dialogues.

In this chapter, I have addressed the contextual factors pertaining to the object of the research from five aspects in order to help readers understand the circumstances that make community translation as a cultural practice unique in its own right, while also allowing it stand as a point of connection within the history of cross-cultural communication. Based on

this analysis, I proceed to the case studies in the next three chapters, where the ideas discussed above are further elaborated based on empirical observations and data.



# Chapter 4. Case Study 1: Longtengwang

## 4.1 Introduction

Until the turn of this millennium, it had been a daily routine for many Chinese families for decades to sit in front of the television at 8:00pm sharp to watch the China Central Television (CCTV) news broadcast. The mission of the program is declared on its official website as ‘to publicize the spirit and policies of the Party (the Communist Party of China) and the government, and deliver the important and current events which are happening around the world’.<sup>45</sup> In addition to television, newspapers have been another important medium for many Chinese people to know what is happening in the world. Presently in mainland China, there are only two Chinese newspapers that are authorised to report international news and opinions or source them from foreign media: one is the Reference News Newspaper (RNN, Chinese Pinyin: Cankao Xiaoxi, referred to as RNN hereafter); the other is the Global Times (Chinese Pinyin: Huanqiu Shibao). The former is affiliated with the Chinese state-run Xinhua News Agency and the latter with another governmental media institution, People’s Daily. These official media outlets have been the major or only sources of information for the majority of Chinese people in knowing what is happening in the outside world. Currently, all the official news channels have developed digital platforms to keep abreast of the times. However, regardless of how different the medium may be, the news media in China have always operated under the centralised management of the governmental regulatory institution. The principle they are expected to follow— ‘media serve the government’—was made clear by President Xi Jinping when he toured three state-run media operations in February 2016: ‘The media run by the Party and the government are the propaganda fronts and belong to the Party’ (‘Xi Jinping’, 2016). Therefore, ‘in the context of the political system of socialism, the medium of TV has been utilized as the mouthpiece of the Party and the government, an instrument of publicity, from the very start’, and readers or audiences are regarded as the ‘educatees’ (Liu, 2007, p.30). This statement made about television culture in China is by no means a detached scholarly diagnosis but is also applicable to every other mass media platform in China.

According to the 38th Statistical Report on Internet Development in China in 2016, among China’s more than 700 million internet users, up to 564 million were users of online news sources.<sup>46</sup> Among various reasons behind the popularity of online news, one is that the

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<sup>45</sup> [http://guoqing.china.com.cn/zhuanti/2015-12/30/content\\_37422783.htm](http://guoqing.china.com.cn/zhuanti/2015-12/30/content_37422783.htm)

<sup>46</sup> [http://www1.cnnic.cn/hlwfzyj/hlwxzbg/hlwtjbg/201701/t20170122\\_66437.htm](http://www1.cnnic.cn/hlwfzyj/hlwxzbg/hlwtjbg/201701/t20170122_66437.htm)

‘[e]xisting media are weak’ (Piskorski, 2013), according to *The Hindu*, India’s national newspaper, in an article entitled ‘Why China loves the Internet’. This was echoed by Shirk (2010, p. 233) who described Chinese netizens as ‘not satisfied with the news and information they get from newspapers and televisions alone’. The question thus arises—has the internet provided Chinese users alternative media sources to the official ones? The early years of the 2000s saw the emergence of commercial media providers as well as grassroots initiatives for providing news services, which changed and diversified the media culture. This did not last long, however. The authorities lost no time in stepping in and imposing regulations on the rapidly burgeoning online media sites. For example, the above-mentioned 2005 ‘Provisions on the Administration of Internet News Information Services’, which was replaced by upgraded new rules in May 2017, has ruled out most of the new players by raising the threshold for entry. In addition, these provisions are meant to put content under strict control. The old rules listed 11 types of content as unhealthy, anti-government, and anti-social, and thus banned from the internet. The new rules replace the list of banned content with a more sweeping statement that bans ‘any information that is prohibited by laws and administrative regulations’ (CAC, 2017a), which gives China’s top internet regulator, the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) and other competent authorities greater leeway to interpret the nature of content publicised in accordance with relevant laws and regulations.

The pervasive and connected internet keeps the government on high alert for those content that instigates opinions or negative reporting about the regime that could have the potential to stir up social unrest. Consequently, there have been waves of shut-downs of self-driven media initiatives. The government’s latest effort sent a strong signal about its seriousness in tightening up supervision of internet news. In 2017, several influential Chinese online news portals, including Sina Corp., NetEase Inc., Sohu.com Inc. and Tencent Holdings Ltd., were ordered by the CAC to stop reporting original political news and to only repost news published by state-approved news entities or their local subordinates (CAC, 2017b).

In this constraining political context, a similar fate befell various foreign news service platforms. The Chinese website of the BBC was blocked in 2009. The year 2012 saw the blockage of *The New York Times*, and one year later the Chinese website of *The Wall Street Journal* and *Reuters* was inaccessible to Chinese readers. At the same time, the sweeping ban also targeted domestic grassroots-based initiatives. In 2014, *Cenci*, a civic journalism initiative founded by five students from Beijing Foreign Languages University in 2011, was shut down. Upholding the slogan of ‘Same Events, Diversified Reports’, this civic media outlet aimed to provide multiple perspectives on global and Chinese current affairs by

translating news and commentaries in more than 14 foreign languages into Chinese. The same political environment has pushed Yeeyan, the largest translation community in China, to shift its focus from the translation of news sources to books, which will be discussed in Chapter 5. Longtengwang, like Cenci and Yeeyan, is a civic translation community and one of the rare sources of international news and digital content for Chinese readers. But, unlike Cenci and Yeeyan, Longtengwang has been able to partially hold onto its original aspirations and maintain sustainable development.

Based on the case study of Longtengwang, this chapter examines the development and dynamics of civic media platforms in the socio-cultural context of contemporary China and the roles they have played in changing the news mediasphere in China and broadening the dialogic spaces between cultures through news translation.

## 4.2 Longtengwang in the Semiosphere of News Media

Longtengwang was founded by a Chinese netizen around January 2011.<sup>47</sup> Its Chinese website name Longtengwang literally means ‘the dragon is taking off’, implying that China is taking off to be a great country (the dragon is the legendary ‘deity’ of the Chinese people). Even among civic media platforms, this initiative is quite unique in that rather than focusing on the content of mainstream media outlets, it mainly translates comments and forum posts related to China’s current affairs, policies and culture published by foreign internet users on popular social media forums such as Yahoo, YouTube and Quora. The community categorises its translation genre as Wangtie translation (Wangtie means social forum posts). A piece of Wangtie translation on the Longtengwang website generally takes two forms: one comprises a headline and the lead of a news story and readers’ comments on it selected from foreign news media; the other, a post, blog or article and comments on it selected from popular foreign social forums.

Longtengwang’s task and objective are stated on its mission statement page as ‘to refuse to passively accept the information fed by the media; listen to the authentic voices of the common people around the world’. The translator is encouraged to provide objective translation by sourcing original material from popular social media, and if there are too many

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<sup>47</sup> The statement is based on an advice-seeking notice posted on the community forum. See the screenshot (S4.1) for the notice.

comments and posts, he/she should give priority to those with most ups or likes, or translate chronologically.<sup>48</sup>

Since ordinary Chinese people have a very strong desire to know more about the outside world, the platform became popular very soon after its establishment. By its one year anniversary, it had attracted more than one hundred volunteer translators to join the group, and all together they had produced 2050 translated pieces for a readership of more than 20,000 registered members.<sup>49</sup> As it has grown, Longtengwang has upgraded its website several times to make the operation mechanism more efficient and workflow smoother. For example, in the translation task section, it has adopted a display board which displays all the information about the worklist and task planning. Depending on interest and time allowance, the translator can choose to undertake the whole translation task of a piece of Wangtie or just part of it. Here almost every piece of translation is completed as a work of cooperation, and the operation procedure is as follows: the platform or some user recommends the source text; the recommendation is approved; the task is segmented to be claimed by translators; the involved translators translate, revise and approve each other's work; the translation is published by a community coordinator.

A point to note here is that this operating model marks a departure from the conventional linear process of translation, editing and proofreading that guides the activities of translation agencies or professionals. By segmenting the work and distributing it among different translators, the platform moves editing and proofreading earlier in the process rather than leaving them until translation is finished. Another striking feature is that the users are not neglected in this collaborative environment. They have the comment section to voice their views on the news and on the translations, and they have an influential voice in deciding what to translate. The discussion is organised consecutively but into discrete threads. The relationship between one comment and the responding ones is made explicit by the nested layout on the screen, where a response to a comment is placed below it and indented. These features promote a dialogic environment required for community building.

Two years after its establishment, this endeavour initiated by a single individual became a gathering-place for like-minded translators and readers. At the same time, its website multiplied its functions to include video translation, social forums and entertainment.

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<sup>48</sup> When I tried to access the website page of the mission statement and disciplinary rules of the community on August 14, 2019, a 'temporarily closed' notice popped up. Fortunately, I saved a PDF version of the page when I accessed it in Nov. 2016. See the screenshots (S4.2 and S4.3) for the mission statement and requirement for translation.

<sup>49</sup> See the screenshot (S4.4) for the source of statistics.

Gradually, Longtengwang grew from a single-function translation forum to a multi-function website to accommodate the various needs of its ever-enlarging number of users. However, in the eyes of a veteran user, the greatest change has come in its content management policy. To toe the line of governmental regulations on internet information and content, Longtengwang has adopted self-censoring behaviours. In practice, the published translation ‘can’t contain sensitive issues or opinions’ as stated by an interviewed Longtengwang translator (I1).<sup>50</sup> The restriction also allows more publication space to be given to news and comments that reflect positively on the image of China. As a result, the sentiment of nationalism has started to pervade the community, which ever became a discussion topic in Zhihu, a Q&A social forum. An anonymous user said that as a regular visitor to the website, he/she noticed an ideological shift to the left among the commenters.<sup>51</sup>

This censorship has partially led to the decrease in translation output. To encourage translators’ involvement, Longtengwang started to implement a semi-paid-reading model in 2017. On the website, while some translations are still free to read, readers must pay to read other translations. Users can buy virtual coins on the platform. The exchange rate is approximately 1 RMB to 100 coins, but the more the user exchanges, the more extra coins he/she will get; for example, 100 RMB is worth 10,500 coins. Although the translator can put a price on his/her translation depending on its length, the cost of reading a piece of translation is usually below 0.5 RMB that will go to the translator directly. As a result, the platform has seen an increase in the daily output of translation.

Therefore, as a semiotic space of news translation and transmission, the structure and nature of Longtengwang is not one of certainty or fixity but one of becoming and mutability. Its formation, development and survival are embedded in and greatly shaped by the specific situations related to technological affordances, socio-cultural context and the political and ideological mood, as well as the copyright issue. This is the reason why a translation community usually denies the categorisation by any predefined label, since any clear-cut label can miss some dimension of the dynamic semiotic space, as pointed out in Chapter 1. On the other hand, to understand online civic journalism as a dynamic cultural form and see how it opens up semiotic spaces of meaning-making and knowledge-production in the news media sphere in China, it is imperative to look at the semiotic space that precedes and conditions its existence. For this, I turn to Yuri Lotman’s seminal concept of the semiosphere.

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<sup>50</sup> According to my interview.

<sup>51</sup> See the screenshot (S4.5) for the cited view.

Lotman maintains (1990, 2005) that a semiosphere is a conditional heterogeneous space of meaning-making. The internet and web culture had not yet caught Lotman's attention in his writing. But with its connectivity, heterogeneity and numerous semiosis processes happening at every level in every part, internet media is certainly a semiosphere. Within the semiosphere there are multiple smaller units, and the pertinent one here is the online news sphere, which functions as a semiosphere itself and contains various subspheres of its own, such as the websites of official or commercial news agencies, civic journalism projects, blogs, and social forums of various languages. Based on language difference, the constitutive spheres of the online news semiosphere can also be the news sphere in Chinese and those in foreign languages. With all the possible interventions, those spheres are in reciprocal interaction and exchange. Drawing on Lotman's post-structuralist model of cultural studies, Ibrus (2010, p. 90) argues that the semiotic structure of 'Web semiosphere' is defined by 'power asymmetries' and 'centre-periphery dynamics'. This model allows researchers and scholars to capture the fluidity and liquidity of the semiotic environment in cyberspace:

It emphasizes shifting boundaries and hierarchies, permutations between the centre and the periphery, mediations and translations, isomorphic relations between event on the micro and macro levels and unity through diversity. The organicist metaphor of the semiosphere serves not to essentialize discourse but to restore to it a sense of unceasing life, of the continuous metabolic exchanges discourses undergo when they are thrown into the world (Schonle, 2007, p. 7).

In the case of the online news sphere in China, the centre is occupied by the state authorised news agencies, and the periphery belongs to less powerful agents such as bloggers and civic journalism communities like Longtengwang. From the very beginning, Longtengwang has distinguished itself from the current mainstream media 'which focus their reporting almost exclusively on major news events and official viewpoints', and 'places equally great, if not greater, emphasis on common foreign netizens' opinions [sic]', so that it 'could shed a light into how the rest of the world see China and themselves' (the original translation on the community website).<sup>52</sup> How does Longtengwang then interact with its environment and alterity? And how does it organise and represent itself as a semiotic space to contribute to the growth of meaning and knowledge?

It is important to remember here that in the semiosphere, semiotic spaces are mutually interdependent and constitutive, not always in a friendly way. When it comes to a specific field of news media, in this case, the mediasphere on the one hand has its autonomous

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<sup>52</sup> See the screenshot (S4.6) for the cited statement.

mechanism for maintaining its integrity and boosting its uniqueness by defining its cultural codes to be shared among its different subspheres; on the other hand, its growth is largely driven by the heterogeneity of its subspheres, which is a dialogic precondition for the processes of semiosis. However, the dialogues are not conducted on a level playing-field, since the power relationship is always dependent on ongoing ‘centre-periphery dynamics’. In the dialogic interaction, some sub-systems play a dominant role in laying down the meta-language and prescribing the codes to control and stabilise the culture, while others play a passive role by taking orders. However, this is only part of the picture. The development of a culture is driven by the shifting dynamics of the power relationship among its subspheres, and more often than not its source of newness and creativity comes from the disruptive force located in the peripheral spheres. To examine the evolution of the UGT news practice and how it makes contact with other semiotic spaces and brings about sources of cultural newness in China, I rely for an empirical analysis on Lotman’s semiospheric concepts of boundary, centre and periphery, dialogue, translation and communication and auto-communication. ‘As a metadisciplinary concept, semiosphere belongs to the methodology of culture studies and is associated with the concepts of holism and the part and the whole’ (Torop, 2005).

First, let us turn to Lotman’s semiospheric concept of boundary.

### 4.3 Longtengwang as a Cultural Borderland

Every culture needs another culture to understand and present itself as well as avoid stagnation. This line of thinking propels Lotman to explicate the dynamics of the semiosphere in terms of boundaries. Drawing an analogy to the biological function of the cell membrane, Lotman (2005 [1994], p 210) defines the boundary as “a bilingual mechanism, translating external communications into the internal language of the semiosphere and vice versa. Thus, only with the help of the boundary is the semiosphere able to establish contact with non-semiotic and extra-semiotic spaces...” In other words, the boundary precedes and preconditions the dual dimensions of cultural construction and evolution: (A) communication that increases understanding of the Other; (B) communication that increases an understanding/reinforces the established image of the Self. This means that, on the one hand, boundaries as bilingual translatable ‘filters’ allow cultures to contact, absorb and culturalise otherwise counter- or extra-cultures; on the other hand, a boundary functions like a cell layer that will protect a culture from the undesired influences of aliens/others by limiting or stopping their penetration. At the same time, it constructs ‘who I am’ and confirms its subjectivity through the vision of aliens/others.

In Lotman's (1990, p. 191) revised model of the semiotic space of culture, the notion of space takes on a metaphorical implication, and the semiosphere is considered 'a likeness' and 'image' of real space. In Chapter 3, based on historical evidence from China, I stated that a cultural borderland no longer overlaps with a territorial and political dividing line used to stake out sovereignty or dominions, but correlates with the semiotic spaces which connect and separate the internal and external spaces of meaningfulness. In harmony with this line of thinking, Eva Huang (2005, p.43) identifies two types of communities as 'cultural borderlands':

1. Communities that were exposed to bicultural or multicultural influences because of their location at geographical and/or national boundaries;
2. Communities, large and small, which arose as a result of special social and political arrangements that allowed for the systems and norms of more than one culture to co-exist.

Longtengwang is a representative of the second type. Its mission statement<sup>53</sup> clearly states it aims to facilitate two types of communication: 'how the rest of the world see China and themselves' and 'how Chinese netizens react to other people's opinions that differ from theirs'—that is, communication of *I* and *the other*; and '[w]e need listen to the unbiased voices from the common people from the outside world to rectify our policy, straighten our thoughts and distinguish friends from enemies'—that is, auto-communication of *I* and *I*. From this perspective, Longtengwang is a 'bilingual translatable "filter"', a third space at the interface between semiotic systems (Lotman 2005, p. 208-9).

As a boundary of distinction between the external and internal space, the website allowed its users full autonomy to perform and complete tasks in its early stages. A website page titled 'Forum Matters', under the heading of 'Points to Note for Translator' published on 8 May 2011,<sup>54</sup> stated that the translator can either find his own source text or ask the community moderators to provide it and then he can directly publish his translation in the corresponding forum section according to its content category without any strings attached. One year later, community users started to experience a narrower discursive space when the community introduced a stricter set of disciplinary rules for its members. 'Sensitive content' was listed as one type of content to be banned, and every year there has been a renewed list of sensitive content.<sup>55</sup> Quite often an item of translation or post is deleted because it contains sensitive content or some banned words. This implementation of self-censorship has met with

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<sup>53</sup> See the screenshot (S4.6) for the mission statement.

<sup>54</sup> See the snapshot (S4.7) for 'Forum Matters' website page.

<sup>55</sup> See the snapshot (S4.8) for the 2014 renewed list of sensitive content.



backlash from some users. In November 2018, a translator<sup>56</sup> started a post titled ‘why I don’t want to do more translation: Longtengwang deleted my two long translations and blocked the entry to my thread post’. In response, a community moderator replied that they needed to recheck the old translations before republishing them. However, another translator<sup>57</sup> who encountered a similar situation presented an alternative perspective about the self-censorship:

Several of my paid-to-read translations were also deleted within a week after being published. You cannot blame the moderator. Don’t you understand how narrow-minded your country has become and how sensitive her nerves have turned? Why don’t you read the notification issued by the authority to various websites? With little disobedience, they will be shut down immediately!

Therefore, under the strict political environment, the separating function of the community as a boundary has begun to play a larger role than before. In one sense, it becomes part of the Great Firewall to build up a protective boundary in order to maintain and construct a homogenous order. However, to use ‘obedience’ or ‘disobedience’ to describe the power relationship between the civic mediasphere and the official mediasphere obscures some more important underlying facts. Located in a periphery space, what discursive practices can the community become engaged with in order to function as a boundary of connection between the news space of China and that of other cultures? Based on my observation, interviews and the analysis of documents and other textual materials posted on the website and other social media platforms, I next present an empirical analysis of the processes of semiosis happening on the platform.

First, though, I want to diverge briefly to comment on Pym’s (2011b, p. 6) dehumanisation argument about technology-mediated translation, since the concept of human dialogue or communication is key to the understanding of online translation communities. To comprehend Pym’s claim that ‘[t]echnology, we have proposed, increasingly imposes the paradigmatic, thus diminishing dialogue’, the reader should contextualise his remark in a commercial-oriented institutional environment where with the deep involvement of machine-aided translation, a translator completes his or her work in a more fragmented and automatic way. For example, he/she usually deals with paragraphs instead of the whole text and does post-editing rather than becoming involved in the entire process of translation. In some sense, the causal relationship between paradigmatic reading and diminishing dialogue

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<sup>56</sup> See the snapshot (S4.9) for the translator’s post.

<sup>57</sup> See the snapshot (S4.10) for the translator’s comment.

assumed by Pym largely reflects the changing relationship between the translator and the original author or the text. However, the dialogues enacted by online translation practices point to the opposite, and compared with traditional print-dependent translation practice, the mediation of the internet has facilitated dialogues between and among original writers, translators and readers, which would otherwise be impossible. At the same time, these activated dialogues constitute processes of semiosis resulting in the creation of meaning and knowledge, as discussed below.

On 3 November 2011, NetEase<sup>58</sup>, published a collection of photographs with textual descriptions depicting life in the slums of India, titled *Dignity in the Slum*. This topic aroused great interest among Chinese netizens, and it had received more than 5,000 comments and attracted contributions from more than 100,000 users in the discussion section when accessed on 21 July 2018.<sup>59</sup> Many comments earned more than 10,000 likes, including the top three comments listed below (original community translation).<sup>60</sup>

Comment 1 (19,896 likes): they live in reality [sic], We live in CCTV.<sup>61</sup>

Comment 2 (14,336 likes): Seen [sic] these photos, I think Indian over China [sic] is not impossible. Although their development is slow, But they have a solid foundation. Economic development is built on the foundation that all citizens share the fruits of development.

Comment 3 (12,392 likes): A slum resident said: “We are the masters here, not government, not rich, not the charity”. “We slum dwellers er[sic] human beings & not dogs”- ---They will fight hard for the land,[sic] everyone knows who will win in Future.

This demonstrates that the NetEase media platform, as a private commercial space, to some extent acts as a permeable boundary to allow people to see, understand and interpret different social systems and ideologies. The participant users not only expressed their views on the social life, economic development and democracy of the Indian people, but also reflected on the relevant social issues in China with a focus on democracy, which finds no place in the dominant state media. What happened here points to the function of a boundary as a semiotic intermediary between ‘we’ culture and ‘they’ culture, a mediation of both connecting and separating. In the discussion section, Chinese users turned to India, a ‘they’ culture, to

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<sup>58</sup> NetEase is a leading Chinese internet company providing services of content, communication, community and e-commerce.

<sup>59</sup> See the screenshot (S4.11) for part of the comment section.

<sup>60</sup> See the screenshot (S4.12) for the top three comments.

<sup>61</sup> CCTV refers to China Central Television, the predominant state television broadcaster in Mainland China.

understand China, a ‘we’ culture. Two types of communication occurred: the ‘they’ and ‘we’ intercultural communication (communication) and the ‘we’ and ‘we’ intracultural communication (auto-communication).

These two types of communication were exemplified by dialogic contacts in the discussion section. The dialogues revealed that for some Chinese internet users, Indian culture with its democracy and prevalent poverty constituted a despicable cultural alterity. In this sense, the boundary is a semiotic condition to maintain the individuality and identity of the ‘we’ semiotic space. For example, a netizen<sup>62</sup> commented: ‘LOL, some here admire on Indian democracy [...] what a bunch of idiots, how about you all go to Indian slum to enjoy your democracy, LOL’ (the community translator’s translation). In contrast, for others, the Indian social system provided new perspectives for looking at their own system and the issue of democracy. For example, another user was very critical of the above comment. He wrote:

Why so many blindman [sic] can’t see what we are arguing about, or do they born incapable of thinking? I think its [sic] because being a servant requires no thinking. we [sic] are not talking about how happy they are living in slums, after all which country can be free of poverty? But Indian is on the correct path, even the poor have dignity, even they are very poor now, their future is bright, this is what good of democracy [sic] (original community translation).

Therefore, the boundary mediates not only the communication between the domestic and the foreign culture, but also between and among people of the former. This speaks to the integration of communication and auto-communication as described by Peeter Torop (2008c, p. 394):

That which on one level of culture manifests itself as a process of communication and a dialogue between addresser and addressee can be seen on a deeper level as the auto-communication of culture with itself.

NetEase’s initiative aroused great interest in Longtengwang when a netizen<sup>63</sup> forwarded it to the community forum and solicited help in translating those short descriptions and some popular comments with a view to posting all this on an Indian social media forum. Soon eight community translators volunteered to help and completed the translation. After being posted on an Indian social forum whose address was not revealed for fear that it would be overwhelmed by the visits of Chinese users, the translation attracted the attention of one of

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<sup>62</sup> See the screenshot (S4.13) for the comment and the response cited below.

<sup>63</sup> See the screenshot (S4.14) for the general introduction of the whole translation event.

its moderators who gave it some adjustment. Within two days, it had attracted great attention from Indian internet users. The cross-cultural communication did not stop here. To further the dialogue between the Chinese netizens and their Indian counterparts, Longtengwang mediated two series back-and-forth conversations between its users and the users of the Indian forum.

Peirce's triadic model is a relational account of signification, representation, meaning and interpretation between and among three interrelated elements: a sign, an object, and an interpretant. Among them, the interpretant allows us to interpret the sign so as to have a more comprehensive understanding of the sign/object relationship and can be understood as the translation of the original sign. Departing from the simple dyadic sign/object relation of Saussurean model, Peirce posits that a sign signifies only in being interpreted, and thereby the interpretant is considered 'the most innovative and distinctive feature of Peirce's account' (Atkin, 2015, p. 128). In what follows, I demonstrate how the meaning of text diversifies and grows through translation and interpretative commenting enacted by both translators and users.

On the Indian forum, the responses were not as enthusiastic as those of the Chinese readers. Nevertheless, there was genuine effort to carry out cross-cultural communication. For example, an Indian net user<sup>64</sup> wrote,

I would suggest you (a Chinese net user who dismissed the dialogue facilitated by Longtengwang translators as a waste of time, my note) toss your pre-packaged derision and make an effort to build bridges like Itaakat (one of the translators, my note), because it will be beneficial for China, India and Asia in the coming decades. There are plenty of Indians like myself who will respond positively (original community translation).

Nevertheless, many Indian net users on the forum shifted away from the focus of the original post—the relationship between poverty and dignity in India—and expressed an interest in the Sino-Indian relationship. There was a tension enfolding in the cross-cultural communication with both attempting to argue that 'we' are sensible, just, and honest and 'they' are soulless, unjust and deceiving. The antagonistic mood seemed to go against the translator's intention to benefit both cultures by facilitating meaningful cross-cultural communication. However, all translation is a special case of semiosis in that it establishes relationships between two semiotic spaces or cultures which are to be interpreted by an

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<sup>64</sup> See the screenshot (S4.15) for the response.

audience. ‘The relations between texts and readers are always profoundly mediated by the discursive and intertextual forces’ and are the result of ‘a complex set of negotiations and inter-relations’ (Mao, 2008). In their article ‘The Text and the Structure of its Audience’, Lotman and Shukman (1982, p. 81) remarked, ‘dialogic speech is distinguished not only by the common code of two juxtaposed utterances, but also by the presence of a common memory shared by addresser and addressee’. As demonstrated above, the different codes coupled with the memory disparity between the Chinese and Indian readers undoubtedly led to different interactions between the text and its addressees. In this sense, Lotman (2009, p. 4) notes, “‘Language”, albeit unconsciously, awakes in us an image of the historical reach of existence. Language – is a code plus its history.’

From another perspective, the differing identities of the two cultures make some of the communication untranslatable. However, it is the disparity and difference that gives rise to creativity in the process of cross-cultural semiosis. As Lotman remarks (p. 6), ‘You could say that the translation of the untranslatable may in turn become the carrier of information of the highest value’. Among the more interesting dialogues happening between the two sides, I present only one dialogue here in the interest of space.<sup>65</sup>

A Chinese net user wrote:

As long as a government can let its people live a good life, who cares it is a democratic government or a communist one? ... It is only an illusion for you to think having the right to vote will give you a say in deciding the road your country will take (original community translation).

To this, the Indian net user replied:

Coming back to the "illusion" of the voting rights, I have an interesting hypothesis. After the Cultural Revolution, would the Chinese have voted for Mao if he would ever have stood for election? Once you find the answer to the question, you would also find that this so called "illusion" is not something to be scoffed at. But coming from a country, whose citizens have not tasted this for the past 3 or more generations I can understand your skepticism to this so called "illusion". After all we have a

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<sup>65</sup> See the screenshot (S4.16) for the quoted dialogue.

saying "Bandaar kya jana adrak ka swadh"<sup>66</sup>. Just a disclaimer, I do not consider the chinese [sic] as Bandaar (original community translation).

The above dialogue reveals that the two users had different perceptions on the relationship between 'a good life' and democracy. The semiotic space mediated by the community has engaged people from two cultures in a dialogue, thereby contributing to communication across linguistic and cultural lines.

According to Arthur Miller (Brennan, 2017), a good newspaper should be an inspiration for a nation to talk to itself. To extend this line of thought further, I argue that to encourage communication and auto-communication, on either a personal, local or national level, is the very reason for the existence of any text. Besides, the internet is populated by people from multicultural backgrounds, carriers of different beliefs, values and communication codes, and the consequent 'demic concentration' has further externalized the 'demic knowledge', which in turn has "broadcast" or mediated the stories and identity of the culture' (Hartley & Potts, 2014a, p. 218). This is identified by the new approach of the model of cultural science as a mechanism of meaning-making, newness and innovation, which was attested by some users in the cross-cultural dialogue:

A Chinese net user:<sup>67</sup>

I hope this kind of communication would go on. It is a great fun to communicate with netizens from other countries. We could understand more about each other through exchange what we think of each other instead of believing the one-sided reports of the news media. India is a great country which I'm very interested in. Maybe we should include in the discussion more topics like those of life, entertainment, politics and so on (original community translation).

An Indian net user:

Thanks Itakaat. It was a good post. Have not seen the photos. Interesting comments that show the frustration of many common Chinese with their communist masters. Have never come across such views of Chinese before. Thanks again and welcome (original community translation).

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<sup>66</sup> kya jaane adrak ka swaad literally means "how can a monkey appreciate the taste of ginger?" It actually means that a person who is almost unaware of the existence of something can never appreciate its true value.

<sup>67</sup> See the screenshot (S4.17) for the quoted comment.

Therefore, it is advisable to view all these dialogues on freedom, democracy and the Sino-Indian relationship facilitated by the community as an encouraging indicator of more possibilities for open and democratic cultural communication to come—something that was simply impossible to imagine in the pre-internet age. The reasoning behind the potential for cultural change at a boundary is that

In the frontier areas semiotic processes are intensified because there are constant invasions from outside. The boundary as we have already pointed out is ambivalent and one of its sides is always turned to the outside. Moreover, the boundary is the domain of bilingualism, which as a rule finds literal expression in the language practice of the inhabitants of borderlands between two cultural areas (Lotman, 1990, p. 141-2).

I think this has alternatively answered the question raised by an Indian commenter<sup>68</sup> in the cross-cultural communication event discussed above: ‘Do the comments look like being left by people who do not have any rights for expression?’

## 4.4 Centre and Periphery

As indicated above, bilingual or multilingual civic media communities as a whole function as a cultural borderland located between the Chinese news media and other foreign news media. The boundary, with its dual function of separation and connection, on the one hand enriches and expands the domestic media space by bringing in new meanings and knowledge; on the other hand, it consolidates and highlights the self-descriptive language of the core culture by criticising and opposing the media content of the others. In addition, a boundary can also overlap with a periphery in terms of imaginative spaces or physical entities. In this sense, Lotman (1990, p. 141) refers to ‘the periphery of periphery’ as a border area. The cultural boundary as the periphery is out of joint or disarticulated because it belongs at the same time to the internal and to the external space, or from another point of view, it belongs neither to the internal nor to the external space (Lotman, 2000, p. 140). Its shifting topological nature renders it undetermined in its identity formation and self-description. That is why it is more hospitable and receptive towards the unknown and the alien—what is regarded as chaotic and non-cultural by the central space. This points to the third function of the boundary as an instrument of differentiation, presented in Lotman’s

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<sup>68</sup> See the screenshot (S4.18) for the quoted comment.

later works, which pinpoints the difference between the heterogeneous and evolving periphery and the homogenous and hierarchical centre (Monticelli, 2008, 2009).

In the pre-internet age of China, the government-sponsored newspapers and television programs occupied a predominant and central position in the role of producing and disseminating information and content for its people. However, this predominance has been greatly challenged by the technological affordances of the internet, where collective intelligence emerges and builds up through discursive interaction among internet users. Chinese authorities nurse a lingering fear that the expanding discursive participation of Chinese internet users will undermine the solidarity of the homogenous collective as a Chinese nation or ‘a harmonious society’ as publicised by the incumbent government. In an effort to diminish the dialogic space online, the government has launched a series of crackdowns to either shut down or restrain online media platforms. The 2017 provisions on the Administration of Internet News Information Services laid down a set of specific rules and regulations restricting the publication and circulation of media content to keep its people ‘out of harm’s way’. This kind of exclusion and restriction is enacted to strengthen the centralisation and homogenisation of the semiotic space. The governmental media outlets have spared no effort in promoting the ideological self-portrait of the state as defined by such official platitudes as ‘a socialist society with Chinese characteristics’, ‘harmonious society’, and ‘pursuing the Chinese dream’. With their equivocal and ambiguous implications, the ideological phrases allow the Chinese censors a great deal of discretion in regulating digital content, and most of them have overstepped, resulting in a sweeping ban on content labelled as anti-Party, anti-government, and anti-society on the internet. Under the current situation, content provided by foreign media and the emerging civic journalism platforms, as mentioned in Chapter 1, has become the target of exclusionism. As a result, there arises a clear delimitation between the ‘we’ media and the ‘they’ media.

However, the self-description produced by the state and its media is an idealisation of a real language incongruous with the ‘semiotic reality’ which underlies the ideal norm originated in the central cultural sphere. This was the case when Lotman wrote and remains the case in today’s digital context. Today’s mediasphere preconditions the dialogic contacts between Chinese internet users and their foreign counterparts. The Chinese people are eager to communicate with the rest of the world and are thirsty for information about the outside world. The rise of bilingual or multilingual translation communities is a direct response to their thirst. These communities have opened the floodgates for a wide range of new information and knowledge by importing voluminous content including news, literature, entertainment and educational materials.



Longtengwang differentiates itself from the mainstream media by offering alternative ways for ordinary people to understand other cultures and themselves. Its mission page<sup>69</sup> states that it is committed to breaking the hard and solid ‘wall’ and take the initiative to communicate with the common people of the world instead of being the passive educatees of the state media. In this way it hopes to make ‘the meaning of the Wangtie translation go beyond itself’. This self-description resonates with the impression of some of its users. Even in my 2016 online survey,<sup>70</sup> when translation played a much less important role in the community due to the increased governmental restriction, nine out of twelve responders considered it a translation community, and five believed that it provided them an opportunity to know more about views from the outside world when they were asked ‘Do you think Longtengwang is a translation community?’ and ‘What about Longtengwang attracts you most?’

How then does the civic media platform differ from the official media in practice? Here, RNN offers a suitable object for comparison. A Chinese news organisation operated under the Chinese state-run Xinhua News Agency, RNN is the only news translating institution authorised by the Chinese government to translate and republish news and articles sourced from foreign news media. With translation as the centrepiece through its whole process of news production, the newspaper claims to adopt ‘faithful translation’ in rendering foreign articles into Chinese for its Reference News (RN; Chinese in Pinyin: Cankao Xiaoxi) and to provide perspectives on ‘how the foreigners look at China, and how the Chinese look at the world’.<sup>71</sup> In this way, RNN has made itself unique, since most global news agencies adopt transediting as the accepted practice that means not only a language change but also a rewriting for target readers and translation is largely invisible in news production (Bassnett & Bielsa, 2009, p. 91). The translating practice of RNN has made it an interesting subject of research. For example, Li Pan (2014, p. 577) investigated the interplay between the agency of translation and institutional mediation, a mechanism of the social order, and argued that ‘faithful translation’ claimed by RNN should be understood as ‘faithful translation of the selected paragraphs of the selected foreign reports’, especially when translating articles on domestic issues regarded as sensitive by the Chinese government. In addition to pointing out its selective translation as a reframing strategy, some researches have put its claim of ‘authentic’ and ‘faithful’ translation under scrutiny through textual comparison between target and source texts. As a result, discrepancies have been revealed with regard to the political position implied in the headlines and the evaluative connotation of some key words,

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<sup>69</sup> See the screenshot (S4.19) for part of the quoted mission statement.

<sup>70</sup> According to my online survey (refer to Appendix 4).

<sup>71</sup> See [http://nis.xinhuanet.com/2009-02/16/content\\_15676872\\_1.htm](http://nis.xinhuanet.com/2009-02/16/content_15676872_1.htm)

especially when the news is related to sensitive topics such as Tibet (Li, 2015; Liu, 2010), in an attempt to cultivate a positive image of the government.

At this point, it is evident that news selecting, translating and editing are all tasks where an agent carries out a ‘gatekeeping’ role (Bennett, 2004; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). It is clear that RNN as an official news organisation cannot avoid being institutionalised, and its agency in contributing to information transmission and the introduction of different thoughts is greatly restrained by the ideological and political framework imposed by the government. This further attests that the mainstream media, especially in the context of contemporary China, constitutes the core/centre of the news mediasphere which tries to construct and maintain a normative and homogeneous picture of the system.

In comparison, in the peripheries emerge various news media spaces which are ‘brightly coloured and marked’ with ‘deviant’ texts (Lotman, 1990, p. 141). A webpage snapshot of Longtengwang published on 5 November 2011<sup>72</sup> reveals that the community provided a variety of texts categorised under different headings, some of which were far outside the ideological framework of the mainstream media and could be considered taboo topics in the socio-political context of China, such as ‘China police fire on Tibetans, nun burns to death: Report’ and ‘Sách TQ từng thừa nhận Hoàng Sa là của VN/ The Chinese history book admits that the Paracel Islands belongs to Vietnam’.

Besides those politically charged hard news items, the community has engaged in facilitating conversations in broader social contexts of everyday life, including on the topics of customs, travel, literature, education and lifestyle. For example, a translated post titled ‘what is standard of living in china like? is it similar to uk?’ was sourced from a popular social media forum in the UK and triggered a discussion on the great development gap between different regions in China.

From March to April 2012, Longtengwang reproduced a series on a specific topic titled ‘How foreigners look at China: a different China’,<sup>73</sup> which introduced to domestic viewers how foreigners think of their culture, ranging from food and customs to public facilities. Around the same time, it initiated a series of cross-cultural dialogues via translation between Longtengwang users and foreign users on some popular social media sites in Korea, Indian and Japan. Unsurprisingly, those posts seldom failed to elicit comments of varied responses ranging from applause, acquiescence and dispute to condemnation. However, the perspective

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<sup>72</sup> See the screenshot (S4.20 & S4.21) for the information.

<sup>73</sup> See the screenshot (S4.22) for the published series.

of outsiders often presents to Chinese internet users an unfamiliar yet inspiring understanding of their own culture. For example, to a comment on a blog on China's culture and customs posted by a Japanese student studying in China, a Longtengwang user wrote, 'Very interesting. Have never expected that the usual things in our culture should be interpreted in this way'.<sup>74</sup>

The civic media represented by Longtengwang and other grassroots-based initiatives exists in a grey area, which has been greatly narrowed, especially after the issue of the New Rules in 2017. In order to survive, the website has continued to warn its users against publishing translations and comments on sensitive topics. However, at the same time, it has shown its commitment to protecting its users' right to speak and their freedom to criticise, as stated in a notification on its page of 'Suggestions, Complaints & Supports'-'In order to ensure a smooth development of the website, please try your best to avoid sensitive topics and people of taboo... We will try our best to protect your right to speak and criticise and ensure your freedom of speech'.<sup>75</sup> How will the platform balance the relationship between self-censorship and freedom of speech? Responding to a post mentioned above, a translator shared his insight into the flexible strategies adopted by the platform.<sup>76</sup>

Now there is a survival time for the current events-related news and posts on Longtengwang, because it seems to fear that it would be summoned for talks. Generally, the content will be deleted within a week after being published. If the user will know about the event if he/she has read it; otherwise, he/she will have no idea what has happened. Sometimes, some radical comments will also be deleted. Nearly all of my translations I've done recently have been deleted. Several of them have been quite hot abroad, but there is not much reaction at home (because of the censorship). One is about the debate on the gene technology. Probably it is accounted as conspiracy theory or the authority is worried it will instigate social unrest if getting disseminated. If the translation is on some sensitive topic, maybe it will get published if you do some minor adjustments after discussing with the moderator. I have even got my translation sent back three times before getting it published. Still, the moderator is a communicative guy. Don't get upset. Give it another try ... (my translation)

The translator's remarks reveal much about the flexible strategies adopted by the platform to cope with the strict regulations imposed by the authorities. To some extent, this is a cat-and-

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<sup>74</sup> See the screenshot (S4.23) for the quoted remarks.

<sup>75</sup> See <http://www.ltaaa.com/bbs/forum-50-1.html>

<sup>76</sup> See the screenshot (S4.24) for the quoted remarks.

mouse game in the battlefield of China's censorship. The platform seeks a loophole in the time it takes to attract the attention of the authorities and deletes sensitive content before being caught. Another strategy is to rephrase the banned words by using semantic variations, synonyms, misspellings and satire. For example, the translator will use TG or GF to represent the Communist Party of China.

In addition, the normative structure prescribed by the centre can never regulate the natural language rooted in people's lived experience and the meaning of a text which is the result of fluid semioses in a semiotic space. The life of a sign can only be sustained by being interpreted. The relationship between a sign and its object can be standardised to some extent, but the signification of a sign is forever in the state of becoming and expanding owing to the agency of the reader, the listener or the interlocutor. For example, on 20 May 2016, the community published a piece of Wangtie originally titled 'Власти Китая заблокировали активность посольства США в соцсети' ('Chinese authorities blocked the activity of the US Embassy in social networks').<sup>77</sup> The news was originally reported by *Global Times*. In the translated comment section, several users interpreted the state's act as that of isolationism and keeping people in ignorance. A user said, 'Just keep people isolated and in ignorance to the utmost degree. Blocking the channels of cross-cultural communication can only make Chinese people more narrow-minded and extreme.' In reply to the comment, another user said, 'The majority of Chinese people are not fools and can distinguish the good from the bad. It is really foolish of the Chinese government to rob its people of the right to listen to the voice of U.S.A. and block the way to know it. ...' What is interesting about this example is that the news resource came from a state media source. The original Russian comments are mostly positive about China's approach. However, the opinions clearly diverged among the Chinese commenters. This example demonstrates how the meaning of the text diversifies and grows through translation and interpretative commenting enacted by both translators and users.

All these efforts underline the potential for civic journalism projects to open up alternative discourses in a dynamic way. It is undeniable that the internet enables the emergence of more semiotic spaces at the peripheries for civic interaction where people can engage in discursive activities to assert and reconstruct group values, ideals and belonging in public spheres (Dahlgren, 2005). In addition, compared with institutional or other public spaces, civic media platforms like Longtengwang are more anchored in the context of lived experiences, personal amenities, and subjective dispositions of ordinary people. How then

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<sup>77</sup> See the screenshot (S4.25) for the published piece.

does this community construct the semiotic space of identity, meaning and subjectivity through translation and dialogue? This question is addressed in the next section.

## 4.5 Sources of Cultural Newness

Central to the cultural turn of translation studies is the belief that translation is a social act where various agents interact with each other and engage in discourse practices at a particular time in a given social context. This runs contrary to the normative line of thinking which underscores the polarised relations of the classic binaries between source language and target language, source and target culture, author and translator, translator and reader. Jakobson (2004, p. 139) applied the concept of translation in the widest sense possible when he wrote that ‘the meaning of any linguistic sign is its translation into some further, alternative sign’. In a sense, he considered translation as the core of meaning-making process. Yuri Lotman’s conceptualisation of translation as the ‘fundamental mechanism of dialogue’ is a continuation of this mode of thinking. Rather than merely defining it as a mode of communication (linguistic transfer), he foregrounds the social relations and relational encounters activated by translation (dialogue), which in turn leads to cultural innovation and newness.

If put in a micro-scale environment like Longtengwang, translation reflects the interplay and negotiation between the author/culture of the original, the community moderators, translators and users of the community, and at the same time is shaped by the news mediasphere in China and worldwide. In this semiotic sphere, translation is a site of multidimensional ‘productive encounters’ as well as a process of active meaning creation. For the sake of analytic clarity, based on the case study, I identify the sources of meaning-making from three perspectives: translation as communication and auto-communication, as narrative mediation and as pluri-subjectivity.

### 4.5.1 Translation as Communication and Auto-communication

The notion of auto-communication is a key term for Lotman in understanding the dynamics of culture because he holds that engagement with auto-communication fundamentally impacts the dialogic capability of a culture and the internal diversity of that culture. In placing translation in the broad context of cultural auto-communication, there are two important points to make. First, given that a culture constitutes a conglomerate of texts,

translation is a crucial mechanism for driving cultural dynamics because of its role in mediating and facilitating ongoing processes of textual interpretation, transformation, elimination and addition. In other words, translation enables and activates the construction of discursive spaces that otherwise may not be possible. Second, as translation actualises and expands interaction with its environment, it is also a mechanism for generating communications within the culture itself by presenting its difference from its communication environment and triggering self-observation and identity exploration. In this sense, translation is describable as a semiotic process where the translator and the readers not only step into a dialogue with a different culture but also enter into a dialogue with their own culture and themselves. From these two levels of semiotic interaction, personal and community identities change and grow.

As noted above, the Longtengwang community is intended to serve as a platform for viewing how foreign netizens see China and how the Chinese people react to those views. This rallying cry is also the common aim or interest shared among volunteer translators and users in the community. However, realising this aim goes beyond accessibility to information or what can be realised through normative linguistic transfer. The community members aim to establish a discursive space where they carry on dialogues with others (communication) and with themselves (auto-communication) on the issues which they think important. This aspiration is clearly revealed in a user's post written to celebrate the community's one-year anniversary:<sup>78</sup>

I, the dignitary once lived inside the walls over which the creepers grew. The walls were so tall that I could only hear the hubbub of the outside world, but couldn't get a glimpse of it. Later, the creepers grew stronger and somehow they made a hole in the wall. Out of the hole, I, the dignitary peeped at the new world while enjoying a bottle of coke. After a while, the creepers withered and their fallen leaves and twigs blocked the hole connected to the outside world. Fortunately, I remembered I saw two characters 'Longtengwang' scribbled on one leaf. That's why I land here and am admired by you, the shitizens because I look as cool, rich and impressive. Then you, the Longtengwang netizens all follow my suit, watching Bilibili [a video sharing website themed around anime, manga and game fandom based in China] while drinking coke and eating the tea-flavoured eggs. It's I who let you have a nice life and so be grateful to me! (my translation)

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<sup>78</sup> See the screenshot (S4.26) for the quoted remark.

Overall, this post is a laconic satire full of metaphors. Here ‘the walls’ alludes to the Great Firewall, the instrument of censorship initiated by the Chinese government, and the name ‘the creepers’ (Chinese Pinyin: Pashanhu) refers to a website, a news-comments translation platform similar to Longtengwang. The ‘dignitary drinking coke’ alludes to the comment from a Canadian expert who said that in China, only those rich or with a high official rank can afford to drink coke,<sup>79</sup> while the tea-flavoured eggs are linked to another comment made by a Taiwanese professor on a television program that the mainland Chinese are so poor that they cannot have tea-flavoured eggs.<sup>80</sup> The post on the one hand alludes to both the isolation policy adopted by the government regarding information and communication and the ignorance of outsiders about the current social and cultural situations in China; on the other hand, it is indicative of Chinese netizens’ persistent efforts to explore discursive spaces alternative to the mainstream media in order to independently understand and construct their realities.

This post is literally a piece of interesting self-description of the community. It describes how the community navigates the semiotic media space which is defined by the tension of the centre-periphery relationship between the authority and the civic media initiatives and how it constructs its identity through interpreting and mediating the signs and texts of the external culture. These relational encounters are a process of meaning-making and identity-formation for the community. As discussed above, the self-description it presents is neither that normalised by the central culture protected by the tall ‘walls’ nor that projected by the external culture ‘unable to afford to drink coke and have tea-flavoured eggs’. This exemplifies Lotman’s understanding about the topography of the boundary that is out of joint and is a ‘zone of structural neutrality’ (Lotman, 1990, p. 259).

What is intrinsic to both communication and auto-communication is the need for dialogue. For Lotman (pp. 143-4), dialogue is the beginning of everything meaningful: ‘[...] the need for dialogue, the dialogic situation, precedes both real dialogue and even the existence of a language in which to conduct it’. On the platform, dialogue functions as a medium to meet various personal needs (e.g., self-understanding, enjoyment, escapism) and social needs (e.g., knowledge about the world, self-confidence, stability, self-esteem) (Fiske, 2002, p. 20). To ensure a cross-cultural dialogue, the community primarily selects those news comments and posts from foreign social media which are related to China and the Chinese. At the same time, it asks its translators to focus on the comments and posts most representative of the views of foreign internet users. Sometimes translators are asked questions by readers such as,

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<sup>79</sup> See [http://news.ifeng.com/mil/4/200809/0910\\_342\\_777215.shtml](http://news.ifeng.com/mil/4/200809/0910_342_777215.shtml)

<sup>80</sup> See <https://www.bilibili.com/video/av14924317/>

‘there are many Chinese here to comment, right?’ or ‘does this stance reflect that of a majority of foreign users?’ Furthermore, the platform has organised activities of direct dialogue between Chinese users and those from other cultures, as mentioned above.

The community has attached great importance to the possibility of learning the ‘truth’—that is, the views and opinions of ordinary people from all around the world, as declared in its mission statement quoted above. On the platform, the internal texts exist with those external ones; the old texts exist with the new. For example, in addition to current affairs, the community has tried to reach a better understanding of how foreign users view the history, literature and customs of China by collating and translating specialised posts like ‘Why you should read China’s vast, 18th century novel, *Dream of the Red Chamber*’, ‘How the foreigners look at the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), and the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE) of China?’<sup>81</sup> More often than not, Chinese readers feel impressed by the foreigners’ sinological knowledge, as indicated by such comments as, ‘that’s a very good analysis of China’s history. (The commenter) shows an understanding better than the Chinese. Full score from me’. On the other hand, those external and new texts help Chinese readers move beyond their entrenched self-description, add new meaning to their identity and actualise texts in a way meaningful to the community. One user commented on the relationship between civilization and lineage in the discussion section of the second post mentioned above:

The continuity of a culture depends on its civilization. The culture of China has something in common with that of America: constituted by groups of people with shared cultural identity. The lineage theory has already been eliminated by history. History has seen many mighty tribes of ‘armoured cavalries’. Where are they now?

In dialogic processes, translators cease to be mere mediators because they are capable of generating new languages to describe and renew a culture and shape the dialogic capability of that culture with other cultures and within itself (Torop, 2008b, p. 376). Translators need to appropriate, deploy and make use of language innovatively in order to facilitate cross-cultural communication. A case in point in the history of translation in China is Chinese translators in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century used westernised Chinese to translate the books from the west world owing to difference and disparity in language as well as in ideas and concepts, which in turn shaped the development of modern Chinese language as indicated in 3.2. In this sense, translation can be used as a medium in changing not only the object language but also the metalanguage of a culture. Lotman saw the boundary between object language and

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<sup>81</sup> See the screenshot (S4.27, S4.28&S4.29) for this post and the following comments.



meta-language as mobile. In this case, the news, the news comments and posts can be the natural everyday living environment functioning as object language, but they are also the reflectors and interpreters of everyday life and indicators of the capability of the culture's auto-communication functioning as metalanguage.

Both translators and users are attracted to the community for its communicative environment that is hospitable to different views and promotes cultural polyglotism that is in discordance with the metalanguage imposed by the authority. When asked, 'what motivated you to join the community?' a community user (I2) answered:<sup>82</sup>

The reason for me to join Longtengwang is I participated in a debate on the pros and cons of the social system between China and some foreign countries on the Tianya forum (a Chinese social media platform where people voice their opinions on the current affairs at home or abroad). While I searched Baidu for some related material, I found most of the opinions went to two extremes: either the moon abroad is rounder than that in China or China is the centre of the world and all the other countries are still at the stage of the uncivilized. The scarcity of sensible views at home prompted me to find out how the foreign net citizens look at the issue. I didn't want to pay to jump over the Firewall to get access to the information outside, and when a friend of mine recommended Longtengwang, I registered as a user.

His view of Longtengwang as a site of multicultural dialogues is echoed by other users. In reply to my question, 'what does community translation mean to you?', a user interviewee said that community translation helps the Chinese people know more about the world and helps the world know more about China and its development (I9).<sup>83</sup>

Therefore, the different perspectives from beyond China help the community users to form more sensible views about themselves and China. For Lotman, it would be impossible to speak about the identity of a culture without referring to its capability for auto-communication. What we need to bear in mind is that a culture or semiosphere is not just an assemblage of signs, texts or languages but a dynamic interactive process where signs and texts are mediated, transformed, interpreted, and eliminated and so on. The more a text is mediated and interpreted, the more possibilities and chances there are for the creation of new information and meaning and the more active is the culture or semiosphere in auto-communication (intercommunication).

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<sup>82</sup> According to my interview.

<sup>83</sup> According to my interview.

To learn the ‘truth’ is not an easily achieved goal even in today’s internet-mediated context, since the language barrier is always an unsurmountable barrier for many people and translation only offers a partial solution so far. Besides this, the high-handed measures adopted by the Chinese government in media censorship have made information and news from the outside world a resource of scarcity in China. However, the scarcer a resource is, the more precious it is. This interplay between constraining and enabling factors is the very cause behind the emergence of online news translation communities and also the reason why most are doomed to a short life from the very beginning. In this aspect, community managers and moderators play a crucial role in the maintenance and survival of the community. Besides the daily routine of running a website and community-building through various means such as awarding badges and scores, placing major contributors on an honours list and deleting abusive expressions, the community manager tries to juggle the roles of information facilitator and self-censor. Having incurred much criticism from some users, the role of moderator has been described as a practice of ‘dancing with shackles’ by one of the moderators on Zhihu (Handengduyeren, 2016):

In the past few years, I have no idea how many times we’ve received the warning of being shut down just because we want to have more content translated... As for Longtengwang, it doesn’t have much freedom since its server is in China. More often than not, we’re dancing with shackles. Everyone understands this (my translation).

‘[D]ancing with shackles’ is the art of preserving and maintaining as much semiotic space as possible. This phrase provides a glimpse of how the community is treading on thin ice in the media context of contemporary China. However, although restrained by shackles, the dancing has been able to create external communicative interactions mediated by translation, as demonstrated by Longtengwang’s website. All the community players including moderators, translators and users play a very crucial role in enabling the website become the medium and outcome of the information flow across borders.

#### 4.5.2 The Narrative Mediation of Translation/Translators

Community translators have presented a diversity of geographical and linguistic backgrounds which in turn enables Longtengwang to translate articles and comments from more than 130 countries and areas. Some of these translators are travellers to foreign countries for various purposes such as education, work or as immigrants. Travelling abroad has become a part of life experience for many Chinese. *The Telegraph* (Smith, 2018)

highlighted the exponential growth of Chinese outbound travel in the article ‘The unstoppable rise of the Chinese traveller’, and *The Economist* (Economist, 2018) described Chinese people’s desire for travelling abroad as ‘insatiable’. Chinese travellers, especially those who study and work abroad, are very able players in cross-cultural communication. As members of a diaspora, their (dis)location between the foreign and domestic culture puts them in a position ‘at which boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, of belonging and otherness, of ‘us’ and ‘them,’ are contested’ (Brah, 2005, p. 205). Lotman has described travel as a kind of interaction unfolding between semiospheres that is driven by human’s need for extra-cultural encounters ‘in order to process information, generate new information, store it in their memories, and communicate it to other individuals’ (Neumann & Nünning, 2012, p. 46). This is why travel as well as translation is central to cultural transfer and cross-cultural understanding.

This diasporic status provides translators the possibility for cultural communication and identity-building not only by the mediation of translation but also by telling the stories of their lived experiences. The interview of three translators of Japanese social forums discussed in Section 4.5.2 forms a typical example.<sup>84</sup>

All three studied or worked in Japan for many years. One translator interviewee named Dingding presented a thought-provoking analysis of the national character of the Japanese illustrated with detailed lived experiences. When commenting on the cliquishness of the Japanese, she said, ‘cliquism in Japan brings one endless depression’. She then supported her view by telling the story of one of her best Japanese friends who acts as a lone ranger and sticks to his values rather than following the trend. Reflecting on this, she said, ‘in the crowd of human beings, one should know what he wants to do and what efforts to make instead of mixing up in the small group, moping. This is how one should live his life, right?’ This also has a bearing on her translation activities, as indicated by her remark:

I think one’s value lies in his/her difference with others. This is the very reason why I don’t want to translate the stereotyped news. I always wait for the news with different perspective to translate. Once there is, no matter right or wrong, I’ll translate them for you to appreciate and evaluate (my translation).<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> The interview was done by one community moderator named 寒灯独夜人 (Chinese Pinyin: handengduyeren) and published on the website section ‘Translation of News of International Current Affairs’ on May 16, 2013.

<sup>85</sup> See the screenshot (S4.30) for the quoted remark of the translator.

This view supports the argument advanced in the previous section, namely that the translator (the traveller) drives the coexistence of a diversity of texts and languages that enriches culture and enhances its capability for auto-communication.

Today, powered by digital mediation, members of a diaspora can go online and nurture their differential diasporic spheres, where they can express their individual voices, share concerns and create encounters with fellow diaspora members and other people across large geographical distances both at home and abroad. As a border-crosser, the diasporic translator is aware of his role in creating productive encounters between cultures and systems and actively engages in ‘perceiving and creating a set of relationships, based on his observation of relationships in source and target texts, cultures, languages, societies’. In addition, as demonstrated above, he/she is able to adopt an outsider mentality to encode and reflect his/her activity. Thus, ‘in the complex humming and buzzing of relations and perceptions of relations in the translating act, the translator becomes a keen observer of his/her own agency’ (Gill & Guzmán, 2011). In a sense, this is an embodiment of the self-generative and self-referential mechanism of culture on a micro-scale of the translator: on the one hand, he/she creates texts on various topics ranging from literature and politics to history and entertainment; on the other hand, he/she creates meta-textual space where he/she can self-describe his/her translation activities. In this way, the translator plays an active role in producing and framing narratives to establish meaningfulness for himself/herself and the semiotic space he/she subscribes to (Baker, 2007; Brownlie, 2007).

Therefore, it is very convincing that Baker (2006, 2007) turns to socio-narrative theory to examine various discursive practices undertaken by translators. Inspired by narratologists such as Somers and Gibson, Baker (2005) notes that ‘narrative is not conceived as an optional mode of communication but as the principle and inescapable mode by which we experience the world’. Besides this, she agrees with Bruner (1991, p. 6) that what the narrative approach emphasises is not the structural make-up but how it ‘operates as an instrument of mind in the construction of reality’. In the case of community translation, it is not difficult to find textual and para-textual devices used by the translator to intervene in narration. The textual techniques include changing the title to a greater or lesser extent by highlighting some words, adding exclamatory expressions, and adopting ideologically-loaded words to show the translator’s stance; the para-textual includes the brief prelude to the translation, notes or annotations inserted within or following the translation, and the translator’s views given in the comment section or published on the community forum. Additionally, on many occasions, what the community users can access is an abridged version of the original, especially when a piece of Wangtie that the translator has chosen is

too long. Although the translator is required to select the comments to translate by either popularity or the chronological order when there are too many, this is not always the case. From the standpoint of Baker, those intervening discursive practices are quite normal because the translator is always embedded in particular stories in a temporal and spatial context which in turn prevents him/her from achieving 'objectivity' when translating and interpreting. This is attested by some community translators. When asked on the Q&A platform Zhihu whether there is a selection bias with regard to the choice of the original text, the most popular responder who self-proclaimed as a veteran Longtengwang user (Dianban, 2015) answered, 'to make it clear from the very beginning, yes'. To explain this, he/she said, 'Longtengwang is biased in its Wangtie translation. But that does not mean that the translator does it on purpose or the translation is manipulated by the community moderators. Instead, it is a result of two-fold filtration prompted by the external context and the community readers'.

Baker (2007, p. 156) uses the concept of framing to study the translator's moves of engagement and treats translation as 'an active process of signification', which 'involves setting up structures of *anticipation* that guide others' interpretation of events, usually as a direct challenge to dominant interpretations of the same events in a given society'. Although Baker's work is significant and valuable especially in revealing how translation can function as a powerful discursive mediation to challenge dominant narratives and enable social movement, a careful look at the case under study calls the full applicability of her concept into question. First, while framing is part of translational strategy on the platform, being open to all narratives and perspectives contained therein is considered as more important, as revealed in the second section of this chapter. This is also the reason that some translators, including the three mentioned above, believe their translation is objective rather than being biased and manipulated.

The community has taken some measures to provide translations that are as accurate and neutral as possible. The translation guidelines posted on the website stipulate that the translator shall provide the link to the original text and the Chinese version shall be displayed in alignment with its original version. Besides this, the translator is required to provide a complete translation of the original, and if he/she has to do partial translation when there are too many comments, he/she should select by popularity or the order of time rather than favouritism. This is where the community defines the border with the state-run media culture in China, which eliminates and filters out elements contradicting its ideological guidelines. If Longtengwang translators engage in such filtering, the translation will be deleted or the violator even banned from the platform. For their part, the users are also engaged in

maintaining the openness and credibility of the community and having their expectation met. In 2011, a user triggered a 'biased translation' protest<sup>86</sup> in the community where a translator specialising in translating Japanese social media posts was accused of manipulating the comments of Japanese internet users via preference selection to support his narrative. Therefore, while I agree with Baker that engagement is a crucial element of translational behaviour, it is not necessarily actualised through framing, and it can also be realised through staying as neutral and open as possible to the original. That is, to a large extent, it is decided by the positioning of the translator and the community he/she subscribes to. In the case of Longtengwang, it means providing information and the appearance of 'credibility', 'quality' and 'objectivity/impartiality'. This is its discursive act challenging dominant narratives and promoting alternate views.

Secondly, embedded in the highly political context of the Middle East, the approach adopted by Baker highlights the political engagement of the translator and the power binaries between peace-makers (America) and extremists (the Arabic world). In a sense, translation becomes the site where the political discourse of dominance and resistance plays out. However, the translation practice of Longtengwang portrays a different story about the discourse on translation and conflict. On 4 November 2011, TVenana, a very popular translator and also a moderator responsible for current international news, posted 'let's do something big in this small place. Let's begin from here'.<sup>87</sup> To manifest 'something big', she cited a user's comment:

To translate the posts on current affairs is hard work of virtuous achievement. Externally, it will deepen the international communications; internally, it can enlighten the intelligence of its people. I hope you will carry on. We need hear the voices from outside which are representative, objective and fair so as to appraise our strategies, straighten out our thoughts and distinguish our friends from enemies (my translation).

This is reminiscent of the wake-up call by Liang Qichao,<sup>88</sup> a revolutionary thinker a century ago who proclaimed that 'in today's world, to translate the western books must be put on the top agenda of strengthening the country'(Liang, 1989). This 'enlightenment' discourse on translation has run through different historical periods in China like a red thread since its

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<sup>86</sup> See the screenshot (S4.31) for the post.

<sup>87</sup> Seen the screenshot (S4.32) for the quoted post in Appendix.

<sup>88</sup> Liang Qichao (Chinese: 梁启超; Feb. 23, 1873 - Jan. 19, 1929), was a Chinese scholar, philosopher, and reformist who played a significant role in advancing the reform movement in China with his writings in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

subjugation by foreign forces in a series of humiliating wars like the First Opium War (1839–1842) and the Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945). This is also the driving force behind various translation waves in the contemporary history of China like the translation of science and technology during the period from the late Ming dynasty to the early Qing dynasty and the translation of western learning in politics, social science and economics at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century. Through those disparate historical events, the discourse on translation has been centred on the idea of ‘learn from the foreigners in order to compete with them’, as advocated by Wei Yuan (1794–1857) (Wei, 1999, p. 67), an influential Chinese reformer in the late Qing dynasty. Therefore, translation in China is largely intended to revive the country and bring fresh energy and ideas to the core culture rather than to resist it.

In the Longtengwang community, there is no lack of Chinese pride on display. On 26 August 2011, when the website lost one month’s data, the above-mentioned moderator TVenana, alluded to the tough journey of PRC’s development since its founding in 1949 and encouraged the community to draw on that spirit and achieve more thorough hard work.<sup>89</sup> What I have discerned from the majority of translations, posts and comments is not the interplay between the force of dominance and that of resistance, but a discursive activity establishing meaningfulness for the community which cares about how the outside world views China. For Longtengwang, what the community is resisting is the actions of the Chinese government which deprive them of the right to listen to the voices of the outside world rather than the political discourse of the central culture. I agree with Baker that every translational choice is ‘a kind of index that activates a narrative, a story of what the world or some aspect of the world is like’ (Baker, 2006). However, at least in the case of Longtengwang, political engagement is not an essential motivator driving every choice in the translation process, as her work highlights.

### 4.5.3 Pluri-Subjectivity

The formation of a community is the outcome of not only the cooperation but also contention between and among different agents and participants. As regards online translation communities, the relationships between moderators, translators and users can no longer be defined by the traditional hierarchical supply-consumer chain but is reconfigured in the digital context to form a conduit where each link depends upon and impacts the others. Translation depends on no longer the subjectivity of the translator but is the work of

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<sup>89</sup> Seen the screenshot (S4.33) for the relevant post.

interaction among various agents, an outcome of pluri-subjectivity. In online communities, translators are first and foremost community users, with no clear delimiting boundary between the two roles. Translators translate, read, comment, post and interact with other users. In other words, 'it is the potential audience for the translation that does the translation' (Cronin, 2010b, p.4). The term 'prosumer' is used to describe the double role of users or consumers. To them, translation not an end in itself but a means to develop the products they like or promote ideas they believe in. In relation to news and commentary translation, prosumers are well-positioned to know what the target users would like to know and how they will respond to the translation. On a personal level, some translators translate in order to achieve a certain level of affective commitment among their readers, which is argued to be 'a powerful non-representational force behind amateur mediation' (Pérez-González, 2012a, p. 335). This view resonates with that of a veteran community user posted on Zhihu who holds that the translator's choice will inevitably be influenced by the expectation of the users, as mentioned above, and the translator will feel encouraged to do more translation if he/she gets more ups and replies.

The expectations and needs of the community users have usually had an important influence on their behaviour in relation to what and how to translate. In contrast, research on RNN has found that the first three determinants of translation behaviour in dealing with China-related news are 'the stance in the original report', 'the news policy and regulations of the state' and 'the institutional requirements and its instructions stipulated in its style manual' (Li, 2014). According to the questionnaire that was part of that research, when the researcher asked 35 translator interviewees to choose five out of eight factors considered top concerns in translating China-related news, only nine put the Chinese reader's attitudes and expectations among the list. Given this situation, it is plausible to assume that being subject to the discourse of power, the institutionalised news agency RNN is allowed a very limited discursive space to meet the expectations of ordinary Chinese people.

The involvement of users in the process of translation has become more practical and viable with the development of digital technologies. The internet becomes the enabling medium that 'shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action' in the process of translation, thereby, according to McLuhan (1964, p. 2), manifesting the point that 'the medium is the message'. In this case, the community user can recommend a piece of news or forum post to be translated, or to guarantee that this happen, he/she can raise funds to have it translated. Some users choose to communicate with the translator directly to reveal their opinions on whether the translation is meaningful to the community and to give suggestions. Moreover, the user's comments and views are no longer kept to himself/herself as in most



cases of the past but form an integral part of the translation act through which the translation is transformed, extended and mediated in the user's dialogic contacts with translators and community moderators. In this sense, Nida's approach of 'dynamic equivalence' is no longer applicable here, since the communication here is a two-way dialogue where the receptors not only receive but also contribute to the creation of meaning and knowledge and in turn influence other users' responses.

The pluri-subjectivity of interaction model also means that the knowledge-learning and -producing process is actualised not only by translators but by users. In the comment section, some users express their support for a translator and other contribute by adding more facts or offering their own insights. This reveals how the act of translation can be extended to be a site of learning between users and translators. On the other hand, in the digital context, the blurred boundary between professional and non-professional has broken down the walls that used to enshrine the prestige of translators. In February 2017, one user within the community started a thread titled 'Can't take any more those affected versions under the mask of the terms 'literal translation, liberal translation and faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance' to criticise the translator's idiosyncratic translation strategies and accuse the translator of showing too much presence in the translation. Users are no longer passive information receivers. Some users of Longtengwang with a certain level of bilingual or multilingual proficiency took the initiative to check the original and target text to put the translation in question to the test. This was the reason why the 'selective translation' protest arose in 2011, which prompted the community to conduct the interview of three Japanese translators mentioned in Section 4.5.2 in order to build up the credibility of the community translators. In addition to the practices mentioned above, the accessibility and immediacy of the hyper-textual digital environment enables users to enrich the content of the semiotic space simply by creating links to other webpages, which has been an important complement to the translated content. As explicated in a post by a veteran user in the community in Zhihu, community translation is the outcome of dynamic interactions between various factors and players including users, translators, the digital media context and the current socio-political environment in China.

## 4.6 Conclusion

Longtengwang 'Wangtie translation' signifies a discursive attempt of creative Chinese citizens in a postmodern milieu to create and construe knowledge and meaning that is relatable and meaningful to them. The community resorts to language, media and communications as the sphere of meaning to construct their identity and form relational

associations (often adversarial) with the internet users from other cultures. Community members have been gathering information and stories through a delegation of self-appointed scouts who have usually immersed themselves in various foreign social media forums long enough not to miss any interesting trending topic or post, particularly those concerning China. Distanced from the formal and institutional mediasphere, they are determined to decide for themselves what an objective world looks like and what news, stories and information deserve their attention. Together they have formed a social semantic platform where social interactions between and among community members and with foreign online communities have brought about the creation and dissemination of semantically explicit and rich knowledge representations which can coalesce around everyday trivialities such as food, living expenses, and travel or around sensitive political issues on such topics as Xinjiang and censorship. In this community, to myriad users who have come together to publish, write, and express themselves, facts count as much as values, personal concerns as much as public policies. The case of Longtengwang speaks for ordinary users' capability to realise the potential of networked affordance through communication. Through digital media, they have reconfigured their formerly ephemeral and unrecorded statements into something more formal, articulate and collective that is constitutive of a public sphere, more in line with the 'affective public' observed by Zizi Papacharissi (2015).

# Chapter 5. Case Study 2: Yeeyan

## 5.1 Introduction

Yeeyan is the brainchild of three Chinese IT engineers who, like the founder of Itaaa.com, initiated and promoted user-generated translation (UGT) as amateur translators. It all began with a very simple thought: ‘At least we can share’. They started by translating some science articles and posting them on a registered blog named ‘yanduobide’ (言多必得) (literally, ‘the more you speak, the more you gain’) in 2006. Although computers were already very popular in China by then, Chinese netizens still felt the information gap between the digital sphere at home and that abroad acutely. Zhaokai (one of the three founders, whose username is Dingding on the platform) highlighted this information disparity in the preface to his translation of *The Long Tail*, saying that the theory had exerted great impact on the internet industry since it was put forward by Chris Anderson in October 2004, but he could not find its Chinese version in the first ten pages of Baidu in September 2006.<sup>90</sup> Zhang Lei, another co-founder, has related how his personal life was impacted by the lack of information on lymphoma, of which his father died.<sup>91</sup> All this drove the three founders to set up a blog to help Chinese internet users gain access to more trustworthy information and knowledge.

It did not take long for the platform to attract attention from domestic readers, and some of them volunteered their time to join the initiative. On 10 December 2006, to accommodate its increasing information traffic and the interactive engagement of its expanding user base, the blog was upgraded to the full-feature website Yeeyan (literally, ‘translate language’), which functioned like a media portal but distinguished itself by feeding on UGT. It was with the contributions of the community-based volunteers that in 2009 it became the largest translation community in China either in terms of registered translators or in terms of users after two and a half years of development.

However, this promising early start was only the first part of Yeeyan’s story, as it began to operating again and embarked on a journey of twists and turns after its shut-down by the authorities on 1 December 2009, by which point its daily tally of unique visits had reached 30,000. As an emergent cultural form, Yeeyan is subject to the political environment in China; however, the relationship between power and culture can only partly explain its uneven path of development. The changes in its function and operation model are

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<sup>90</sup> See the screenshot (S5.1) for the source.

<sup>91</sup> See the screenshot (S5.2) for the source.

consequences of the dialogues within the community and with its neighbouring systems, which in turn have shaped its meaning-making practices of UGT and crowdsourced translation publication as well as its operation and management strategies.

How then does Yeeyan evolve as a semiotic space, self-organise and interact with other spaces and systems including the state, media and publishing, and translation industry in the context of contemporary China? This chapter examines Yeeyan as the second case study of this thesis. As in Chapter 4, it draws on Yuri Lotman's conceptualisation of the semiosphere as well as on his sub-concepts of dialogue, border, core and periphery, and heterogeneity as analytic tools to examine Yeeyan's dynamics and its implications for cultural newness in contemporary China.

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## 5.2 Yeeyan: A Semiosphere

As part of the mediasphere, Yeeyan is a (sub)semiosphere itself. It has provided a semiotic space for processes of semiosis which may otherwise have been impossible. Emerging as a new media practice at the periphery of the mediasphere, its complexity and fluidity has made it difficult to place into any categorisation. Based on Lotman's semiosphere theory, Hartley and Potts (2014a) advanced a cultural science approach to explain cultural dynamics. Conceiving of culture as a group-making form of evolving knowledge, they use 'demic concentration' as a key concept to understand how the boundary change between groups leads to the growth of new ideas or contributions to knowledge. The dynamics of Yeeyan are largely an outcome of its interaction with semiotic spaces at all levels and of heterogeneous elements with no central control. The following section presents an empirical analysis of the evolution of Yeeyan.

Yeeyan's development is best characterised as a continuum rather than by delimitations. Nevertheless, for the sake of a greater analytic clarity, I divide its history into three stages based on Yeeyan's historic archives, the documents published on its website and material

obtained on Zhihu. The three stages are embodied by the three versions of its website, which are called Blue (July 2006 to December 2009; see Figure 5.1), Red (January 2010 to January 2013; see Figure 5.2), and Black Yeeyan (February 2013 to the present; see figure 5.3) by its users, based on the background colour.



Figure 5.1: Screenshot of Blue Yeeyan from 30 October 2008



Figure 5.2: Screenshot of Red Yeeyan from 10 July 2012



**Figure 5.3: Screenshot of Black Yeeyan from on 2 September 2019**

Blue Yeeyan was a site for passionate users. Its recruitment slogan stated, ‘in the early 20th century, Liang Qichao saw translation as the means to save our country; Today in the digital age, there still exists a huge information gap between China and its western counterparts; Let’s create more valuable information for the Chinese internet together!’<sup>92</sup> An urge and desire to translate was quite perceptible, as translation was ‘increasingly seen more as a utility service than a highly specialized activity’ (ENRÍQUEZRAÍDO, 2016, p. 978). According to a survey undertaken by the platform, its volunteers were largely young people aged 20 to 30, most of whom were college students with adept internet skills and adequate time to spare.<sup>93</sup> More importantly, like other UGC contributors, they were willing to transform their cognitive surplus into social value by creating and sharing more valuable information with their follow netizens (Shirky, 2010). In the media, their work was compared to that of Prometheus in Greek mythology in the sense that it had imported new thoughts, perspectives and art into China. A user (Zheng & Yang, 2009) wrote, ‘the more profound and important impact is through translation, my perspective and perception of the outside world is totally changed, and my interest in and love of English learning has never been so strong. [...] Without Yeeyan, there is no way I can gain access to so many quality articles and keep up with the trends of thought internationally’. Without a doubt, as maintained by some academics (Zhang, 2016), cooperative translation projects like Yeeyan

<sup>92</sup> See the screenshot (S5.3) for the recruitment statement.

<sup>93</sup> Refer to baike.com. for the user base. See <http://www.baik.com/wiki/%E8%AF%91%E8%A8%80?hf=youdaocitiao&pf=youdaocitiao>

have represented a new social formation in China and a new demic concentration if approached from the perspective of cultural science.

On the other hand, the importation and penetration of those quality foreign texts was greatly facilitated by the open and free environment provided by Yeeyan. It allowed translators to translate according to their interest and to be published with almost no restrictions. In contrast to professional codes and practices, a piece of translation was published first and then was edited and commented upon by other translators and users. On the part of translators, what mattered more here was their competence to engage with the digital environment, understand the users and demonstrate their discursive presence. On the part of users, they were also active players in the process of semiosis by recommending, commenting, voting, or posting rather than being passive receivers of content. This Blue Yeeyan achieved much on both the personal and social levels. Michael Anti, a Chinese journalist and political blogger, highlighted its role in making western mainstream media accessible to Chinese internet users. He conceived of Yeeyan as the watershed between the age of RNN and post-RNN, in the sense that with alternative journalism projects like Yeeyan, Chinese people were no longer the passive receivers of foreign news and views already filtered and censored by RNN (Xinyu, 2009).

However, it was Yeeyan's practice of breaking the barrier of journalism between China and the West that brought its forced closure on 30 December 2009. This event pushed Yeeyan to adjust its website, thereby entering into the stage of Red Yeeyan (December 2009 to January 2013). Drawing on the lesson learned from the closure, it now filtered all content before publishing and declined political news content. The red website was designed to put the interests and needs of translators first: the text features included side-by-side presentation of the original text and the target text, plus proofreading notes and comments. In this way, it provided novices with a space to practice, where they could receive instructions and advice from other translators; on the other hand, it used levels and badges to evaluate the contributions of translators based on their translation volume and quality, and split the revenue with partner translators once their translations had more than 1000 views. The visibility of translators was enhanced by giving them a high-profile presence including through various honour rosters. The number of followers could also help the translator attract attention. Celebrity translators often amassed hundreds of thousands of followers. However, the number of per-article views decreased on average, largely because of the elimination of those articles on current affairs, which had been in high demand by Chinese readers. Red Yeeyan was committed to building up a talent pool of translators and followed a principle of 'translator is number one' in its management and operations. The reformation of the group

boundary meant that what was meaningful to the community shifted from the popular political news and opinions to a performance stage for translators, both professional and amateur. In one sense, Red Yeeyan became an open translator community of practice where translators developed a work ethic and translation practice different from the professional environment. This will be a topic of discussion in Section 5.5.3.

Through the demic concentration of translators, Red Yeeyan obtained the required personnel capital to boost its commercialisation drive. It should be pointed out that although Yeeyan was started and built up by volunteer translators, it was intended to be a start-up company from the very beginning. Its early business at the stage of Blue Yeeyan was a cooperative project with *The Guardian* in 2009 to provide Chinese versions of some of its news. In the stage of Red Yeeyan, this focus shifted to book translation. Without the money to acquire permission to translate and publish copyrighted books, it tried to cooperate with publishers. Although it managed to secure some cooperation, the most successful of which was the translation and publication of *Steve Jobs* by Walter Isaacson, a joint project with CITIC Press Group<sup>94</sup> in 2011, most publishers adopted a lukewarm attitude toward their solicitation.

Slighted by the traditional publishing industry, Yeeyan set out to develop its own e-publishing platform, named Tangcha, on which twelve books including *Steve Jobs* and *Out of Control* by Kevin Kelly were published within four months from July to November 2011. With translators on standby and a publishing platform available, Yeeyan launched its Gutenberg Project in July 2012, aiming to translate those e-books in the public domain or under Creative Commons licenses. This initiative shifted Yeeyan to an e-book translation and publication platform.

Along with its commercialisation shift, Yeeyan's website underwent major adjustments in 2013 and entered its third stage as Black Yeeyan (February 2013 to the present). Book translation and publication became a dominant feature of the platform. On the other hand, as it no longer showed itself to be a producer of mass content, non-translator users started to play a smaller role. The site dispensed with most of its former spaces and features through which users could express an opinion including a 'hottest versions' section and its user rating system. Its neglect of community construction estranged a number of its former users—a trend evident in low traffic to its content during this period. A large proportion of its resources were channelled into e-book translation and publication and translation business

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<sup>94</sup> CITIC Press Group (Chinese: 中信出版集团), formerly CITIC Publishing Group, is a Beijing-based publishing company founded in 1988, engaging in digital and physical book retail and providing professional education in China.



services, while it tried to seek cooperation with traditional publishers and media portals. On 17 August 2013, it began to provide translation services on mobile terminals.

Its website at time of writing (2018) is the result of another round of reshaping in June 2016. On the menu are tags listed as Books, Cooperation, Instant Translation, Business and Translation Practice. Project Gutenberg occupies nearly the whole home page with the categories ‘books awaiting translators’ and ‘books on the shelves’. The articles are subsumed under Translation Practice and directed to individual content pages, most of which are completed by novice translators expecting comments and instructions. However, the single- and double-digit figures for the number of views or comments indicates that Yeeyan is no longer a content provider for the masses but instead a commercial platform of translation and publication. For translators, especially amateurs, the reshaping of the platform has also been a process for them to develop and learn the codes for forming and reforming a group or a knowledge club and “interfere” with the knowledge system of another’(John Hartley et al., 2017) (Hartley, Montgomery & Li, 2017:17). With those knowledge groups, the platform came out with a new translation and publication model, which I return to in Section 5.5.4.

Simply put, through its three phases, Yeeyan has drawn and redrawn boundary lines with a ‘they’-group to define its own identity and create the knowledge which is meaningful to it. By interacting with foreign media, it became a popular news portal in China. By differentiating itself from professional practice, it became a pioneer in changing translation practice and codes. By transforming and complementing the traditional publication system, it established an e-book publishing model based on crowdsourced translation. Accordingly, its roles and functions have been shifting from user-generated-translation to crowdsourced translation, volunteer-translation organiser to business translation provider, media-content translation to book publication. The process also implies an ongoing process of identification and integration between the ‘we’-group with our effective set of ideas. On a micro level, it is an account of cultural dynamics through the mechanism of demic concentration.

To tease out the driving forces behind these dynamics, we need to examine the evolving relationships Yeeyan has formed and is forming with other spaces or systems including the Chinese government, news media and publishers against the backdrop of global digital culture as well as within itself. The following two sections focus on an analysis of how dynamic social formations between and among different systems and agents have impacted the platform and how it has adjusted to this changing social and cultural context.

## 5.3 Yeeyan as a Cultural Borderland

In the 1970s, shifting from his structuralist dualism, Lotman conceived of the semiosphere as a semiotic space of complexity that is intersected by multidimensional dialogic interactions at different levels, and he conceived of the boundary as a ‘third space’ between a semiosphere and its external environment (Nöth, 2015). The experience of studying and working abroad puts all of the three founders of Yeeyan in a borderland between the media space of China and that of the Western world. They look and negotiate both ways, belonging to neither space. In this sense, they can be said to represent a third space, a meeting point of two semiospheres where two media cultures encounter each other and new information and knowledge is generated. It is in this sense that Lotman described travelling individuals as the driving force behind the interaction of semiospheres.

Yeeyan’s oft-quoted mission slogan in the early stages of its development was ‘to discover, translate and share the essence of the internet in languages other than Chinese’. By means of translation, it has staked a semiotic territory for itself. Joined by a contingent of user-translators with a variety of educational backgrounds and interests, the platform was able to cater to the requests of more and more fragmented readers. Together they formed a bi-coded and multi-coded borderland between domestic and foreign media—an ‘amorphous semiotic world’, in Lotman’s term. Yeeyan’s development and evolution, especially in its early stages, can largely be ascribed to its openness to its users, whose diverse interests were reflected in the material they chose to translate. An open and free publishing environment is the reason cited by several interviewed translators for participating in the initiative in its early stages. This open network approach is what made YouTube a phenomenal success. With the catchy slogan ‘Broadcast yourself’, YouTube has been tapping into the creative potential of the entire world population to build a global sense-making system and a creative economy (John Hartley, 2008b). With almost no restrictions on content and no qualification requirements for translators, Yeeyan soon grew to be a meaning-making space bursting with immense information and knowledge. On the platform, translation was not a specialised skill for earning money or a highly elaborated literary art to be appreciated, but a discursive act to access, understand and create communication, even if the work was done poorly or recognised as mistranslation. Some translators attracted the attention of millions of followers, and it was very common for popular articles to be viewed by tens of thousands of users. The demand for translation and new ideas and knowledge was felt acutely.

One typical example is the initiative to translate the news and opinions published by western journalism mainstays such as CNN, *Newsweek*, the BBC, and *The Guardian*. Instead of

being passive recipients of the news provided by the tightly controlled official media, some Yeeyan translators chose to (re)produce the news stories published by foreign media. Soon this spontaneous activity came to the foreground to become Yeeyan's defining identity as a civic journalism platform. This embodies how social networking technology enables individual users to self-organise themselves into purposeful meaning-making groups and contribute to the growth of knowledge via their collective intelligence. It is a process of cultural evolution through the mechanism of demic concentration, as advocated by the cultural science approach, along the lines of Lotman's semiosphere and the notion of the 'Three Bigs': everyone, everything, everywhere (Hartley, Wen, & Li, 2015).

The Yeeyan community was largely made up of young people who are well-educated, tech-savvy, and cynical about society. Bound by a common interest, they took their work seriously and proudly take Yeeyan'er (Yeeyanese) as one of their identity tags. One user and translator even told the media that he was a Yeeyanese and being a Yeeyanese was a meaningful landmark of his college years (Zheng & Yang, 2009). Beyond college students, many community translators were salaried workers with different educational backgrounds and specialities, including business, IT, sexology and medical science. It was usually their translations that became the most popular ones, attracting tens of thousands of views. When interviewed about what characteristics or functions of the community motivated him to participate in this cross-cultural effort, one translator's (I3) reply spoke for most translators: 'It is a platform where people can exchange information and talk with each other or carry out "cross-cultural communication" as a practical activity.'<sup>95</sup> Their dual role as both translators and readers put them in a position to produce translations that could meet the expectations of Chinese readers. Take the translation of *Getting Started with Lymphoma* as an example. When I last accessed it on 27 September 2017, it had 190,514 views and 185 comments.<sup>96</sup> It presented a very touching scene of mutual encouragement and care in the face of this life-threatening disease. In the comment section, a user named Lonyin thought the article would bring a ray of light to her/his father.

My father has fought this cancer for 7 years and now it comes to a very critical stage. This article provides us very timely information when we are burdened with the doubt whether it can be kept under control. I hope it will give my father more confidence after I tell him about this. It's painful to lose loved ones and let's cherish who we have now. Thank you (my translation).

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<sup>95</sup> According to my interview.

<sup>96</sup> See the screenshot (S5.4, S5.5, S5.6&S5.7) for the translation and the following two comments.

Nester, a user suffering from lymphoma, contributed a very inspiring post telling how he/she learned to get along with the disease.

I only want to tell those people diagnosed with cancer like me that maybe we can tide over the difficulty or maybe not. It is not different in nature from a patient who died of cold complications, except that taking this challenge, we need to care more about ourselves, the true self (my translation).

Many other users, including medical care workers, showed their support by sharing their experience with the disease or providing useful medical information. The value of Yeeyan as a meaning-making space was well recognised by its users, as indicated by user Shibeichen, who wrote, ‘an article can help so many patients. This reflects the value of Yeeyan. Wish all the patients will recover soon’. Several years later, inspired by this translation, another translator named 沈逸尘 (Pinyin: Shen Yichen) volunteered to translate and publish another article on cancer, ‘The T-Cell Army-*Can the body’s immune response help treat cancer?*’. In the prelude to the translation, the translator told how the T-cell had helped keep his grandmother’s lung cancer under control. This article soon attracted tens of thousands of readers<sup>97</sup> and was forwarded by Charles Xue Manzi,<sup>98</sup> who is a Weibo celebrity with 11.5 million followers. A project was soon established to focus on cancer-related research and studies, and with the involvement of more and more translators, the community undertook the task not only of spreading knowledge about cancer but also of helping its community members stay abreast of the latest research. This demonstrates clearly that the production of a translation is a social act in specific social settings for specific purposes, as elaborated by the Skopos theory (Vermeer, 1996). From another perspective, how Yeeyan generated value for the community and spread it to the Chinese people through various media channels is a vivid embodiment of the concept of ‘creative citizenship’, which was introduced by Hargreaver and Hartley to explore the potential of creative, civic-minded individuals in the context of a changing media landscape and an expanding creative economy (Hargreaves & Hartley, 2016).

The example examined above speaks to the role of civic-minded translators in the process of social and cultural changes. As discussed in the previous chapters, translation has long been a catalyst of social evolution in China. Imported notions such as ‘survival of the fittest’ and ‘democracy and science’ have been embraced and acculturised by Chinese people and have exerted great influence for more than a century. The act of Yeeyan was acclaimed as just as

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<sup>97</sup> See the screenshot (S5.8) for the webpage of the published article.

<sup>98</sup> See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles\\_Xue](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Xue)

significant as that of Prometheus, who brought fire to the human world, which alludes to the statement made by Lu Xun, a great writer and translator more than ninety years ago. However, every cultural form is embedded in a specific context of time-space. In the time of Lu Xun, translation was often the weapon taken up by influential thinkers, writers and reformers to spread their thoughts and enlighten the public. Belonging to the centre of culture, they were well-positioned to leave their discursive presence and impact on the social construction. By contrast, we now live in a very decentralised digital world. Cyberspace is a semiosphere of fluidity and complexity, intersected by numerous boundaries and characterised by a plurality of centres (Nöth, 2015). Located at the periphery, Yeeyan, like many other emerging Chinese social networking sites committed to novel writing, video broadcasting, and movie sharing, has become a centre of its own. Its semiotic space is defined by its codes and languages, which are different from the centre or other semiotic spaces, and the meaningfulness of its texts and signs comes out of the dialogic contacts between and among the community members, whether related to a piece of news or an article with a personal story behind it. Although the Chinese authorities have attempted to control and regulate the content accessible in cyberspace, web users are autonomous producers of meaning and knowledge who will not easily yield to the power of the alleged centre and accept what it offers. Situated at the periphery, how does Yeeyan interact with the centre and construct its discursive presence?

## 5.4 Centre and Periphery

Yeeyan's popularity as a news portal won it a business cooperation with *The Guardian* in 2009. This meant that it had increased its creative potential by incorporating the creative energies of international content producers. Accordingly, it began to adjust to its role of 'helping foreign media to open the door of China'. This put it into a sensitive relationship with the state. The media outlets in China are expected to help the government maintain a harmonious social environment and broadcast a positive image of China to the outside world. Foreign media are often criticised for 'demonising China' and 'fabricating distorted reports on China' (Chen, 2011). RNN's claim of 'faithful translation' of foreign media reports is only true of those versions selected by the editors and in-house translators. Yeeyan's censor-free publishing practice, especially related to Chinese political news, went against the regulations stipulated by the authorities, resulting in the site's closure at the end of 2009.

As indicated above, Yeeyan staged a comeback one month later in January 2010 and embarked on its second stage, Red Yeeyan. Given the strictly regulated media space in

China, most content providers like film makers have to compromise on sensitive topics. Yeeyan is no exception in this regard. However, unlike film-making, which has no escape from being censored by the Central Propaganda Department and its various local subordinate branches, most social networking sites like Yeeyan are allowed to show their allegiance by adopting self-censorship. Although this political atmosphere had, to some extent, weakened its discursive presence in the cyberspace of meaning-making, Yeeyan still exercised its discretion and autonomy to decide what should and should not be published while making a superficial nod to official restrictions. While it ended its cooperation with *The Guardian*, most of its articles were still sourced from it and from other western mainstream media outlets including *The Economist*, *Newsweek* and *Harvard Business Review*. In addition, many of its publications still had the potential to rile the authorities.

During this period, more new translators joined Yeeyan, and Yeeyan's celebrity translators were powerful magnets for its users because of their outstanding performance, with some translators attracting millions of followers. Among them, some translators' publications covered a wide range of interest, displaying a low consciousness of censorship. For example, on one translator's space page<sup>99</sup> were translations including *Did Chinese TV pass off Top Gun footage as a military*, *And Now Presenting: Amazing Satellite Images of The Ghost Cities of China*, *Deep throat Made Easy* and *China's Beauty Problem* which were highly popular among readers. However, at the same time they posed a challenge to the authorities, with content that either presented a negative image of China or touched on taboo topics in terms of official standards in China, like democracy, human rights or obscenity. This further confirms the finding by MacKinnon (2009) that internet companies and website moderators are the predominant operators of internet censorship through self-censorship, rather than state censors as usually presumed. As a result, a great deal of politically sensitive material survives on Chinese websites, and the chances for survival are further increased with greater knowledge and strategy. One point the finding has brought to attention is that private individuals and companies play a very important role in the power struggle of freedom and control. Even Sina, a Chinese media baron, was revealed once by one of its managers to have adopted subtle strategies to push the boundaries of free speech with a view to winning over users (Beach, 2013). In the case of Yeeyan, the restrictions of the authorities have failed to undermine its role as a valuable information provider, and it is nonsensical to say that the power of the centre is the determinant in deflecting Yeeyan from developing into a sustainable public sphere.

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<sup>99</sup> See the screenshot (S5.9) for the page mentioned.

Interestingly, Yeeyan twice cited ‘the relevant government regulations’ as the reason to explain its adjustment and transformation. This is also in alignment with the narrative of the media and scholars, which tends to hype the causal relationship between Chinese censorship and the withering UGC space online (Tan, 2015; Zhang, 2012). However, Yeeyan’s explanation was not accepted by some users. Its drastic adjustment toward commercialisation in 2013 touched off a discussion on Zhihu among some of its users. While some thought the commercialised orientation was a wise decision, others had a negative attitude to the change. One user (Zhou, 2013) said, ‘[the change] gave me a start. My first feeling is there is much less content than before [...] Is it because of lack of money?’ As a matter of fact, his guess was not wide of the mark. When interviewed by Frees Fund, an internet service provider, Zhao Jiamin (Fengxiaorui, 2016), now Yeeyan’s CEO, sketched the difficulties and successes Yeeyan experienced during its ten-year growth. According to him, in 2012, Yeeyan lost some of its able hands and the situation was worsened by a lack of operating funds. To escape this predicament, in 2014 he had to work for other companies with his technical team and left only four people with the platform in charge of business cooperation, book translation, the Gutenberg Project and community construction respectively. Hence, its 2013 reshaping had much to do with its commercialisation drive and with its lack of both money and staff. This insight was shared by other users regarding the 2016 adjustment, which required users to link their account number with their email or mobile phone to log in. Another user commented on Yeeyan’s website, ‘[...] actually (the change) is largely made out of commercial consideration. (The regulations of) the government are not transparent and you (the platform) can only blame yourself if you want to be the scapegoat’.<sup>100</sup> Therefore, it is interesting to see that Yeeyan tried to use ‘governmental censorship’ to deflect possible anger from its users.

Mitchell’s statement about translation production is very pertinent here: ‘I don’t pledge the present problematic state of affairs has been planned on purpose, for, like all complex systems, production networks do exhibit emergent complex behaviour with no central control’ (Mitchell, 2006, p. 1195). In the case of Yeeyan, as analysed above, it can be said that the formation and development of Yeeyan as a cultural form has been conditioned and shaped by the relational encounters between and among its various agents, including translators, users and coordinators, and with those related systems like the state, media, technology, society, economy and publishers. This in fact has been aptly claimed as a universal law by Lotman (2009, p. 133): ‘The dynamics of culture can be represented as neither an isolated immanent process nor the passive sphere of external influences. Both

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<sup>100</sup> See the screenshot (S5.10) for the quoted remark.

these tendencies are realised in conditions of mutual tension from which they cannot be abstracted without the distortion of their very essence’.

## 5.5 Sources of Cultural Newness

### 5.5.1 Translation as an Act of Social Problem-Solving

Every translation is an intended act. As demonstrated in Chapter 2, more and more scholars tend to view translation not as a static closed product but as a dynamic process which allows translators to perform and demonstrate their competence based on their own agenda. Venuti (2012), a powerful advocate for translators’ visibility, dedicated his work *Translation Changes Everything: Theory and Practice* to highlighting the generative potential of translation action. In one sense, he conceives of translation as an ‘event’ that is used to supplement a ‘void’ or lack in the receiving culture. This is a reminder of the argument advanced by Itamar Even-Zohar that translation is a major channel for bringing home foreign models to fill up a ‘vacuum’ in the target literature ( Even-Zohar, 1990, p. 48). Nevertheless, this ‘void’ or ‘vacuum’ concept has its flaws, as argued by Watson (2005), who criticised its one-sidedness and pointed out that other factors such as financial returns, politics, economics, and international relations were presented as the determinants in shaping the emerging translation pattern.

An examination of the different phases of Yeeyan indicates clearly that filling the void of content has been a strong but not exclusive motivation behind its initiative. Other factors, including its financial status, pursuit of returns and building a good relationship with the state, have also played a very important role in shaping its development. Nevertheless, bringing new ideas and knowledge to internet users in China was what the public valued most about it. One typical example is the initiative to translate the news and opinions published by western journalism mainstays such as CNN, *Newsweek*, the BBC, and *The Guardian*. Being open to the western media was what distinguished Yeeyan from the official media which in contrast have drawn a line from it because of political or ideological disparity. Its civic journalism helped it be recognised by the public as the ‘Most Valuable Information Website’ in China in 2009<sup>101</sup> and ‘the Wikipedia of news translation’ by the

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<sup>101</sup> The award was given by New Weekly, a Chinese magazine of life and current affairs in Oct. 14, 2009. See <http://www.newhua.com/2009/1014/76411.shtml>



foreign media<sup>102</sup>. This showcases the rise of users who with bilingual or multilingual proficiency have taken the responsibility of filling the void of information for domestic users. I would go even further than that to examine Yeeyan's value by considering its work as an act of social problem-solving.

It is impossible for any sign or text to be recognised by a society or community if it remains only as shallow and abstract information or content. Yeeyan's popularity in its early stages means what it had provided had resonated with its users and touched their life. To its users, the signs and their interpretations on the website were not only 'not only a reflection, a shadow, of reality, but is also itself a material segment of that very reality' (Voloshinov & Bakhtin, 1986, p. 11). On the other hand, the community users' enthusiasm for Western media content reflects the disengagement of the domestic media from the social reality and also its neglect of some social issues. Without a public space to discuss, debate and find solutions, people often grapple helplessly with the problems they face. In this situation, the public space provided by the Western media provides an alternative approach for them to begin with, a step toward problem-solving.

Besides the initiatives undertaken by individual translators, Yeeyan organised several cooperative translation projects to promote social welfare, such as the translation project on cancer prevention and treatment mentioned in Section 5.3. In May 2008, when an earthquake hit the southern province of Sichuan, China, Yeeyan organised its translators to translate *National Urban Search and Rescue Response System: Field Operations Guide* (a partial translation) and *Earthquake Safety Checklist* (a full translation) compiled by the Federal Emergency Management Agency of the US and *Epidemics after Natural Disasters* (a partial translation) by the World Health Organization. These translations were widely circulated by its users and incorporated as the bulk of the *Chinese official version of Earthquake Safety Checklist* published by the China Earthquake Administration. In April 2013, Jianglienong<sup>103</sup> made a post to proofread and comment on part of the translation, and at the end of it he urged the government to compile and compose an earthquake handbook more suited to its national conditions instead of blindly copying other countries. In this case, the translators and other community members clearly demonstrated their civic agency in solving public problems and promoting social welfare. This project was followed by others of a similar

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<sup>102</sup> The related report was published on NiemanLab, an online media portal in Jun. 25, 2010. See <https://www.niemanlab.org/2010/06/the-wikipedia-of-news-translation-yeeyan-orgs-volunteer-community/>

<sup>103</sup> See the screenshot (S5.11) for the post.

nature including the translation of *Mediactive*<sup>104</sup> and *The TOF Child*.<sup>105</sup> In August 2014, when the community solicited ideas from its users for more project topics that interested them, it received dozens of suggestions from child abuse prevention, water sanitation and hygiene in rural areas, and food safety to bereavement disorder.<sup>106</sup> Both the completed projects and the suggested ones reflected concerns not of individuals but of the society as a whole in contemporary China. Translation opens up a dialogic space where users are able to see their own problems from an external perspective, thus creating a bridge from knowing to doing.

## 5.5.2 Discourse Construction

Lotman regards boundary as the defining feature of a semiosphere in establishing its individuation. Every sign, text or culture as a whole needs to refer to the other semiotic entity to establish and consolidate its own identity. In this way, we have antinomies like Western culture versus Eastern culture and ‘we’ group versus ‘they’ group. Likewise, any discourse needs to fashion its boundary to establish its legitimacy and authority within its internal space. Translation, as a means of importing or even smuggling new elements from a foreign culture, certainly poses as a possible threat to dominant discourses at home. From this perspective, Robyns (1994) defined the activity of translation as ‘discursive migration’, which will arouse different attitudes from the receiving culture, namely, imperialist, defensive, trans-discursive and defective.

On the Yeeyan platform, translators produced all kinds of content, including the ‘shocking’ type. The information translated about sex was an eye-catching content category. On the topic of sex, the 1997 penal code of China (NPCC, 1997) forbids publishing and disseminating obscene materials that depict sexual acts and scenes except for medical or artistic purposes, because these materials will corrupt ‘socialist spiritual civilization’. However, it is very difficult to define what is legal and what is not based on the opaque terms of the regulation. In order to avoid any legal jeopardy, publishers usually refuse to take any book on topics related to sex, regardless of whether it is erotic fiction or an academic work. Given this restrictive social context, broaching any subject related to sex in the public space causes many raised eyebrows. That is why Peng Xiaohui, an active Chinese sexologist, was splashed with faeces when he made a speech on sexology on a square of Guangzhou on

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<sup>104</sup> The book provides practical tips about how to become an active user instead of being a passive consumer. See <http://mediactive.com/book/>

<sup>105</sup> The book discusses genetics, treatments, surgeries, and support for children with tracheoesophageal fistula (TOF). See [https://issuu.com/twyningdennis/docs/the\\_tof\\_child](https://issuu.com/twyningdennis/docs/the_tof_child)

<sup>106</sup> See the screenshot (S5.12) for the solicitation notice and part of users’ responses.

Nov. 11, 2014. Peng (Liu, 2014) claimed that 99% of the Chinese have never received a general education on sex, and that is why sex knowledge comes as a shock to some Chinese people or is labelled as obscene by others.

An interviewed community translator (I4)<sup>107</sup> specialised on translating sex content revealed that he had translated two clinical research books on sex: *Sexual Medicine in Primary Care* and *Principles and Practices of Sex Therapy*. With much difficulty, he got the first one published in 2014. In 2017, he was still seeking a publisher for the second book three years after it was finished. Undeterred by the restrictions, he came to Yeeyan to publish some popular and interesting short articles on sex. On his personal page,<sup>108</sup> there are 591 translations, largely on sex, ranging from masturbation skills to theoretical concepts. Many of his translations have attracted tens of thousands of viewers. Far from believing that his translations would corrupt people's mind, he hoped that his work would 'bring sexual happiness to thousands of friends'. Together with other community translators, he tried to help Chinese internet users look beyond the boundary erected by the state and come into contact with alien views and outside knowledge. In my interview with this translator,<sup>109</sup> he commented on the role of translators, 'through their efforts, translators will produce some social effect, because people will, more or less, have a renewed understanding about their own world when they have seen other different worlds'. Therefore, changing the structure of discourse on sex and bringing new narratives to it is clearly on the mind of this translator.

His efforts did not come to nothing. In the discussion section of translations, many readers' responses were shocked but happily so. Typical online comments were 'God! Oh my God!', 'Awesome!' 'An eye-opener!', 'so shocking' and 'Up!'. In the view of Bruner (1962), even this kind of response speaks of the creativity of translation, because a creative product can be 'anything that produces 'effective surprise' in the observer as well as a 'shock of recognition' that the product or response, though novel, is entirely appropriate'. Moreover, it provides a discursive space for different narratives to communicate with each other. For example, when the translator published his translation of a photo study of female genitalia, a female reader made herself the target of criticism from other users when she declared that she felt ashamed for the translator.<sup>110</sup> Although there was verbal abuse in the comment section from both supporters and opponents, most commenters held that to know about human bodies should not be restricted by moral standards. UserYq5101498 commented, 'to explore the unknown world is more important than the so-called moral disgrace. Why is it

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<sup>107</sup> According to my interview.

<sup>108</sup> See the screenshot (S5.13) for the page mentioned.

<sup>109</sup> According to my interview.

<sup>110</sup> See the screenshots (S5.14&5.15) for the quoted comments.

weird to know the vulva? [...] Our society still nurses a fear towards sex and it is believed that to speak it out will cause moral depravity and corrupt practices. However, that is only the fantasy imagined by the old moralist'. Another user, Griffith000, exclaimed, 'sister marymengya's reply makes me feel ashamed of her. I have received some education and learned to embrace some universal values. I feel helpless and regretful about this. Has all the reading of English articles come to nothing? All our efforts to learn different civilizations and cultures are of no use?' This line of reasoning reflects the 'resource-oriented approach' to intercultural contact promoted by Cronin. He (2013a, p. 205) argues that translation should help increase the 'fecundity' of a culture rather than consolidate its 'uniform blocs' of identity, which are always bound up in a relationship of power. In other words, translations should be approached as resources that are indefinitely exportable (exploitable) and available to everyone, not to be avoided because of the value labels tagged to them.

It is in this sense that the translator in question discussed the meaning of the project 'Sex' under his charge.<sup>111</sup>

The original version:

在不得不自我审查的今天，译言真是个好自由的好地方，支持了，理解了。这个项目只是愿大家的性息更“ji”中一些，让有性趣的朋友们更“kao”近一些。呵呵，“敏感”有xing成敏感，“亵渎”无辜被亵渎——不是无辜哦。性，是最搞的人权。.....无权利，就用爱交换吧，无自由就从性开始吧。加盟“sex”项目，聚合就是力量就是访问量！.....

My translation:

Yeeyan is a really good place of freedom given we live in a society where everyone has to live a self-censored life. Here I give Yeeyan my support and understanding. This project is intended to accumulate more information and build up a sense of closeness among people interested in sex. Haha, the word of sex becomes a sensitive word, and the word 'profanity' becomes a victim of itself without testimony – not testicle.<sup>112</sup> Sex is the highest right of human beings. .... Without right, let's replace it

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<sup>111</sup> See the screenshot (S5.16) for the quoted remark.

<sup>112</sup> In Chinese, the character '辜' and '辜' look very alike. The phrase '无辜' means 'groundless' or 'without any testimony' and '无辜' means 'without testicle'. Here, the author aims to mock at the censorship policy in a humorous and satirical way by mixing up the two phrases.

with love; without freedom, let's start with sex. Folks, join the 'Sex' project. To get together is strength and is visitor volume!

In this short paragraph, the translator used Chinese Pinyin to replace five characters to indicate five sex-related sensitive words to be banned on the internet.<sup>113</sup> Confronted with the oppressive social context, the translator reveals clearly his intention to construct a semiotic space to shape the sex discourse in China and a clever strategy for circumventing it. In the past, Chinese reformists resorted to translation to enlighten and revitalise the country. In the digital age, ordinary internet users adopt translation as a discursive instrument to help solve social and personal problems in medicine, natural disasters, psychological counselling, and sex. From the standpoint of Lotman, it is also a process during which the communication between 'I' and 'he' changed to the auto-communication between 'I' and 'I'. Auto-communication, as a mechanism of personality and consciousness transformation, 'does not add to the information we already have, but [...] it transforms the self-understanding of the person who has engendered the text and [...] it transfers already existing messages into a new system of meanings' (Lotman, 1990, p. 30). In this case, the disparity in the discourse on sex between the domestic and foreign cultures prompted the translator and his readers to engage in a dialogue on sex and morality, sex and human rights. The auto-communication thus aroused within the culture added extra layers of meaning to the text and shaped the identity structuring of 'I' and 'we'. Yeeyan demonstrates how the role of translation goes beyond bridging gaps between cultures and lies in the communicative life it brings to the receiving culture, which is avoided or banned within the framework of the official discourse.

### 5.5.3 'Live Scene' of Translation

Yeeyan is a semiosphere of meaning-making and a semiotic site of demic concentration. What makes Yeeyan a more interesting case to research is that it presents a 'live scene' of social formation unfolding through spontaneous events of translation. Heather Inwood (2014, p. 15) uses the notion of 'live scene' to describe the Chinese poetry space and defines the term as 'an ideology of spontaneity and the here and now of fleeting moments rather than big schemes and grand narratives, and of the increasingly permeable boundaries between participant and observer, performer and audience, author and reader'. In the following section, I adopt 'live scene' as a theoretical concept to capture the properties of Yeeyan as a

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<sup>113</sup> 'cha' is used to replace '查' a homophone of '插' which means 'penetrate' in the context of sex; 'ri' to replace '日' which means 'fuck' in the context of sex; "ji" replace '集' a homophone of '鸡' which means 'penis' in the context of sex; 'kao' to replace '靠' which means 'fuck' in the context of sex; 'xing' to replace '性' which means 'sex' in the context of sex.

fluid and heterogeneous semiotic space where productive encounters are formed to generate new possibilities of cultural newness.

As analysed in the first section of this chapter, the translation practice conducted on Yeeyan has a heterogeneous and dynamic nature. As a result, it can fall under various categories such as amateur translation, crowdsourced translation, community translation and cooperative translation, when viewed from different perspectives. Nevertheless, all these terms have been created by researchers examining the phenomena as outsiders. While interviewing translators, I have attempted to elicit their own descriptions of the activities they are a part of. While their views vary to a greater or lesser extent with individual motivation, all of them share one point in common, namely the interaction between and among translators and readers. One interviewee (I3) put it neatly: ‘The “community-based” interaction is the most appealing point to me. The translators can conduct direct discussions with other translators and readers on translation itself besides the translated information. It’s very hard for other platforms to cultivate such an environment’.<sup>114</sup>

Incorporating communication between various players into the translation process is not a new idea. In ancient China, reams of the Buddhist scriptures were translated in translation workshops where translators cooperated with each other under the auspices of the state. The translation of *Selected Works of Mao Zedong* conducted in 1950s is another typical example that involved the participation of a team of not only well-known domestic translators but also foreign experts. However, throughout history, without the involvement of an official or institutional organisation, translation has largely been a lonely task. Even when translated versions were the result of the concerted efforts of multiple translators like the examples mentioned above, readers were always the absent player. That leads to the miscarriage of the democratic translation notion advocated by Nida and Taber (2003, p. 200) who hold that the receptors should be involved in the process of translation and that their responses are an essential determinant in measuring the quality of a translation. Now, electronic technologies have been hailed as the means of realising ‘collaborative and democratic translation’ (O’Hagan, 2011) and enabling ‘humanizing dialogue’ to ‘enter the internal dimension of translation decisions’ (Pym, 2011b, p. 1). Yeeyan, as demonstrated above, is an epitome of this orientation. Like the scene of online poetry writing as described by Heather Inwood (Inwood, 2014, p. 5), translation on the platform is practiced not only as a bilingual transfer but also as a ‘social form’ where different agents interact with each other to ‘further their

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<sup>114</sup> According to my interview.

chosen area of culture and shape the value of what they do with like-minded creators and audiences’.

Beginning with the structural features and functions adopted by the platform, the real-time updating of the most popular articles and the numbers of their views and comments accentuated the development and evolution of the space. On the individual pages, the messaging function and display boards that indicated users’ followers, the people they were following, their badges of achievement and activity levels, and their contributions and latest activities served to give users a sense of being on the spot. On the section of published translations, the function of fault-finding, proofreading and commenting left translated versions open to rewriting and new interpretation; thereby, translation to some extent became transparent to readers as an ongoing event. On this point, a community translator’s<sup>115</sup> translation of *Han Han Finds a New Crowd to Irritate*, originally a column from *The New Yorker*, can serve as an example. The translation with its 41,821 views and 80 comments portrayed a live scene of spontaneous communications on translation per se and the topic implied in the title, namely, the possibility of revolution in China. The translation received its first comment 16 minutes after its publication, and from there, the conversation continued until midnight when the translator suggested resuming it next day. Its readers were impressed by the ongoing conversations on the choice of words, translation concepts and political awareness in China. A user wrote, ‘just want to show my admiration. Both translation and comments are very powerful. Add it to my favourites.’ Another user said, ‘I’ve learned more from reading the comments than from the article. Mr Jiang is a very meticulous translator.’

The comments were further enlivened by the twists and turns of the live scene of decision-making in the process of translation. This can be illustrated by part of the interaction between the translator and a commenter. The commenter questioned the appropriateness of the translation of the sentence, ‘[H]e appeared on a Chinese state-television broadcast and sat through an hour of criticism from education experts and audience members’, and contended that the translator should not render the phrase ‘sit through’ into the Chinese version ‘干坐 /ganzuo’ (which usually means to sit somewhere without doing anything), since in the program, Hanhan actually delivered some counterattacks against the criticism. In response to the questioning, the translator said he would reply to the commenter one hour later after he watched the program again. One hour later, he replied that his understanding was correct according to the clipped version of the program, which, he pointed out, had a lot of Hanhan’s

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<sup>115</sup> See the screenshots (S5.17&S5.18) for the translation status and the following quoted comments.

remarks omitted in order to make him look powerless in face of all the criticism. However, considering the ambiguity of the Chinese phrase ‘干坐’, which also means being neglected or snubbed by the host under some context, he omitted it from the translation and added ‘谈话/tanhua’ (literally, talk) which is not only the Chinese name of the program but also indicates the bi-directionality of the communication. As a result, the back translation of the adjusted Chinese version is ‘he appeared on a Chinese state-television broadcast of a talk show program and went through an hour of criticism from education experts and audience members’. Reaching an agreement on this point, the commenter suggested that the preceding discussion should be mentioned in the translator’s explanatory notes. However, the translator thought this kind of note would make the translator overstep his boundary and mislead readers.

Then the conversation took another turn, when the commenter made a comment on what the translator was doing. He showed his respect for the translator’s meticulous attitude but at the same time felt pity for him, because according to him an article of either the author or translator could only attract people’s attention for several hours or minutes and there were not many people who were serious about their words. As an alternative, he thought the translator should translate some literary works, which would put his literary accomplishments to better use. To this, the translator replied that if he decided to translate an article, he would translate it well, and that it was natural for his translation to become obsolete in the sea of information. He added that literary translation was interesting to him but it required a healthy cultural and social environment to thrive, which was what the so-called ‘public intellectuals’ like him have been trying to build up. In this sense, he did not think his translation was a waste of his time and hoped it would not waste the time of his readers.

The live scene described above not only portrays the communications between and among the original author, the translator and the readers, but also sheds some light on the translator’s lived experience of translation and his decision-making process. The attention paid to details by both the translator and the commenters fleshes out translation as a complicated activity and ‘reveals the “gaps”, the distance that needs to be crossed in translation, and the resources which are made available to world languages and cultures through the translational circuits of intelligibility’ (Cronin, 2013a, p. 206). The users of the platform want not the political engagement or activism advocated by Baker and Tymoczko but to find a means of acquiring knowledge, interpreting reality and cultivating a discourse of their own conviction and interest. A user wrote, ‘thank the translator for the article. Sometimes we will have a deeper understanding of our own issues if seen from another



angle, not to mention many of them are not discussable domestically'. For many translators, this discursive practice was both a way for them to help people access more information about the outside world and a kind of informal, distributed, peer-to-peer, spontaneous and imitative creative learning to improve their own expertise.

The above example also reveals how the participants listened and responded to others in a responsible way. Another interviewed translator (I5)<sup>116</sup> said that Yeeyan's populist translators, diversified content and academic style make it different from other Chinese websites and forums that provide foreign media content to Chinese internet users; on those platforms, heated political arguments usually run rife.

These characteristics also make it a gathering ground for people from all walks of life, including poets, professional translators, public servants, doctors and students. But here their identity acquires another dimension—the user of Yeeyan or Yeeyan'er. Translation is not only their mutual interest but also constructs and defines the relationships between and among them. For example, one community translator is both a poet and a prolific translator, but still his translations published on the platform were not immune from criticism, which he happily accepted. Another interesting example is the communications between a professor of translation studies and his readers about his translation of *Songbirds: Scared to Death*. Most of the 28 comments<sup>117</sup> received were criticism of the translation, which, however were not all welcome as revealed by one commenter who said that his criticism had resulted in the professor attacking him personally through an email. These relational encounters further confirm the difference between professional codes of ethics and non-professional codes elaborated by Joanna Drugan (2011), with the former stressing loyalty to each other—that is, one professional should not find fault with a peer professional's work—and the latter stressing loyalty to the group as a whole, which is represented by the online translation community 'with its openness, shared values, and supportive colleagues, might offer an inspiring and positively ethical model'. From another perspective, this incident reveals the blurred boundary between the professional and the amateur and between the reader and the translator, who are more often than not one and the same. All this will not only shape power relations within the networks of agents and agencies but also change the social discursive practice through which people access cultural resources and make their voices heard.

Therefore, this unfurling process revealed in the live scene is more informative about the target culture, the translator and his/her readers than the original culture and its author. What

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<sup>116</sup> According to my interview.

<sup>117</sup> See the screenshot (S5.19) for parts of the comments.

deserves our attention is not only the spontaneity and presence of the live scene but also the relational encounters between different agents and the disruptive innovation generated therein.

#### 5.5.4 A New Method of Publishing Translations

Yeeyan's engagement in the publication of translated books, as alluded to above, is consequent upon the interactions of various factors including financial viability, technological affordances, and the publishing context. By integrating the concept of crowdsourcing into the translation and publishing process, the platform has set up an operation model different from its traditional counterparts. The landmark work produced through this model was the translation and publication of *Steve Jobs* by Walter Isaacson in 2011, with CITIC Press Group as the cooperative publisher. For the translation, five non-professional translators were selected from more than 400 applicants, and they finished translating about 500,000 words within 30 days, which was regarded as a miracle in the translation and publishing industry.<sup>118</sup>

Crowdsourcing is also the core concept of its Gutenberg Project. By the end of 2018, 464 books had been translated through the project, with many more on the waiting list. This new method of publishing has attracted attention from researchers. Considering it a successful application case of the crowdsourcing approach, most dwell on its operation procedure and characteristics and its implications for traditional publishing practice (Dai, 2014; Ling, 2015). However, these researchers have overlooked how this model has opened and created more dialogic spaces where different individuals and groups such as net users, translators, editors and publishers interact and negotiate with each other and how border-crossing takes place between different spheres such as professional and non-professional, translating and reading, paper media and digital media. This interaction and border-crossing, viewed through the lens of cultural science, is the source of cultural innovation and newness. From this perspective, this section examines Yeeyan's model of crowdsourcing translation-driven publishing.

To adopt the crowdsourcing approach, 'the crucial prerequisite is the use of the open call format and the large network of potential labourers', as stated Jeff Howe (2006), the creator of the term. With 50,000 registered translators, the platform was well positioned to meet the two primary conditions. However, to apply the approach in practice required much empirical exploration. After around two years of experimenting in the field, Zhao Jiamin became more

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<sup>118</sup> <https://www.tmtpost.com/1960.html>

convinced of the view expressed by Jimmy Wales, the founder of Wikipedia, that one of the crucial rules to harness the generative potential of the Web 2.0 era is ‘to provide a structure for your users to collaborate’. To him, crowdsourcing is not a business model but an organisational mode of production. In an article published on *Harvard Business Review China*, Zhao (2015) expressed a belief that the key to the smooth operation of Yeeyan Gutenberg Project lies in its tripartite structure, namely, in-house editors, subproject coordinators and translators. By June 2015, three years since its commencement, the organisational mode had allowed the platform to select and involve about 400 subproject coordinators and over 15,000 translators in the process. To some extent, it had realised social production through crowdsourcing in the networked society in the field of translation and publication.

Zhao’s three-level structure approach resonates with Kevin Kelly. Citing Kelly’s remarks from ‘Out of Control’, Zhao (2015) sets out the characteristics of the structure as setting up ‘a subsumption or web hierarchy’ where ‘information and authority travel from the bottom up, and from side to side’ differing from the ‘rank hierarchy’ inherent in traditional publishing houses. The concept has been put into practice from the very beginning of every subproject, that is, the acquisition of the book to be translated. The community acquires most of its book resources through the recommendations of its users. Once the recommended book is approved by the in-house editor(s), a subproject is set up to recruit a coordinator, who in most cases is one of the translators, and then the coordinator selects other translators depending on the quality of their trial translation (usually at least two translators are needed). With segments of work assigned among the team members, translation, mutual-proofreading and editing are done simultaneously before the version is handed over to the in-house editors for final revision. After this, the in-house editors contact publishers to have the work published, primarily on digital platforms such as Kindle and Douban Read.<sup>119</sup>

Compared with traditional publishing practice, this approach creates more space for different groups or individuals to communicate with each other throughout the entire process. Most project translators interviewed welcome this as a great learning experience. One interviewee (I6)<sup>120</sup> told me that the complementarity between his collaborator and himself helped to produce a better work of translation than would otherwise have been possible, saying, ‘for example, my last book is done with the other translator who is in Japan. I communicate with him about the Japanese bathing culture online, which helps me to avoid some potential

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<sup>119</sup> Douban Read is an e-book reading platform. It is a product of Douban, a Chinese social networking service website which is one of the most influential web 2.0 websites in China.

<sup>120</sup> According to my interview.

mistakes in my translation. At the same time, I help him polish his awkward Chinese expressions caused by his long time immersion in Japanese'. Chen Xuan (her nickname on Zhihu platform is 冬惊/Dongjing) (Dongjing, 2016), one of the two translators of *Memories of Fanny Hill*, the Chinese version of which secured a place on the list of Douban popular readings for 5 months in a row, expressed a similar opinion on Zhihu: 'We learn from each other and both feel greatly benefited from the cooperation. For those translators who haven't gained much experience in book translation, cooperative translation is a very good learning opportunity because every sentence of your version will be checked on by other people and your version will undergo several rounds of correction and revision. This is impossible if you work with a publisher or magazine'. This mutual checking and proofreading conducted during the process by translators and coordinators forms a distinct contrast to the traditional practice in which translation is largely the work of an individual and proofreading takes place only after the entire work is translated.

However, communications are not limited to between and among the three parties highlighted by Zhao. Some project translators have tried to make themselves visible to internet users by interacting with them on various social media platforms such as Zhihu and Douban. For example, on Zhihu the above-mentioned translator Chenxuan responded to a user's question about the translation quality of the Gutenberg Project by sharing her experience of book translating, and she also participated in an interview organised by the platform to answer questions from other users.<sup>121</sup> She also actively engaged with her readers on Douban, where her translation received hundreds comments since September 2013.<sup>122</sup> This kind of engagement is partially driven by the marketing awareness of the translators who, empowered by the internet, are not content to leave the distribution of their work in the hands of publishers. In the case of Chenxuan, she stated that instead of being the person behind the scenes, she has motivated all her friends, relatives and other people in her social networks to pay attention to her publication, and her father also helped to publicise her translated book in his friend circle on Wechat.

In addition, this model has allowed internet users to exert a greater influence on the translation and publication of translated works, especially when it comes to some contemporary best-sellers such as *Steve Jobs* and *Out of Control*. In the case of the former, users were involved right from the start. Its four translators were selected from more than 400 online applicants. At the stage of translation when the publisher posted the first three

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<sup>121</sup> See

[https://read.douban.com/ebook/1718675/comments?page=1&commentType=Review&sort=SCORE\\_DESC](https://read.douban.com/ebook/1718675/comments?page=1&commentType=Review&sort=SCORE_DESC)

<sup>122</sup> See <https://read.douban.com/ebook/1718675/>

chapters on the designated media for sample reading, the sample chapters immediately attracted many readers who commented on the translation and helped to spread the chapters further to more users. Among them, the fan group Apple4.us<sup>123</sup> contacted the publisher and volunteered to do proofreading, which enabled readers to play a role in translation modification and criticism in the middle of the publication process. Even after the book was published both in paper and digital copies, the publisher and Yeeyan encouraged users to find flaws with the translation by organising an online flaw-finding activity, which resulted in the revised edition of the translated book.<sup>124</sup>

Some users, however, did not need encouragement to get involved, as instanced by the translation and publication of Kevin Kelly's *Out of Control: The New Biology of Machines, Social Systems, and the Economic World*, whose translation was a crowdsourced work of Yeeyan then published in paper copies by the publisher New Star Press in October 2010. A user named 书海回头客 (Chinese Pinyin: shuhaihitouke) started a thread, 'Some serious Chinese mistranslations of *Out of Control*' on Douban Read,<sup>125</sup> which attracted many other users to join in the effort. Some in turn took aim at the versions done by shuhaihitouke, leading to a heated debate on the ethics of translation criticism as well as translation standards. Nevertheless, shuhaihitouke's effort won great support from many Douban users. Some of them who already had the book chose to transcribe his translations into their books for reference. The starter of the thread also engaged the publisher, Yeeyan and Kevin Kelly through emails. In response, Yeeyan amended part of the translation of the book in its digital copy according to the suggestions of shuhaihitouke and organised an online flaw-finding activity to further improve its translation. Later the paper copy of the book was also revised accordingly in 2016.

Alluding to the translated book, another user called kaijuanyouyi aptly commented, 'isn't this translation correction activity a kind of self-reparation in the state of *Out of Control* where organisations lost control of things?' As interesting as this perspective is, I think that this activity, rather than an instance of cultural self-evolution, speaks more to the concept of a dialogical model of culture proposed by Lotman (2005, p. 225):

Since all levels of the semiosphere—from human personality to the individual text to the global semiotic unity—are a seemingly inter-connected group of semiospheres, each of them is simultaneously both participant in the dialogue (as part of the

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<sup>123</sup> A group of die-hard fans of Apple who were also very highly critical of others' translation. See its Weibo account [https://www.weibo.com/apple4us?is\\_all=1](https://www.weibo.com/apple4us?is_all=1) which stopped updating on Jan. 6, 2018.

<sup>124</sup> See the flaw-finding activity <http://steve-jobs.yeeyan.org/>

<sup>125</sup> See <https://book.douban.com/review/4951557/>

semiosphere) and the space of dialogue (the semiosphere as a whole), in each can be seen manifestations of ‘rightism’ and ‘leftism’ and, whether lying to the right or left, each also includes within itself, at the lowest level, structures belonging to both right and left.

In this case, ‘a subsumption or web hierarchy’ advocated by Kevin Kelly clearly extends well beyond the tripartite structure mentioned by Zhao. Every internet user, be it the translator, the publisher or the reader, can constitute a node in the web of relationships that has the potential to shape encounters between and among different groups, thereby impacting the flow of information and the generation of knowledge. For example, as illustrated above, the translator can promote his/her work by engaging with potential readers on various social media, and web-savvy readers, rather than being the passive recipients of information, can become transmitters with the autonomy to generate and access the information they need through the media channels they prefer. The potentialities that arise from the generative dialogic spaces more than compensate for the possible shortcomings of the approach. What is more, as predicted by Kevin Kelly in his book *Out of Control*, in the age of information explosion, we must rely on ‘hive wisdom’ to deal with information transmission and interpretation, and a well-designed crowdsourcing approach will most likely be the trend of the future.

## 5.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined three aspects of Yeeyan: the evolution of Yeeyan across its different developmental phases; the relational encounters within it as a semiosphere and its interaction with the external environment; and the sources of cultural newness arising from a new model of translation practice and publishing. Drawing on concepts from cultural semiotics and cultural science, this chapter has broadened the understanding of Yeeyan and other translation communities as semiotic spaces and explored the creative potential of the collective intelligence enabled via translation in the digital age.

The semiosphere approach has helped the current research transcend the existing conceptualisation of the online translation community, which has defined it as a form of CoP, a volunteer translation community or a crowdsourcing translation community, and instead has examined it as a semiotic space of dynamics in which different knowledge groups have been evolving, thus producing different kinds of knowledge and creativity. Since its establishment in 2006, Yeeyan has played different roles consecutively and simultaneously: as a news portal, it has imported news and opinions from the mainstream

western media, thus opening a new world to Chinese internet users on the culture and current affairs of the outside world; as a community of translation practice, it has formed new translation practice codes characterised by democratic translation and ‘live scene’; as a translation publishing platform, it has developed an innovative publishing model based on crowdsourcing and a ‘web hierarchical’ management structure.

As such, Yeeyan is heterogeneous, and its functions are constantly in correlation with other cultural spaces and systems economically, politically, and culturally. As a knowledge group, its members depend on each other and are connected by a pledge to a common cause. On the other hand, Yeeyan has attempted to dodge the restrictions of governmental censorship and subvert the commercial logic of the content economy by cashing in on public domain books. Here, we see public welfare, individual interest, financial benefits, social recognition, bottom-up grassroots initiative and top-down institutional management all coming together. That being said, Yeeyan is a robust example to explicate the idea of ‘demic concentration’, which is an account of how culture makes groups, how groups make knowledge and how cultural newness is then produced via the mechanism of the demic dynamics. Yeeyan is a semiosphere, an epitome of culture and a culture in itself.

# Chapter 6. Case Study 3: RRYS

## 6.1 Introduction

In the past decade, foreign audio-visual products, especially western television hits, have captivated the attention of Chinese audiences. *The Guardian* (2014) described the relationship between the two sides as that of ‘a love affair’. In China, foreign television programs and films are made available mainly through three intermediaries: the state-level television networks (CCTVs), popular private video websites including iQiyi, Youku, Tencent Video and Le Video, and fansubbing groups. The first two, despite being the licensed providers, are inveighed against and shunned by many Chinese viewers for their poor content service, which often misrepresents the original with a significant time-lag between the initial release of a visual work and its accessibility in China. In comparison, fansubbed products are credited to be free, authentic and of able to be viewed immediately. Thus, grassroots fansubbing has become a popular alternative to the official domains of foreign visual content. I have been a registered user of RRYS, the current top fansubbing group in China, since 2015. Upon opening the RRYS app on my laptop at noon on 28 January 2019, I found 13 visual products that had just been released that day and were available for free download.<sup>126</sup> On the page listing the most popular items,<sup>127</sup> a series of films and television dramas were presented, including *Strike Back*, a British/American action-adventure television series, *Black Earth Rising*, a 2018 television drama series, co-produced by BBC Two and Netflix, and *Deadpool 2*, a 2018 American superhero film. In the case of *Strike Back* as an example, I could access the latest episode (episode 1 of season 7) two days after its official release on 25 January 2019.

Although it is difficult to determine the exact number of fansubbing groups or their followers in China, their influence and popularity have already been well captured by the mainstream media. In 2006, *Sanlian Lifeweek*, an influential Beijing-based weekly, published a report titled, ‘Underground Crazy Pursuit of *Prison Break* in China’ (Chen & Liu, 2006), which helped push fansubbing groups into the spotlight as the drivers behind the popularity of online foreign visual products among Chinese internet users. They were highly extolled for their efforts to break cultural barriers and for ‘making American popular culture available in near-real time free to Chinese audiences’ (French, 2006). As stated in Chapter 2, although the practice of fansubbing was initiated three decades ago in the 1980s, it has only attracted

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<sup>126</sup> See the screenshot (S6.1) for the newly released visual products.

<sup>127</sup> See the screenshot (S6.2) for the hit list.



scholarly attention more recently. Minako O'Hagan (2009, 2013) coined the term user-generated translation (UGT) to highlight the contribution of translators-cum-prosumers and hailed fansubbing groups as forerunners of crowdsourced translation. Their 'groundbreaking innovations' have been an indicator of a changing translation landscape and have influenced the professional practice of subtitling (Díaz-Cintas, 2009, p. 11; Gonzalez 2007, 2012). Hu (2009) directed our attention to a fascinating facet of fansubbing groups, which is the hybridity of non-profitability and neoliberalism. Challenging this assumption, Matt Hills (2017) argues that cult cinema fandom has presented 'liminal discourses' across niche and transnational value systems, subcultural and cultural capital, and formal and informal economies. Rather than undermining each other by through contradiction, however, these different arguments actually have reflected the evolution and heterogeneity of fansubbing as a cultural space.

In fact, internationally, fansubbing groups as a whole have undergone a process of transformation and divergence, which defies any unanimous categorisation. In this respect, Chinese fansubbing culture is not an exception. The shift towards division and discrepancy among different groups in anime fansubbing has been well documented in relation to codes of ethics (Lee, 2011), monetisation (Hu, 2016) and mainstream culture (Schules, 2014). Overall, fansubbing groups present a changing landscape of heterogeneous elements, which is further complicated by the socio-cultural context they are embedded in. This speaks to not only the transformative identities of fansubbing groups but also the 'productive encounters' with other cultural spaces and among themselves in a shared space, which are sources of cultural newness (Hartley & Potts, 2014a: p. 126–7). Therefore, beyond the inspirational insights already illuminated on fansubbing, a more comprehensive and holistic investigation is still needed to account for the interaction between textual and extra-textual, internal and external elements, especially when situated in a specific tempo-spatial frame like China.

Accordingly, in this chapter, I address the following questions: how has RRY5 evolved and self-organised as a semiotic space of meaningfulness as a result of the interactions within its internal elements and with other spaces and systems including other fan communities, video websites and the state? And what cultural newness has been achieved throughout its process of identity evolution and new patterns of meaning-creation? In conceptual alignment with the previous two case studies, while consolidating and complementing the analysis through concepts from other disciplines, I continue to draw primarily on Yuri Lotman's conceptualisation of the semiosphere and his conceptual subcategories of boundary, centre and periphery, translation, and communication and auto-communication as analytic tools for

examining the dynamics of fansubbing and its implications for cultural newness in contemporary China.

## 6.2 Fansubbing Groups: A Semiosphere

In his seminal work *On the Semiosphere* (Lotman, 2005, p. 207), Yuri Lotman originally defined the term ‘semiosphere’ as ‘a specific sphere, possessing signs, which are assigned to the enclosed space. Only within such a space is it possible for communicative processes and the creation of new information to be realised’. The Chinese fansubbing culture, through providing Chinese-subtitled foreign films and television shows to native internet users, functions as a semiotic space of dialogues between and among domestic visual culture, foreign visual culture, fansubbers and viewers. It is a semiosphere nourished by the activities of meaning-creation enabled via interpretative interaction, which intersects with a larger semiosphere—the Chinese screen culture and with an even larger one—the world screen culture.

The emergence of fansubbing groups is a worldwide cultural phenomenon. Globally, the history of fansubbing can be traced back to the formation of the first fansubber group with the introduction of video cassette recorder in the US in 1970s. Around the mid-2000s, fansubbing became a world phenomenon largely owing to the connectivity and pervasiveness of the internet. The internet has extended the action radius of group-forming semiosis by connecting individuals and groups through a bond of common concerns and interests. From the perspective of cultural science, the internet has acted as an enabler of demic concentration. According to Hartley and Potts,

[d]eme theory does not see groups as simple aggregates or even ‘assemblages’, but as competitively-generated components in a larger system (the semiosphere or noosphere), in which the status of knowledge is radically altered by the position of the boundary between any ‘we’-group and its others or ‘they’-groups (Hartley & Potts, 2014a, p. 41).

The proliferation of multimedia and internet technologies has juxtaposed foreign visual products with domestic ones. Although the screen culture of China has been greatly diversified through imports of foreign visual products, especially of American films and television series, strict censorship and awkward professional translation are blamed for having transformed original works into something of ‘Weitong Jiaola’ (literally meaning, the product tastes as dry as a piece of wax ) and ‘Xuyao Naobu’ (literally meaning, the viewer

needs a lot of personal and idiosyncratic interpretation to make up what has been deleted from the original work by the censors) (Qi & He, 2014; ‘Operated on by CCTV, American TV dramas lost much of its appeal’, 2010). In 2005, CCTV8 began to broadcast the American sitcom *Everybody Loves Raymond*. But the affected language of the dubbed version was a major turn-off for Chinese viewers. Later, the broadcasts of two other American series, *Desperate Housewives* and *Grey’s Anatomy*, were also criticised by audiences as travesties (‘Those American TV dramas ruined by CCTV’, 2014, May 4).

Against this backdrop, groups have formed that together have taken the initiative to build up a semiotic space of visual culture that is meaningful to them. The space houses a collage of foreign visual products of different genres and different cultures, filtered, translated, archived and discussed, distinct from both the officially authorised space at home and the original visual culture abroad. In China, the earliest fansubbing activities were devoted to the sharing of Japanese anime,<sup>128</sup> and around 2002, fansubbing culture expanded to produce subtitled visual content of other types. Among members, those with an interest in American television shows quickly created a vibrant and competitive cultural space out of which arose four leading groups around 2006: YTET, YYeTs (the predecessor of RRYs), Fengruan and Ragbear. With new groups joining in, fansubbing practices provided a visual feast for millions of Chinese internet users who otherwise could only accept what the official channels offered them.

As the popularity of fansubbing increased, large groups began to compete for user attention. Each had its own distinctive characteristic to draw loyal fans. For example, YDY specialised in crime dramas, FR in medical dramas and YYeTs in science-fiction dramas and history dramas, and each had its own distinctive translation strategy, aesthetic style and community culture. The competition reached a height when the three major groups YDY, FR and YYeTs decided to invest their best resources into subtitled the second season of the American series *Prison Break* in August 2006. This series spread quickly via video sharing websites, social networking media such as Weibo, Wechat and Douban groups. Its popularity also pushed fansubbing groups into the spotlight, as mentioned above. Together with the popularity of other series like *Lost* and *24*, ‘pursue and talk about American TV series’ became a fashion among Chinese internet users, particularly young men and women. Its social effect was described as ‘American TV Series Syndrome’ (Yin, 2010). Those hit series became a topic

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<sup>128</sup> According to an interview with one of the founders of a Japanese animation done by 南方周末/Southern Weekly, the early fansubbing group is named ‘Planet’ which was devoted to translating the Japanese animation. The group was disbanded in 2000, but the interview didn’t provide its time of establishment. See [https://news.sina.com.cn/m/2011-11-18/184523489180\\_2.shtml](https://news.sina.com.cn/m/2011-11-18/184523489180_2.shtml)

to socialise with other people about in social settings both online and offline. A survey (Sui, 2016) revealed that it was through word of mouth that over 50% of the participants came into contact with American TV series for the first time. With fansubbing groups as the intermediaries between foreign and domestic screen culture, a distribution web has formed consisting of hundreds of file-sharing and social networking sites and millions of users to exponentially multiply the penetration of foreign visual products.

Some researchers in China have examined fansubbing as a discursive practice of identity construction and subcultural construction (Zhang & Cassany, 2017; Qin, 2015) On the one hand, fansubbing reflects the discursive presence of fansubbers in an attempt to resist the well-controlled and homogenous screen culture at the centre, which is stripped of critical voices and is often out of touch with social reality and people's daily lives. In the face of the state's censorship, various fansubbing groups have united into a large 'we' group and helped each other survive and develop. On the other hand, the development of fansubbing groups is also a process of identity-formation and evolution, thus an 'I' group distinguished from a 'he or they' group, which is further driven by both the state regulations and intense inter-group competition.

As an example, RRYS, like other groups, has a hybrid identity of national and international culture, family bonds and hierarchical ranks within the group and animosity and alliances with other groups. But unlike other groups, RRYS has attempted to expand its influence through any means, as a result of which some implicit norms have been broken. For instance, it earned the nickname 'Universal Group', intended to mean that it overestimated its capacity by believing it could subtitle all visual products of all types rather than staying within its compass of speciality. Its practice of releasing unrevised subtitles in order to grab viewers' attention was also disparaged by other groups. Nevertheless, in doing this, RRYS succeeded in hyping its products, further promoted by its bilingual subtitles and user-friendly video download format. By 2014, its 10th anniversary, the group had already become the largest fansubbing group in China. Its achievements included the recruitment of 10,000 translators from all corners of the world, and in addition to more than one hundred fully subtitled television shows, its website posted 70 subtitled shows in instalment for free download (Yeyuchentu, 2014).

Also in 2014, RRYS was shut down by the state due to its influence. Other groups then began to maintain a low profile by limiting the scale of their membership by adopting an invitation mechanism for registration or by only subtitling the video content that appealed to their tastes instead of competing to draw more visitors. In February 2015, two months after its shutdown, RRYS staged a comeback as co-operator of a newly registered internet

company named rrmj.TV, which aimed to provide the latest news and reviews of American movies and shows. In spite of its commercial transformation, RRYs continued to release textual renderings of video content on a forum named ZiMuZu.TV, but stopped the visual source download service. This business trial turned out to be a failure. In December 2016, RRYs posted a statement (YYeTs, 2017) on its microblog account, saying that it had already quitted the joint venture because of the differing values of its partners. It also announced that it had become a legal video website and a translation service provider and would continue to share its subtitle translations with its users for free.

With its new domain name (ZiMuZu.TV) and a different logo, its website presented an uplifting design (see Figures 6.1–6.2). Different from other fansubbing groups' websites, its new website harnessed the technological affordances in information aggregation and curation, becoming more than a space for sharing visual content. Its homepage comprises several subsections. On the top left is a ranking board that shows the most downloaded movies and shows in the past 24 hours. On the top right is a notice board of shows on air mostly in the US. In the centre are community-produced news and reviews of the hot movies and shows as well as the users' discussion section. The lower section displays information about the ratings and recommendations of some newly released films and shows. The design of the interface is user friendly and multifunctional. Its search function can help users find the resources and information they need quickly, and each user has a private space where he or she can store data, publish comments and receive emails from the platform. Besides the abundant information, the website also provides download links to the subtitled video products produced by third parties and itself.



Figure 6.1: Top section of RRYs website, accessed 3 September 2019



**Figure 6.2: Centre and lower sections of RRYS website, accessed 3 September 2019**

All this demonstrates that the initiative undertaken by RRYS has moved beyond the traditional fansubbing practice limited to producing and distributing subbed foreign content to fellow fans. Currently, RRYS is the most influential group in its field. When interviewed by Guiquan (Chen, 2016), an entertainment column affiliated with Tencent, a fansubber from another group referred to RRYS as the oligarch of the fansubbing world and predicted that it would become a monopoly and establish the code of practice for fansubbing culture. Based on the unexpected twists and turns in the development of fansubbing groups in the past decade, it is too early to tell whether this prediction will hold true. However, the aim of this research is not to make a fixed prediction about the future of a cultural space. Instead, it aims to map the dynamics of the meaning-making process of the space, which does not follow formal logic in the mathematical realm but is shaped by the conflict and negotiation of various agents within and without, as formulated by Lotman (2009, p. 133):

The dynamics of culture can be represented as neither an isolated immanent process nor the passive sphere of external influences. Both these tendencies are realised in conditions of mutual tension from which they cannot be abstracted without the distortion of their very essence.

Across his various works, Lotman elaborated that the smallest functioning mechanism of culture is not a single text or a single semiotic system but the semiosphere encapsulating ‘the semiotics of culture’, and the semiosphere preconditions the existence and functioning of languages and other semiotic systems. In the next section, I analyse how fansubbing culture

is positioned relative to Chinese screen culture and how it conflicts and negotiates with other semiotic spaces at different levels in the shared semiosphere, thereby being shaped by those relational interactions.

### 6.3 Fansubbing Groups as a Cultural Borderland

Situated at the periphery of cultural environments, the boundary is the area of ‘accelerated semiotic processes’ of cultural space, while the centre is the ‘sanctuary’ of culture (Lotman, 2005, p. 7–8). In China, the authorised providers are at the centre of the screen culture of films and television programs, including TV stations at various administrative levels, film theatres and video websites. In 2006, the sector of movies and television programs was listed as a strategic segment of the cultural industry of China in *The Outline of the National ‘11<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan’ Period Cultural Development Plan* (CPCCC, 2006). The outline stipulates that the production of visual products in China is expected to follow guidelines of ‘theoretical and ideological morality construction’ and contribute to ‘strengthening Marxist theory research and theoretical innovation’, the ‘flourishing and development of philosophy and social sciences [sic]’, ‘strengthening socialist ideology moral construction’ and ‘moving spiritual civilization construction activities forward’. Ambiguous as the outline sounds, it regards visual products as a political instrument to ‘construct a positive national image’ and ‘become part of the national strategy of going global’.

With reference to the preceding two case studies, we can discern a consistent attempt to self-describe the central culture on the level of the state, which centres on ‘socialist core values’, the ‘national image of China’ and the ‘construction of harmonious society’. For Lotman, the capacity of self-description is the most universal feature of any culture because without it, there could be no cultural identity. Visual culture is conceived as a culture of the state in China, which is controlled and processed through mechanisms of policy, ideology, marketing and mass media regulation. For example, to protect its weak screen culture, China has set up an import quota of foreign films to limit the competition from international rivals. In 2012, according to an agreement with the World Trade Organisation, the number was 34, valid for five years, and the mandated import quota for a TV station was 25% of the station’s total screening time on a given day (SARFT, 2004). In relation to content control, censorship is used by the authorities as an effective measure to ensure a healthy and green screen culture for domestic audiences and, at the same time, is criticised as another undermining factor restricting the development of screen culture in China. In 2016, RNN (Qiao, 2016) reported that Gao Mantang, a famous Chinese playwright, scathingly renounced domestic censorship and said it required approval from six different departments and institutions to shoot a

television series to tell the story of how an ordinary person turned into a successful businessman. Foreign visual products are not immune from the restrictions if they are targeted at the Chinese market. Two years ago, citing a Professor Jiang, an academic specialising in the Chinese film industry, the same newspaper ('Foreign Media', 2014) said that censorship made the process of obtaining the permission license for foreign films exhausting and depressing and many foreign films had to be pruned they were shown on screen.

Censorship is used by the authorities not only to assume a dominant position in the power discourse in the production and dissemination of visual cultural products in China, but also to standardise the narratives and language in the screen culture. As a result, there arise some untouchable taboo topics such as the Cultural Revolution of China (1966–1976), the Tian'anmen Movement (1989), social unfairness, and drugs. This has, to some extent, contributed to the formation of an organised Chinese audio-visual semiosphere, characterised by certainty and systematisation and lack of diversity and creativity (Lotman, 2009). From a cultural science perspective, this mechanism of protection and control cannot generate newness 'because it is no longer interacting with other elements of meaning in a semiosphere' (Potts & Hartley, 2014a, p. 51). Furthermore, the well-controlled visual culture is disjointed from social and cultural reality, and the standardisation is only a superficial phenomenon. At the periphery and in the black market, extra-cultural products started to infiltrate through.

In this cultural and political context, fansubbing groups are acting like 'outlaws' inhabiting the periphery, hardly bound by the state's goodwill and its regulations. Most fansubbers are proficient in at least one foreign language and well-educated, and some have had the experience of studying or living abroad. For RRYS, the ratio of its domestic members to overseas ones was 5:3 around 2010 ('Member of the CPPCC pays his respect to fansubbing groups', 2010). A majority of the former were engaged in a foreign-language-related job and lived in metropolises like Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou, and the latter were mainly spread over Canada, the US, Australia and Britain. Thus '[b]elonging simultaneously to the internal and external space' of visual culture, fansubbing groups have become the 'semiotic border' 'represented by the sum of bilingual translatable filters' (Lotman, 2005, p. 208–9).

Historically, this grassroots initiative has its precedents. For example, the American television series *Friends* was first imported by Hong Kong in 1994 and then transmitted to the coastal cities of the south of China before spreading to the rest of the mainland. In the 1990s, DVD became the medium to break the limitations on the importation of foreign audio



products and bypass censorship<sup>129</sup>. A large proportion of VCD/DVD audio-visual products either rented from stores or bought from vendors on the street were pirated and belonged to the black market. Although VCD/DVD was a niche media choice and the selling and transmission was mostly done through word of mouth, it nevertheless gave people more autonomy in deciding what to consume.

It is undeniable that even in the context of traditional media, such as television, radio or VCD/DVD, audiences were capable of using media and choosing content constructively to satisfy their interests instead of merely being passive recipients at the other end of the one-way communication model (McQuail, 1987; Wicks, 2000). The rise of fansubbing groups embodies the unprecedented level of autonomy exercised by audiences which, however, is manifested not only in consuming the media content of their choice but also in reproducing cultural products based on original visual works in a way meaningful to them. Subtitling has become a discursive means for them to construct their cultural identity and represent their daily experiences as a knowledge group bonded by taste, culture and expertise. As demonstrated in the previous section, fansubbing groups are not simple aggregates but ‘competitively-generated components’ in a semiosphere (Potts & Hartley, 2014a, p. 41).

Fansubbing culture as a whole is intersected by fansubbing groups of different specialties and interests. In most cases, it is the love for foreign visual content that prompts members to be a part of the initiative, as one fansubber (I7) said in my interview: ‘Many subtitling groups are formed on impulse. Some people get involved simply because of the thought “the film is so cool. Why nobody translates it. Well then let’s do it”’.<sup>130</sup> Most fansubbing groups have their narrowly defined interest, such as an individual movie star, a specific television program or a certain genre. For example, the Sheldon fansubbing group<sup>131</sup> does not miss anything related to Sheldon Cooper, one of the protagonists in the American show *The Big Bang Theory*, both on and off screen, ranging from the actor’s TV interview as a kid, his love stories to each of his birthdays. With tens of thousands of followers, the group’s Weibo overflows with comments showing empathy among community members who treat the star

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<sup>129</sup> From 1994 to 2003, China imported 48 films per year on average, which was a great stimulus for its domestic film market. However, during this period, the import and export of films was fully controlled by a state-owned enterprise, China Film Group Corporation, whose political orientation functioned as one layer of filters to decide on what imported films could be available to Chinese viewers. This monopolistic model of trade greatly constrained the creativity and development of the film culture in China. Refer to: Chen, Q. Y., & Huang, Y. L. (2018). Transformation into a butterfly: evolution and performance of film importation policies in 40 years since reform and opening up (羽化成蝶: 改革开放 40 年以来电影引进政策的演变与绩效). *Art Review (艺术评论)*. (6), 26-35.

<sup>130</sup> According to my interview.

<sup>131</sup> For the Weibo account of Sheldon fansubbing group, see [https://www.weibo.com/u/2663368513?is\\_hot=1](https://www.weibo.com/u/2663368513?is_hot=1)

as their old common friend. The subtitled version of *The Big Bang Theory* is also one of the signature products of RRYS, which has helped one of its translators become a big V.<sup>132</sup>

The impact of this series has spilled over onto various social media sites. A search on Zhihu on 23 August 2019 revealed that under the topic *The Big Bang Theory* there were 2,418 questions, 67,751 followers and 890 recommended answers.<sup>133</sup> The most popular answer, liked by more than 15,000 users, was a reply to the question, ‘what are those details in *The Big Bang Theory* which creep you out?’<sup>134</sup> The replier shared the behind-the-scenes stories about the whiteboard that has been an essential element in the development of the story. Other popular topics included the financial status of Sheldon’s family, the mother and son relationship, the personalities of the protagonists, and how to become a member of the studio audience. Some repliers devoted pages of writing illustrated with snapshots and video clips to expound upon an idea. They celebrated and appreciated but also critically analysed what had been presented in the series’ stories, discussing topics such as love, lifestyle, personality, friendship and happiness. To some extent, they had become a part of the story and the story a part of their own narratives in transmitting knowledge and understanding. Under the question, ‘what is the conceptual origin for the psychological test “fall in love in a couple of hours done by Sheldon and Penny in Episode 16 of Season 8?”’ The answer given by user 527haoxiaoguaishou (2015, July 12)<sup>135</sup> came out on top. He/she introduced the experiment on intimacy originated by Arthur Aron and explained the concept in simple language, which was, I believe, largely owing to his experience as a research assistant in a psychological test. At the front of the post, Sylvia stated, ‘this post has been reposted on Issue 13 (2015) of *Southern People Weekly* with permission. I have been contacted and paid in advance. Thanks for you letting me know, my Zhihu friends’. Therefore, for many viewers, the passion for a visual product is both the instigator of a treasure hunt for knowledge and meaning and a bridge to a new career. This is reminiscent of the model of blogs and Wikipedia, which features the production form of ‘produsage’, a role disruption of the traditional author and audience that facilitates the boundary-crossing of texts and dialogic interactions in unpredictable ways (Bruns, 2008, p. 1–7).

The ambition and influence of RRYS is evident in both its audience coverage and content resources. On its website, its Today’s Programs section lists the television series on air in the

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<sup>132</sup> A big V refers to a verified Weibo user who has more than 500,000 followers.

<sup>133</sup> See the screenshot (S6.3) for the Zhihu page.

<sup>134</sup> See the screenshot (S6.4) for part of the reply.

<sup>135</sup> 527haoxiaoguaishou. (2015, July 12). What is the source for the psychological experiment "Fall in love within hours' done by Sheldon and Penny in S08E16 of The Big Bang Theory (《生活大爆炸》S08E16 中 Sheldon 和 Penny 做的「几个小时内爱上彼此」的心理学实验来源自哪里?) [Zhihu answer]. Retrieved from <https://www.zhihu.com/question/28417861/answer/41786181>

US within in the past 24 hours. Those series are ready for download, with the popular ones already subtitled. In one sense, RRYs offers its users an even more flexible and convenient viewing experience than that of the American audiences themselves, since a variety of visual content is just few clicks away and can be viewed anytime and anywhere simply by downloading them to their PC or smart phones. Besides offering its users a near-real-time viewing experience, the platform has a rating mechanism where every registered user can rate new films or shows and have input into which visual products should be given priority in subtitling. Users can also write a persuasive evaluation preview to convince others to give something a high score. Its extensive remit indicates that RRYs aims not only to break the blockage but also to build up a free open sharing space where quality foreign content, especially American shows and movies, is available to every Chinese internet user, and every user has a right to choose what to watch. This aim is evident in its Chinese name, Renrenyingshi that means everyone's movies and television shows.

Many fansubbing groups in China have followers only in the thousands or hundreds, and their popularity is incomparable to that achieved by RRYs, whose followers number in the millions. However, only because of these hundreds of fansubbing groups of different sizes can Chinese viewers have the opportunity to enjoy the beauty of a colourful visual culture. This heterogeneity is a carnival where identity hybridity and change are the norm. For example, fansubbers follow the work ethic of free-market capitalism and at the same time commit themselves to public service. They repurpose entertainment products as educational materials. Fansubbing groups usually claim that their subtitled products are intended for language learning in order to avoid possible legal liability. Indeed, according to a survey (Sui, 2016, p. 11), more than 30% of the participant viewers revealed that they had used American TV shows as an alternative means to learn English and American culture. In addition, fansubbers are amateurs but have challenged and changed professional and industry practices, as elaborated in the next section.

At the same time, heterogeneity answers to the interests of diverse groups of viewers. Through mass circulation and networking sites, a fansubbing group (or subtitled visual product) becomes the communication site for unexpected groupings, which would otherwise be separated by either spatial-temporal interference or social divisions. In this sense, translation fosters communities, and connectivity is further facilitated by the network technologies that enable them to hear of, talk to and even meet their fellow members to actualise creativity. The fansubbing community is no longer 'imagined' and living with 'limited imagines' as portrayed by Benedict Anderson (2006), but constitutes a self-organising space of collective knowledge, one of plural centres of cyberspace, with its own

set of meaningful ideas, its own centre and boundary, which in turn are intersected by a range of boundaries of various kinds.

## 6.4 Interactions: Fansubbing Groups, Video Websites and the State

In the early years of 21st century, there was no copyright law covering online audio-visual content in China, and the grey zone overlooked by the law and the government's tolerance toward the production and dissemination of unauthorised cultural products turned the internet into a permeable borderland where foreign content was filtered and translated into China's visual culture. Fansubbing practice was integrated into the booming cultural space co-constituted by BitTorrent (BT) forums, video websites and various media platforms including forums and social networks where millions of Chinese viewers searched for free sources of films and television shows. In the early stages of their development, fansubbing groups and platforms for file sharing and downloading forged a symbiotic relationship to help each other grow. On the one hand, those platforms greatly increased fansubbing groups' influence and visibility. According to the statistics released by CNNIC ('CNNIC issues the 17th internet report', 2006) in 2006, the number of Chinese BT software users exceeded 30 million, accounting for 27.8% of the total netizens, and 76 million net users (37.1%) went online to watch or download television programs and films. By sharing their visual sources on these platforms, fansubbing groups quickly expanded their user bases. On the other hand, 'most private video websites were established at a time when altruistic Chinese subtitle groups were widespread and stable on BitTorrent (BT) forums', and fansubbing groups contributed most of the unauthorised foreign language visual content, which took up a great portion of the nearly 100% illegal uploads (Hu, 2014, p. 439). The symbiotic relationship between fansubbing groups and private video websites has accelerated the emergence of the craze for American drama in China.

The emergence of these video production and distribution spaces has greatly increased the structural irregularity of Chinese screen culture (the semiosphere), which was largely under the control of the state in the pre-digital age. However, the state soon updated its policies to regulate the digital content of cyberspace. As a result, the interdependent relationship was disrupted in 2009, when the state, citing the lack of license or copyright infringement, launched a harsh crackdown targeting 111 audio-visual platforms including RRYS, some video websites and the top three BitTorrent forums: BTChina ([www.btchina.net](http://www.btchina.net)), Yidianyuan ([www.YdyBt.Com](http://www.YdyBt.Com)) and Youyouniao ([www.uubird.cn](http://www.uubird.cn)). In response, RRYS

published an adjustment statement, stating that it would only provide textual subtitles and end the video downloading service. The only survivors of this attack were those large video websites that had obtained approval from the government and could afford to buy copyrighted programs. The heavy financial cost of purchasing copyrights pushed the remaining video websites toward commercialisation as soon as possible.

Those changes shaped the relationship between the websites and fansubbing groups. Although the websites were able to obtain the foreign copyrighted programs, they lacked the personnel and the time to produce the Chinese subtitles for a simulcast, which had become the viewing pattern for the Chinese online audience. Therefore, some video websites turned to fansubbing groups for cooperation, as confirmed by a staff member at Tudou, a leading video platform, in charge of American television series: ‘the domestic sub groups have formed a sophisticated production mechanism to produce quality subtitles at great speed. To cooperate with subgroups will give the viewers more pleasure and help the groups better developed (‘Video websites compete to import American TV shows’, 2011, Oct. 3). For some fansubbing groups, cooperating with video websites is the solution to the copyright issue and provides some financial return which, although not much, can usually cover most or all of their operating expenses. Thus, the underground interdependence of the past was turned into an open cooperation, which meant that fansubbing groups could be incorporated into the business sphere by some media companies.

However, the two sides are related in more than one way. The TopGear fansubbing group,<sup>136</sup> which focuses on subtitling *TopGear*, a BBC motoring series, is a good example. Begun by a small group of fans in 2010, by August 2019 the group had attracted the attention of more than one hundred thousand users. To some extent, its efforts have helped the mainstream video platforms realise the potential popularity of the program in China, and in 2013 and 2014, Youku and Iqiyi successively bought the copyright of the program. Later, the latter recruited the fansubbing group as its subtitling team. One of its members (Yin, 2016) remarked on Zhihu that the best end-result for the group was to help the video platforms and TV stations discover the business potential of the TV series, thereby leading to its legal introduction to domestic viewers. This illuminates how the foreign semiotic object is accepted by the target culture in the dialectic relationship between the periphery and the core. Likewise, it is fansubbing groups specialising in American TV series that have facilitated the popularity of American shows in China (Cao & Fu, 2010; Zhang, 2008). Subsequently, the popularity led the four leading video providers—Sohu, Youku, Iqiyi and

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<sup>136</sup> For the Weibo account of TopGear fansubbing group, see [https://www.weibo.com/313184442?is\\_all=1](https://www.weibo.com/313184442?is_all=1)

Tencent—to compete with each other to import hit American TV series in 2013, though this competition has cooled down significantly since the government banned several popular TV series including *The Big Bang Theory* and *The Good Wife* in 2014.

Nonetheless, business filtration is generally considered to go against the free-sharing spirit and corrode the spirit of the utopian community nurtured by fansubbing groups. Facing pushback from both domestic regulations and overseas copyright holders, many groups including those very popular ones like YDY, Ragbear and FR, rather than collaborating with large video websites, have adopted a membership invitation system to circumvent unwanted attention, which put them in an obscure but safe space to do what they love. A translator (Chen, 2016) at Rijing, a famous fansubbing group for Japanese visual movies and shows, revealed that the group had organised several donation activities among its group members to cover its operating expenses but turned down the money offered by its followers. Liangliang (Gu, 2018), one of the founders of RRYS, once stated that they worked in a state of idealism that was driven by their love of foreign visual content and any connection with commercial profit would sow distrust among its members. Liang admitted the group's cooperation with Sohu but emphasised that it was 'just a kind of help and symbolised nothing' and it was impossible for RRYS to be incorporated by commercial institutions.

While not incorporated, RRYS has been a subtitle provider for large domestic video websites including Sohu, Iqiyi, Tencent and Youku. It has relied on this service and ad revenue to sustain itself and develop. In addition to being a source of income, this collaboration has given RRYS more recognition and, to some extent, a legitimate status. In December 2016, RRYS posted a statement on its Weiblog account stating that it had become a legal video translation website, providing both translation services and free subtitles for its users. But, its relationships have been greatly shaped by the fluctuating social context of China. When it and Shooter, a high-speed P2P file sharing and downloading platform were shut down by the state in 2014, the media interpreted the event as 'the end of the fansubbing age', which pointed to an expanded market for authorised video websites. Given the influence of fansubbing groups, whose users number in the millions, and their efficiency and professionalism, this view is understandable. Nevertheless, another crucial player was left out in this consideration: the state. The state has always played a decisive role in the mediaspace of China and stood at the helm of marketisation. Different from a market economy where supply and demand direct the production of goods and services, 'marketization is a fluctuating state between open and market-oriented reforms and curbs on the same reforms to promote party aims' in China (Yeh & Davis, 2017). An example is the total ban of four American drama series, *The Big Bang Theory*, *The Practice*, *The Good Wife*

and *NCIS*, on all video streaming sites, even though the shows had been purchased. Officials cited violations of governmental policies without giving specifics, and speculation proliferated online. *The Global Times* indicated that this was part of the governmental action to protect weak visual products at home (Tan, 2015).

The 2014 *Notice Concerning Further Implementing Regulations on the Management of Online Foreign Film and Television Dramas* (SARFT, 2014) stipulates, 'Individual websites' annual import quantities of foreign films and television dramas may not exceed 30% of the quantity of domestically produced films and television dramas the said website purchased in the previous year'. Besides the quantity limitation, all the foreign visual products need a permit before being broadcast online, which means the end to near-real-time viewing. This certainly prompted video websites to adjust the provision of their visual products in relation to foreign films and TV dramas. For example, Souhu, which had American television dramas as a flagship product before 2014, began to decrease the proportion of such shows in its overall repertoire after the ban. Through the interstices between the state and private video suppliers, fansubbing groups filter in. Compared to video websites that must rely on the goodwill of the state and copyrighted programs to develop, fansubbing groups have the passion of their fans, support of their followers and technical affordances as their base. Their work is evaluated not by the economic value it will create but by the value in use and how it is recognised and loved by its users. This in turn gives them a dimension of freedom unbound by legal or financial constraints.

However, being in the interstice as an informal media economy does not mean that fansubbing is not subject to the state's supervision, only less so compared to private video websites. In 2009, the web server of RRY5 was confiscated by governmental regulators. But after a few days' hiatus, it came back stronger with upgraded internet servers and broadband thanks to donations from its users. The 2014 shutdown prompted it to move its web server abroad to Korea. On its website, it posted a notice stating that its website in China was closed, and it used its international website to continue providing subtitled foreign videos. Additionally, it stated that its website and all its resources were under the management of some of its overseas members and that its domestic team focused only on providing translation service. Around the same time, it tried to seek a legal status by joining a newly registered internet company named rrmj.tv. However, this business trial turned out to be a failure owing to disagreement among different parties on the product design and positioning strategies.

All these measures are evidence that RRY5 has made efforts to keep their work within a legal framework in China. On the other hand, it has also engaged in a guerrilla-style war

with the state to circumvent its constraints. Since its web servers were moved abroad, Chinese authorities will not be able to confiscate its servers and will not be able to close it down as before except by using the Firewall to block it. However, RRYS has had a countermeasure for even this possible blockage ready for its users. Its website hosted a running ad on a firewall-climbing software, saying ‘bypass the Firewall and have more excellent visual content’. In December 2016, RRYS replaced its old domain YYeTs.com with ZiMuZu.TV with a different logo. To date, with several new client terminal apps successfully developed, RRYS is able to reach more consumers than before and remains the most influential provider of subtitled Western visual content in China. Additionally, its open and free registration system means its resources are available to any internet user in the world. This is the ambition of RRYS, as indicated by its name ‘Renren Yingshi’ that means literally ‘everyone’s films and TV programs’.

It is clear that RRYS, like many other groups, has assumed a hybrid identity, indicating the permeability of disparate spaces such as amateur and professional, legal and non-legal, formal and informal economies and official cultural capital and subcultural capital. As demonstrated throughout this section, this is the result of the multiple and complicated relational interactions with outer spaces like the state and video websites as well as within fansubbing culture itself.

## 6.5 Sources of Cultural Newness

### 6.5.1 Discourse Construction

Translation is an intended act, whether for casual entertainment or political aspirations. The translator’s intention is inextricably bound up with the socio-cultural context where the act of translating takes place (Hatim & Mason, 2014). It is generally held that fansubbing was born out of fans’ discontent with the ‘culturally odourless’ (Iwabuchi, 2002, p. 27) translations of their beloved foreign audio-visual content provided on the market. In China’s context, the initiative was driven more directly by the tedious domestic screen culture than by appealing foreign visual products. To some extent, Barboza was correct in claiming that the reason why younger generations of Chinese people use the internet is ‘not because it offers a means of rebellion, but because it gives them a wide variety of social and entertainment options’ (Barboza, 2010, April 10). While domestic movies still linger at the edge of world screen culture, contemporary popular television themes have been mockingly summarised by Chinese internet users as ‘single-hand-tear-Japanese war’, ‘scheming court play’ and ‘goofs-filled-time-travel’. Branded together as ‘brain-impairing’ plays, these series also irked



People's Daily, which published articles to criticise those dramas for distorting history and demoralising human nature. People.cn (Wen, 2014) and People's Daily (Gao, 2017, Sept. 1), which are both state media outlets, made the same negative comment on the current situation of the country's film and television, respectively, describing them as glutted with products of similar themes and poor taste.

But the state media have used discretion in stopping short of pointing the finger at one principal culprit: the state. Visual culture in China, as discussed above, is a well-regulated space. By laying down restrictive laws and publicising guiding ideologies for the production of artworks, the state attempts to establish a set of meta-language for mainstream visual culture that functions to complete the system's structural construction (Lotman, 1990, pp. 124–40). As one of the fundamental organising mechanisms of culture, the prescriptive meta-language will lead to cultural rigidity by ostracising the elements of indeterminacy and disruption from within and precluding invasion from without. One typical example is the political catchphrase 'core values of socialism', which is generally characterised as promoting the ideologies and concepts of Marxism, patriotism, diligence, honesty, harmony and other 'positive energy'. Currently, this standpoint has penetrated every cultural space in China and become the universal criterion of evaluation. In the case of audio-visual culture, it is understood that those products that reflect the core values of socialism are good and healthy and will be given the green light. Feng Xiaogang ('Feng Xiaogang denounces the harsh censorship of SARTF', 2011), a famous film director, even lamented that the current censorship has harmed and shackled film production and 'being positive or negative' has become the only standard in determining the quality of a film. Therefore, through market protectionism and harsh censorship, the state has stifled the creativity and meaning-making that is driven by the interaction between incompatible and heterogeneous cultures, systems, ideas, perspectives, realities, imaginations, and genres.

The dialectic interaction of natural language and various forms of artificial language including the 'speech-about-speech' meta-language is a distinctive feature of Lotmanian cultural semiotics (Chang, 2009). The language of films, for example, clearly relies on everyday language and life. On the other hand, films could be a part of the everyday lived environment. Caged within the ideological and political corral, the producers of films and television programs in China have failed to inject 'life' into their products, thus losing appeal among prospective audiences ('Why there is no life in domestic TV shows?', 2018, Feb, 9). What happens, then, to imported foreign visual content? According to a news report of one entertainment website, the screen time of 22 films imported in 2016 was shortened by 237

minutes to eliminate their inappropriate content, including sex, violence and religion (Duyaojun, 2017).

At this point, returning to Barboza's 'social and entertainment options' argument, I believe the popularity of foreign visual products in China is relevant to broader and deeper social and cultural implications. First, visual products are not produced in a vacuum. Many researchers have examined how movies interact with social structures and regimes and how they reflect the reality of social life (Caldwell, 2008; Kaufman & Simonton, 2013). On the other hand, movies are recognised as important agents in imparting meaning and producing knowledge, thereby reinforcing or modifying a specific set of social norms or ideologies (Denzin, 1995; Kellner, 2003). Therefore, it stands to reason that films and television shows are means of transmedia discourse through which ideologies, narratives and knowledge are used, produced, interpreted or transmitted. Mediated through translation, these visual products cross the boundary into a foreign cultural space, as do the meaning and knowledge they carry.

Without a doubt, love for the content is the most powerful force behind the emergence of a variety of fansubbing groups. When a user in Zhihu asked whether fansubbers agreed with the media rhetoric that acclaimed them as the 'Chinese Prometheus' for 'break[ing] the cultural barriers' and 'promot[ing] the sharing of cultural resources', a majority of the 28 responders indicated that they did not have such grand ambitions and that what they did was simply to let more people share their favourite visual products.<sup>137</sup> Humble as they are, fansubbing groups in China have taken on some cultural and political implications they have not intended to. Fansubbing is an act of rebellion against the pre-existing frameworks, and it is a discursive act to build, defend and revel in their own carnival of visual culture unfettered by the political meta-language.

Unlike the mainstream culture dominated by all the 'positive' language and content, fansubbing groups as a whole ushered millions of Chinese people into a visual world of different genres and narratives where violence, drug, sex, dictatorship and other 'negative and dark' sides of life are, more often than not, the highlighted elements. When I went on RRYS on 5 September 2018,<sup>138</sup> on its 24-hour-most-downloaded list were the American TV series *Westworld* and *Silicon Valley* and the movies *Compulsion* and *Anon* to name but a few. *Westworld* is full of scenes of violence and lust; *Compulsion* gives many descriptions of homosexual behaviour; *Silicon Valley* banter about the trickery and deception of the

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<sup>137</sup> See <https://www.zhihu.com/question/46441345/answer/101816702>

<sup>138</sup> See the screenshot (S6.5) for the website page.

Chinese staff in stealing patented technology and *Anon* reflects on a dictatorial state's ubiquitous surveillance and supervision of its people. These products which are either too 'dark' or have political insinuations will find no formal way to enter the visual space in China without hefty cutting or revision. The application of the 'approved before release' regulation set for TV programs, online video and audio programs has put the visual space under a situation of harsher restrictions.

Facing a visual culture of constraint, fansubbing groups take a 'defective' stand, 'turning to "alien" discourses and importing discursive elements from them' in an effort to enrich the target discourse (Robyns, 1994, p. 420). Fansubbing is undoubtedly an effective discursive act of understanding foreign cultures. On the other hand, the understanding of 'their' cultures and discourses cannot be realised without putting them in relation to or in opposition to 'our' cultures and discourses, leading to the awareness, negotiation and challenging of 'our' set of common codes or norms. In one sense, through fansubbing, texts and discourses are engaged with by otherwise unrelated people who self-organise into the public rather than being defined by an external framework (Warner, 2002).

On 4 June 2018, RRYs put up a poster on its website to promote the homosexual-themed film *Love, Simon*.<sup>139</sup> This was clearly a 'defective' discursive practice, since in China homosexuality is still a taboo topic, largely considered a behaviour of psychological alienation (Li, 2014) and absent from the public discourse and screen space. This stance was officially made a hard rule in the 2016 general regulations (Xu, 2016, March 4) for the production of TV series, which states that all abnormal sex behaviours like homosexual relationships, incest, sexual violence and sexual abuse should not be described or displayed in TV series. Nevertheless, fansubbed visual content of this type opens or expands a dialogic space to not only understand alien discourses but revitalise, understand and even shape 'our' own.

Browsing through the five pages of comments in the discussion section of *Love, Simon*, I could see these communications happening between user participants. Several homosexual users were inspired by the film to share their experiences and opinions about how they interact with the social environment. Among them, one commenter said, 'I'm a gay. ... I was marginalised in my class, having no one to play with or talk to. ... To act like the normal people, I felt like doing improvisational performance every minute. Life was so tiring to me for those years. ... Now I won't allow others kidnap me morally any more... When we're

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<sup>139</sup> See the screenshot (S6.6) for the website page.

free, prejudice and hate won't be that fearful and they won't hurt us'.<sup>140</sup> The story he shared is by no means exceptional in light of the social context in China described above. Instead of standing out to reveal a true self like Simon in the film, the Chinese homosexual choose mostly to build up an inner world alienated from the hostile outside world. However, for some homosexual people the discursive space provided by subtitled visual content provides at least a space to tell their stories and interact with the outside world. For some users, this is a chance to gain some knowledge about gender.

When one user expressed his/her curiosity about the causes of homosexuality, he/she received replies from several other users including homosexual users. The atmosphere turned tense when the homosexual supporters and opponents confronted each other, with the former group believing that the homosexual should be equal with the heterosexual in every aspect of social life like marriage, employment and healthcare, while the latter group believed that homosexuals were people with perverted psychology who should remain as invisible as possible. One of the most popular comments<sup>141</sup> was targeted at the so-called neutral whose stance was largely represented by the slogan 'no support, no objection, no discrimination, no encouragement'. The comment stated, 'those who showed their stand on the homosexual as "no support, no objection, no discrimination, no encouragement" are the people who hold prejudice against the group, because the logic implied in the statement is "I discriminate against the homosexual and I know it is not sensible". So I have to find an excuse to shut your mouth"'. Hence, different voices were heard, some critical, in the interdiscursive communication, and participants were engaged in the processes of positioning themselves and others, negotiating and challenging meanings.

Since much of the hostility is the result of the ignorance of the public (Li & Wang, 1992), it is meaningful to use foreign films of this type as a discourse carrier to engage people of different views in a dialogue. Ironically, Chinese viewers have no legal access to a host of internationally recognised Chinese homosexual-themed films including *Farewell My Concubine*, *Lan Yu* and *Happy Together*, which have to be distributed, viewed and interpreted in the periphery and under the ground. Together these films constitute a discursive space, enabling the issue of sexual identity and orientation to become a negotiated social practice instead of predetermined positions or roles. In one sense, fansubbing for RRYS and other groups has gone beyond the pure act of seeking more entertainment options. Translators, as much as creative artists, writers, or politicians, participate in the powerful acts that create knowledge and shape social culture. Fansubbers' efforts to defend its cultural

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<sup>140</sup> See the screenshot (S6.7) for the quoted remark.

<sup>141</sup> See the screenshot (S6.8) for the quoted remark.

manifestation and resist the mono-cultural discourse are comparable to the media news translation researched by Pérez-González (2010, p.11), who argues that the ‘very selection of audiovisual simulacra represents an act of resistance against the dynamics of global audiovisual flows, in that the chosen messages would not have otherwise reached the activist’s target constituencies’. Originating as a practice of pursuing a common interest among a small group of friends, fansubbing has popularised foreign visual culture, especially that of America, among young Chinese internet users. For them, watching American movies and shows is no longer a mere act of fandom but a part of daily life that connects them to the outside world and helps them understand themselves. Those visual products become their language for presenting, expressing and interpreting the world they live in. In this sense, they function as a public space of discourse construction.

I would like to end this section by presenting remarks made by an anonymous Zhihu user (Anonymous, 2016, May 18) on the contribution of fansubbing groups:

I think fansubbing groups have made a greater contribution in breaking the cultural barriers than in facilitating cultural communications. In order to know other cultures and countries, it is not enough to depend on Baidupedia (a Chinese version of Wikipedia) and the news broadcasted on CCTVs. We need more perspectives and films and TV shows are the best sources with vivid examples. ...the more and the deeper we know the outside; the less we will get emotional and the more we will know ourselves and the others. Then we will have more autonomy and less likely be jerked around.

This resonates with the argument made by Casey Brienza (2016, pp. 29-30) that ‘any transnational transfer presupposes a separate space of social action...simultaneously overlapping with and distinct from its constituent national fields’.

## 6.5.2 A RRYS Model: ‘Three Bigs’

Fansubbing is by default transnational and transcultural, an act through which fansubbers strive to build a bridge between cultures. However, transcultural communication represents only one of its facets with a textual and cultural focus (Mattar, 2008; Yasser 2008; Hills 2005). The dynamic and evolving nature of this cultural phenomenon has inspired researchers to examine it through a prism of perceptions and perspectives. Among them, the characteristics of fansubbers’ unusual translation strategies and formal devices have attracted much academic attention (Caffrey, 2009; O’Hagan, 2008; Pérez-González, 2007a, 2007b). The impact of fansubbing practice on the global audio-visual market has been a research

focus for Dwyer (2012) and Gonzalez (2007), while scholars like Hills (2017) and Hu (2012) explore where it stands within the frame of a neoliberal context. Thus, fansubbing presents a generative space where the processes of meaning-creation operate in a set of interacting systems and cultures; it is not merely a practice to bridge two cultures. In this respect, RRYS offers an interesting example in that it has showcased the underlying potential of a knowledge group that continually adapts to new environments and is open to empowering transitions.

In the above sections, I have examined the semiosis of fansubbing particularly that of RRYS as a boundary between internal and external visual culture and also investigated its interactions with other systems, mainly the state and private video websites. In this section, I examine a RRYS model from the ‘Three Bigs’ approach as proposed by Hartley, Wen and Li (2015).

I see the ‘Three Bigs’ as a derivative concept of Hartley’s cultural science approach, which identifies demic concentration as the mechanism of cultural innovation. However, the ‘Three Bigs’ concept has gathered its own momentum by capturing the distributed creative potential at a scale of the universe—put simply, ‘creativity as a group-made common resource, belonging to whole populations: to everyone (not just owners of intellectual property); everywhere (not just in advanced countries); across all of their activities (not just in one sector of the formal economy)’ (2015:25). The concept is spelled out at three levels of scale and complexity:

*Macro*: population-wide abstractions (audiences, citizens, consumers, the public)

*Meso*: particular but still potentially vast organised and institutionalised groups such as social networks (Twitter, Facebook, YouTube)

*Micro*: various forms of self-organising group entities, such as firms or other enterprises, community associations, cultural institutions and ephemeral groups in digital culture: flash-mobs, crowd-sourcing networks, companies of players/performers, etc.

However, we should not think of these three levels as boundary delimitations. The ‘macro’ level is ‘not an abstract aggregate of smaller realities; it is a causal agent, in the form of complex systems and their interactions’. Accordingly, I have no intention of locating RRYS at a specific level but consider it a cross-level site of semiosis. This is one of its strongest sources of newness.

The Chinese Pinyin of RRYS is Renren Yingshi. The equivalent of ‘Renren’ is ‘Everyone’ and that of ‘Yingshi’ is ‘Films and TV programs’. As its name indicates, the group aims to provide visual entertainment content for everyone and also hopes every user makes his/her contribution in return. Its founders and organisers have iterated the idea of ‘opening to everyone’ as one of RRYS’ key operation strategies on various occasions. By August 2018, it has accumulated proximately 150 million users and more than 10,000 volunteer translators (Liu, 2018). By any standard, this is not a small population. This is a large group whose members are dispersed across the world but are connected via a common interest in films and television.

Besides giving no membership restrictions, RRYS has tried every means to ensure that everyone should have a right to enjoy a visual product to his/her taste. When compared with the professional practice of translation, fansubbing is distinguished by its formal innovation, collaborative methods, foreignisation and genre expertise, as summarised by Dwyer (2012). These traits usually make the fansubbed visual products more appealing to followers than the commercially released versions. This is also true of RRYS to a great extent. With a body of literature already existing on this topic, I will not elaborate on these traits specifically except for a few remarks on ‘foreignization’.

In 2015, many Chinese movie-goers were irritated by the poor translation of an American sci-fi film, *Avengers: Age of Ultron*. As a result, some internet users launched a verbal attack on its translator online, and at last the director of the Bayi Film Subbing Studio was forced to make a public apology to appease public anger (‘Poor translation of *Avengers: Age of Ultron*’, 2015, May 15). Beyond the mistranslations, the excessively domesticated language was the other main target of criticism. Compared with accuracy, the foreignising strategy has become much more of a focus for researchers and is believed to be the reason that fansubbing groups can produce a more authentic representation of foreign visual content. However, this has been questioned by Barra (2009), who pointed out based on the examination of two Italian fansubbing groups that not all fansubbing groups subscribed to the foreignising approach. This is also true of the practice of some fansubbing groups in China.

One the fansubbers I interviewed (I7)<sup>142</sup> specialised in aviation documentaries and said that they chose to produce easy-to-understand versions in order to appeal to the tastes and demands of their audiences, especially when they had more and more young followers. Considering the wide disparity between English and Chinese, the translator needed to

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<sup>142</sup> According to my interview.

domesticate elements of foreign syntax and culture in order to produce ‘easy-to-understand’ subtitles. The translation strategy of RRYS also leans towards domesticating textual practice. According to one of the group members (I8),<sup>143</sup> the group has laid down rules to keep translations plain and smooth, and the use of idiosyncratic expressions like internet catchwords is not allowed. This decision is reasonable since within a very limited time, the audiences’ subtitle reading must be synchronised with their viewing experience, so subtitles of plain and smooth language will facilitate their viewing experience; on the other hand, it avoids an excessively domesticating style caused by using Chinese proverbs, allusions and internet catchwords indiscriminately, which can only appeal to a small audience but irks the majority. A point to note is that in the case of fansubbing, the domestication is not achieved by disregarding the foreign cultural context. Instead, fansubbers resort to explanatory notes to help viewers reach a deep understanding of the original. Hence, the naturalisation adopted in fansubs is different from that used in official subtitles. The choice of the translation strategy reveals the group’s aim of attracting a mass audience instead of satisfying the desire of a small group of fans, and it is also indicative of its efforts to standardise its practices. However, relying on only translation style or quality is not enough to outdo other rival groups in an increasingly competitive environment, because overall there is not much difference in the translation quality or style among rival fansubbing groups, especially the leading ones.

Denisons (2011) has argued that fansubbers have resorted to transnational cult branding practices to attract fans, not unlike corporate brands. The production of fansubs is a process of group collaboration that requires not only language skills but also considerable technical skills and other intellectual expertise such as medical knowledge for subtitling a medical drama or science knowledge for subtitling a science-fiction drama. As most Chinese fansubbing groups have pushed the legal boundaries by providing the download sources of ‘ripped’ visual files embedded with subtitle files, they compete with each other to produce a quality viewing experience rather than merely a quality translation, with the aim of winning more users. In their practice, translation represents only one side of a fansubbing group’s performance. In the case of RRYS, it has relied on the high-quality video compression format HR-HDTV (high-resolution high-definition TV) and bilingual subtitles to reach the leading position in this field. In fact, besides HR-HDTV, the group provides visual sources in various formats including AVI, RMVB and MP4 to meet the demands of different users.

Its special subtitle effects are also a competitive advantage. It is the only group that persists in translating the non-diegetic content present in the original footage, such as shop names

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<sup>143</sup> According to my interview.



and public signs. The well-designed font style and colour of the subtitles enables them to blend in with the background so well that viewers hardly notice its intervention. The same effects are also seen in the presentation of the titles of visual products and fansubber names, which follow the style of the original cast. This detail has succeeded in impressing many users, as one popular post (DoBeDo, 2012, Feb. 22) on the Douban group ‘American TV Show Fans’ attested: ‘Recently their (RRYS) subtitles look more and more beautiful. What’s more, they do special effects!!! Special effects!!!! They have done it better than those TV stations’. Therefore, while translation is usually foregrounded in studies of fansubbing, fansubbing groups’ involvement in technological development is a crucial constitutive element of the evolving fansubbing culture as a whole. As demonstrated above, RRYS is a telling example in this respect, and the list of its innovations could go on. Beginning in 2017, RRYS has developed and released a series of apps to enable its users to enjoy its visual products on various terminal platforms such as iOS, Mac OS, Android TV, and Android mobile, which has, in return, greatly expanded its accessibility. In 2018, it developed a translation app ‘Renren Yishijie’, an attempt to converge AI technology and the practice of traditional translation. It is no surprise that grouping becomes the vehicle for releasing the creative potential of fansubbers, and interaction centring on a common interest provides a performance stage for otherwise latent skills and capacities, which in turn draws users with different demands. All these factors indicate that RRYS is a semiotic space of boundary crossing where fans take on the role of translators, consumers that of producers, and amateurs that of expert content creators. Boundary repositioning is key to RRYS’s rapid growth.

The above examination demonstrates how RRYS has, over the past quarter-century, developed its reputational cultural capital, which is more than ‘brand-like’ (Denison, 2011). In effect, with its own logo and distinctive products, it has become a brand widely recognised among the viewers of English-language visual content. Responding critically to the binary opposition between formal and informal economies, Lobato et al. (2012, p. 903) described how the seemingly informal fansubbers display the structural criteria of a formal economy. As discussed above, the professional and branding practice conducted by the group in the stages of production, distribution and promotion calls into question the scholarly claims about UGC’s antipathy to professionalism and its disruptive nature. In addition, monetisation is another of its cross-boundary features in need of further exploration.

Gift culture is to some extent embedded in the narratives scholars have created for the fandom world. According to Hellekson, for example, ‘online media fandom is a gift culture in the symbolic realm in which fan gift exchange is performed in complex, even

exclusionary symbolic ways that create a stable nexus of giving, receiving, and reciprocity... ’ (Hellekson 2009, p. 114). The ‘gift’ narrative categorises fandom as a not-for-profit culture based on a dyadic exchange relationship and reciprocity with a focus on interest cultivation. Hence, Hills (2017, p. 84) argues that fansubbing is ‘typically legitimated via discourses of the “gift economy”’, which is corroborated by the fact that most fansubbing groups include a statement like ‘only for communication and educational purpose, any commercial usage prohibited’ in the headnotes of fan creations. However, the ‘gift versus commercial’ narrative has been questioned in scholarship as instances of fandom-related monetisation are recognised (Annett, 2014; Woodhouse, 2018). In this aspect, RRYYS presents an interesting case—how does the group cross the gift and commercial boundary and in turn create more space for meaning-making in the context of China?

The ‘not for profit’ code applied to fansubbing has caused many fansubbing groups to avoid all money-collecting activities, even at the expense of their survival and development. As mentioned above, the Rijing fansubbing group declined to accept its fans’ donations even when lack of money for maintenance pushed it to the brink of closure. For RRYYS, however, collecting donations has been a strategic practice of development. After its servers were confiscated by the authorities in 2010, it received more than 80,000 RMB (about 12,516 USD) within one week, which not only enabled it to cover the server rental for one year but also provided enough funds to develop two types of subtitle-based educational software.<sup>144</sup>

In 2016, RRYYS launched another donation-soliciting campaign to crowdfund an English-Chinese dictionary app, and in one month it raised 803,433 RMB (about 125,888 USD), exceeding its target of 800,000 RMB by 1%.<sup>145</sup> This initiative is an attempt to help its fans learn English in the vivid audio-visual situations provided by scenes from American television shows, thereby creating more practical value for the subtitles the group has accumulated over time. The latest call for donations went out in March 2018, when RRYYS stated on its microblog that it needed more funds to upgrade the capacity of its broadband and carry out technological development because the number of its users was increasing ‘with an alarming speed’ at various client terminals.<sup>146</sup> When accessed in May 2018, its website showed it had developed seven versions of client apps compatible with various platforms including iOS, Android, Windows, Mac OS, and Smart TVs. All of these services are available to users at no charge. Hellekson (2015, p. 126) supports fandom groups’

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<sup>144</sup> See the screenshot (S6.9) for the donation information.

<sup>145</sup> See the screenshot (S6.10) for the donation information.

<sup>146</sup> See the screenshot (S6.11) for the donation information.

attempts to profit under certain circumstances: ‘...such attempts must be initiated by and embedded within the fandom in question. Such profiting must be a form of making use of; it must grow out of the fandom’s community ... It cannot be unilaterally imposed, and proposed constructions...’ Clearly the donation-gathering activities of RRYS comply with all these conditions except that they are not directly for the pursuit of profits.

Regarding commercialisation, RRYS has offered another perspective on its commercial activities. Its ‘About RRYS’ statement<sup>147</sup> states that ‘with the growth of RRYS ... donation alone cannot provide enough funds to cover the expenditures incurred by renting servers and broadband service. In 2010, several core members agreed on several commercial initiatives including providing translation services and accepting advertisements. Profit-making is not what we want, but only with enough funds can the group have a better development’. Put simply, business and money do not destroy fan gifting culture but instead fertilise it. In fact, the convergence of fan gifting and commercial activity has been the practice for RRYS for quite a while. For example, many fansubbers play across-group roles. While some community translators do translation for video websites, they are also core members of the fansubbing community. In addition, RRYS has been carrying out both fan gifting and commercial activities on the same platforms, including its website and its various client apps. Here we see how synergy exists between the ‘gift’ and ‘commercial’ culture in the model of RRYS and how both sides have facilitated each other’s growth. On the one hand, gift culture endows RRYS with the resources it requires, including genre expertise, production mechanisms and personal resources, to enter the commercial space; on the other hand, entrance into the commercial space allows prosumer fans to engage with a world larger than the fansubbing community, which has enabled RRYS not only to play a larger role in screen culture but also to improve its adaptability in the complex and shifting context of China.

There is no doubt that being open to various commercial opportunities has brought RRYS into dialogues and interactions with other parties, thus redrawing the boundaries of its knowledge space. Its collaboration with video platforms has to some extent legalised its practice and expanded its space of semiosis. As mentioned above, up to 2018, it has produced about 90% of the American television series and 100% of the Japanese television series broadcast in China. Its translation app described above is also an outcome of cooperation with a translation company. Apparently, the differences among different parties make the idea of transferability more valuable and creativity more sustainable. This speaks to not only the intersection of fan gifting and commercial activity and their mutual

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<sup>147</sup> About RRYS. (2018). [Webpage]. May 10. Public Notice Retrieved from <http://www.zmz2019.com/announcement/90>

promotion, but also once again to the perception that demic concentration is the mechanism of cultural dynamics on the scale of everyone, everywhere and across a range of activities (both cultural and economic).

## 6.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, rather than merely conceiving of fansubbing as a practice of cultural mediation, I position it as a semiosphere of visual culture. In this way, I have been able to capture its dynamics as its relationships with other systems such as the state and private video websites have changed and its newness as a result of evolving group formation. Using RRYS as a typical case, I have illustrated how it has taken up the challenge of promoting dialogue and has contributed to creativity creation by crossing boundaries between Chinese visual culture and foreign visual culture, formal and informal economy and amateurism and professionalism. As in the previous two case studies, the examination of RRYS reveals how ordinary people empowered by digital technologies can act as an intelligent collective and expand the visual semiosis to the population. As a great majority of its users are well-educated young people, their choices and preferences have had their effects on the development of popular culture in China and ‘changed new dialectical discourse between media users and the government-regulated broadcasting system’ (Kung, 2016, p. 264; cf. Akhavan-Majid, 2004). On the other hand, for its users, RRYS has empowered them by involving them in a public discourse through watching, discussing and writing and thinking about a film or a television show, and thus ‘in the being of the sovereign’ (Warner, 2002, p. 52). Users are reached and welcomed into the fold as potential contributors of translation, technologic support, financial support, reviews, comments and business mentoring. The example of RRYS is a vivid illustration of the point that the sources of cultural newness lie in the ‘Three Bigs’. As the current study is ending, RRYS has been bracing itself for something even ‘bigger’: blockchain. According to its proposal on blockchain, it will launch its content value network (CVN) in the third quarter of 2019, then becoming the first DAPP (decentralised application) in the CNVT blockchain in China (Huang, 2018). It aims to be a population-wide platform of content creation, evaluation, trading and dissemination not only of films and television series but also of short videos, books, novels, articles, sentences, music and every other type of content imaginable. Optimistically, blockchain may not only be an effective strategy for RRYS to break through the copyright and financial bottleneck, but it may also represent ‘new social forms of organisation and cooperation, new types of transactions and sources of value and ways of living’, becoming ‘arguably the single most significant new creative industry sector to emerge in the past two decades’ (Potts & Hartley, 2018).

# Chapter 7. Inter-Case Analysis: Conclusions and Implications

## 7.1 Introduction

This thesis has explored the evolution of Chinese online translation communities as a social form of knowledge group (demic concentration) and their potential to bring about cultural newness. User-generated translation as a user-participatory translation practice has attracted the attention of scholars in the field of translation studies, but their foci have primarily been on fansubbing, translation and translators while excluding other contextual factors like community moderators, users, industrial players and socio-cultural environment. In addition, the activities and initiatives taking place in non-Western countries have largely been ignored. Given this situation, Chinese online translation communities as a whole offer a very interesting case to examine, especially when the media landscape in China is shaped by a set of conflicting yet complementary determinants: authoritarian government yet open market capitalism, accessible global media content yet censorship, internet blockage yet tech-savvy net users. These situations have created a research setting where the online translation community functions not only as a type of community of practice that has transformed the traditional practice of translation per se, but also as a disguised form of public discourse that embodies a new form of citizenship and collective action in the digital age of Web 2.0.

## 7.2 Key Findings

Chapter 1 of this thesis presented a brief overview of Chinese online translation communities and posed an overarching question: How have Chinese online translation communities evolved, and how have they contributed to the emergence of cultural ‘newness’ in the digital context of contemporary China? To address this question, three sub-questions were developed. This section presents the findings to these questions based on a comparative analysis of the case studies.

**RQ1: How have Chinese online translation communities emerged and fitted into the contemporary Chinese context as user-generative and participatory communities of meaning-making, especially in relation to the tightening regulations governing the internet in China?**

The three cases analysed above are part of the shifting media culture where grassroots users (citizens) have become important players in the production and creativity of cultural content and commodities distinct from privileged experts and professionals (Hartley, 2004). This civic culture is brought about by the ‘increased networking and interdependence of the world’ (Tymoczko 2009, p. 401). Technological affordances have enabled myriad acts of semiotic copying and translation carried out by individuals and groups acting on their own with their own special contextualised knowledge and in competition with other such individuals and groups. On the other hand, digital technologies have offered new ways to recognise the capacity of the whole population as active citizens who can become involved in a wider scope of civic culture, as illustrated by Dahlgren’s (2003; 2009) multidimensional mode of civic culture components and Hartley’s silly citizenship<sup>148</sup> (Hartley, 2013). This approach calls for a ‘cultural turn’ to understand the discursive practices of civic agency deployed by internet users, which can be seen in acts of meaning-making, dialogic interactions and identity-formation particularly with regard to public life. In this sense, those rationalist and formalist concepts with a focus on politically-charged activism have only limited utility for understanding people’s engagement in public spheres, especially in the fluid and evolving cultural context of digitalisation.

## 7.2.1 Externalism and Authenticity

A historical perspective makes it clear that for the Chinese people translation has surpassed its interlingual and intercultural level from the start and evolved as both a personal and collective act of identity-construction, frequently traversed by politics. The cases under study are no exception. The direct control of the Chinese government in the production and dissemination of cultural and media products has given rise to a highly structured communication model where the audience or readers are treated as a group of homogenous and passive receivers. Consequently, unsatisfied with the texts provided by the central mediasphere, internet users have organised themselves into collaborative groups and have acted as self-appointed commissioners to use translation as a means of meaning-making and discourse-construction. What follows is a comparison of the three case-study communities’ engagement in semiotic construction of a meaningful cultural space and the consequent impacts on the communities and the social culture as a whole.

Although we are far from living in a digital utopia, the internet has manifested itself as ‘a democratisation of technology’ (Burgess, 2006), which empowers users to emancipate

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<sup>148</sup> Silly citizenship represents a type of DIY citizenship where people produce their own content for fun.

themselves from the semiotic constraints imposed by a central culture. To create a dialogic space with ‘they’ cultures and diversify and change the dominant culture at home is the common objective of the initiatives across the three communities in this study.

Longtengwang sets itself apart from the mainstream world media by focusing on the voices and opinions of ordinary people from all over the world and by facilitating cross-cultural dialogues between its users and internet users from foreign cultures. In its early stages, Yeeyan focused on creating a Chinese space of foreign mainstream media including *The Guardian* and *The Economist*, or in its words, ‘opening the door to foreign media’. In the case of RRYS, one of its co-founders, Liangliang (Ying Weilai, 2010, March 28), even placed domestic television series and foreign ones, especially American, at opposite ends of a quality spectrum: one is ‘(plots) full of loopholes’, ‘lack of quality programs’; the other is ‘(plots) sensational’, ‘successful’. According to him, fansubbing groups are motivated in part by the expectation that ‘domestic producers and playwrights will draw on others’ strong points, learn from the production of American TV programs and in so doing help the TV series of China enter the world stage’.

To realise their objectives, one core concern in these groups’ discursive practices is authenticity, that is, to help internet users access pure foreign cultures immune from the ideological interference of the authorities and the abusive treatment of translators. To transfer authentic content from foreign media sources, the three communities have adopted different operation strategies. Longtengwang has set up regulations to prevent translators from selecting source material based on personal preference. Yeeyan in its early days (before the shutdown in 2009) adopted a ‘publishing-before-proofreading’ approach in order to encourage translators to contribute more content, which then was rated through the number of user views and comments. In respect to authenticity, RRYS emphasises the importance of maintaining the original flavour or otherness of the translated materials and asks its translators not to use classical Chinese and network buzzwords. In addition, all three communities have utilised the hypertextual context to realise a cross-referencing evaluation system that anyone can contribute to.

Another aspect of authenticity is to produce correct translations. Longtengwang mobilises its translators to mutually proofread each other’s translations before handing them in for a final check by the editors of the platform. Yeeyan adopted the footnoting function to encourage translators to proofread and comment on each other’s work. By comparison, RRYS enacted a higher entrance threshold from the very beginning. Translator applicants must pass a proficiency test to join the group, and only after an internship of two weeks to one month can

they take part in producing subtitles, which are not released until senior fansubbers have proofread them three to four times.

However, the issue of objectivity and authenticity is far more complicated and traverses the whole process of translation-mediated communication. It could become a dominant issue at any point. In the case of Longtengwang, the translator's choice of the original text has been contended and questioned by community users. Longtengwang focuses on translating China-related Wangtie posts on popular foreign social forums whose informal and impromptu style of interaction helps to create an atmosphere of immediacy. As a result, the community users easily become embroiled in the conversations rather than being bystanders, which sometimes backfires on the translator. As mentioned in Section 4.5, a Longtengwang translator specialising in translating content from Japanese social forums was once accused of only translating those to he preferred instead of following the popularity- or timeline-based criteria acknowledged by the community. This event eventually involved many people in the community, including moderators, translators and users, and later developed into a discussion on the pervasiveness of negative sentiments or attitudes towards China-related topics among Japanese internet users and the reasons behind these sentiments. This incident has taken its toll on the community, with several translators specialising in Japanese and Chinese translation leaving and others becoming more sensitive to the decision of what to translate. One senior translator (Handengduyeren, 2016) believed this event marked a transition point signalling the rise of nationalism on the platform.

By contrast, translators on Yeeyan are seldom confronted with this sort of challenge, but some of its users are concerned about the objectivity of the source media chosen by the translator. For example, commenting on an article published by *The Guardian* about how a North Korean defector escaped from a slavery camp, a user<sup>149</sup> commented that he questioned the objectivity of the source since according to him, westerners are highly skilled at fabricating stories and they always held stereotypes when looking at North Korea or China. His comment was confronted with strong rebuttals: one<sup>150</sup> defended the credibility of the article by referring to the comparative transparency of the media in the West; another accused him of demeaning the humanity of the article for some disguised motives.

In the case of RRY5, it is acclaimed as a provider of an authentic viewing experience in contrast to the castrated and censored offerings of the authorised media institutions (Gao, 2014). In addition to providing full-length versions of foreign audio-visual works, the

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<sup>149</sup> See the screenshot (S6.12) for the quoted remark.

<sup>150</sup> See the screenshots (S6.13 & S6.14) for the quoted remarks.



fansubbing group strives to maintain the original flavour by using annotations and maintaining the original allegorical expressions to render culturally or ideologically-loaded originals, in contrast to the over-domesticating approach adopted in the institutional practice that aims to ‘let the foreigners speak Chinese’.

Thus, we face an even trickier situation when considering the situational variables effective during different stages of translation. The digital context of hypertext not only makes Lawrence Venuti’s call for the translator’s visibility a reality, but also empowers readers to flaunt the signs of participation in the creation of meaning (Littau, 1997). That is to say, translation becomes a collaborative reframing process not only between the original text and the translator, but also between and among the original text (the foreign culture), the translated text (the native culture), translators and readers. In this sense, it is reasonable to state that a ‘good’ translation should aim at meeting specific communal needs. This line of reasoning is actually in accord with the objectives of online translation initiatives: the production of meaningful content and the construction of communities. To the communities, ‘[t]he artisan quality, whiff of the clandestine, social interaction, and vague connotation of resistance were as much a part of the signifying experience as the content itself’ (Dwyer & Uricaru, 2009, p. 49). Across the three cases, we see overlap and parallels in the roles of online translation communities where net users coalesce into knowledge groups of collective intelligence and exert their civic agency with a view to constructing a discursive space that is authentic and meaningful to them.

## 7.2.2 Free Culture or Permission Culture

The popular American copyright commentator Lawrence Lessig (2003, p. 30) identifies a dichotomous opposition of ‘free culture’ versus ‘permission culture’: a free culture supports creators or innovators by either granting them intellectual property rights or limiting the constraint of intellectual property rights on follow-on creative activities; a permission culture is controlled by gatekeepers who are induced by interest groups to curb the freedom of the public to use previously published content creatively. Generally speaking, the bottom-up initiatives undertaken by the users-cum-translators under study here have reflected the spirit of a free culture. They feel free to expand on published content and use it as a way to express their ideas and opinions on a wide range of topics and issues or to create their own space of interest. However, this activity does not come without a cost, since translators always feel the issue of intellectual property rights like the sword of Damocles hanging over their head.

An important point to note is that the communities examined in this project are not blatant perpetrators of piracy. The source materials for Longtengwang come mainly from popular open social websites such as Quora, 2ch of Japan and Yahoo, and the translator is asked to provide the link to the original content as required by most open social platforms when non-commercial copying and reproduction occurs. Yeeyan was aware of the copyright issue regarding publishing user-produced translations in its early stages. To mitigate joint liabilities incurred from possible copyright violation by some translators, it stated in its terms on copyright that if any translation was published against the will of the original author or copyright owner, Yeeyan would delete it immediately after being notified of such an objection. Its partnership with *The Guardian* in 2009 was once a step forward towards solving the issue. Presently, it focuses on translating works licensed under Creative Commons licenses that allow them to redistribute the translated versions of foreign works without concerns of copyright infringement.

For subtitling groups in China, by contrast, piracy has increasingly become an issue of concern because their practice has the potential to impair others' economic interests. With all their good faith and motivations, their acts constitute a breach of intellectual property law under both domestic and international legal regimes. On this issue, fansubbers usually take a defensive stance. Their argument is that in most cases their acts have not damaged the copyright owner's interest since the subtitled video works have not been officially released in China due either to the regional marketing policies of global media companies or the restrictions imposed by the Chinese government through censorship or import quotas (Meng & Wu, 2013, p. 130). In addition, fansubbers have developed a community ethos that most groups abide by. One practice is to superimpose a notice on the top of the screen indicating its non-commercial use and a 'Cease Distribution When Licensed' policy. In the early days, the interested media corporations were rather tolerant towards this kind of reproduction and dissemination. But because the audience base of foreign video works is expanding and concomitantly Chinese online platforms such as Tencent, Sohu and Iqiyi have started to procure television programs and films from abroad to attract viewers, the market potential in China is spurring foreign media suppliers to take action against piracy conducted or facilitated by subtitle groups and Chinese file-sharing platforms. In 2014, Xunlei, the most popular software-download provider in China, and RRYS were targeted by the Motion Picture Association of America, with Xunlei being closed down by the Chinese authorities and RRYS being asked to delete all unauthorised files.

The long arm of intellectual property law has been blamed by some academics for undermining the generative potential of a free culture (Baca, 2006; Boldrin & Levine, 2008).

Indeed, the Chinese authorities have always cited copyright violation as a handy excuse in cracking down on civic journalism platforms and fansubbing activities. However, the extent of the effect of copyright enforcement varies with different political contexts. In the case of China, the issue of copyright is often overshadowed by another interlinking situational variable—censorship—as demonstrated throughout this thesis. However, since there are no explicit definitions or guidelines regarding specific content targeted by censorship, the execution of Chinese censorship is ‘contextual, individualized, and continuously negotiable rather than absolute or binding’ (Calkins, 1998, pp. 242–3). As mentioned in Chapter 6, in 2014 the government censor asked that four American television dramas be removed from all domestic private video platforms without providing any reason, despite the fact that these platforms had a license to stream the shows online. When the platforms demanded a proper explanation, the authority (‘Response from SARFT’, 2014) informed them that ‘the viewing service cannot be provided due to some relevant governmental policy’, which left viewers even more bewildered. Therefore, even the legal framework surrounding copyright protection rests on shaky foundations. Yeeyan underwent a similar situation in November 2010 and was forced to cease its partnership with *The Guardian*. In other words, compared to censorship, copyright plays only an ancillary role in the government’s endeavours to control the digital space.

In order to survive under such capricious circumstances, most websites and social networking platforms have begun to adopt a mechanism of self-censorship, thus a new dynamic relationship of power arises between the ruler and the ruled (Tong, 2009). In the case of Yeeyan, after the closure in 2010 it shifted its core content production from foreign mainstream news to articles on technology and lifestyle, and in addition it changed its operational model from publication-before-approval to preapproval-before-publication. This change aroused a pessimistic sentiment in the community, as echoed by one senior media professional Anti (Xinyu, 2009), who predicted that the change would make Yeeyan lose the meaning and value originally attached to it. Nevertheless, the readjusted Yeeyan soon drew its users back. One reason was that it was still devoted to providing a CoP environment for its community translators, whose contributions were in turn a magnet for users. The other reason was that translation in this community still functioned as a medium of disguised discursive power. On 25 June 2010, one translator translated an article from *The Guardian* titled ‘China’s Conscience’ and posted it on the community website. Within half year, it had attracted more than 30,000 views and 161 comments.<sup>151</sup> In the comment section, users carried out a lively discussion on Lu Xun and his fight for democracy in China. In response

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<sup>151</sup> See the screenshot (S6.15) for the webpage. For the original article, see <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/jun/12/rereading-julia-lovell-lu-xun>

to the article's popularity, one commenter said, 'this seems to be the most commented article in this community. This means we are interested in politics. Be careful! Otherwise it will get censored!'<sup>152</sup> Another commenter expressed his shock and surprise that Yeeyan had greatly compromised itself for the sake of its users and believed this article would attract censors' attention sooner or later.<sup>153</sup> To this, another user reminded others of the role played by translation, saying, 'it is only because these words were spoken by foreigners first that they haven't been censored'.<sup>154</sup> Therefore, even in the restrictive context, the community still managed to create a translation-mediated discursive space for its users.

In the case of Longtengwang, while it still aims to adhere to its original mission of helping Chinese internet users hear the voices of ordinary people from other cultures, self-censorship has changed its previous open publication structure. The moderators check the title and content of every article awaiting publication and to ensure that the authorities will not be offended. From a glance at the first few topics listed on 19 July 2018, one can infer that the platform tried to present what the authorities would be pleased to see or what would not catch their attention: 'Attempts to isolate China from world trade system "will not work"'; 'Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi was murdered in the consulate'; 'China wins the first round in US-China trade war'; 'Why Does China produce military weapons and India does not?'. This strategy has somewhat encouraged the growth of nationalist sentiment on the website. Some of its users deplored the sense that the dialogic space they had cherished so much had been corrupted by conformity and homogeneity. In response to this reaction, one of the senior moderators (Handengduyeren, 2016) said, 'if you feel disappointed with the comments published on Longtengwang, the only solution is to let your rational opinions overshadow those impetuous ones. Given its web server still being in China, Longtengwang has not much freedom and mostly it is dancing with shackles. Everyone understands the situation if he wants to'.

What good then is this shackled dance? For a start, when something is rare, it becomes precious. This is true of Longtengwang. With the shutdown of other civic media platforms, it is a valuable public space of dialogue for its tens of thousands of users. This is why whenever a political debate runs hot, some users become worried this will attract unwelcome attention from censors and a common warning is voiced along the lines of 'just keep fighting. You will feel happy when it gets the website closed'. Nevertheless, the value of a dialogue lies in its nature as evolving and creative rather than fixed and prescriptive. A

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<sup>152</sup> See the screenshot (S6.16) for the quoted remark.

<sup>153</sup> See the screenshot (S6.17) for the quoted remark.

<sup>154</sup> See the screenshot (S6.18) for the quoted remark.

dialogue is also a process of activating a multiplicity of communications among people of different social groups, cultural backgrounds, political affiliations, age groups, and so on. The participation of the multitudinous voices that is called heteroglossia by Bakhtin (1981, p. 270) means that an utterance cannot be framed by a single voice or language but is shaped by the respective ‘melody’ sung by each voice in the context of the utterance. Along this line of reasoning, Lotman’s idea (cited in Żyłko, 2015, p. 36) of the generative potential of a text offers an inspiring perspective. He holds that the meaning-making potential of a text is activated through its interaction with the reader who has his own system of codes. The codes of the text and of its reader are only partially equivalent, and this gives rise to what Lotman calls ‘a non-trivial shift of meaning in the process of the text passing from the sender to the receiver’. Out of the interaction, new meanings or new texts are created. The Longtengwang platform abounds with exemplary cases of this type.

For instance, on 2 July 2013, a user posted a commentary on the book *A Global History: From Prehistory to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* by L.S. Stavrianos,<sup>155</sup> titled ‘How China was discriminately labelled as a nation of feudal autocracy-the westerners should be evicted from the altar in the Chinese mind’.<sup>156</sup> In the commentary, the user quoted several authoritative experts to argue that the feudal regime in China ended with the collapse of the Qin dynasty (221–206 BCE), which marks a wide disparity with Stavrianos’ timeline on which feudalism continues through the Qing Dynasty (1644–1912). By May 2016, this commentary had scored more than 120,000 page view hits and triggered a debate on the nature of the regime of contemporary China. There arose different voices, some of which would not be pleasant to the ears of the authorities. One commenter questioned the original post, saying, ‘there is much room left to discuss the timeline of the feudal regime. But how can you deny autocracy (of China)? Just look at the family of 走肖/Pinyin: ZouXiao (the Chinese dignitaries) and then look at the development of the western countries since the enlightenment movement. What has happened to the west?! What has happened to China?! When the people are not allowed to talk, how could you have the face to drag others off the altar?’<sup>157</sup>

This example demonstrates how the translators and readers went out of their way to express their opinions and create new meanings out of the text. In some sense, the politically correct title or text functioned as a type of decoy to distract the censors. The savvy users then exploited the dialogic space by resorting to various creative practices to defy suppressive supervision, such as the use of coded or allegorical expressions. In this case, the two Chinese

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<sup>155</sup> Stavrianos, L. S. (2004). *A global history: From prehistory to the 21st century*: Peking University Press.

<sup>156</sup> See the screenshot (S6.19) for the webpage.

<sup>157</sup> See the screenshot (S6.20) for the quoted remark.

characters 走 and 肖 are also the two components of a traditional Chinese character 趙 (pinyin: Zhao). The Zhao Family is an element of an episodic novella *The True Story of Ah Q* by Lu Xun, in which it refers to the politically powerful family. In 2015, the phrase became an internet meme alluding to the ruling families of the Communist Party of China, but was soon banned from being used on the internet. Here the user disassembled the Chinese character 趙 into its parts to avoid being censored. Here, the signs of the past are revitalised through the transition to new dialogic contexts, as stated by Bakhtin (1986, p. 170):

There is neither a first nor a last word and there are no limits to the dialogic context (it extends into the boundless past and boundless future). Even past meanings, that is those born in the dialogue of past centuries, can never be stable (finalized, ended once and for all)—they will always change (be renewed) in the process of subsequent, future development of the dialogue. At any moment in the development of the dialogue there are immense, boundless masses of forgotten contextual meanings, but at certain moments of the dialogue’s subsequent development along the way they are recalled and invigorated in renewed form (in a new context).

This episode also provides a glimpse into the cat-and-mouse game playing out in the digital space in China (Lillie, 2012)—how some grassroots-initiated public spaces, to quote the above moderator’s remark again, ‘dance with shackles’ in the complex socio-political context of China.

In this game of cat-and-mouse, RRYS is another player on the side of the mouse. After its forced shutdown in 2014, it initially attempted to convert to the permission culture by partnering with an authorised media corporation, which did not work out. It then registered itself as an independent company and avowed that it would continue to provide textual subtitles for popular foreign visual products loved by Chinese internet users. However, morphing according to the situation, it remained one of the most popular download sites for foreign video content in China. A search through WHOIS,<sup>158</sup> a database querying protocol, revealed that web servers had been transferred abroad. As mentioned in Section 6.4.2, by August 2018 the total number of RRYS users has reached 150 million, with 70 million being daily active users. Additionally, RRYS provides an overwhelming majority of the subtitled foreign video products for large online video websites such as Suhu, Tencent, LeTV and Youku, including more than 90% of American and 100% of Japanese television series (Liu,

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<sup>158</sup> See the screenshot (S6.21) for the WHOIS page.

2018). Currently, domestic users can access the enormous volume of those products via various apps on different digital devices. This is a manifestation of how the group has adhered to its motto, ‘one for all and all for one’.

In addition, RRYs embodies how a new social form of organisation and cooperation can champion open source and inter-subjectivity. It has gone a step further in this direction. In July 2018, it issued a white paper on a blockchain-based content value network (CVN) on its Wechat account and aimed to establish itself as a decentred file-finding platform where any user can provide the content required by another user through an encrypted transmission channel and earn the CVN token in return from the file-seeker; in essence, any user will be able to access any content he/she wants. To some extent, this deinstitutionalised and incentive-based sharing model may provide a viable and sustainable model alternative to the open access initiatives advocated by governmental or institutional agents such as Creative Commons Australia<sup>159</sup> or Harvard University’s open access mandate, especially in the context of China. It remains to be seen what this transition will bring to the community and the larger global digital visual space, since the new operation model will go online in the third quarter of 2019.

With the above examples in mind, it is credible to claim that in China there are institutional efforts to promote and implement a permission culture that is licensed not so much by its legal system as by its ideological framework. However, a dichotomous opposition of ‘permission culture’ versus ‘free culture’ fails to account for the dissonance that translation has introduced into the autocratic monologue. In the internet-mediated world, the people are no longer as helpless as before. They are ready to embrace advanced, cutting-edge technology to transcend their physically embedded world via translation to create a free culture—not ‘free’ as in ‘free beer’, but ‘free’ as in ‘free speech’ (Lessig, 2003).

**RQ2: What new features have developed in the discursive practices of UGT as represented by Chinese online translation communities?**

### 7.2.3 Citizen Activism

Most of my interviewees have cited interest as the number one motivator behind their voluntary involvement in online translation, with contributing to cross-cultural

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<sup>159</sup> Creative Commons Australia is a member of the Creative Commons Global Network that supports Creative Commons in Australia and administers the Australian Creative Commons licences. See <https://creativecommons.org.au/>

communication as the second leading motivator.<sup>160</sup> The concept of activism has been deployed by some researchers in examining the motivations and socio-political implications of some UGT initiatives. As far as my case studies are concerned, most of my interviewees have not considered activism as what their participation represents, although many have expressed their frustration with censorship in China. Yet the influence of translation is an issue conditioned and actualised by complicated situational variables, economic, cultural or political, and not controlled or presumed by the translator. As demonstrated throughout this thesis, these grassroots initiatives have manifested some characteristics of activism in perhaps subtle ways; in other words, they have embodied the culture of citizenship that has disrupted and diversified the mediasphere authorised by those in power.

## 7.2.4 Market-Orientation

One indication of how translation has been evolving is its increasing connectedness and interaction with other cultural spaces and systems in a multicultural context. In this evolving interconnected information age, canonical translation no longer plays the dominant role in prescribing the criteria of ‘good’ translation and establishing the approaches and strategies a translator should follow in the translation process with the aim of producing a version corresponding to the original in terms of language aesthetics and ideology. Translation as a whole has expanded and diversified, involving products ranging from ads, news and software to websites, and video games in addition to traditional literature. The majority of translations undertaken today are market-oriented and intended for greater communicative efficiency.

One key factor in translation is how quickly media products can be presented to target audiences. Cronin (Cronin, 2013b, p. 71) distinguishes two types of time pressure imposed on the translator: ‘mnemonic time’ and ‘instantaneous time’. The former refers to the amount of time allowed to the translator to bring foreign texts from the past or afar to the current society. The latter, by contrast, refers to a situation ‘where the space-time compression and time-to-market imperatives generate demands for an extremely rapid turnaround of translation jobs’—a situation that has become current practice even in the field of literary translation. A telling example is the translation of *Steve Jobs*. Collaborating with Yeeyan, the licensed publisher in China adopted the crowdsourcing translation approach and managed to publish the translation at the same time as the original work. The result was a great market

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<sup>160</sup> According to my interview.



success with more than 50,000 books sold on the first day.<sup>161</sup> Time efficiency is certainly a criterion in other types of translation such as subtitling, video games and news, which are largely a part of the attention economy abiding by the law of ‘time is money’. This is brought about by the nature of the knowledge-intensive industry, which utilises rapid obsolescence and frequent updating of knowledge and information to drive its growth (Dunning 2000).

## 7.2.5 Pluri-Subjectivity

In the meantime, heavy media consumers are more sophisticated and demanding than ever before, valuing rapid responses and requiring their voices to be heard. To some extent, users regard translators as peers rather than awe-inspiring intellectuals and experts. Users are thus ready to doubt the motivation of the translation and challenge translators with respect to objectivity and accuracy. As demonstrated throughout the three case studies, especially in Sections 4.5.3 (pluri-subjectivity) and 5.5.3 (‘live scene’ of translation), user engagement has sometimes made comment sections more appealing than translations themselves. Media and technologies have made the dialogue between different players practicable during the pre-production, production and post-production phases of translation. This pluri-subjectivity has, in turn, expanded the discursive space of meaning-creation.

## 7.2.6 Materiality of Translation

Another aspect of translation is that it is, as Mitchell (2010, p. 25) describes, a ‘material practice’: translation is not only about ‘translation and texts’ or ‘translation and translators’ but also about the relationship between ‘translation and things’, and we cannot afford to ignore the tools and material that have affected or even preconditioned the work of translators. This situation is truer than ever before in the contemporary context. Initially, a translator consults on-line dictionaries and various other online resources to conduct background research or locate a more approximate expression for the original version. In addition, a translator involved with multimedia materials is expected to be a competent user of various computer softwares to process different digitalised files and produce translation in various file formats. However, it is necessary to keep in mind that the relationship of the translator to technologies, tools and techniques is a co-constitutive relationship rather than a one-way street. On this point, RRYs, since it is engaged in intersemiotic translations, is a

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<sup>161</sup> The statistics is based on an article published on the Wechat public platform. The account is freesvc. 峰小瑞. (2016, Oct. 08). 创业者说 Re: 译言往事和赵嘉敏的十年 Retrieved from <https://36kr.com/p/5054108>

more typical example than the other two communities with their focus on interlingual translations (cf. Jakobson, 1959).

When fansubbing groups were formed in the late 1990s, subtitling was a translation-specific document type, meaning that no precedent was available for reference (Sager, 1998). By that time, dubbing had become an established localisation practice in cinema and television conventions, and subtitling was an expedient alternative approach for film studios in China dealing with the large influx of foreign visual products. In addition, from the very beginning fansubbing groups had no intention of looking to their industrial counterparts as models but have on the contrary tried to distance themselves from them in terms of target text editing, temporal parameters and spatial layout. Therefore, fan-initiated subtitling, in the early instances, was an act of creativity that was later incorporated into the target culture and provided precedents for future translations of this type.

Nevertheless, the creativity of fansubs has not stopped there. For example, RRYs has mostly relied on its self-developed captioning software to produce subtitled visual products throughout the entire process. They developed a piece of software called TimeMachine for timing and another that shortened the time required for simulation by allowing the subtitler to simply click a button to superimpose subtitles onto the screen automatically. May 2018 marked a further step in RRYs's technological innovation with the release of the new audio-visual translation platform Yishijie (literally, 'translate the visual world'), which has been acclaimed as a futuristic and out-of-this-world technology. Instead of relying on different software at each stage of the subtitling process, this technology provides a cooperative workflow with all task processes integrated into one seamless operation system. In addition, by taking advantage of the technology of artificial intelligence (AI), the platform has helped relieve a large proportion of the translator's workload, which is now focused on post-editing. As a result, the turnaround time of translations has been reduced by 80% (Lv, 2018). This user-friendly software is not only a blessing for subtitlers but also a free and ready-to-use product for ordinary internet users who have an interest in producing their own subtitled visual products. The advent of the technology means that if one is content with passable machine translation, subtitling no longer requires either technical knowledge about the post-production of visual products or proficiency in a foreign language. Fansubbing groups have already had a grander plan in the pipeline. They believe that this technology can help the film and television industry enlarge the profit margins of their visual products considerably by enabling their promotional trailers to reach all corners of the world via instantaneously subtitled versions. At the same time, according to Liangliang, a co-founder of RRYs, this product certainly has great potential to help the domestic films and television series gain

attention from the outside world, thereby contributing to China's cultural exports in the long run (ibid.).

Presenting themselves as a new cultural form that blurs the boundaries between work and play, community and commerce, production and consumption, these bottom-up translation groups channel their technological savvy and cultural capital not just toward preserving and strengthening community culture and values but also to becoming an influential link in the value chain of content production, either wittingly or unwittingly. This embodies the vision of the planetary innovation capacity described by John Hartley, where the creative economy is presented and actualised by the 'Three Bigs - Everyone, Everything, Everywhere'. It is beyond time to shift our focus in translation studies from the individual translator as the dominant player to adopting an 'integrated approach to translation' that considers not only the general symbolic system (human language), the specific code (the language(s) translated), the physical support (stone, papyrus, CD-ROM), the means of transmission (manuscript, printing, digital communication) but also how translation is carried through societies over time by particular groups (Cronin, 2002, p. 3). In other words, future research should further investigate how 'knowledge clubs' work and how they 'nurture their formation, interaction and openness in digital, global, creative knowledge economy' (Hartley, 2018, p. 337).

### **RQ3: What cultural newness have Chinese online translation communities brought to the mediasphere in China and the culture and society as a whole?**

Culture makes groups and groups make knowledge (Hartley and Potts, 2014a). The internet-mediated world abounds with instances of how groups engage in knowledge production and meaning-making, thus shaping the scenario of cultural dynamics. Groups are the existential condition prior to the action, creativity and selfhood of individuals. An individual can only establish his/ her identity by constantly defining his/ her relationship with and position within a group or groups. The productivity of groups lies in their yet-to-be-formed identities, which are embedded in a continuous dialectical interplay between regular and irregular conditions and stable and unstable semiotic processes functioning at a system (culture) level. Through the process, constructive interactions are carried out and knowledge and meaning are created. This section presents a comparative analysis of the three chosen cases pertaining to their demic identities and potentialities for cultural newness in the context of contemporary China.

## 7.2.7 Collective Citizenship

The cultural science approach designates ‘groups’ as one of the key concepts for understanding creative culture and economy (Hartley & Potts, 2014a; John Hartley et al., 2015). The term ‘groups’ is synonymous with the Greek ‘demes’ to denote the distinctive features of groups as organised and productive subpopulations that are created by culture, especially storytelling. This means that here the term ‘groups’ cannot be used loosely to refer to the groups swarming a busy shopping street or the people’s commune in the rural areas of China during the period from 1958 to 1983, since the former is too unorganised to be productive while the latter is too super-organised to be productive. In his article, “‘People’s Commune’: the Journey to the Hell for the Chinese Rural Residents”, Chinese scholar Xu Zhenhu (2009) argues that the people’s communes were utilised as multipurpose organisations facilitating the rule of local governments and the management of all economic and social activities with the ultimate aim of turning China into a ‘paradise’ where the communist party could manipulate and control the people at will. In a context characterised by nationwide political fear, all agents or entities from individuals to collectives at various levels were forced to give up their autonomy and lose their voices. As a consequence, famine became an everyday reality and knowledge production and economic leap-forward became a utopian dream (Ding, 2017). Xu ascribes the imposed ‘ideological homogeneity’ and ‘people without freedom’ as the causes of the cultural stagnation and historical retrogression.

The above historical tragedy is a cruel reminder of one of the starting points of the Lotmanian semiotics theorisation, namely, that the operation of culture is based on the mechanism of dialogue. Dialogue, essentially a semiotic process of translation, presupposes a productive asymmetry between and among at least two signs, texts, interlocutors, languages or cultures. Therefore, on different levels—micro, meso or macro—culture is an enveloping ‘polyglot’ semiotic space featuring heterogeneity and complexity. This is true of the online translation communities under study. As illuminated in Chapter 3, internet connectivity has helped to dissolve spatial and temporal distance, and as a result, ‘clubs’ and ‘commons’ can no longer be identified as coterminous with national cultures (say, China’s), or even with language communities (say, English), religions (say, Judeo-Christian, Moslem) or ideologies (say, Western); all of these are thoroughly interpenetrated; across the range, each of them intrude globalised systems with their own burdens of knowledge (e.g., science, media, social media, journalism, works of the imagination, entertainment), and an individual may belong to idiosyncratic mixtures and amalgams of such ‘identities’ (Hartley et al., 2017, p. 20), and his/ her identity is constantly defined by his/ her relationship with and position within a group or groups.

Longtengwang was initially established by a university student and then was joined by tens and hundreds of volunteer translators and technicians from different educational and geographical backgrounds. Likewise, Yeeyan and RRYs have attracted and trained hundreds and thousands of volunteer translators. The heterogeneous backgrounds and specialities of translators enabled the communities to produce a kaleidoscopic range of content to meet the demands of fragmented users. On the other hand, the translator's expertise in a specific area other than translation, like IT entrepreneurship, cancer treatment or environmental science often helped engage readers in an interactive dialogue far beyond textual interpretation.

These communities 'form *purposefully* to achieve some common aim where a "good", in this case knowledge, is shared among members of a group' (Hartley et al., 2017, p. 19). They are bound by a common interest, whether in foreign visual products, open courses, or comments and posts from foreign internet users. Not until recently did a shift towards commercialisation take place. The immaterial labour has been one of the core characteristics of the bottom-up initiative since its emergence, which has won it acclaim as an act of 'Living Lei Feng<sup>162</sup>'. With no remuneration offered, community moderators were able to attract, mobilise and retain able hands both online and offline through the affinity of the community and the enmity of adversaries. Longtengwang positioned itself in opposition to the mainstream media, which were the discursive spaces of the elite. Yeeyan prided itself on being a publishing space for translators unstrained by hierarchical power structures typical of traditional practices. Spurred by the dissatisfaction with the official releases, RRYs gave priority to offering an authentic viewing experience of foreign video products, free and in abundance.

The contributions of volunteer user-producers fit in with the category of affective labour. Michael Hardt (1999, p. 94) defines affective labour as creation of immaterial goods such as services, information, or knowledge, giving rise to the formation of social networks, communities, and biopower: that is, the power to create society itself. Alternatively, seen from the perspective advanced by Arvidsson et al. (2008), it belongs to ethics-based value generation. They propose that the concept of 'ethics' has become a new value-logic shaping consumer practice of social production, which means that prosumers' ability to create values transforms a multitude into a community. Like most sustainable virtual communities, despite the disparate motivations of joining online translation communities, most community

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<sup>162</sup> Lei Feng (18 December 1940-15 August 1962) was a soldier in the People's Liberation Army. He was characterised as a selfless and modest communist devoted to serving the Communist Party and the people. The masses in China have been encouraged to follow his role model of selflessness and modesty.

members have cited ‘affective commitment<sup>163</sup>’, ‘sense of belonging’ and ‘spirit of sharing’ as the core stimuli for participation and contribution (Zhu, 2014). Liangliang said in an interview (Yingweilai, 2010) that for him, the most attractive aspect of the community was the affinity among like-minded people and the learning environment constructed within it. Participants from the two other communities have similar views regarding their engagement. One user<sup>164</sup> on Longtengwang said, ‘besides, I’ve become attached to it (a little bit cheesy). But indeed, since knowing its existence four years ago, I would log in to the website and take a look. Otherwise I would feel something is missing...’

However, underlying the sociability of this sharing culture is the disruptive and innovative potential unreleased from the intelligent collective on the scale of population. Hafstein (2018, p. 378) described this as ‘distributive, cumulative, collaborative, collective creativity’, which allows for creative expressions and practices ‘building on other expressions that in turn build on other expressions, and so on’. By July 2016, Yeeyan grew to be the largest translator community and translation crowdsourcing platform, with 568,130 registered users and 376,973 published articles.<sup>165</sup> These are not merely abstract numerical statistics but indicators of an evolving public discourse, as demonstrated in Chapter 5. Another field Yeeyan has explored is book translation and publication. In addition to publishing 300 books in the public domain via crowdsourced translation, it broke a record by completing the translation of *Steve Jobs* within 30 days. The technological affordances have enabled Yeeyan to gain more autonomy by dispensing with the mediation of traditional publishers and repositioning consumers as productive translators instead of the previously dominant professionals or insiders of translation publication circles. Longtengwang has not presented its achievements in terms of specific numbers of articles translated. Nonetheless, its translations have provided a dialogic space for cross-cultural internet users, especially its back-and-forth translation through which the community translators acted as the intermediary while dialogues were ongoing. During the process, some foreign internet users also contributed to facilitate the cross-cultural communication.

By its tenth anniversary, RRYYS had subtitled and published approximately ten thousand episodes of foreign visual products and open courses from Yale University. As demonstrated in Chapter 6, textual transfer constituted only one of RRYYS’s priorities. Its function as a community of practice to provide an educational environment for amateur translators also remained high on its agenda. This was manifested not only in its input into training programs

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<sup>163</sup> Affective commitment refers to community members’ positive emotional attachment to the community.

<sup>164</sup> According to my online survey (refer to Appendix 4).

<sup>165</sup> See the screenshot (S7.1) for the information accessed on June 6, 2016.

for amateurs but also in its endeavour to compile a revolutionary dictionary for Chinese English-learners. Financed by crowdfunding, RenRen Dictionary was released in September 2016. As an audio-visual dictionary based on the video clips of American television shows, this dictionary also features an interactive function that enables its users to take notes, practice pronunciation and even proofread the dictionary as a collector-editor. As of September 2019, three years after its release, it has gathered more than 15,000 fans on its Weibo account.<sup>166</sup> It also has a rating of 4.4 out of 5 stars from 240 reviews on the Apple App Store.<sup>167</sup> Most of the posted comments give it a fairly good review. For example, one user says, ‘I was overwhelmed when looked it up for a word casually picked. A plenty of clips of American TV shows helped me get this word etched in my mind. It must have costed a lot considering the data needed, not to mention the import to organise the tremendous amount of material’.<sup>168</sup> Another user writes, ‘It’s the first time for a dictionary to keep me swipe the screen for such a good while. I’ve downloaded many English-learning software apps but just quitted half way. But this one is an exception. It’s so good. Renren, thanks a million. For all those years most of the TV shows I’ve watched came from you and now you’ve produced such a good software’.<sup>169</sup> Therefore, in several respects, RRYS’s management team has been able to establish an operation model that outdoes its industrial counterpart in both quality and efficiency, and its technical team has been exploiting the software technology to expand the space of its public discourse via various digital devices. What it exhibits is a hybridity of fandom amateurism and industrial professionalism, pursuing entertainment and facilitating education.

At this point, it is reasonable to claim that the practice of online translation communities has reframed the dichotomous relationship between authorship and readership or, in Hafstein’s (2018, p. 381) term, the folk tradition. Hafstein proposed an alternative model of creativity where the creative agency lies in the domain in between the author and the folk, that is, the collective-editor, which is cumulative and historical. This concept resonates with the concept of demic agency (Hartley & Potts, 2014a; Hartley, 2015) and the creative effect of ‘social network markets’ (Potts et al., 2008). This model has been espoused by empirical practitioners on these digital platforms. Referring on different occasions to the Yeeyan initiative as a practice of hive culture, Zhao Jiamin holds that its efforts to build a networked community suits the information needs of the new age and its potential lies in large-scale social collaboration (Zhao, 2009).

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<sup>166</sup> See [https://www.weibo.com/rrcd?is\\_hot=1#1567865030195](https://www.weibo.com/rrcd?is_hot=1#1567865030195)

<sup>167</sup> See the screenshot (S7.2) for the information accessed on Sept. 7, 2019.

<sup>168</sup> See the screenshot (S7.3) for the quoted remark accessed on Sept. 7, 2019.

<sup>169</sup> See the screenshot (S7.4) for the quoted remark accessed on Sept. 7, 2019.

## 7.2.8 Entrepreneurship

The mechanisms of demic creativity, social network markets and the collective-editor have enabled these communities to possess substantial cultural and social capital accumulated through years of development. This capital preconditions the shift toward commercialisation. This trend is driven in part by industries leaning on consumer labour to cut costs and quickly find the right person for the right job from the nationwide or worldwide talent pool, along the lines of the practices of Wikipedia or Facebook. On the other hand, it is also prompted by the communities and their participants themselves who see the commercial potential in their expertise and social networks of talents.

For many participants, online translation communities have provided them a platform of practice of entrepreneurship, ranging from freelance media workers, amateur translators turned professional to community moderators turned professional. Yeeyan has cultivated many translators who otherwise would not have considered translation as a career choice. Dongjing (2018), a former Yeeyan translator on the Gutenberg Project (2018), shared her story of how she was recruited for the project as a college sophomore and then set up her own translation studio in 2016, where she found that half of the translators involved in her commercial translation had previously participated in the project. In addition to getting translation work from Yeeyan, many high-performing community translators like Dongjing have attracted attention from other publishing houses or media institutions. As a translator incubator like Yeeyan, RRYS has also helped many community members embark on a new career. What is of more interest is that it has facilitated the commercial viability of the prosumer culture by capitalising on the human relations and affinity built up over years within the community (Green & Jenkins, 2009). Its large base of users together with the celebrity effect of fansubbers has given rise to a fansubber fandom that functions as a form of 'social network market', embodying a process of consumer co-creation framed by the co-evolution between markets and non-markets (Banks & Potts, 2010). For example, one of the renowned fansubbers launched a Zhihu live event in April 2017 when he was followed by more than 1.7 million fans on his Weibo account. At this event, six questions were asked by his fans and attracted an audience of more than 19,000, and he earned approximately 2000 RMB (approximately US\$280) by answering the questions.<sup>170</sup>

Another commercialisation shift is embodied in the community's role as the brokerage firm for industrial employment seekers. This is in part a reflection of the shortage of quality

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<sup>170</sup> See the screenshot (S7.5) for the information accessed on March 27, 2018.



translators confronting the translation publishing industry. According to a questionnaire (Lin, 2010, Oct. 13) targeting the editors of imported books from more than 20 large publishing houses, they had very limited resources to find suitable translators, mostly through relationship networks. For example, a translator will recommend a student or a friend to do the translation work. But with the increasing quantity and variety of books waiting to be translated, the old model of recruitment has outlived its utility. Yeeyan has cooperated with more than 40 publishing houses largely as a brokerage firm without much sway in the process. In its own way, RRYs has also sought cooperation with industrial counterparts. Instead of helping online visual platforms recruit fansubbers, it has participated in the production of subtitled visual products as a strategic partner. In 2017, one former operational staff of Sohu revealed that Sohu had signed a 5-year cooperation contract with RRYs, and the latter was responsible for the production of more than 90% of all the subtitled American television dramas available on the Sohu visual platform. Besides Sohu, RRYs has undertaken the subtitling production for almost all the Chinese online visual tycoons such as Youku, Tencent and Iqiyi. Although RRYs has always kept its financial situation secret, according to one of its operational staff, commercial translation has become an important source of income in addition to advertising revenues.<sup>171</sup> The platform has become quite adept in negotiating win-win partnerships with its industrial counterparts. Besides bringing financial gains, this cooperation also functions as a cushion from the copyright issue, which has more than once put the community in legal hot water. Almost all the foreign visual products available on the platforms of its commercial partners can also be accessed through its various visual apps and much more. In addition, the resources from the partners have been utilised for its own self-promotion. For example, in a promotional event for its coming CVN project, it used one-year VIP membership from Tencent video, Iqiyi video, Yukou video, Netflix and Hulu as rewards for the winners of competitions to attract more attention. Thus, instead of ending up being subsumed by commercial video corporations as predicted by the media and academics, RRYs has developed a hybrid identity of profit-seeking commerce and affinity-building community, having deviated from its original role as a coterie of sharing and support.

Beginning about a decade ago, some critics have tried to raise awareness about the exploitation of ‘participatory culture’ (Jenkins, 2006b) and ‘prosumerism’ (Benkler, 2006) by information and communication technology companies and agencies for commercial purposes (Terranova, 2000; Bonsu & Darmody, 2008). At this point, we can say that the

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<sup>171</sup> The information about RRYs’s commercial cooperation with video websites is largely based on media report. 中国经营报. (2017 Sept. 9). 人人影视自曝资金被挥霍一空 转型到底出了什么问题? . Retrieved from <https://tech.qq.com/a/20170909/010213.htm>

commercialisation of online translation communities is a matter of contention and torturous progress; however, to generalise the relationship between prosumers and capital as ‘exploitation’ is simply too lopsided to capture the dynamic scenario shaped by Web 2.0 platforms. With more dimensions of value and power recognised as inhering in bottom-up culture, grassroots players are bound to play a more and more important role in constructive dialogues with their institutional or industrial counterparts in relation to the decision-making, production and dissemination of cultural content (Füller, 2010).

## 7.3 Theoretical and Methodological Implications

A body of existing research has captured the agency and creativity of internet-mediated community translation, focusing on its various aspects such as linguistic analysis, social discourse analysis (how to interweave subtitle translation with social activism), procedure or operation analysis (the process of translation and cooperation of group members), technology-enabled new subtitling practice and fandom’s role in the globalisation of screen culture. However, without a comprehensive theoretical framework, the existing research has failed to capture a holistic picture of this evolving cultural phenomenon of collective intelligence, which has been examined more or less as a homogenous whole or has simply been underexplored.

Theoretically, this thesis has adopted an interdisciplinary approach drawing on cultural semiotics, cultural science, translation studies and media studies to develop its conceptual underpinnings and analytic tools. My decisions regarding the construction of a theoretical framework were determined by the research subject and questions, which are closely related to the fields of culture, media and translation studies. Lotmanian concepts of boundary, dialogue, centre vs. periphery, communication and auto-communication and translation are the analytic tools employed throughout the thesis. Resonating with cultural semiotics, the ultimate aim of cultural science is to explain the cultural dynamics which it holds to be driven by ‘structures of association when different semiotic spheres interact’ (Hartley & Potts, 2014a, P. 127). All these theories and concepts have guided the research to focus on not only the internal growth of UGT but also its productive encounters with other systems. In addition, perspectives and concepts from translation studies and media studies have enabled the research to give due consideration to the ‘translation’ activity occurring in the translation communities and to include an empirical analysis of how digital technologies have shaped the translation landscape. The interdisciplinary approach has helped the research achieve the following results:

-This research has been able to present a holistic picture of online translation communities by performing an empirical analysis of the relationship between part and whole and of the interplay of external influences and internal structuring. I have shown via the three case studies that an online translation community, though an autopoietic semiotic space with its own self-organising structure, is not an semiotic sphere isolated from other socio-cultural spheres but is intertwined with the socio-cultural contexts (often not friendly) of structure, rule and power. In addition, unlike previous studies that have generally prioritised fan subtitling, this research has incorporated other UGT forms, which may help not only to broaden the research scope but also to shed light on some thus-far unexplored aspects of this cultural practice.

- Following on the above point, the Lotmanian concepts and the theorisation of cultural science have armed me with tools to capture the dynamics of online translation communities, rather than viewing them as static. I have presented a lively analysis of how internet users have resorted to translation as a discursive medium for engaging in cross-cultural communication and auto-communication, generating meaning and knowledge. On the other hand, the formation and evolution of online translation communities as part of UGC culture is the result of negotiation and conflict between different groups and semiotic spaces immersed in the complex systems of society and culture: they come and go, change and transform, disrupt and stabilise—an epitome of cultural dynamics.

- The research is committed to presenting an empirical analysis by basing its findings on lived experiences and real-life situations translation communities encounter in their daily activities. To achieve this, the study has adopted various techniques to collect data to address the research questions. My interview questions were designed to shed lights on my research focus from the perspectives of the translator, user and moderator of translation communities. The online participant observation allowed me the opportunity to be part of the three communities as an insider, helping me produce a nuanced and in-depth analysis of their internal structuring, the interactions between different agents and the technologies involved. I have also followed community users on several platforms including Weibo, Zhihu and Douban in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of a community-related event or change. To complement the above data sources, I have resorted to Wayback Machine to retrieve much precious data to enrich my analysis with a historical dimension.

## 7.4 Limitations and Future Research

This thesis has explored quickly evolving user-generated translation as represented by Chinese online translation communities with a view to shedding light on how translation can shape the dynamics of the media culture in China. However, the ever-changing information and communications technologies, global media culture and the complex socio-cultural context of China have presented challenges in keeping the research in step with the latest developments. This challenge is further compounded when it comes to documenting the development trajectory of this emerging and quickly shifting translation activity, as demonstrated in the three case studies. Although an archiving device like Wayback Machine can be of great assistance, the researcher needs to keep a close eye on current developments in order to understand the dynamics of this cultural phenomenon. In addition, besides the copyright issue, the practice of UGT is also a target of censorship in the socio-political context of contemporary of China, which makes many community members very cautious about revealing their thoughts.

This research has provided a theoretical and methodological approach for exploring the dynamics of UGT communities and their contributions to cultural newness. However, more studies are needed across different cultures and socio-political contexts to test and improve this framework. Therefore, this research is not intended as a final solution to understanding UGT communities but rather as a starting point for further research and discussion.

### **Future research**

While my research has focused primarily on computer platforms, I have noticed that there have emerged some translation communities on mobile digital devices who self-organise and nurture a discursive space to generate and spread meaning of common interest. For example, JTWest, a Wechat-based civic journalism initiative, expands its user base by encouraging users to recommend its Wechat account to relatives, friends and colleagues and frequently redirects its users to new sites to avoid censorship. Constraints of time and space made it feasible to focus on three influential translation communities; however, there are tens and even hundreds of translation communities contributing to Chinese UGT culture. Thus, Chinese online translation communities present an even more diverse and complicated picture than that illustrated by the cases examined in this research. This being the case, it will be interesting for future research to explore whether my findings here can be identified with other translation communities that are different from the three cases in size, content genre or community management.

The members of online translation communities are largely tech-savvy young people who are quick to take up new digital technologies. For example, RRYS has participated in developing AI translation technologies and is developing its content value network project. These technological innovations will augment the agency of translation prosumers considerably. This dimension of dynamics is related to the materiality of translation, which warrants further exploration.

In this research, the agency of user-translator communities consists largely in enabling changes in media culture and creating a public discourse distinct from the authoritarian discourse in China. This argument is, to some extent, based on the relationship between and among translation communities, industry players and the state, a relationship that is defined by the issue of copyright, censorship, technological affordances and social norms. Presently, the mediasphere in China is by no means stable, especially in light of the current government's tightening ideological control. Therefore, how the collaborative activity of UGT will evolve against the shifting power relationship will remain an important topic for research in the coming years.

This research is specific to the context of China. While there are many commonalities in the cultural phenomenon of UGT across cultures, China's state-controlled and market-based mediasphere presents a distinctive contrast to Western cultures. Comparative research would help illuminate how contextual variables not only influence translation semiosis but also are influenced by it.

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# Appendix 1: Sample of Interview Questions

## Interview questions for Community Managers

Q1 When did you first get involved in the translation community and what is your role in the running of the community?

Q2 What motivates you to be a part of this endeavour and what effects do you expect to be realised through this?

Q3 How do you understand the online grassroots cooperative translation in relation to its emergence and evolution?

Q4 What external factors do you think are exerting most important impacts on the development of online translation communities?

Q5 How do you think the practice of online translation communities differs from more traditional translation practice?

Q6 Can you specify the changes translation is undergoing in the digital age, in relation to its objective, norms of practice and the role of readers?

Q7 Can you share your understanding on the community's efforts to promote information and knowledge renewal and the effects achieved so far?

Q8 I have noticed there has been some cooperation between online communities and some related industries such as the publishing industry, newspapers and video platforms. What do you think of this trend?

## Interview questions for Community translators

Q1 When did you first join the online translation community and what is its name? Had you ever done and published translation before this?

Q2 What kind of community translation have you engaged in? As a translator, how much autonomy do you have through the whole process in relation to choosing the original content, deciding on translating strategies and getting it published?

Q3 What are the main constraints (e.g. material repertoire to choose from, financial returns, technical support, readers' response as well as the gatekeeping mechanism such as censorship)?

Q4 What characteristics or functions of the community motivate you to participate in this cross-cultural effort?

Q5 How do you understand the online user cooperative translation in relation to its emergence and evolution? And what cultural effects can be realised through this endeavour?

Q6 What impacts has the internet technology brought to translation practice in light of your experience?

Q7 How does the online cooperative translation differ from the traditional translation? And do you have any intention to become a professional translator or engage in translation as a sideline career with the experience you have gained through the online translation practice?

## Interview questions for Community users

Q1 When did you first join or pay attention to the online translation community? What is the community's name? What motivated you to join the community?

Q2 Is the translated work available for free? Will you continue to visit the community if you have to pay to get access to its service or information?

Q3 As a user, do you think this community is a community of translation (or other identity such as film and video, news, game, literature)? And what role is translation playing in the development of the community?

Q4 How do you think of the translations published in the community? In what ways do you think they are valuable to you?

Q5 How do you understand the online grassroots cooperative translation in relation to its emergence and evolution? And what cultural effects can be realised through this endeavour?

## Appendix 2: List of Interviewees

According to the ethic clearance, the information of interviewees should not be publicized.

## Appendix 3: Screenshots Mentioned in Footnotes

Refer to those screenshots in the data storage documents which have been organised by chapter and note number.

## Appendix 4: Online Survey Carried in Longteng Community

Questions Answers username		
	<p>1. 作为用户，你觉得这是个翻译社区吗？翻译在该社区发展中的作用是什么呢？</p> <p>2. 龙腾社区对你的主要吸引力是什么？</p>	<p>1. Do you think, as a user, Longteng is a translation community? What role does translation play in the development of this community?</p> <p>2. What about Longteng attracts you most?</p>
问号 (wenhao)	是，权贵，吹水	Yes. Translation can give some people privilege. Longteng is a place I can brag and talk nonsense.
东方明矣(dongfangmingyi)	东方明矣	Yes. Translation makes 50 Cent Army stauncher on their stance. There are a lot of 50 Cent Army here. (Note: 50Cent Army is the colloquial term for internet commentators which are hired by Chinese authorities in an attempt to manipulate public opinion to the benefit of the Chinese Communist Party).
四无君 (siwujun)	<p>1、是；大爷</p> <p>2、撕逼</p>	<p>1. Yes. The translator is our lord.</p> <p>2. Squabble with each other.</p>
雪之华(xuezhihua)	<p>1. 有点像最开始的参考消息，后来的环球时报。但是这不是很严肃的网站，有点娱乐化。翻译都有其自身的喜好。</p> <p>2. 还是翻译的文章啦。其实我更想看外国的事件报道而不是外国对我国事件的评论。</p>	<p>1. The platform is a bit like cankaoxiaoxi newspaper at its early stage and the Global Times. But this is not a serious website and a bit entertainment-oriented. The translator has his own taste.</p> <p>2. The translated articles. In fact, I would like to read the reports on current affairs by foreign media rather than the comments on China-related events made by foreign internet users.</p>
Sonata14	<p>1. 是。其作用是方便了不通外语的用户可接触到外面世界的动态，儘管主體新聞都是帶立場的片面之詞，但評論卻可以看到外國人的真實看法。</p> <p>2. 娛樂，學習，擴展個人眼界與觸角。</p>	<p>1. Yes, it is. It can help those users who are not proficient in foreign languages to get in touch with the outside world. The comments made by foreign internet users can shed lights into their true views</p>



	世界交流，二是能和懂中文的人交流探讨。	
打印机(dayinji)	是，不管那么多，有翻译帖子看就可以了，虽然翻译少了，对大事的关注度少了，但要想看外国新闻翻译相对来说龙腾还是很好的，还有一点，有感情了（有点肉麻），确实，自从四年前知道有这个网站以来，每天都要来看一看，要不心会痒痒的。。	Yes, it is a translation community. I won't care too much as long as there are translated posts to read. Although it has less translated articles and less attention to big events, yet it is a good platform to access translated foreign media content. In addition, a bit sentimental. In fact, my heart will itch if I don't come here to have a look since I knew it four years ago.
rankyfire	1, 是，就算最近状况有变，但还是值得看的 2, 正是因为有人讨论政治，才能让偶见识一下不同的观点	1. Yes. It is still worthy to come and have a look, although it has changed lately. 2. It gives me a chance to encounter various political views because some people talk about politics here.
po502316	1、是个翻译社区，翻译是主要的。早些年对于外国人是怎么看中国抱有新鲜感和兴趣，现在嘛...我对于歪果人能以奇葩眼光看中国，对歪果论坛逗比多感到很开心 2、龙腾对我这种不懂外语的人来说，因有翻译区能看见外国评论，能与国内人互相交流的地方。	1. It is. Translation is the important part. I were interested in how foreigners would view China several years ago. But now I am happy to see how weird and funny it is when foreigners view China by their way. 2. For those who can't understand foreign languages like me, Longteng's translation provides a platform to read foreigners' comments and communicate with domestic users.



