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Fan activism sustained and challenged: participatory culture in Chinese online translation communities

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Henry Jenkins, in *Convergence Culture*, argues that “[p]opular culture may be preparing the way for a more meaningful public culture”. This article examines this argument in the context of online translation communities in China, which originated from fan groups interested in foreign comics, games, movies, and television dramas. Drawing on evidence collected through participant observation and 23 in-depth interviews, this article first reviews the historical development and the structural layout of such online translation communities. It then focuses on the motivations of their members to contribute to the translation tasks, which show that personal interests speak louder than collective goals. Finally, it analyzes how the collaboration structure, mindset of collaboration, skills, and sense of agency are transferred from translating entertainment content to civic education content (i.e. open courses). Participatory culture fostered through fan activities is found to be transferred into civic engagement; however, the transfer between fan activism and political participation is yet to be seen.

Keywords: China; fan activism; Internet; online community; participatory culture

Introduction

The expansion of cultural industry in China and the advance of Internet technologies have given rise to a growing body of fandom residing in Chinese cyberspace. The massive production of popular culture in the form of media outputs and consumer goods has cultivated a great number of loyal and active fans who tend to share their affections toward a certain fan object with their peers. The online space supported by Web 2.0 technologies not only provides a locale for these fans to gather and interact, but also facilitates new ways to conduct the activities that the fans enjoy doing together. China has witnessed a rapid proliferation of online fan communities in recent years. Social media in China, such as BBS (Bulletin Board Systems, see Zhang, 2006), SNSs (Social Networking Sites, see Zhang & Wang, 2010), blogs (see Reese & Dai, 2009), and microblogs, have offered numerous channels and various platforms for Chinese citizens to participate in cultural practices in pursuit of all kinds of fan objects. Among them, online translation communities have been quite a prominent phenomenon in the past five years.

These translation communities were initiated by groups of Chinese fans who enjoy watching foreign entertainment content that is not provided in Chinese official outlets but is accessible on the Internet. They come together to translate the foreign language subtitles for better enjoyment and to publish them on the Internet to share with fellow fans. It can be said that anyone in China who has ever used an unofficial

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channel to consume a foreign entertainment product, such as a Hollywood movie not publicly released in China, must have benefited from their efforts. Their success has inspired other kinds of online translation communities to emerge. These latecomers focus on translating news articles, commentaries, and speeches that are delivered in foreign languages. These translation communities are built on the spirit of sharing, volunteerism, and do-it-yourself, for they never charge for their work, which itself has entailed certain civic values. In addition, the online activities have been moving toward the more civic side of the spectrum with the recent change in the content they translate – from pleasure-seeking entertainment to content of educational and social value, such as open courses provided by world-famous universities.

As Henry Jenkins (2006a, p. 228) argues in *Convergence Culture*, “[p]opular culture may be preparing the way for a more meaningful public culture”. The question to be asked is whether these online translation communities in China can act as an embodiment of such transfer from the cultural sphere to the civic sphere, especially in view of the Chinese government’s strict control over citizens’ political participation. To address this issue, this article starts with a review of studies on fandom and fan activism. A description of China’s media, cultural, and political landscape is then provided. Analyses of the online translation communities’ background, contributors’ motivation to such volunteerism, and the transfer procedure were made based on participant observation and in-depth interviews with 23 community members. A discussion of the potential transfer among fan activism, civic engagement, and political participation in the context of China is provided at the end of this article.

Fandom and fan activism

Fans used to be represented by the mass media as obsessed, deviant, and dangerously fanatic. In particular, the news media have cultivated a notion of fans as psychologically defunct. For example, crazed fans caused the death of 35 Italian soccer spectators following crowd disturbances at a European Cup final in Brussels in 1985 (Sandvoss, 2005). Jenson (1992) noted tendencies to pathologize fans both in early mass communication scholarship and in “official” high culture. Compared to popular representations of fandom, the portrayal of fandom in early academic approaches was rooted in an almost exclusive emphasis on structure. Fandom is interpreted as a consequence of mass culture in need of compensation for lack of intimacy, community, and identity. If the fan is predominantly the perpetrator in mass-mediated representation, then in academic analysis he or she is first and foremost the passive victim.

One thread of thought saw engaging fans as immaterial labor.¹ For instance, Terranova (2000) pointed out that online activity, such as building virtual communities, signifies free labor on the Internet, which is simultaneously voluntarily given and unwaged, enjoyed and exploited. Furthermore, Andrejevic (2008) argued that participants in online fan sites serve as value-enhancing labor for television producers. Similarly, Cote & Pybus (2007) proposed that the recent wave of social networking sites (e.g., MySpace) contains a dynamic new source of creative power, the so-called Immaterial Labor 2.0.

This depiction of fandom as a consequence of psychological dysfunction or further development of capitalism constitutes the background against which fans first

attracted attention from media and cultural studies scholars in the 1980s. According to Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington (2007) in *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, the study of fandom can be contextualized across three distinct “waves” since the 1980s.

The first wave of fan studies was inspired by Michel de Certeau’s (1988) notion of the tactics taken by the disempowered. John Fiske’s work on popular culture and fandom (1989a, 1989b, 1992) provided a useful starting point and an overall paradigm. Fiske’s emphasis is on resistant readings and construction of the popular from the grassroots and audiences’ guerilla-style tactics of constructing meanings, fan communities, and, thus, sub-cultural resistance to the dominant culture. This is the celebratory phase, in which “fandom is beautiful” (Gray et al., 2007, p. 2), as Gray et al. phrase it. The early phase of fan studies “constituted a purposeful political intervention that sided with the tactics of an audience in their evasion of dominant ideologies, and that set out to rigorously defend fan communities against their ridicule in the mass media and by nonfans” (Gray et al., 2007, p. 2). The first wave of fan scholars attempted to take what used to be viewed as a derogatory practice and status and turn it into a positive one (Costello & Moore, 2007).

The second phase was a response to the spread of new media and new forms of fan culture in the 1990s. During this period, fan communities proliferated endlessly, mostly fuelled by the Internet. Fandom became a common and ordinary aspect of everyday life in the industrialized world. It was even actively fostered and utilized in industry marketing strategies (Jones, 2003). From Fiske (1989a, 1989b, 1992) to Jenkins (1991, 1992), the increasingly ethnographic studies revealed a more complex relationship between fans as agents and the structural confines of popular culture in which they operate, for this relationship cannot be reduced to one being simply a consequence of the other. Furthermore, in this phase scholars often focused on the fans’ construction of identities through their insertion into fan communities (Grossberg, 1992; Harris & Alexander, 1998). Through their identification with fan objects, people helped to define themselves. Fandom appeared more positively than it did previously in the cultural industries themselves, which nourished their fan communities in a highly competitive market (Kellner & Collette-VanDeraa, 2008).

A third phase of fan studies has emerged, as claimed by the editors of *Fandom*, in which studies of fans and fan objects expanded from looking at individual tastes and participation and examination of fan objects to “investigation of fandom as part of the fabric of our everyday lives”. These fan studies aimed “to capture fundamental insights into modern life” (Gray et al., 2007, p. 9). Thus, studies have broadened the analytic scope to a wide range of different audiences reflecting fandom’s growing cultural currency (Hills, 2002, 2007; Sandvoss, 2005).

Fan activism, as a more specific subject under fan studies, however, has rarely been explored in terms of how its conceptualization evolved over these three waves. For many years, according to Rowe and his colleagues, “fan activism was regularly read as grass-roots resistance to cultural capitalism and its colonization of the life worlds of those whose authentic relationship to their cultural forms, identities, and practices cannot be reduced to disciplined, obedient consumption” (Rowe, Ruddock, & Hutchins, 2010, p. 299). For example, the Internet-based fan community challenged the narrative construction of the romantic relationship between Michael Scofield and Sara Tancredi in the television drama *Prison Break* (Knaggs, 2010). However, in comparison to social movements seeking political democracy or the

rights and dignity of disadvantaged groups, fan activism embodied as complaints and outrage might appear as little more than a celebration of hobbyist trivia (Rowe et al., 2010) or immaterial labor serving the global capitals (Andrejevic, 2008).

Henry Jenkins (2006b) raised fan activism out of the consumerist or cultural domains and laid out the ways in which fan activities start to change politics. Set against the backdrop of media convergence, fans as consumers of media content were offered different technologies to bring the flow of media under their control and to interact with other fans. A participatory culture, in contrast to the older notion of passive media culture, emerged as a networked practice, as well as a collective intelligence. Fan communities became knowledge communities that creatively appropriate and transform materials borrowed from mass culture, which empowered these communities in their relationship with corporate media. So far, this new power has been inserted into the entertainment system. Moreover, it has the potential to be inserted into the political process.

The gap between participatory media culture and participatory political culture is not a small one. How does activism in cultural forms become translated and transferred into activism in politics? Jenkins (2006b) suggested that citizens started to apply what they learned as consumers of popular culture toward political activism. For instance, election-related video clips on YouTube show how participants applied their skills learnt from making amateur fan movies to making political discourse. Another transferable factor between fan and political activism is agency: games like *The Sims Online* cultivate a sense of agency among players and encourage them to participate in civic engagement. In addition, fan communities provide a space or structure that could be used to support political activities. This structure provides mechanisms of collaboration that foster expertise other than official sources, production that challenges corporatized or politically controlled discourses, and circulation that invites diverse responses. These fan spaces are not overtly political and, thus, have lower stakes in bringing politics closer to the everyday experience of citizens, as well as being less policed by ideological powers. In short, Jenkins saw the potential of skills, sense of agency, mindset of collaboration, and structures supported by technologies (which in total is named participatory culture) being transferable from cultural consumption to political engagement.

Media, culture, and politics in China

In the specific context of China, Marxist ideology and the Communist Party have exerted such a great influence on drawing the ideological boundaries of political, social, economic, and cultural activities that China has been regarded as the world's largest authoritarian regime (Zheng, 2007). However, with the implementation of the socialist market economy, and particularly with its entry into the World Trade Organization in 2005, China has taken quite an active role in receiving the influx of foreign capital, values, cultures, and their consumption (Fung, 2009; Tan, 2011). The top state agenda of economic expansion has put aside the intrinsic contradiction between Marxism and consumerism, as well as putting aside the cultural differences. This has led to a multiplication of popular voices, values, ideals, and paradigms that have been generated, circulated, and consumed in the forms of magazines, comic books, idols, television programs, popular movies, and various digital content, both online and offline.

However, this multiplicity of popular culture is still subject to state control, either directly or indirectly. Censorship in China has done a thorough job in suffocating free views and opinions expressed in mass media. The “market-driven popular culture and soft entertainment” actually “serve a conservative role of social pacification and, thus, function to sustain the party’s continuing political dominance” (Zhao, 2008, p. 223). Meanwhile, with a new market economy, the party-state increasingly and selectively incorporates transnational and domestic private capital into various media and communication sectors. In such a system, state capital occupies the “commanding heights” while private capital does the heavy lifting, such as running retail shops or making risky investments in teleplay production. This enables the state to keep ideological control while making the media and cultural markets responsive to popular tastes. During this process, the state has taken more regulatory, managerial, and gate-keeping roles, accumulating capital through rental seeking and the strategic control of media, while outsourcing the bulk of media production and distribution work (Zhao, 2008).

As to the Internet, supposedly offering “an imagined empowerment for netizens, who can, for the first time, intervene in the formation of an institutionalized narrative” (Gong & Yang, 2010, p. 8), it actually has quite limited power in acting as an alternative public sphere for political engagement in China (Zhang, 2006). The seven internet service providers available in China are either state-owned or state holding companies under the direct supervision of major government ministries. The multi-layered and self-censoring structure of the Internet filtering system in China is found to be “the most sophisticated in the world” (Meng, 2011, p. 6). Websites that host liberal discussions are either suspended or forced to shut down, and individual netizens who cross the boundary face coercive measures, such as deleting posts or being arrested.

Due to the risk of publicizing confrontational opinions, the capacity of the online discussion space is considerably handicapped. The online sphere thus becomes a market place encouraging sensational performance and voyeuristic peeping. The increase of the Internet population “leads to the prevalence of popular taste on the web, with a tendency to sensationalism nurtured by plebeian curiosity and parochial imaginations” (Li, 2010, p. 73). The news arousing public responses is often associated with national pride, the international image of China (e.g., the China–USA relationship or the anti-Korean debate) or gossip and scandals about celebrities and social elites.

As entertainment and popular culture proliferate across the Chinese media landscape, fandom has become quite a relevant and prevalent phenomenon in contemporary China, with fan objects ranging from popular singers, movie stars, and sportsmen to teleplays, film franchises, and video games. Fans exist anywhere – in online clubs, forums, or at the scene of concerts and other events. On one hand, these fans are active consumers constantly engaged in material consumption activities connected to direct products (e.g., music albums, DVDs, and concert tickets) and derivative commodities (e.g., tie-in commercial goods and star-represented brands). On the other hand, they are dedicated to what Fung (2009) calls “immaterial labors”, in which they collectively participate in public activities supporting their idol and establish their rapport and mutual identification through sharing and communicating informational content or affective expression. To certain extents, fans begin to

assume an intriguing new role of prosumers that integrates fan production, fan promotion, and fan consumption (Yang, 2009).

Overall, the Chinese government has adopted a fairly tolerant attitude toward fan activities. As long as everything is kept at the material consumption level and within the party line, the authorities do not interfere too much, since the people's preoccupation with consumption and obsession with idols is "likely to divert them from the critical discourse of civic engagement that could undermine state legitimacy" (Fung, 2009, p. 297). However, if not by direct banning, the party-state still tries to exert its control in roundabout ways. Whenever the counter-forces of popular culture have approached an uncontrollable level, the state has tried to co-opt them actively into its propaganda machine (Fung, 2009). For example, as a gesture to accommodate the expressive individuals of the new generation, the state held its own music awards or reality shows to keep fans under control or to cultivate its own fans, so that it could immediately spot any organized collective activity that may threaten the "harmonious society".

Against the backdrop outlined above, the optimistic prediction from Henry Jenkins regarding fan activism seems to be doubtful in the Chinese context. Are Chinese fans only entertainment seekers? Is their enthusiasm for cultural products purely driven by pleasure seeking? What are the motivations that drive fans to participate in cultural production or appropriation? How do the restrictions imposed by both political and commercial powers impact fans who want to spend their energy on causes beyond entertainment? Do new media provide any possibility for fans who actively participate in cultural consumption to become political activists?

Methods

We conducted a virtual ethnography to obtain insights regarding the communities' structures and activities. Virtual ethnography refers to the process of conducting and constructing ethnography with the virtual, online environment as the site of research (Evans, 2010). It provides the ability to make observations of and participate in computer-mediated cultures through a multitude of non-face-to-face methods. As the Internet is increasingly conceptualized as both culture and context for social interaction (Dominguez et al., 2007), virtual ethnography can "be used to develop an enriched sense of the meanings of the technology and the cultures which enable it and are enabled by it" (Hine, 2000, p. 8). While challenges may remain due to the difficulty in integrating and analyzing the heterogeneous data, online ethnography opens a new space where researchers can study the people whose online lives are also part of their real lives. To understand the very textures of social life as created and enacted through the Internet, it is essential for the researchers to enter the field to see how it functions to bring dynamics to the community and to become familiar with the technologies and communication tools the community members use to make their activities possible.

First, we used participant observations on websites, blogs, and microblogs to discern how the communities work in their day-to-day routines. These online spaces included seven community websites (yeeyan.com, dongxi.com, yiai.org, eastgame.org, yyets.com, sfileydy.com, and ocourse.org), five dissemination websites (v.163.com/open/, tv.sohu.com/open/, verycd.com, tudou.com, and youku.com), one blog (Yizhe, i.e., yyyyiiiii.blogspot.com), and the microblog accounts of the corresponding

actors. One of the authors was a registered member of most of the community websites and the other author followed the players through microblog and feed subscriptions. One researcher has been a passive observer since 2009 when the temporal shutdown of Yeeyan made headlines. The researchers took advantage of their experience to explore the content provided by the websites. In addition, sub-sites, forums, groups, and various functions were studied, as well as site documents (e.g., FAQs, about, help, and terms of use) and relevant news reports.

In-depth interviews through instant messaging tools (e.g., MSN, QQ, and GTalk) and emails were conducted with 23 members of these online translation communities during April and May of 2011. The interviewees included founders, project managers, and contributors from the communities. One staff from a portal website that worked with these communities was also included. We started with contacting webmasters and active members who could be identified through the ranking on the websites. We then utilized the snowball sampling technique to recruit more interviewees. During the sampling procedure, we intentionally sought for diversity in terms of personal background, opinions, and community affiliations. Our final sample was fairly representative of the different actors involved in the online sphere of translation communities, including Zimuzu (subtitle groups, four interviewees), information-oriented translation websites (eight interviewees from Yeeyan, two interviewees from Yizhe, and seven interviewees from Dongxi), specialized translation communities (one interviewee from Ocourse), and popular websites (one interviewee from Netease). Our interviewees ranged from college students to working professionals to one self-employed person. Most of them were amateur translators but we also interviewed one professional translator. The gender breakdown was about even.

Written consent from the interviewees was obtained through emails when we first contacted them. Each interview took from one to three hours with an average of 1.7 hours, depending upon how much time the interviewee had available to talk. One interview was interrupted due to a work issue and the interviewee was away for one hour before the interview resumed. An interview guide with 40 questions divided into four sections was used as a rough guideline during the interviews. However, the questions were not limited to those listed in the guide and not all questions were asked of each of the interviewees.

From fans to online translation communities

As the influx of foreign cultural products became evident in the 2000s, Chinese consumers' needs for both information and entertainment produced outside of China became acute. Unfortunately, the policy infrastructure did not allow a free flow of foreign cultural products. On one hand, the import of such products was strictly limited to a few institutions (e.g., China Central Television), as well as to a small number of products (e.g., 20 foreign movies per year), under the claim of protecting local cultural industry. On the other hand, the imported cultural products were often censored and edited to remove politically sensitive content. Thus, Chinese audiences were left with no choice but to look for the complete versions of foreign games, movies, and television dramas by themselves.

The emergence of broadband Internet in the 2000s opened up the possibility of obtaining such products without going through the official venues, such as television channels, movie theaters, and DVD retails. Fans residing in a market where access to

a cultural product was guaranteed (e.g., American fans of *Prison Break*) could upload it to the Internet to share with their fellow fans, but the product was still in its original language. As most Chinese have insufficient English skills to understand the product, translating such foreign entertainment content became necessary for Chinese fans to enjoy them fully. To fill this need, the fans came together to build communities to collaborate on translation tasks.

The earliest translation communities were formed around 2001–2002 by fans of Japanese comics and computer games. Shortly afterwards, fans of foreign movies and television dramas started to build their own communities. These movie or television drama fan communities are often called Zimuzu (literally meaning subtitle groups), as they essentially provide subtitles in Chinese. The popularity of American television dramas, such as *Friends* and *Prison Break*, has brought subtitle groups a great amount of online visibility. By 2007, the most well-known groups were Yidianyuan (Garden of Eden, YDY for short), FengRuan (Wind Soft, FR for short), and Renren Yingshi (Everyone's Video, YYeTs for short). The first two communities have about 400 regular translators and the third has about 200 translators. These three communities, along with numerous smaller ones, have become an influential force in producing and disseminating translated foreign entertainment content in China.

The evolution of Chinese online translation communities did not stop at subtitle groups. The format of distributed and collaborative projects was carried on to translation tasks of different natures. Chinese netizens who were attracted by foreign mass media content started to join Web 2.0 communities to translate news, analyses, talks, and speeches conveyed in foreign languages. Yeeyan became a pioneer in this domain by signing agreements with foreign mass media, such as the *Guardian* and *Forbes*, to translate their content into Chinese. Different from the grassroots nature of the subtitle groups, Yeeyan is an Internet start-up founded by returnees from the Silicon Valley. Interviews with its founder Jiamin Zhao showed that Yeeyan was aimed at making a profit from the first day of its inception.² Its commercial model focused on a “hierarchical crowdsourcing” approach similar to that the subtitle groups had taken. In his email reply to our interview questions, Zhao explained that a hierarchy is necessary for controlling the quality of translation whereas the majority of contribution comes from the “crowd”.

The subtitle groups and Yeeyan-type Web 2.0 sites would not have been possible without the infrastructure provided by the Internet. Various technologies were used to facilitate the hierarchical crowdsourcing mode of collaboration. Taking American television dramas as an example, an episode is first recorded and shared on a BitTorrent (BT) site located in Europe or the US. A group of transportation editors put it on a Korean or Japanese server, as the Chinese Internet connects to these two countries much faster than it does to Europe or the US. At the same time, overseas members who live in the foreign countries record and upload subtitle files in English. Source editors are responsible for downloading these source files and uploading them to Chinese servers. A single episode is broken into multiple sections and multiple translators download their parts. Then a proofreader is responsible for checking all the translations. When proofreading is finished, all the segments are put back together into one episode by timeline editors, who also check the correspondence between subtitles and scenes. The final products are then sent to dissemination websites, such as shooter.com (for downloads of subtitles), verycd.com (BT seed-sharing website),

and Chinese YouTube sites (e.g., tudou.com or youku.com). The whole procedure takes just five hours to complete.

For information-oriented translation sites, like Yeeyan and Dongxi, translators can “claim” an article for translating from article databases categorized into different topics. After being proofread by the site editors (mainly for a quick filtering of sensitive or obscene words), the translation is posted on the website. In some cases, the editors may “assign” articles to capable translators.

The site may hold projects for a special occasion, for example translating a book on earthquake knowledge one year after the Wenchuan earthquake. The editors will recruit project managers and translators from the site for that specific project. The candidates will first finish a trial translation and send it back for editor evaluation. If the translation quality is good enough, the candidate will be assigned part of the book to translate, the amount of which depends on the pre-negotiated work schedule of each translator. After all the parts are done, the project manager or site editor will proofread for grammar and style before combining them into a complete whole. These virtual structures have proven to be highly efficient in any kind of translation task, regardless of its content.

While subtitle groups seem to focus on entertainment, the Yeeyan-type websites show an emphasis on information. This division becomes seriously blurred when it comes to translating open courses. When prestigious universities, such as Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard University, began to provide free videos of their courses to the public, members of the Chinese translation communities showed great interest. YYets, TLF, and Yeeyan became three major players in translating open courses.

The same virtual structure that was used to translate *Prison Break* was applied to open course projects with only one significant difference: the translators must have some knowledge regarding the topic. As the open course content did not have serious copyright issues, mainstream portal websites (e.g., Netease and Sohu) became part of the dissemination websites. Each of them established its own open course page by collecting courses translated by various communities. Netease also provided its own translations by hiring freelance translators from both the Yeeyan-type websites and college students majoring in English.

From November 2010, when Netease first officially presented the videos of the world-famous universities’ open courses, to August 2011, the translated open courses posted on the Netease platform added up to 6000 episodes (about 9000 hours). In late 2011, the amount of courses translated reached 200 hours per month. The content of these open courses covered everything from arts, humanities, and social sciences to computing and all kinds of natural sciences. The open course project has been well received by both traditional media and the public (including non-netizens).

A dynamic Chinese online translation sphere has been formed through the collective effort of translating open courses since 2010. The fans’ volunteered contributions to open courses show that these fans are not just entertainment seekers who try to maximize their pleasure. If pleasure seeking is not the only motive that drives fans to contribute, what are the fulfillments and satisfactions these fan-translators are looking for? How do these motivations connect to who they are and what they do in their everyday lives? The next section addresses such questions.

From personal interest to public good

According to the interviews, the strongest force that drove fans to join and keep working in these groups was an interest and/or hobby. When asked why they were doing this, all our interviewees used at least one of the following statements: “I am interested in ...”, “For personal hobby”, “It’s my interest”, or “I just like it”. Most of these voluntary translators were young people in their twenties or thirties, either employed or studying in colleges. Although their activities required professional skills in translating from a foreign language to Chinese, only a small number of them actually specialized in a foreign language. They rarely expected any material profit from these activities (extra money, for example), but simply considered them a good way to spend their leisure time.

Interest in the source texts played an important motivating role, especially in terms of choosing what to translate. Yeeyan has its own original article database from which translators can select articles to work on, but translators tended to choose articles from sources other than the database. They wanted to translate what appealed to them and what they thought of as good quality, no matter how many clicks or views they would get. For example, one respondent said, “I saw an article, and I liked it so much that I cannot help it, so I translate it”. It also had something to do with the translator’s aptitude. For instance, one interviewee specialized in information technology (IT). When he saw an English piece about IT, he translated it because he enjoyed it and thought he could come up with a professional translation. This “interest principle” also applied to open course translation, which was initiated by someone who was interested in the topic before he/she could recruit a team of others who were also interested.

These translators were also interested in language learning or translation *per se*, which helped to maintain their proficiency in the language. In the process of doing various translation works, their skills greatly improved. From this improvement, they harvested ever-increasing confidence, passion, and enjoyment, as English skills are currently considered a crucial qualification for job hunting in China. Many college students and working people take great pains in learning English by attending specially designed training courses, so that they can obtain the various English proficiency certificates needed as a competitive advantage in job hunting. However, when asked if they wanted to acquire any credentials from what they did, the interviewees usually said, “Well, no such plan ... It really doesn’t matter. It’s only a hobby”.

Some of the translated content had social, political, or educational meaning, such as the open courses from prestigious universities or news articles from Western media that provided views about China that differed from the local mainstream voices. In these cases, the translators seemed to take on a grand civic responsibility to open up people’s mind, broaden their horizons, and offer them different kinds of knowledge. They believed that what they communicated to the public was of great significance and could bring various benefits to the receivers. However, when asked, “Which is the stronger motivation, for yourself or for the public?” they tended to put their volunteerism into the personal category, while a few considered the two as not conflicting but complementary.

One respondent said that his activities in Yeeyan were purely out of personal interest: “As one’s ideal way of living is to fulfill each passing whim, I am actually making my whim come true”. A highly active TLF member, who was also an open course team supervisor, said bluntly:

Actually, I think all my translation activities are for myself. “I want to help netizens to learn English better, so I want to translate the subtitles?” No one thinks like that ... it is the same for open course; I like it, so I do it. It’s like Adam Smith’s theory – we promote the public interests while we are pursuing our own interests.

Therefore, it all comes back to the process of self-fulfillment and self-improvement. Another contributor from TLF, who had quit his job in real life and set up an independent open course Zimuzu website, spoke in the same vein: “(m)y job is boring and meaningless ... I just want to live the way I want ... there are more personal elements involved. People always speak highly of me, but I am really not that great”. While he thought public good was important, it was not his first priority.

Although the translators believed it was necessary and important to let the public know about alternative views, they did not hold the unrealistic hope that a couple of articles would exert significant influence. While they can try their best to translate, drawing an audience is quite another business. As one interviewee said, “(t)hose who are interested will come to read on their own; those who are not will not read anything, even if we send articles to them. I will not impose my views on others. As long as I know, nothing matters”.

Although their primary motivation to do such voluntary work was not specifically to enlighten the public, they did feel more motivated to continue or to excel in their work when they received positive feedback and appreciation from the readers/viewers and their fellow translators. They acquired a sense of distinction from the recognition that they were unique and extraordinary. As one subtitle translator said:

Sometimes when I chatted with people and mentioned that I am a Zimuzu contributor, they would say, “Really? That’s cool!” and then I feel quite good about myself. It’s like “Wow, I am awesome!” It’s not purely about my English skills, but about that the subtitle of this movie is done by me, and what I have done can be seen by other people. It feels awesome.

While the motivation of participating in media production (translation in particular) is fairly fandom-like, the effects of such self-interested actions can spill out of the realm of fan culture. How does fan activism transfer from media production into civic engagement? Which components of fan activism are transferable and how are the components transferred? The following section addresses these questions.

From participatory media culture to participatory civic culture

The case of open course translation indicated a turn of fan communities from entertainment seeking to knowledge sharing, an activity that could be considered part of civic education. Although our evidence was not strong enough to say that this phenomenon was representative of the entire cybersphere in China, the cases cited below showed a possibility of components in supporting fan activities being transferred to civic activities. A good example is the fact that one of the most popular courses is “Justice” from Harvard University. If a topic like justice does not directly mobilize the Chinese to change their political situation, it at least serves the purpose of educating the Chinese about civic value. The fact that this is the second best received course³ until now suggests that the knowledge shared through translated open courses is definitely not just instrumental (e.g., how to make iPhone applications) and oftentimes the values and principles entailed in the courses are what attract both the translators and the audiences.

However, the transfer from translating entertainment content to open courses was not a simple one. According to Jenkins, four things can be transferred: skills, sense of

agency, mindset of collaboration, and structures supported by technologies. What is evidently transferable is the collaboration mechanism, the virtual structure that has been used in translating movies and television dramas. However, the biggest challenge was the expertise required. Although expertise played a role in translating entertainment content (e.g., dramas about doctors require medical expertise), the depth of knowledge needed to translate university-level specialized courses was far more demanding. A solution was to include translators who have a background in the specialty. As many translation communities' members were college students, it was not impossible to include at least one translator who had a similar background in the project team.

There are still times when there are no real experts in a highly specialized field. Translating "Astrophysics" from Yale University was one such case. The leader of this project was a girl who majored in economics. She had no knowledge in astrophysics before she decided to take on the responsibility of supervising this project. However, lack of expertise was not a barrier to her as the mindset of collaboration made her believe that any problems could be solved through collective efforts. Firstly, she relied heavily on online information from Google, Wikipedia, and so on, to educate herself during the process of translation. Secondly, her team members debated on the translation whenever there was confusion. Finally, when knowledgeable audiences sent back comments, she immediately updated the translations.

As most of the translators were not foreign language majors, they improved and maintained their language sufficiency through the regular translation of foreign content. However, the skills transferred into open course translation were not just about the language. The astrophysics example showed that the skills of learning by oneself, peer-learning, as well as new media literacy, such as crowdsourcing and searching, were transferred into the success of open course translation. As stated by the project leader of the astrophysics course:

Astrophysics courses mentioned the big bang. Then I looked through all the material I can find about big bang theory, and then there was the Hubble theory, there was stars, etc. I searched for tons of material about each subject. I even studied logarithm again. So I don't know about the audience, but I do learn a lot myself.

What was also transferred was the sense that "I should be the person who does it" (i.e. sense of agency). While the average Internet user might wait for others (e.g., the cultural industry) to produce the content they want, this group of fans had a high self-efficacy in creating content they liked. They considered themselves not only capable but also responsible for translating their content of interest. One interviewee described it well: "Frankly speaking, I am afraid other people would ruin the subtitle (bad translation). I don't want to see that, so I do it myself".

As a final point of empirical note, we would like to clarify why participatory media culture is not likely to be transferred to participatory political culture in China for the time being. This has to be explained through the relationships between online translation communities and the government(s) at various levels. As content providers, these translation communities confronted the government(s) because of the information contained in the translated materials. At the end of 2009, Yeeyan was found to be down with a notice posted on its main page saying, "(d)ue to our errors in handling some of the articles on the website, we went against the relevant regulations;

therefore, Yeeyan has to temporarily shut off its server and adjust the relevant content”. Interviewees from Yeeyan confirmed that after this shutdown, stricter self-censorship was employed, such as the deletion of published articles that contained sensitive content and longer waiting times to be approved for publication.

Copyright appears to be the battleground where subtitle groups have to fight against commercial interests equipped with governmental assistance. In August 2010, YYets.com, one of the leading subtitle groups, announced its shutdown, as well as the confiscation of its server. It stated, “(w)e are trying our best to coordinate with relevant government agencies while raising funds from community members to buy new servers. We will also thoroughly clean out the content on our website”. It was reported that this shutdown was caused by YYets’ release of BT seeds for a local blockbuster. The two examples here illustrate how the government can pressure or even make such communities dysfunctional. With such density of surveillance and control, the transfer to translating political content seems to be unlikely, if not completely impossible.⁴

Discussions and conclusions

The fans gathered in Chinese online translation communities are very different from the image of obsessed, deviant, and dangerous fanatics often portrayed in traditional mass media. Instead, the fandom of foreign information and entertainment is practiced through calculated actions and efficient collaboration supported by Internet technologies. To realize the goal of enjoying foreign content, the virtual structure involves a hierarchical crowdsourcing procedure that cannot be completed without a close collaboration among multiple parties. Therefore, we first conclude that the fan activism observed in Chinese online translation communities is driven by the fans’ own deliberate choices.

The motivations that have driven fans to contribute are mainly interest-based. The primary interest is in the content itself, be it entertainment or information. These fans also hold an interest in learning or improving their language skills. After the fan communities were fostered online, being part of the communities gave the fans a sense of belonging, which helped to sustain their contribution. Although distinction coming from outside of the communities serves as an extra reward, these fan-translators consider the social impacts of their efforts a byproduct of pursuing their personal interest. We thus conclude that the translation communities found on the Chinese Internet were embarked on as fan objects although their implications were enlarged as their activities entered into new realms (e.g., civic education content).

Translating inaccessible foreign content voluntarily can be read as grassroots resistance to a market economy with Chinese characteristics, which means everything within the party line is free to be commercialized. Although commercialization has invaded almost every corner of the cultural space that it has been allowed to enter, current legal and policy constraints forbid the Chinese cultural industry from freely supplying foreign cultural goods to the local market. The strategic proscription emerges between the flooding of “Chinese” cultural commodities and the suppression of foreign content. On one hand, these fans take advantage of Internet technologies to access the content unavailable in the local market, which could be considered resistance to the state dominance on information flow. On the other hand, we have to be cautious. Although fans are not evidently subject to capitalist exploitation (e.g.,

working as free immaterial labor)⁵ because the cultural industry cannot fully capitalize on such labor yet, exploitation could easily happen when the constraints withdraw, thanks to the market readiness cultivated by these communities.

In addition, it was a concern that if fan culture dwells on hobbyist objects, fan activism would diverge from “more important struggles” (Rowe et al., 2010, p. 300), such as political progress. Jenkins (2006a) has shown that the fans’ energy is not limited to the cultural realm and when conditions permit, fans seamlessly transform into political activists, at least in the context of the US. The circumstances in China are quite different, as political participation is heavily controlled by the government and a fine line is drawn between everyday life and political life for ordinary citizens.

We have found that most Chinese fans are aware of this boundary and their activism is consciously limited to fan objects that are not apparently political. From self-censorship to overt censorship, we have yet to see political content produced by foreign media become a regular component seen in these communities. However, this does not mean that fan activism seen in these communities has nothing to do with the “more important struggles”. The open course program indicates that fan activism could be transferred from entertainment seeking to knowledge sharing, an activity that entails civic if not political values.

We see a possibility for a participatory civic culture to grow out of the collaborations made during the translation of entertainment content. The collaboration mechanism, including both the virtual structure and the mindset of working together, is easily transferred into translating civic education content. In addition, the collaboration experience cultivates a spirit of volunteering and sharing in the fans who are involved. The individual contributors are empowered by the successful collaborations in the sense that they perceive themselves as the agents of action, rather than waiting for others to make changes for them.

We conclude that the fan activism seen in the Chinese online translation communities is sustained primarily through the spirit of volunteerism and the sense of agency that it engenders. Its sustainability, however, is constantly challenged by censorship, copyright, and commercialization. The more for-profit members, such as Yeeyan, have to conform to censorship requirements if they want to keep their business legal in China. Copyrights also prevent the commercial players, such as the portal websites, from disseminating foreign movies and television dramas. If the Chinese government decides to enforce strict copyright protection, the visibility of the subtitle groups would be seriously compromised. The volunteer-based communities, such as the subtitle groups, are threatened by commercial forces as they try to commodify translation and devalue the spirit of volunteerism. These challenges make the sphere of online translation more rather than less dynamic, as different forces try to define this newly emerging phenomenon with their own logic.

This article focuses on how fan activism is sustained and challenged in the context of Chinese online translation communities. We argue that a participatory civic culture is emerging through the collaboration between fans translating foreign entertainment and information. This participatory culture distinguishes fans from the passively receiving audiences. Instead, fans actively select which content they want to consume, despite the structural constraints – be it censorship or commercialization. In addition, fans become producers when foreign content is recorded, transcribed, translated, and disseminated through an Internet-supported infrastructure. This participatory culture values volunteerism and the do-it-yourself spirit, as well as

sharing and collaborating. Although the constraints in China still forbid such culture to be fully extended to the political sphere, we suggest that future research should keep tracking these communities to see what kind of permissive conditions would encourage the transfer between fan activism and political participation.

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Notes

1. Hardt & Negri (2000) argue that immaterial, intellectual labor in high value-added sectors of the economy has become increasingly important in globalized capitalism. In addition to referring to the informational skills involved in the workers' labor processes, Lazzarato (1996, p. 133) defines immaterial labor as involving “a series of activities that are not normally recognized as ‘work’ – in other words, the kinds of activities involved in defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms, and, more strategically, public opinion”.
2. See the interview with Mr. Zhao Jiamin by the magazine *Programmer*, at <http://www.programmer.com.cn/4813/>
3. Second only to a course about happiness from Harvard University, according to a Netease survey (<http://v.163.com/special/endclass/endclass1.html>).
4. Translators who insisted on uncensored information left Yeeyan to build Yizhe, a blog located outside of the Great Fire Wall. Yizhe regularly publishes translated foreign news and analyses that are obviously critical of the Chinese government.
5. Fans as immaterial labor and fans as civic participants are not contradictory categorizations. Labor, since Marx popularized its usage, has always been a concept that contains the potential of liberation. The working class was hoped to be the agent of social revolution. The immaterial labor, according to Hardt & Negri (2000), possesses heightened powers of subversion precisely because of its importance in the capitalist economy. Instead of taking an essentialist view of fans and fandom, we recognize that fans can be both immaterial labor and civic participants.

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