

AMATEUR TRANSLATION AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF A  
PARTICIPATORY CULTURE IN CHINA – A NETNOGRAPHIC  
STUDY OF *THE LAST FANTASY* FANSUBBING GROUP

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## List of Abbreviations

AVT: Audiovisual Translation .....	13
CMC: Computer-Mediated Communications.....	87
CoP: Communities of Practice .....	68
CPRs: Common-Pool Resources .....	64
OYC: Open Yale Courses .....	134
P2P: Peer-to-Peer .....	17
SARFT: State Administration for Radio, Film, and Television .....	34
SPPA: State Administration for Press and Publications .....	34
TLF: The Last Fantasy .....	90
TS: Translation Studies .....	11

## Abstract

Triggered by globalisation and the increasing media convergence enabled by digital communication technologies, fansubbing has become one of the most observable aspects of Chinese participatory culture, both domestically and internationally. Informed by concepts drawn from the science of complexity and drawing on social self-organisation theory (Fuchs 2002), this study adopts a systems perspective and the method of netnography (Kozinets 2010) to bring to light the dynamics of collective identity formation in *The Last Fantasy* (TLF) fansubbing group, one of the most influential fansubbing networks in China. In particular, this study aims to reveal how TLF's fansubbers deploy digital technologies to facilitate their daily subtitling activities, build and maintain their relationships, and express a collective voice in relation to the specific media context in China. Findings from this study are used to evaluate the role played by amateur translation, as exemplified by fansubbing activities carried out by TLF's fansubbers, in China's participatory culture. It is hoped that this study will enrich our understanding of the phenomenon of amateur translation in an increasingly networked society.



## **Declaration**

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# Chapter 1 Introduction

## 1.1. Research Background

As a highly dynamic and inclusive interdisciplinary, Translation Studies (TS) has witnessed several paradigm shifts or ‘turns’ (Snell-Hornby 2006) over the past few decades, moving from the ‘linguistic turn’ (Catford 1965) in the 1960s and 1970s, to the ‘cultural turn’ (Lefevere and Bassnett 1998) in the 1980s, and the ‘sociological turn’ in the late 1990s (Bachleitner and Wolf 2004, Wolf and Fukari 2007). With the emergence of ubiquitous computing at the beginning of the 21st century, along with a growing demand for translation as a result of increasing global trade and communication, the focus of TS has shifted to the impact of technologies on professional translation practices (Cronin 2012).

The most recent paradigm shift is perhaps the “medial turn” advocated by Littau (2011: 261) that emphasises various aspects of media translation (e.g. “audiovisual translation; translation and film adaptation; translation at the movies; translation and global news broadcasting; translation and communication technologies”) and its role “in diverse mass-mediated globalised contexts”. Understanding media translation in all its complexity, Littau notes, requires us to move beyond an exclusive focus on “*translation and text* or *translation and translators*” and to take into account the “exosomatic contribution” made by media technology in the development of translation practices (*ibid.*: 263 emphasis in the original), including those carried out by Internet users engaging in the appropriation, translation, and circulation of a variety of digital texts (e.g. videos, games, websites, and open source content) to broadcast their own media experiences via social media platforms.

This emerging trend of “non-professional translation” carried out by “individuals not only without formal training in linguistic mediation but also working for free” is receiving increasing attention from TS scholars (Pérez-González and Susam-Saraeva 2012: 151). Drawing on the concept of “user-generated content” (Flew 2005: 35), Perrino (2009) and O’Hagan (2009: 97) introduce the term “user-generated translation” to describe the harnessing of

technologies by users, who voluntarily act as “remediators and direct producers” (*ibid.*) of media content that would otherwise remain linguistically inaccessible to them and/or their target viewers. Informed by Howe’s (2006) concept of ‘crowdsourcing’ that taps into the ‘wisdom of crowds’ (Surowiecki 2005), DePalma and Kelly (2008) coin the term ‘CT<sup>3</sup>’ (pronounced ‘CT cubed’, i.e. ‘crowdsourced’, ‘collaborative’, and ‘community’ translation) to refer to the corporate harnessing of translations created by Internet users in providing language services that would normally be assigned to in-house bilingual employees or professional translators. DePalma and Kelly (2011: 381) further note that the CT<sup>3</sup>-based approach to translation could replace the “traditional waterfall process known as T-E-P” (i.e. Translation, Edit, Proofread) with collaborative translation and revisions proceeding almost in parallel with source content creation and editing, thereby greatly reducing the time and cost required to produce translations.

Emphasising “the subversive potential of the crowd” (Cronin 2010: 5) inherent in the sort of collective, self-initiated action typical of community-based translation, other scholars (Baker 2009, Bo éri 2008, Pérez-Gonz ález 2010) have advocated the study of activist translation that challenges the traditional conceptualisation of translators as passive and intervention-averse individuals. Drawing on social narrative theory, Baker (*ibid.*) focuses in particular on the role of professionals in activist communities and on how such communities position themselves and their translated written texts through their narratives about themselves, their political agendas and activities. Drawing on insights from globalisation studies and media sociology, Pérez-Gonz ález (*ibid.*: 259) focuses instead on “*ad-hocracies*” of amateur subtitlers who “exploit their collective intelligence” by “[capitalising] on the potential of networked communication” to band and disband for short-term or sustained online activism. Compared to traditional online groupings of activist translators whose activities mainly revolve around translating written texts, activist subtitling not only involves the production of new language versions of audiovisual texts, but also “the appropriation and distribution stages of the mediation process” (*ibid.*: 284).

Due to their lack of professional training, non-professional mediators are less “indoctrinated” and, hence, “more prepared to ‘innovate’, play around with the

material in hand, retell it in a way that is likely to be more interesting and intelligible for their audience – often because they are themselves part of the audience” (Pérez-González and Susam-Saraeva 2012: 158). Implicit in such activities of interlingual mediation is a move away from the traditional conceptualisation of machine-human interaction as fundamentally dehumanising towards an alternative understanding of technology as a facilitator of human intervention or interaction. As Cronin (2010: 5) argues, the shift from “monadic subject of traditional agency – Jerome alone in the desert – to a pluri-subjectivity of interaction” points to the need for TS scholars to carefully evaluate the implications and consequences of non-professional practices enabled by new technologies, so that “conventional understandings of what constitutes translation and the position of the [non-professional] translator [can] be systematically re-examined” (*ibid.*: 1).

As the best-established form of non-professional mediation, fansubbing, or subtitling carried out by fans of Japanese *anime* (in a narrow sense), has existed long before the digital era since the late 1970s. Despite its long history, fansubbing has only recently been acknowledged and recognised by TS scholars (Munday 2008). Much of the existing literature on fansubbing has been authored by specialists in Audiovisual Translation (AVT) with an interest in the production workflow of fansubbing (Dáz Cintas and Muñoz 2006, Pérez-González 2006); its ‘abusive’ break with subtitling norms (Nornes 1999, Caffrey 2009); ‘interventionist’ approaches involving a creative deployment of traditional meaning-making codes (Pérez-González 2007); and extensive domain-knowledge possessed by fansubbers (O’Hagan 2008). The norm-defying practices of *anime* fansubbing have been characterised as a search for ‘authentic text’ (Cubbison 2005, O’Hagan 2009, Caffrey 2009), which may have become “the seed of a new type of subtitling for the digital era” (Dáz Cintas and Muñoz *ibid.*: 52). Pérez-González (2012) and Dwyer (2012) further point out that the subversive practices typical of *anime* fansubbing represent expressions of resistance against global capitalism and its cultural manifestations, often driven by fansubbers’ desire to effect aesthetic change. On a more critical note, concerns have been expressed about the potential threat on the translation industry brought by the ‘mass amateurisation’ of the

otherwise highly specialised AVT (Ferrer Simó 2005, García 2010), and the inferior quality exhibited by non-professional subtitles (Bogucki 2009).

The above literature tends to privilege the amateur subtitling of *anime* as the central form of fansubbing, “emphasising its formal and textual difference to mainstream, commercial AVT while downplaying its heterogeneity and geopolitical complexity” (Dwyer 2012: 219). Recent studies conducted by scholars in media and cultural studies on fansubbing as a globalised participatory media fandom have brought to the fore the proliferation of non-*anime* fansubbing groups. These groups often translate various source materials (e.g. US, South Korean, Chinese and Taiwanese films and TV drama series) into a broad range of target languages, filling the gaps between the increasing demand of global consumers for audiovisual media content across temporal, spatial and linguistic barriers, on the one hand, and the territorially and technologically bound model of distribution at the heart of the media marketplace (Lee 2011, Barra 2009, Hu 2006), on the other. Placed in the bigger picture of participatory media consumption, amateur AVT is far too complex to be treated as a phenomenon exclusively related to *anime* subculture.

Against the backdrop of digitisation and media convergence, amateur subtitlers can be seen as ‘prosumers’ (producers-consumers) (Toffler 1980) or ‘produsers’ (producers-users) (Bruns 2005), capitalising on the affordances of digital technologies to engage in the ‘co-creation’ (Banks and Deuze 2009) of media content – a process which is often driven by “self-referential properties in that certain values, beliefs and practices are preferred over others” (Deuze 2006: 71). Such co-creational activities contribute to the consolidation of a new type of social production, formalised as ‘commons-based peer production’ (Benkler 2006), outside the property- and contract-based models of firms and markets. Through networked communication and collaboration, ordinary citizens are likely to make themselves more visible and audible through ‘self-mediation’ practices (Chouliaraki 2010); these involve the affective or performative employment of semiotic resources to represent “authentic” individual or collective voices in the new environment of “technologised or hypermediated textualities” (*ibid.*: 229). The public recognition of ordinary voices also entails releasing the democratic potential inherent in self-mediation, “insofar as such

practices can facilitate associative relations among strangers and may thus lead to networked forms of collective identity and social action” (*ibid.*: 228).

Highlighting such democratic potential, some scholars (Benkler 2006, Jenkins 2006) conceptualise participatory forms of media co-creation as an empowering force that may foster participatory democracy and revitalise a truly engaged and participatory citizenship. On the other hand, there are many suggestions in the literature that commons-based peer production models (e.g. Wikipedia) cannot “escape the proprietary imperatives embedded in the Web’s network architecture” (Langlois and Elmer 2009: 774). While networked technologies have provided consumers with unprecedented leverage to meaningfully reshape the media content they consume, the same technologies have also been pivotal as a means for commercial media companies to integrate consumers into their production processes (Terranova 2000).

The endeavour of media business to capitalise on the cultural/economic value of co-creational practices has been conceptualised within the framework of “immaterial labour, affective labour, free labour [or] precarious labour” (Banks and Deuze 2009: 424), which regards consumers’ voluntary free labour as essential to the economic logic of an increasingly knowledge/information-based society. A case in point in the audiovisual industry is the Internet start-up ViKi<sup>1</sup>. Appealing to a fast-growing and avid fan base, ViKi has managed to leverage crowdsourced subtitling to distribute copyrighted non-English/US media products to overseas markets for free through an online streaming platform. In spite of the potential tension between ViKi’s profit-driven nature and the not-for-profit spirit of fansubbing, ViKi’s model “adds complexity to the fansubbing landscape” (Dwyer 2012: 224), further refuting the assumption that fansubbing practices are necessarily *anime*-specific, non-commercial and copyright-infringing, while demonstrating the empowering potential of fansubbing as “both a community-building device and mode of personal expression (*ibid.*: 238). This also makes it necessary to investigate whether and how fansubbing has fostered new forms of community and identity construction on the Internet. The role of fansubbing in contemporary Chinese society is precisely the main focus of this study.

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<sup>1</sup> ViKi website: <http://www.viki.com/> (last accessed 07 April 2015).

## 1.2. Research rationale and objectives

While recent scholarly efforts have helped to challenge commonly held stereotypes of fansubbers as unregulated intruders into the precarious AVT industry, they tend to treat fansubbing mostly as a static phenomenon, offering “snapshot” accounts of the textual features of amateur outputs; or the stages and technologies involved in the production and distribution processes of fansubs. Consequently, little is known about how the co-creation networks of fansubbers are sustained and reproduced *over time* through the integration of individual participants into such networks. The following questions therefore arise: To what extent does intelligence in a fansubbing network lie in the so-called “wisdom of crowds”? How does such collective wisdom shape the way participants negotiate and construct their identities through their ongoing interactions with both the social and technological dimensions of their community?

On a different note, few studies have given voice to fansubbing activities outside the United States and Europe, in particular, in areas where “media piracy is rife and [amateur] AVT often assumes a guerrilla-like dimension, becoming more a matter of everyday, *ad hoc* survival than choice” (Dwyer 2012: 225). Even fewer studies have considered whether fansubbing networks in piracy-plagued areas can be defined as communities, and whether these communities have acquired certain practices and values that can be seen as an expression of civic activism that may shift traditional balances of power, authority and influence in local areas, or may offer counter-hegemonic discourses against global capitalism and dominant patterns of translation flow.

As a country with significant piracy problems, China is at the centre of the international piracy epidemic. For instance, the piracy rate for the consumption of foreign films alone (and hence excluding other media products such as pirated games, software and music) stood at 95% in 2005 (Shipman 2007). Before the age of the Internet, pirated foreign content in the forms of DVD and VCD have helped to cultivate Chinese viewers’ taste for foreign cultures and lifestyles, particularly those in English-speaking countries. This was intensified by China’s connection to the Internet, which made it possible for Chinese citizens to access a greater number of foreign media products and accumulate information and cultural knowledge about them, ranging from the “text



(aesthetic, narrative, history, visuals and characters) to context (e.g. production, distribution, reception, and market and policy environments)” (Lee 2011: 1136). Such knowledge not only contributed to the emergence of consumerist values embedded in Western popular media in China, but also provided Chinese citizens with cultural references to express themselves and share their viewing experiences with each other (Wei and Pan 1999).

Fully aware of the economic possibilities of the information society, the leaders of the Chinese Communist Party have actively supported the development of the Internet as an “information highway” used for entertainment rather than civic purpose (Guo 2005). To prevent the Internet from becoming an effective tool for political dissent, the Chinese government has built up a robust system of Internet censorship, famously dubbed “The Great Firewall of China” that blocks sensitive information and content, as well as popular Western media platforms and social networking sites. Besides, the government has regularly cracked down on the unauthorised file-sharing of foreign media products through Peer-to-Peer (P2P) networks, often out of concern for their “vulgar” (低俗, *disu*) content – either in the form of sexually explicit or politically sensitive material – rather than for the copyright infringement that such file-sharing represents. Furthermore, a stringent import quota and a strict censorship system on foreign media products are in place to maintain ideological control over what is watched by domestic audiences. Consequently, there exists a huge disjuncture between Chinese media consumers’ capacity to access online information about their favourite foreign content and their access to the actual media content they have read about – as this is heavily constrained by relevant legislation. It is under such circumstances that Chinese fansubbing groups began to flourish on the Internet, working voluntarily around the clock to translate and circulate a wide range of unauthorised foreign content across various media platforms and social networking sites.

Despite the proliferation of Chinese fansubbing groups, many questions are still waiting to be addressed. At the micro level, we can explore the possible motivations for Chinese fansubbers to participate in the voluntary translation and circulation of foreign media products. Are these fansubbers contributing to cultivate a “cosmopolitan” mentality that “deconstructs oppositions between the national and the international” in the realm of symbolic communication

(Stevenson 2004: 68)? Or are they reinforcing pre-existing stratifications in mediated communication processes by further segregating those who have access to the technologies, knowledge and skills needed for meaningful communication from those who do not? Moreover, since Chinese fansubbers are operating in a strictly controlled media environment, it is imperative to find out how these fansubbers experience their daily subtitling activities, establish whether/how they internalise censorship during such activities, and explore the extent to which they define their individual/collective identities different from their Western counterparts.

To diversify and enrich research on amateur subtitling and fill some of the gaps in the current literature, this study draws upon ‘social self-organisation theory’ (Fuchs 2002, 2004) to simultaneously investigate the complex dynamics of the interaction between the people and material artefacts constitutive of fansubbing networks, through the method of ‘netnography’ (i.e. ethnography over the Internet) (Kozinets 2010). Time restrictions dictate that this study can only focus on one Chinese fansubbing online community. *The Last Fantasy* (TLF), one of the best-known and most influential groups among Chinese audiences, provides the data set to address the overarching question that drives this thesis:

*How does an online assembly of Chinese fansubbers create and sustain a sense of community through their collaborative subtitling activities?*

To answer this question, four separate but interrelated analyses are performed; each is designed to address a specific dimension involved in the process of collective identity formation among TLF’s fansubbers. The first dimension relates to the presence of a collective identity in the fansubbing group under study, and the specific meanings ascribed by group members to their shared identity. In order to pursue this strand of the analysis, an online questionnaire is conducted with various participants in TLF fansubbing group to investigate their motivations to join the group, the goals or vision they would like to achieve through their fansubbing activities, and their relationships with other individual members and the group as a whole. Data collected from the online questionnaire is thus used to address the first Research Question (RQ) formulated in this study:

RQ1: Does a sense of collective identity exist among TLF fansubbing group members and, if so, what does it mean for them?

In order to reconstruct and reveal how this sense of shared identity is formed and sustained during members' actual involvement in group activities through their interaction with both the social and technological dimensions of the group, a participant-observational approach is applied to examine the other three aspects related to community-building in TLF fansubbing group: its **social structure** (i.e. the model of hierarchical power distribution of the rights and duties that determine who can participate, use and produce group resources); **governance mechanisms** (e.g. rules of conduct, routines and rituals) in maintaining the group's social structure as it is; and the design feature of the group's **technological platform** in facilitating distributed collaboration and formation of collective identity among group members. Accordingly, three questions are formulated, which are:

RQ2: How is the collective identity of TLF fansubbing group manifested in its organisational structure?

RQ3: How is this collective identity maintained through collective group-specific practices?

RQ4: What forms of digital networked technologies are deployed by the group to facilitate the formation and management of its collective identity?

### 1.3. Theory and methodology

Informed by concepts (i.e. self-organisation and emergence) of complexity science and drawing on Fuchs' (2002, 2004) theory of social self-organisation, this study conceptualises a fansubbing online community as a self-organising system. The individual/collective actions within the community contribute to the production of digital resources stored on the group's technological platform, which, in turn, enables and constrains the development of specific social practices, codes of conduct, collective knowledge and the prevailing governance structure in the group. It is through the mutual dialectic between the bottom-up emergence of technological infrastructure and the top-down consolidation of social actions that a fansubbing network sustains and

reproduces itself. The constant technology-mediated interactions between participants in the network influence the ways in which they perceive themselves and each other. This may foster a sense of collective identity and feelings of togetherness among participants, both in terms of their similarity and their collective distinction from mainstream society. Only then can the network be defined as a community in its traditional sense, i.e. as a collectivity that “rests in the consciousness of belonging together and the affirmation of the condition of mutual dependence” (Tönnies 1998: 69).

Furthermore, a fansubbing online community, as a self-organising system, is embedded in and intertwined with society at large in a mutual shaping manner, with society being a self-organising supra-system itself whose structures (e.g. economic, political, cultural and technological) shape and are shaped by the actions of individuals within it (Fuchs 2002). From this perspective, the meanings, practices and values generated within the fansubbing group are not only reflecting but also contributing to the development of society as a whole. This systems-theoretical perspective entails that the emergence and evolution of any collaborative translation network must be examined by taking into account the broader dialectical processes of social self-organisation, rather than studying it as a more or less isolated setting. The dialectical nature of such processes is briefly outlined in the remainder of this section.

Currently, the overall social structures are still characterised as “exclusive” (Fuchs 2002: 53) based on the logic of competition and capital accumulation that underpins most modern societies, where the asymmetrical distribution of power and resources prevails, and the access to and control of such power and resources are largely in the hands of the ruling classes and the privileged few. The exclusive nature of social structures results in an “antagonism” (*ibid.*: 50) between competition and cooperation that shows up in all subsystems of society, with competition dominating all social relationships and leaving little room for direct democracy and immediate cooperation. As a result, the world system in which we are living has a very low degree of social self-organisation. Historically, this has led to social chaos, instabilities and global crisis – all of which endanger the survival of human beings.

Nevertheless, such antagonistic processes of social self-organisation cannot deprive human beings of bottom-up agency and the capacity to intervene in social systems. Through agency and intervention, individuals confronted by the negative effects of traditional social structures can organise themselves to find a desirable alternative and mount a challenge to the dominant dynamics of competition and exclusion. It is here that the importance of participatory culture such as fansubbing comes in. Its *modus operandi*, social-cultural inner workings, social norms and shared values may enrich our understanding of the opportunities created by fansubbing to intervene in market-based media production models that are oriented to competition and commodification, and to foster the formation and expression of collective identity that may challenge dominant social norms and discourses. This is particularly true in post-socialist China, where democratic constructs such as the rule of law, civil rights and independent judiciary are yet to be firmly established, and political opposition is extremely weak under the authoritarian rule of the Party-state.

In terms of the methodology chosen for this study, netnography is selected for two main reasons. First, the choice of netnography is driven by the adoption of a systems approach to theorise the organisational processes underpinning fansubbing networks. Netnography facilitates the researcher's close association and familiarity with such organisation processes, which is crucial to establish how and why individual network members choose to become full participants and, in so doing, contribute to a sense of shared identity and feelings of togetherness. This means that qualitative techniques (e.g. participant-observation, field-notes taking and interview) should be employed to generate data and address the research questions under investigation.

Nevertheless, the online environment in which a fansubbing network operates consists of a set of complex human and non-human elements, such as machines, human bodies, patterns of human behaviour and their associated symbolic meanings expressed through computer/textual-mediated communications – all entangled in specific configurations as the result of the organisational processes of the network. Such unique circumstances have to be taken into account when applying the general guidelines and traditions of 'physical' ethnography to the study of an Internet-based social group.

As a “qualitative method devised specifically to investigate cultures and communities present on the Internet” (Kozinets 1998: 1), netnography is highly suitable for the study of fansubbing – a phenomenon associated with online communities and an online culture itself. Just like its older sibling ethnography, netnography is “promiscuous” (Kozinets 2010: 42): it involves the deployment of a vast variety of qualitative techniques, and extends the traditional notion of a fieldsite “from the observation of co-located, face-to-face interactions to technologically mediated interactions in online networks and communities” (Bowler 2010: 1271). In doing so, netnography “uses computer mediated communications as a source of data to arrive at the ethnographical understanding and representation of a cultural or communal phenomenon” via the participant-observation of the researcher in the everyday life of an online group (Kozinets 2010: 60). This requires the researcher to consider how to approach the online fieldsite appropriately, how to interact in a participative yet unobtrusive way while capturing data during the fieldwork, and how to handle the fieldwork ethically in the unique environment of the Internet. As far as these aspects are concerned, netnography has developed a set of procedures that can be followed and adapted to suit the research objectives of this particular study: 1) planning: delineating and articulating the research topic and questions; 2) entrée: identifying and entering the online fieldsite of a culture or community; 3) data collection and analysis; 4) ensuring ethical standards; and 5) presenting findings (*ibid.*).

Secondly, despite the growing visibility of ethnographic approaches in TS research (e.g. Angelelli 2004, Flynn 2007, Inghilleri 2003, Koskinen 2008, Sturge 1997, 2007, Wolf 2002), few, if any, ethnographic studies have focused on non-professional translation practices. Even fewer have considered the applicability of conventional ethnographic standards to amateur mediation sites that go beyond traditional organisational boundaries and geographical constraints. This is another reason for this study to use netnography – a method that has not yet been fully incorporated by TS scholars – to examine, while exploring the usability of the method, the distinctive phenomenon of amateur translation on digital networks.

#### 1.4. Chapter outline

This PhD dissertation consists of seven chapters, exploring the role of amateur AVT in fostering a more participatory culture within the confines of the political realities, media control and censorship in Mainland China. **Chapter 2**, “Media convergence and fansubbing in post-socialist China”, contextualises fansubbing activities by Chinese media fans as a form of participatory media fandom resulting from the process of media convergence within China’s residual socialist system (which retains a number of capitalist characteristics). A myriad of forces that shape the current landscape of Chinese media sphere are identified: a Communist Party making compromises between ideological control and quasi-capitalist market operation; an increasingly commercialised and consolidated domestic media industry underpinned by maximal profit and market share; a global media industry desperate for minimum trade barriers and maximum copyright protection; and an ever more active audience promoting their own agendas in freer and more open online spaces. In particular, the Party-state’s capitalist market agenda plays a crucial role in distancing the Internet from total government oversight. While many overseas websites and services are blocked, domestic entrepreneurial efforts have created numerous commercial social media sites and Internet applications. These commercial services not only generate massive revenue for their providers and the government, but also make the Chinese Internet a lively and compelling space for Chinese citizens to inhabit, giving rise to various forms of fandom, such as fansubbing.

**Chapter 3**, “A systems approach to amateur subtitling networks”, aims to demonstrate that a dialectical theory of social self-organisation inspired by the science of complexity can be used as a robust theoretical framework to explain the phenomenon of collaborative, community-based translation initiated by amateur mediators on the Internet. To do so, key concepts in complexity science that are later adopted by sociologists to study networked forms of organisation in the contemporary media environment are introduced. Social self-organisation is then used to theorise the dynamics and practices of fansubbing networks. A working definition of fansubbing sites is then proposed: fansubbing virtual communities are self-organising systems defined by three kinds of commonality among community members: a common

technological infrastructure; a common set of rules of conduct in achieving shared interests and goals; and a sense of collective identity as the result of the continuous communication and collaboration between members during their daily group activities.

**Chapter 4**, “Methodology”, presents the rationale to use netnography in this study; a historical overview and a critique of the key concepts underpinning this methodological approach are then provided. Following the five-step protocol of netnographic research (i.e. research planning, entrée, data collection and data analysis, ensuring ethical standards and research representation), I illustrate how and why TLF fansubbing group is selected as a suitable online fieldsite, and how I approach the fieldsite and present myself during the fieldwork. The chapter then introduces three types of netnographic data captured and analysed during the research project: 1) archival data (i.e. pre-existing online materials archived on the fansubbing network website); 2) elicited data (i.e. the online questionnaire co-created by me and my research participants); and 3) fieldnotes (i.e. records of my observations and experiences in the group). At the end of this chapter, potential ethical issues raised by this netnographic study are outlined and examined. A set of solutions are devised and presented to ensure that the research project abides by widely held ethical standards and requirements.

The following two chapters, Chapter 5 and Chapter 6, present and analyse the data gathered during my fieldwork. **Chapter 5**, “Sense of collective identity in TLF”, focuses on the findings from the elicited sections of my dataset, i.e. the online questionnaire about whether/how TLF’s members perceive their shared identity and how they interpret the latter, in order to address RQ1 in this study. **Chapter 6**, “Collective identity management in TLF”, explores the archival data and fieldnotes collected during my fieldwork. Driven by RQ2, RQ3 and RQ4, these data pertain to material resources stored on the group’s platform, and the ways in which the group governs and maintains such resources as members gradually change their roles and status within the group. Starting as outsiders, they become newbies, and finally core members who know how to define and present themselves as important contributors to the group’s collective resources. In their capacity as core members, they can exert more



influence on communal decision-making to ensure the long-term survival and vitality of the fansubbing group.

In the last **Chapter 7**, “Conclusion”, I provide answers to the research questions, discussing the theoretical and methodological implications of this study, and proposing directions for future research.

## **Chapter 2 Media convergence and fansubbing in post-socialist China**

### **2.1. Introduction**

This chapter aims to map out the new media and communication environment that has given rise to and conditioned fansubbing activities in China. It starts with **section 2.2** which provides an overview of existing scholarly perspectives on new media practices in the era of digitalisation and convergence. **Section 2.3** explores the logic of the convergence culture that underpins current practices in the Chinese media landscape, influencing the interplay between media production and consumption, state control and individual autonomy, corporate enterprise and consumer creativity. Empowered by digital networked technologies, Chinese media consumers, particularly the youth who have been raised on and immersed in new technologies, are embracing popular cultures through a diverse range of fan activities. These not only reflect their lifestyles and views about the world, but also channel their reaction and even resistance to dominant social norms, technical protocols and government policies imposed by the Party-state. Drawing on concepts developed in the field of fan studies, **section 2.4** focuses on the rise of fandom in China and the ways in which Chinese youth cope with consumerism in times of globalisation and media convergence. This leads to **section 2.5**, in which the phenomenon of fansubbing in China and its tensions with media industries and government regulators are examined.

### **2.2. Media convergence and participatory culture**

Since 1969 when four universities in the United States established the first connection between computers, thus giving rise to the birth of the Internet, the world of information and communication has undergone a transformation without precedent in the history of humanity. We are moving from mass media to personalised media, from analog to digital technologies, and from the production/translation of content by a small number of professionals towards content created/mediated by ordinary users of media technologies, i.e. ‘user-generated content’ (Flew 2008) and ‘user-generated translation’ (O’Hagan

2009, Perrino 2009). Meanwhile, we are moving from a generation of citizens informed by traditional mass media controlled by a small number of ruling elites and gatekeepers to a younger generation that informs themselves primarily using the open and interactive Internet. While the potential of this new and shifting scene of Web-based participatory cultures is being celebrated, concerns are also being expressed about the growing attempts of media industries and policy makers to control and capitalise on the public desire for media participation.

Many scholars (e.g. Benkler 2006, Hartley 2008, Leadbeater 2008, Bruns 2008, Castells 2009, Shirky 2010) have sought to approach the emerging tension between grassroots and corporate media by adopting an integrated perspective that conceives media consumers in a symbiotic relationship with media industries and producers. This integrated perspective has opened up important new insights into the role of media in everyday life, as they have become so ubiquitous and pervasive that we are now living in, rather than with, a 'media life' (Deuze 2009) or a 'mediapolis' (Silverston 2007).

Jenkins (2006: 282), in particular, argues that we are live in an era of media "convergence", i.e. "a situation in which multiple media systems coexist and where media content flows fluidly across them". He proposes "convergence" as an umbrella term to refer to the profound and complex technological, cultural, economic and political transformations brought by digitalisation, with the aim to build a bridge between two opposite but equally important academic perspectives in media studies. The first perspective, which is associated with political economy, adopts a top-down approach, emphasising the power of media industries in promoting dominant ideologies of the ruling classes and foregrounding the extent to which social stratification is influenced by dominant trends of media production, use and content. The second strand, i.e. cultural studies, takes a bottom-up approach, arguing that audiences are able to interpret messages in ways that suit their own ends, build their identities and organise social movements from bits and pieces of information they have at their disposal.

Jenkins' (2006) work *Convergence Culture* advocates a third approach that recognises the "cultural hybridity which comes from the international

circulation of media content” (Jenkins 2001: 2) as the result of globalisation and the growing use of digital networked communication technologies. ‘Convergence culture’, Jenkins claims (2006:243):

represents a paradigm shift – a move from medium-specific content toward content that flows across multiple media channels, toward the increased interdependence of communications systems, toward multiple ways of accessing media content, and toward ever more complex relations between top-down corporate media and bottom-up participatory culture.

According to Jenkins (2006), this emerging new media landscape entails at least four major consequences: 1) the technological hybridity that allows separate media functions to be performed through a single device (e.g. laptop or smartphone); 2) the multiplication of media channels for the circulation of information and media content to maximise their reach to audiences with various media consumption patterns; 3) the emergence of vast media conglomerates with ownership of the entire chains of production and distribution (vertical integration) and control over various markets in the same sector (horizontal integration); and 4) more active and engaged audiences who will exercise various degrees of control over the flow of media and co-create content that is highly relevant to their lives. For Jenkins (2006), convergence is not to be understood merely as a technological process, but rather as a cultural process that is being defined on a *top-down* basis by decisions made by media conglomerates to expand their revenue opportunities across multiple delivery channels and *bottom-up* by decisions made by consumers to gain control of the media flow.

At the heart of the convergence culture is the restructuring of the relationship between media and audiences (Baym 2009). Drawing on the affordances of new technologies, ordinary citizens are able to “archive, annotate, appropriate, and re-circulate media content” (Jenkins 2006: 18). In the process, “technologies have altered the ways that consumers interact with core institutions of government, education, and commerce” (*ibid.*: 8). This new climate has fostered the formation of online “knowledge communities” (*ibid.*) formed by media consumers to create and share media resources, while taking advantage of their ‘collective intelligence’ (Lévy 1997) by pooling knowledge

and expertise to solve problems that arise on the way. In order to compete for eyeballs and wallets, media conglomerates in turn have to consider how their products are received and sometimes transformed by the consumers.

The ability of media consumers to influence mass media producers' decision-making to better suit the interests and perhaps the lives of the viewers has given rise to the phenomenon of "participatory culture" (Jenkins 2009), which challenges traditional models of passive media spectatorship and blurs the line between producers and consumers. Jenkins (*ibid.*: vii) defines participatory culture as a culture "with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby experienced participants pass along knowledge to novices".

Digital networked technologies have played a crucial role in expanding consumers' participation by allowing geographically dispersed individuals to claim affiliation with specific media products, and to use these products as inspiration for their own social practices, interaction and knowledge exchange. As a result, Jenkins (2006: 137) argues that increasingly "the Web has become a site of consumer participation", and envisions a world where everyone is potentially a producer as well as a consumer of media who believes his/her contributions matter, and who feels some degree of social connection with other participants.

While acknowledging the role of technologies in the development of participatory culture, Jenkins (2006) also notes that media convergence, collective intelligence and participatory culture are experienced within the brains of individual consumers – it is through the bits and fragments of information they extract from the surrounding media environment that they make sense of themselves and their everyday lives. In other words, technology without human agency remains technology, but technology amplifies the new trend of participatory culture and makes it available to a much larger segment of the population to the extent that media companies cannot ignore the demands and activities of today's technology-savvy consumers.

Despite the efforts made by media conglomerates to control participatory consumption activities or capitalise on the collective intelligence of consumers,

ordinary citizens and audiences are increasingly asserting their rights of participation. Just as corporations resemble “more dysfunctional families than well-oiled machines” (Jenkins 2006: 279), digital audiences are much more particularised and complex, exhibiting heterogeneous patterns of behaviour in which they access, use and respond to commercial texts across social media platforms.

Judging from this perspective, it can be said that “audiences and industry both seem to be gaining – and losing – power”, and that “media control seems to be concentrating and dispersing in the same transitional moment” (Jenkins and Deuze 2008: 7). This is why Jenkins (2006: 7) acknowledges that media convergence in the foreseeable future will still be a “kludge-like process”, where different media systems and participants (both media producers and consumers) struggle to find a clear integration. This also makes it all the more important to carefully analyse what audiences, in their shifting identities as ‘produsers’ (Bruns 2005, 2006) – a term evolved from ‘prosumers’ (Toffler 1980) – actually do with new media and technologies during their daily consumption activities.

To do so, we should cast off both utopian and dystopian rhetoric and offer a more nuanced account of the enabling and constraining factors influencing developments in grassroots communication and media co-creation (Jenkins 2014). In particular, we should not underestimate the barriers that hinder the realisation of a more sustainable and democratic participation, such as “time, space, access to social networks and command of the cultural competences required to interpret and deploy media materials in particular ways” (Murdock and Golding 2000: 79). As cautioned by Jenkins (*ibid.*: 270), “networked communications would not necessarily result in a more progressive, inclusive, or democratic culture”, unless people are willing to be active and act as not just users but participants fighting for a more participatory culture with every tool at their disposal.

From a similar standpoint, Couldry (2011) points out other factors that problematise our account of what a convergence “culture” might be. These factors include the socio-economic forces and political cultures across different countries, which stratify technological access, use and skills in the current

digital media environment. Since a digital divide still exists and is deeply shaped by age, gender, class and ethnicity, we should take into account other “broader stratifying factors which shape the spheres of action of different types of people in contemporary societies” (*ibid.*: 498). Hence, to identify the participatory potential of media technologies, we need to address questions pertaining to the concrete historical context in which convergence culture operates. In particular, we need to establish “what the terms may be under which who exactly is going to do what and with whom, and under which one can begin to decide whether something is politically rather than economically productive” (Verstraete 2011: 539). As pointed out by Benkler (2006: 26):

[t]he actual practices of human interaction with information, knowledge, and culture and with production and consumption are the consequence of a feedback effect between social practices, economic organisation, technological affordances, and formal constraints on behaviour through law and similar institutional forms.

Thus, starting from practices organised around media production, consumption and circulation within China’s residual socialist system, section 2.3 provides a historical account of the emerging convergence culture in China, on the one hand; and problematises the myriad of forces that shape the Chinese media sphere, on the other.

## **2.3. Media convergence and control in China**

### **2.3.1. Chinese media consolidation**

Since the launch of the Reform and Opening-up Policy<sup>2</sup> in 1978, China has experienced structural transformations, marked by its double-digit economic growth, high-tech industrialisation, ideological battles, social unrest and political reform. The media have played an indispensable role in presenting and

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<sup>2</sup> Originally proposed by the late Deng Xiaoping, the economic reform and opening up policy was formally adopted in the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the Communist Party held in 1978. The scope of the reform ranged from the decollectivisation of agriculture in rural areas to the privatisation and contracting out of state-owned industries in urban areas, from the reform of economic structure to structures in all other areas, and from internal economic vitalisation to the country’s opening up to foreign investment. Meanwhile, the Chinese political system has also undergone enormous changes, such as the separation of functions of the Party and Government, the delegation of power to lower levels, the simplification of administrative procedures, and improvements to systems of socialist democracy (Leng 1989).

facilitating these transformations, which in turn have also transformed the Chinese media landscape. Newspaper, television, digital media technologies and particularly the Internet are not only tools of ideological control and manipulation, but also sites of contestation and participation, through which new identities, subjectivities, and social relationships are produced. This post-Mao reform period corresponds to the so-called “post-New Era” (Wang 1992, Zhang 1992, Zhao 1992), a term used to characterise a sense of social and cultural crisis and a nationalistic desire expressed by Chinese political and economic elites to transform China into a modern nation-state. This nationalistic desire is characterised by “a radical attitude about modernisation embracing the existing modern as an absolute, universal order” on the one hand, and “a sinification impulse to restore a past cultural self-sufficiency – including a self-motivated course of evolution and transformation – in an equally absolute, universalistic manner” (Zhang 1997: 90). As a result, “modern China is the product of the conjoining of modernist discourses originating in the West and native institutions, historical social conditions, and native reaction-formation” (Ong 1997: 171).

This contradiction is manifested in the political ideology (i.e. “socialism [or rather capitalism] with Chinese characteristics” introduced by Deng Xiaoping at the beginning of the reform and opening-up), which suggests residual forces of the past (socialism) accompanied by emerging forces of the present (capitalism). Under this ideology, the Party-state became “increasingly indifferent to how citizens used their new commercial freedoms” to coordinate economic transactions and to strive for wealth (Davis 2000: 3). The economy’s dependence on market transactions and private entrepreneurship led to a “Consumer Revolution” (*ibid.*) by the late 1990s, where “millions of daily commercial exchanges not only calibrated the flow of material goods, they also nurtured individual desires and social networks that challenged official discourse and conventions” (*ibid.*: 1).

This was further complicated by China’s entry into the World Trade Organisation in 2001, after which the state was increasingly staking out traditional cultural resources to counter Western influence and reconcile the conflict between collectivism (Confucian morals and socialist ethics) and individualism (self-interests and wealth). All these forces, ranging from the



pre-modern to post-modern, from Chinese to non-Chinese, and from socialism to capitalism, have given rise to Chinese post-socialism as “a product of hybridity, non-synchronicity and contradictions” (Yu 2009: 6).

Such contradictory and incoherent characteristics of Chinese modernity are manifested within the Chinese media development, which is itself a reflection of and reaction to the ‘kludge-like’ (Jenkins 2006) convergence practices in the global media landscape. As an efficient means for achieving economic development as well as an important tool for disseminating propaganda and monitoring citizens’ behaviour, Chinese media have undergone a process of consolidation that has been described as “messy, protracted, confusing, and confused, littered with odd, even counterintuitive institutions, structures, and practices” (Zhao 2000: 3).

In the early 1990s, the Chinese media industry entered a rapid process of commercial revolution. Following the suppression of media democratisation during the 1989 Tiananmen movement, Deng accelerated the introduction of capitalist developments in 1992. This period was characterised by a shift from a media system based on state subsidies to one based on advertisement revenues, which was driven both by state planners from above and private media organisations and producers from below. State-planned and market-driven, Chinese media transformed “from being an instrument of political mobilisation and socialist indoctrination during the Maoist era to economic modernisation and image management in the reform era” (Zhao 2004: 186). This tension between state control and market imperatives significantly influenced the content of Chinese media, which directed affluent consumers to pursue personal wealth and comfort through the delivery of entertainment, business, and lifestyle content, while marginalising social groups such as farmers and workers. This “uneven liberalisation” of the media created “new winners and losers” (Chen and Lee 1997, Wu 2000), and (re)-allocated the discursive power in an increasingly stratified society.

By the mid-1990s, market decentralisation and fierce competition among media outlets to attract audiences and advertising revenues had undermined the central Party authorities and their propaganda objectives, as local bureaucratic and economic interests overrode the central role of the Party-state as the

ultimate manager of the state's media capital. Consequently, media concentration and mergers became a favoured strategy for the state to achieve the optimal integration of political control and market efficiency. Rather than driven by bottom-up market forces, the integration of Chinese media was pursued as a top-down state policy to achieve both political and market agendas. Meanwhile, the merger mania in Western media industries accompanied by China's preparations to enter WTO offered further reasons for the state to consolidate its domestic media industry in the name of protecting it against foreign media giants and the perceived negative influences of foreign cultural imperialism.

One of the biggest conglomerates formed during this period was China Radio, Film and TV Group based in Beijing, which combines resources of China Central Television (CCTV, the largest national TV network and monopolising importer of foreign TV programmes), China National Radio, China Radio International, China Film Group Corporation (the country's biggest film producer and monopoly importer of films), and other state film and cable network organisations (Yu 2009). Another was Shanghai Culture and Broadcasting Group, which monopolises all aspects of broadcasting, film and major cultural operations based in Shanghai (*ibid.*).

The messy and "mass" media consolidation gained momentum in 2002, when China boasted 47 media groups, with 26 newspaper groups, eight broadcasting groups, six publishing companies, four distribution companies and three movie groups (Li 2002). According to a document jointly issued by the Central Party Propaganda Department, the State Administration for Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT), and the State Administration for Press and Publications (SPPA) in 2002, these media groups were owned and supervised by the Propaganda Departments of the Communist Party at various national, provincial and municipal levels (Zhao 2004). Besides, senior management personnel in these media groups were appointed by and accountable to their affiliated Party committees at various levels (*ibid.*). In this way, the Party effectively separated its ownership over major media outlets from media management responsibilities.

These newly established media conglomerates served as effective instruments of ideological and political control for the Party-state to resist the perceived imperialism of Western cultural and media in the post-WTO international competition. After China's WTO accession, the state strove to strengthen its domestic media industry by focusing on delivering 'spiritual civilisation' content (Weber 2003) that revolved around traditional cultures (Confucianism), nationalism and socialist ethics to subtly demonise the West as immoral and decadent. Meanwhile, the state authorities continued to keep media under their control through a series of gate-keeping policies: the prohibition of direct foreign investment in press, publication, broadcasting, television and film; restrictions on import quotas of foreign television dramas and films<sup>3</sup>; strict censorship procedures for imported content<sup>4</sup>; and a ban on foreign satellite channels (Lin 2009).

Despite the Party-state's protectionist media policies, foreign media corporations were still enthusiastic to enter China's media market. Rather than engaging in the battle with the state, foreign media giants adopted what is called "localisation strategies" (Weber 2003) to adhere to the Chinese government's discursive construction of spiritual civilisation. Although some of them, such as CETV (AOL-Time Warner) and News Corporation, achieved major breakthroughs by receiving the permission to broadcast programmes approved by the government, the state still limited their operations in the affluent Guangdong Province, a province, due to its proximity to Hong Kong, has already had large exposure to foreign media content.

Elsewhere in China, foreign satellite channels can be only accessed in three-star (and above) hotels, government departments, media, academic, financial

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<sup>3</sup> According to Article 9 of the 《外国电视节目进口和广播管理办法》 (Administrative Measures for the Importation and Broadcasting of Foreign Television Programs) (2003), the import quota of foreign TV dramas was restricted to no more than 25% of the total television dramas and no more than 15% of prime time between 6 p.m. to 10 p.m. on domestic television. According to Article 4 of the 《电影管理条例》 (Regulations on the Administration of Films) (2003), exhibited foreign films in domestic theatres should not exceed one third of the total exhibited films each year.

<sup>4</sup> Chinese media outlets seeking to broadcast imported foreign content have to get approval from their local administrative bodies. After the initial approval, the content has to be censored and re-edited according to the guidelines issued by SARFT. The guidelines include a constantly updated list of topics banned by the Party, such as the glorification of violence, pornography, racism and superstition, and content of an anti-communist, anti-socialist and anti-Chinese or separatist nature, as well as anything that supports Western values pertaining to human rights, democracy and freedom of speech, and other content that violates the Chinese Constitution and laws (Jiang 2010).

institutions, and luxury residential complexes housing foreigners. Affluent domestic customers can also install their own satellite receiving dishes, which must be registered with the authorities. It is obvious that compared with ordinary Chinese television audiences, receivers of foreign satellite channels are further stratified into those of “three highs and one low – high official rank, high income, high education level, and low age” (Zhao 2004: 202).

China’s media commercialisation, consolidation and integration into global media industries, in short, are part and parcel of “socialism with Chinese characteristics” (Yu 2009: 17). The Chinese central government is carefully negotiating terms of participation and operation of non-state media capital, private capital and foreign capital in its domestic media market. This led to “turf war” situation where “print media must compete with broadcast media, national with local and regional media, domestic with foreign media” for market demand and audience preferences (*ibid.*), making the control of the media unpredictable and inconsistent.

After the introduction of the Internet and with the growing availability of broadband services and file-sharing technologies, free video downloading became an alternative way to consume media content in China at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Numerous BitTorrent platforms such as BTChina (launched in 2003) began to emerge. Facilitating unauthorised downloading of overseas films and TV series (mostly UK, American, Japanese and Korean films and TV dramas), these file-sharing platforms arguably helped to narrow the gap between the release windows of offline and online media distribution and consumption. Not long after the launch of these video sharing sties, they were forced to shut down or give up download services during the 2009 anti-piracy campaign (see section 2.5) initiated by the government as a way to tighten ideological control online while “capturing the opportunity in online video distribution when the market had grown big enough” (Zhao and Keane 2013: 729).

Since then, content providers wishing to operate were pressured to apply for licences from the government and restrict viewers’ access to overseas content with genres (e.g. “time-travel, fantasy, and reality shows”) banned by SARFT

(*ibid.*). A host of new online video streaming sites, such as Youku<sup>5</sup> and Tudou<sup>6</sup>, began to flourish on the Chinese Internet. Operating heavily on advertising revenues, all these content providers offer viewers free and copyrighted content, including domestic media products which can be also accessed on national television, as well as overseas TV drama series and films which, however, are still unavailable on TV. By the end of 2010, 62% of Internet users watched online videos, among which films and TV dramas were the most favoured choices, attracting 93% and 87% of online users respectively (Chinese Internet Network Information Centre – CNNIC 2010). While new media technologies may have provided Chinese citizens with new ways to consume media and access information, the state continues to develop new strategies and policies to consolidate its control over the use of the Internet.

### 2.3.2. Chinese approach to Internet regulation

Adopting similar strategies in dealing with domestic and foreign Internet companies by combining elements of capitalism, authoritarianism, nationalism and Confucianism, the Chinese state has so far arguably succeeded in its claim over Internet sovereignty and managed to “leap frog” the industrial phase with the help of information and communication technologies<sup>7</sup>. Due to the decentralised nature and universal connection of the Internet, media commentators, politicians and scholars in the West showed a great enthusiasm towards the Internet as a force for democratisation when it was introduced in China. *New York Times* columnist Kristof (2005), for instance, wrote that “it’s the Chinese leadership itself that is digging the Communist Party’s grave, by giving the Chinese people broadband”.

The Chinese government, on the other hand, is determined to regulate the Internet to its own liking. The White Paper issued by the Chinese State Council Information Office in 2010 outlines the Party’s basic principles regarding Internet regulation and proclaims that:

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<sup>5</sup> Youku website: <http://www.youku.com/> (last accessed 22 September 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Tudou website: <http://www.tudou.com/> (last accessed 22 September 2015).

<sup>7</sup> Borrowed from the American futurologist Alvin Toffler’s work *The Third Wave*, the phrase “leap frog” or “technological leap frog” is used by the Chinese government to refer to the idea of omitting a stage in economic development with the help of information and communication technologies, that is, of leap frogging the industrial phase and achieving, through informatisation (the third wave), the foundations of the second wave (industrialisation) (Damm 2007).

[w]ithin the Chinese territory the Internet is under the jurisdiction of Chinese sovereignty. The Internet sovereignty of China should be respected and protected. Citizens of the People's Republic of China and foreign citizens, legal persons and other organisations within Chinese territory have the right and freedom to use the Internet; at the same time, they must obey the laws and regulations of China and conscientiously protect Internet security<sup>8</sup>.

What is noticeable here is a clash between two totally different views on Internet sovereignty: a single connected Internet that is sovereign in its own right and a “bordered” Internet based on the territorial sovereignty of China. Instead of individual-based and rights-centred, China's Internet is state-centred, emphasising personal responsibilities over rights, maximum economic benefits, and minimal impact on the political stability of the one-party state. The size of China's Internet users and its centralised governance have resulted in the creation of a parallel Internet universe, the so-called ‘Chinanet’ (Anti 2012) heavily regulated and separated from the global Internet.

While thousands of international websites are blocked by the Internet filtration system (famously dubbed the “Great Firewall of China”) deployed by the government, the parallel Chinanet is booming. According to the statistics released by CNNIC (2014), China's Internet population reached 618 million at the end of 2013, which is by far the single biggest population online. With only about 44% Internet penetration, there is a lot of room for growth. Inside the Chinanet, instant messaging (84%), blogging (68%), video watching (66%), gaming (59%) and shopping (46%) are all popular activities. Due to the blocking of popular Western websites and social networking platforms, and the limitations and barriers that exist for other sites such as Google, China has developed domestic sites with similar functionalities to their foreign counterparts.

Instead of Google, Chinese netizens use Baidu ([www.baidu.com](http://www.baidu.com)), which is estimated to account for eight out of every ten search engine queries in China. Instead of Facebook, there is Renren ([www.renren.com](http://www.renren.com)). The closest thing to Twitter is Sina Weibo ([www.weibo.com](http://www.weibo.com)), which is actually bigger than Twitter

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<sup>8</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all the quoted Chinese texts in this dissertation are translated by the author.

in terms of both registered accounts and active users<sup>9</sup>. Although Youtube is blocked, people can share their videos on Youku ([www.youku.com](http://www.youku.com)) and Tudou ([www.tudou.com](http://www.tudou.com)). So far, the most successful Internet story in China is Tencent ([www.tencent.com/en-us/index.shtml](http://www.tencent.com/en-us/index.shtml)), a massive IT company for which it is hard to find any Western counterpart. Supporting a variety of web services, ranging from instant messaging (Tencent QQ, popularly known as QQ), blogging, e-commerce to multiplayer online games, Tencent is the third largest Internet business in the world after Google and Amazon. All these platforms are targeted exclusively at Chinese-speaking audiences and feature content created by and for Chinese audiences, which make these websites easier to use than those designed in English. As a result, many Chinese Internet users are reasonably content with these Chinese-language websites even though users with technological know-how are able to access foreign sites via proxies or circumvention tools (Robert *et al.* 2010). Backed up by the government, the Chinese indigenous Internet and the telecommunications sector continue to boost the country's economy and the Party's claim to legitimacy.

While the state has firm if not complete control over platforms run by state-operated media as well as e-government websites at county, city and provincial levels, by far the largest portion of the Chinese Internet is run by private Internet companies. Fully aware of the fact that the Internet is both vital and dangerous, Chinese leaders are determined to prevent the Internet from becoming a liberating tool in the way that participatory media tools provided by commercial companies empowered activists in places like Egypt. Thus, besides the Great Fire Wall, the Chinese government exerts another layer of Internet control, i.e. intermediary censorship or “self-censorship” conducted by private companies at the government's behest. Internet providers – domestic or foreign – whose servers are located within the jurisdiction of China are legally responsible for everything published on their platforms. Companies, which are extremely efficient in stifling dissent, are given the “China Internet Self-Discipline Award” for fostering “harmonious and healthy Internet development”

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<sup>9</sup> At the end of 2013, it is estimated that there are over 500 million registered Twitter accounts and 50 million daily active users, whereas there are over 600 million registered Weibo accounts and 60 million active users per day (China digital landscape 2014), available at [http://d1vumxoj4hmk29.cloudfront.net/system/attachables/main/37udcFhkhEY42yteHcUj/orig inal/20140415\\_2014\\_China\\_Digital\\_Landscape.pdf?1398242682](http://d1vumxoj4hmk29.cloudfront.net/system/attachables/main/37udcFhkhEY42yteHcUj/orig inal/20140415_2014_China_Digital_Landscape.pdf?1398242682) (last accessed 01 May 2015).

(MacKinnon 2010: 15); and they run the risk of losing business licence or being shut down if they fail to censor and monitor users to the government's satisfaction.

The most powerful tool used by China-based Internet companies to control banned content <sup>10</sup> is keyword blocking, which can automatically block “sensitive” keywords. Besides, these companies have employed staffers whose single job is to manually review and delete “harmful” content around the clock. In addition, the notorious ‘50-cents’, i.e. Chinese Internet users who voluntarily post pro-government comments and receive 50 cents for each comment they post, are flooding all the popular websites, causing substantial confusion and discursive manipulation. Such multilayered control and surveillance practices have led Western media and human rights groups to conclude that “China operates the most extensive, technologically sophisticated, and broad-reaching system of Internet filtering in the world” (OpenNet Initiative 2005).

However, the tendency to perceive the Party-state of China as a fire-snorting dragon hunting down the obedient and undifferentiated Chinese citizens waiting to be enlightened and liberated overlooks several facts: 1) China's stable and rapid growth over the past three decades has granted economic legitimacy to the authoritarian state among the rising middle class, i.e. the most dominant group of Chinese Internet users with a strong interest in personalised and individual lifestyles, which in turn makes the Chinese Internet more of a playground for socialising, entertainment and commerce than a hotbed for political oppositions; 2) the revival of Confucianism has not only strengthened the Chinese cultural heritage and traditional values of benevolence, obedience and devotion to family and state, but also promoted the Party's political ideology based on the Confucian ideal of social harmony, which becomes an excellent excuse for the government to diffuse challenges to state authority; 3) the turf war between providers of Chinese-hosted content to attract advertisers

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<sup>10</sup> The Party-state forbids the following kinds of content and information: breaking cardinal principles set forth in the Constitution; endangering state security, state secrets, state power and national unification; damaging state honour and interests; inciting ethnic hatred or discrimination and jeopardising ethnic unity; jeopardising religious policy, spreading superstitious ideas or rumours; spreading obscenity, pornography, violence and terror or abetting crime; humiliating and slandering others, injuring the lawful rights and interests of others; and other content forbidden by laws and administrative regulations (Chinese government White Paper on Internet security), available at [http://www.china.org.cn/government/whitepaper/2010-06/08/content\\_20207978.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/government/whitepaper/2010-06/08/content_20207978.htm) (last accessed 01 May 2015).



and consumers has resulted in varied standards and approaches towards censorship, which makes the control of the Internet inconsistent and unpredictable; and 4) Chinese netizens – particularly young urbanities who are growing up immersed in digital media and technologies – are creative, active, alienated from political authority, but quick to respond when government actions interfere with their seemingly apolitical lifestyles and hobbies.

In short, the rising spectre of government-backed Internet censorship and the commercial interests that are simultaneously pursued by private companies and state ministries have underpinned much of the de-politicisation of Internet use in China. It is precisely this de-politicisation that has facilitated the emergence of grassroots participatory cultures and new social spaces where participants, particularly the youth, are “more enthusiastic about ‘commercial democracy’ than in the formal mechanics of representative politics” (Hartley 2000: 4).

## **2.4. Youth and fandom in China**

### **2.4.1. Contemporary Chinese youth**

During the Mao era, there was no such a term as ‘audience’ (观众 *guangzhong*), let alone the notion of ‘fans’ (粉丝 *fensi*) in China. Instead, there were only ‘masses’ (群众 *qunzhong*) or ‘comrades’ (同志 *tongzhi*) to be led and co-opted by the Party-state authorities. With the media shifting away from being a propaganda apparatus to a system regulated by subtle forms of supervision compatible with commercial imperatives, audience participation has been gradually introduced in various television and radio programmes since the late 1970s. As a result, a culture of participation has been cultivated among Chinese audiences. Studies have shown that Chinese audiences have always played an active role in decoding messages conveyed in media texts (Friedman 1994); and that they “move from different reading zones, engage in different modes of reading and adopt different reading strategies in different segments of [their] everyday life” (Ma 2000: 30). Young audiences have played an important role in generating an unofficial and “provocative imagined culture” in urban China (Lull 2013: 48).

China's 30 years of rapid economic growth, 20 years of globalisation and 10 years of Internet and social media development provide the wider social context in which contemporary Chinese young people live (Clark 2012). The belief systems and daily activities of the roughly 200 million Chinese born in the first decade of the Reform and Opening-up period (popularly labelled as the 'post-1980s' generation) are not in line with those of their older generations. With most of them growing up in only-child families, they are more affluent, better educated, and have no direct experience of political events from their childhood. In short, they are, for the most part, "winners" of China's economic reform, even though parental and societal controls are much stricter for them than for their Western counterparts.

Characterised as the "me generation" due to their focus on individuality, the post-1980s generation are often criticised for being "reliant and rebellious, cynical and pragmatic, self-centred and equality-obsessed" as well as "China's first generation of couch potatoes, addicts of online games, patrons of fast food chains, and loyal audiences of Hollywood movies" (Rosen 2009: 360). However, the post 80s and 90s youth are enjoying a previously unknown degree of freedom of expression, and beginning to explore and construct their identities through their consumption activities and making use of popular cultural elements to promote their own, particular and varied agendas. The most obvious indicator of this is the rise of fandom in post-socialist China as more and more young people begin to ask some fundamental questions, such as "what am I passionate about?" and "what is most important to me?".

#### 2.4.2. The rise of fandom in China

Fandom and fan-like activities have actually been around in China for quite some time, even before the advent of the Internet. During the 1980s with the loosening of state control over economic activities and media production, Chinese audiences were provided with widening choices of popular culture products. New kinds of publications (e.g. lurid tales of romance, villainy, martial arts fiction, and Japanese Manga); music cassettes and videotapes flown from abroad; and Hong Kong, Taiwan and Western pop and film stars all began to find fans among Chinese youth. The most influential factor during this period was perhaps the rise of television ownership, which increased from

about ten million sets in 1978 to more than two hundred million by the end of the 1980s (Clark 2012). Filling the screens in urban households were news, cheaply made dramas and a few imported shows (Wu and Han 2009). Through these programmes, Chinese youth gradually increased their familiarity with the lifestyle and fashion of non-Chinese societies, particularly those in the West.

New genres of literary publications and imported audiovisual products have also opened up new opportunities of self-expression for Chinese youth. Characterised by an obsession with bodies (self-image, the exploration of sex and bodies of others), young people began to engage in a wide range of activities to celebrate and parade real or imagined bodily different identities, beauty and adornment, giving rise to various fan clubs built around specific hobbies and interests, such as nude art paintings, bodybuilding and break-dancing, underground rock bands, sports and cosplay<sup>11</sup> (Clark 2012). Decommissioned factory buildings<sup>12</sup>, dance halls, gymnasiums, video parlours, bars frequented or owned by foreigners<sup>13</sup> and other similar establishments offered places for the youth to congregate and share interests. By consuming media images and forming relations in various spaces of consumption, Chinese youth enhanced their passion for popular culture while expressing their evolving and distinctive identities to assert difference and even resistance to the dominant conformist values of Chinese society.

By the mid-1990s with the introduction of new social media and digital technologies, fandom activities in China entered a new era, marked by a shift from a secret cult status towards a more diversified mainstream culture. Fan groups, formerly congregated in physical spaces, could “meet” and interact with likeminded others in the vast multifocal and multilocal virtual space of the Internet. As digital media and technologies have offered young fans more resources and access points to their objects of fandom, grassroots fan

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<sup>11</sup> Cosplay is a contraction of the English words “costume” and “play”. The term refers to the practice of dressing up as a particular character from Japanese manga or *anime* by adopting the costume, accessories, gesture and attitude of the character (Norris and Bainbridge 2009).

<sup>12</sup> Decommissioned factory complexes and run-down houses in China, such as Factory 798 in Beijing and the Loft (创库 *Chuangku*) in Kunming, have been often used to exhibit avant-garde art that is frowned upon by the Chinese government.

<sup>13</sup> Young Chinese with money or access to bars and coffee shops owned or frequented by foreigners in the late 1980s could hear Chinese musicians like 崔健 (*Cui Jian*, the godfather of Chinese Rock ‘n Roll) when they performed in such venues. Foreign-owned or frequented places offered a degree of cover for Chinese underground rock bands and musicians who might have otherwise been vulnerable to official censorship.

communities on the Chinese Internet became increasingly diversified, ranging from cutting-edge slash fiction<sup>14</sup> communities, fansubbing communities, celebrity-worship communities, to lifestyle and consumption communities where young people are discussing digital products, fashion, food, etc.

With fan communities proliferating endlessly across multiple media platforms, Chinese cultural industries have started to constantly incorporate aspects of youth subcultures and fandom to attract young consumers. Examples include the triumphant rise of Supergirl<sup>15</sup>, the instant celebrity of 韩寒<sup>16</sup> (Han Han) and other similar phenomena where an ordinary person with creativity and talent can become an idol of the new generation who prefer content created by and featuring young people like themselves in the context of the relaxation of official cultural controls.

Young people's obsession with idols and compulsive consumption of idol-related products have largely been accepted and even encouraged by the Party-state, because idol-worship through consumption not only perpetuates the country's economic boom, but also diverts young people from the critical discourse of civic engagement that may undermine the legitimacy of the state (Fung 2009). Although fandom has replaced politics in China as the site where young people's lifestyles and values can be publicly expressed, the Party-state

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<sup>14</sup> Slash fiction, known as 耽美 (*danmei*, literally means "boy love") in Chinese, is a genre of fan fiction that imagines the erotic homosexual relationships between male heroes in television TV series. Since the BBC television series *Sherlock* first aired in 2010, for instance, the show (which is unavailable on the national TV in China but is subtitled and circulated by Chinese fansubbers) has inspired a new wave of *danmei* stories on the Chinese Internet, ranging from the sadomasochistic sex life between Sherlock and Watson, to more romantic depictions about the lovers' inner feelings towards each other and their convoluted path to couple-hood.

<sup>15</sup> Supergirl (超级女声) was a singing contest for ordinary Chinese girls, organised by the television station in Hunan Province between 2004 and 2006. Audiences were provided with a novel device to engage in the contest: voting using their mobile phones. The contest had proven a phenomenon on the Internet as well: young people formed fan groups for their favourites and expressed their fandom across blogs, websites and social media platforms. The 2005 season of Supergirl was one of the most viewed shows in China's broadcast history, with nationwide audience numbers surpassing even the hugely popular CCTV's New Year's Gala. But Supergirl was much more than a singing contest, as it represents "the coming age of the people's own amusement" (Hunan Provincial Radio and Television Bureau), in which ordinary young people are provided with the opportunity to achieve success, and audiences and fans have unprecedented influence. Scholars (e.g. Jian and Liu 2009) even speculated on whether this "democratic entertainment" channelled through cell phone text voting and fan campaigns to support their favourite singers on the Internet could provide a model for political democracy in China.

<sup>16</sup> 韩寒 (Han Han, born in 1982) is a celebrated young Chinese author. A good-looking high school dropout, Han is also a professional rally car driver and arguably the most popular blogger (with more than 500 million Weibo followers) in China.

continues to tighten control over the circulation of foreign media products to protect domestic industries and maintain ideological control. This makes the study of Chinese fansubbing culture quite relevant as it has contributed significantly, if not predominantly, to the introduction and spread of foreign audiovisual products.

## 2.5. Fansubbing culture in China

Traditionally a ‘dubbing country’ (Gambier 2003, O’Connell 1998), China has been dominated by a few government-backed media conglomerates (e.g. CCTV in television and the China Film Group Corporation in cinema) that have monopolised the importing and translation of foreign audiovisual products over the past three decades. Nevertheless, since the mid-1980s, the government has provided institutional support to expand the use of foreign languages, particularly English, and raise its social status in China through the introduction of Western literary works (Tang 2008). With the public’s increasing yet limited exposure to foreign cultural products, subtitled foreign films are growing in popularity and even made available by official media outlets (e.g. China Film Distribution Company and Shanghai Film Studio) in addition to dubbed versions in major city cinemas. CCTV has also increased its quota of foreign TV drama series, which, however, are still dubbed into Mandarin on account of the low literacy rate of television audiences such as children and those living in rural areas.

Despite these efforts, all imported media products are still subject to a strict censorship process managed by the State Administration for Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT). As a result, officially translated foreign films and TV programmes often end up being extensively re-edited, usually in the form of cuts, to ensure the content is not “deficient in taste, delicacy, or refinement” (SARFT 2005, translated by Egan 2006)<sup>17</sup>. Such stringent censorship mechanisms and strict import quotas on overseas content have created a huge vacuum of demand for foreign media products, leading to the growth of

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<sup>17</sup> One of the most recent cases is the cancellation of the premiere of *Django Unchained* (the first of Tarantino’s film ever to be licensed for screening in China’s cinemas) in 2013, even though Tarantino had made “slight adjustments” in “the form of smaller splashes of duller-coloured blood” to please the Chinese officials (Offbeat China 2013), available at <http://offbeatchina.com/django-being-castrated-before-unchained-in-china-chinese-netizens-think-so> (last accessed 14 December 2015).

informal media content markets, ranging from video parlours screening pirated videotapes in the 1980s, to street vendors and underground stores selling cheap pirated VCDs and DVDs in the mid-1990s. Following the advent of Internet to China, however, most audiences no longer bothered with DVDs. Instead, they could now easily access foreign films and TV programmes via P2P networks, from *The Pirate Bay* and other similar warez groups<sup>18</sup> overseas to China-based Internet companies BTChina<sup>19</sup>, VeryCD<sup>20</sup> and Xunlei<sup>21</sup>.

Even though Chinese Internet users could download and consume their favourite foreign content through various P2P sites, many still found it a daunting task to fully enjoy the content without it being translated. Consequently, fansubbing groups began to flourish on China's Internet, playing the role of raw material selectors, translators, and distributors of translated work – thus ushering in a wide range of foreign audiovisual products that had previously been either banned by official media institutions or extensively re-edited by Chinese censors.

Although fansubbing activities can be traced back to as early as 2002 in China (Chen and Liu 2006), it was only in 2006 that fansubbing grew large enough to be considered as a phenomenon, drawing attention from both Chinese (*Life Week Magazine*) and overseas (*New York Times*) mainstream news media. This turning point was largely prompted by the huge popularity of the Fox TV drama series *Prison Break*: its focus on filial bonds resonated strongly with Confucian principles in traditional Chinese culture. While the show was not available on the national television, it was translated and widely circulated by Chinese fansubbers on the Internet within 12 hours of each episode's premiere in the United States, with each subtitled episode downloaded as many as two million times by Chinese audiences (*ibid.*). In an article entitled "Chinese tech buffs slake thirst for U.S. TV shows", *The New York Times* noted that Chinese fansubbers were "making American popular culture available in near-real time free to Chinese audiences, dodging Chinese censors and American copyright

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<sup>18</sup> The term 'warez groups' refers to groups organised by hackers or file-crackers who crack and distribute any copyrighted content on the Internet. 0-day (pronounced as 'zero day') warez groups are those that aim to distribute a copyrighted work on the same day of its commercial release (Gehring 2004).

<sup>19</sup> Due to the allegedly "low and vulgar" content contained in BTChina, it was shut down by Chinese authorities in 2009.

<sup>20</sup> VeryCD website: <http://www.verycd.com/> (last accessed 05 May 2015).

<sup>21</sup> Xunlei website: <http://www.kankan.com/> (last accessed 05 May 2015).

lawyers” (French 2006). Such media reports not only brought Chinese fansubbing groups into the limelight, but also put them in an awkward and risky position at the interstices between copyright regulations and government sanctions.

In 2009, the Chinese government launched an Internet cleansing campaign, described as “the most vicious crackdown in years” (Meng 2011: 44), during which thousands of Chinese websites including hundreds of China-based P2P networks (such as the major player BTChina) were shut down because these sites contained “large amounts of low and vulgar content that violates social morality and damages the physical and mental health of youth” (*ibid.*). Following the shutdowns, voices of disappointment, mourning and protest soon began to surge onto the Internet, among which the *Ode to the Grass Mud Horse*<sup>22</sup> was perhaps the most famous political parody that went viral online.

The shutdown of major BitTorrent sites, such as BTChina, also came as a shock for Chinese fansubbers, as they relied on these sites to obtain foreign content to be translated and then re-circulate the translated content across these sites for the public to consume. As a result of the closure of BT websites, Chinese media fans and consumers (including Chinese fansubbers) had to rely on P2P file-sharing techniques such as DivX codec<sup>23</sup> to gain access to their favourite foreign content released on overseas P2P networks. To protect themselves from government sanctions of unauthorised distribution of foreign content, fansubbing groups that had previously distributed both video content

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<sup>22</sup> *Ode to the Grass Mud Horse* is a video created by Chinese Internet users in response to the government’s campaign against low and vulgar content on the Internet in 2009. Grass Mud Horse (草泥马 *cao ni ma*) is the Chinese word for “alpaca sheep”, which sounds very much like the profane phrase “F\*\*\* your mother” (操你妈), except with different tones and completely different written characters. The song is about the battle between Grass Mud Horse and its biggest enemy: River Crab (河蟹 *he xie*, another Internet slang item which resembles the pronunciation of “和谐 harmony”). Since the Communist Party was promoting the ideal of a “harmonious society” with the hope of reducing social tensions and political confrontation, “being harmonised” has been used as a euphemism to refer to the act of being censored. Further explanation and the video song are available at: <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/baidu-10-mythical-creatures-grass-mud-horse> (last accessed 15 November 2014).

<sup>23</sup> DivX codec is a program used by hackers or file-crackers to facilitate the spread of audiovisual content across P2P networks. Using DivX codec, crackers can break the encryption on a DVD film and compress the film into a file almost a tenth of the original size with almost the same picture quality as that of the original (Smithson 2003). The compressed file can then be distributed over the Internet and downloaded within less than an hour through broadband connections. When DivX codec became popular during the early 2000s, this cracking technique was quickly embraced by Chinese fansubbers to gain access to their favourite overseas content.

and translated subtitles for the public also changed their *modus operandi*: from this point onwards, they only made available their translated subtitles to the public, but not their corresponding video content<sup>24</sup>.

This sort of cleansing campaign is not new for Chinese fansubbers. Despite frequent crackdowns on content-sharing and creation activities, Chinese fansubbers are still actively engaged in their subtitling activities, making use of the cultural and technical resources available to them to distribute Chinese subtitles for the public.

The proliferation of Chinese fansubbing networks has also attracted the attention of several scholars in the field of media and communication studies. Focusing on the textual features of fansubs created by Chinese fans of American TV drama series, Tian (2011: 2) notes that these fansubbers tend to make their translations “more familiar to, rather than foreign for, potential Chinese viewers” through a variety of strategies such as: **annotations** that explain culturally unfamiliar references, the intertextuality, or punch lines in original texts; **comments** made by fansubbers expressing their individual opinions, feelings, or sarcasm about what is happening on the screen and sometimes, in relation to current social affairs happening in China; and **localisation** strategies where Western cultural references are replaced by Chinese ones, foreign celebrities by Chinese counterparts, and original scripts by the latest Chinese Internet slang (*ibid.*). These strategies contribute to the development of a unique fansubbing practice that is “more intercultural, intertextual and complex” (*ibid.*: 2), precipitating “the process of globalisation” on the one hand, and “China’s cultural and even political reform” on the other (*ibid.*:iii).

Taking a different approach, Boyko (2012) engages in a comparative study of the operational characteristics of fansubbing groups in China and Russia. Boyko’s study reveals that fansubbing groups in both countries are characterised by “hierarchical organisational structures” (*ibid.*: 59), with members being organised hierarchically from forum administrator to moderator

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<sup>24</sup> Internet users who want to access the video content can still do so using circumvention tools to download the content from overseas warez sites or through other file-sharing techniques. As for members within fansubbing groups, they can still share both subtitles and videos by storing them on servers owned privately by group members.



and then to ordinary forum members. The forums hosted by both Chinese and Russian groups are also “hierarchical or tree-like in structure with sections, boards, subboards and discussion threads” (*ibid.*). These findings indicate that fansubbers in both countries are reaching “a semi-professional level of specialisation and organisation” in order to offer high-quality fansubs to their audiences and get in contact with them (*ibid.*: 73). While both Russia and Chinese fansubbers operate their activities on a voluntary basis, Chinese fansubbers are facing fierce competition in virtually every aspect of their offline lives, whether it is studying to score high on every test or finding a good job (*ibid.*). As a result, they are more likely to use “external motivation factors such as point and credit systems on their forums” to sustain participants’ long-term commitment (*ibid.*).

In their study of Chinese fansubbing activities as an example of commons-based peer production, Meng and Wu (2013) also note the presence of hierarchical governance structures in established and large Chinese fansubbing online communities, where important decisions are made by group leaders and the distribution of group resources is influenced by the logic of capital accumulation in marketplace. Moreover, large groups often compete with each other to translate the same popular content and to release high-quality subtitles as a way to enhance their “brand images” through Chinese consumers’ recognition of their subtitled work (*ibid.*: 137). As a result, Meng and Wu (*ibid.*: 142) argue that the current fansubbing activities in China are not totally autonomous of market logic and should be viewed as “a hybrid of commons-based and commodity productions”, where “there is constant negotiation over which aspects of the two seemingly opposing models will be adopted by the community” (*ibid.*: 125).

This also makes it quite urgent to address the question of how this “hybrid form of peer production” (*ibid.*: 142) is likely to play a role in shaping the motivations of members in a fansubbing community, the rules and norms they develop to regulate their daily activities, and the values they hold for their peer production activities. As pointed out by Pérez-González (2013: 160), until recently “little scholarly attention has been paid to the motivations of creative citizen consumers for wishing to undertake immaterial work and contribute to the global circulation of media content”. Due to the unique positioning of

Chinese fansubbing activities in today's global media sphere, the investigation of why and how Chinese fansubbers negotiate different aspects of their identities may offer some valuable insights into the complex interplay – and tension – between the top-down force of government initiatives and corporate convergence and the bottom-up force of grassroots convergence that is driving many of the changes in today's media landscape.

## 2.6. Conclusion

Against the background of the increasing convergence of contemporary media, this chapter has focused on the field of popular culture in post-socialist China, where the creative ordinary citizens – fansubbers – as active audiences are surging onto the centre stage. The terrain of their activities is transforming into a battleground where the micro-level of creative media consumption activities resist the macro-level of control exercised by media conglomerates and institutions over media production, mediation and distribution. Nothing is political at first glance, but everything can become political in the sense that Chinese fansubbers overcome institutional obstacles to mediate and circulate global media content to suit their own needs in terms of what content they want to consume and mediate, and how they want to distribute their translated work. This form of subversion definitely deserves more attention, because in a networked authoritarian regime where the cost of online activities that directly challenge the authority of the government can be very high, participatory media consumption activities (e.g. fansubbing) can play a crucial role in offering an outlet for engaged individuals to express themselves in ways that may challenge established societal norms, as well as a training ground for the development of basic digital media skills that may be helpful for participation in online activism.

It then becomes fundamental to investigate the built-in mechanisms established in fansubbing networks to encourage participation and community-building, because these mechanisms can be applied to mobilise participation in civic actions. This also makes it necessary to establish whether a fansubbing network constitutes a “virtual community”, a term that needs to be revisited in the era of media convergence. Following this, the concept of virtual community is

explored in Chapter 3 through a dialectical systems approach to human practices and social structures.

## Chapter 3 A systems approach to amateur subtitling networks

### 3.1. Introduction

As online communities of amateur mediators expand in number and size on the Internet, a growing body of literature in Translation Studies has examined this phenomenon through different theoretical lenses. Drawing on narrative theory, Baker (2006a, 2006b, 2009, 2010, 2013) notes that activist communities, with their “permeable and porous” boundaries and “transient and fluid forms of mobilisation” (2013: 29), are a powerful locus of collective identity formation among geographically distributed individuals, who are held together by “their willingness to subscribe to the same, or a very similar, set of narratives” (*ibid.* 2006b: 463). This narrative affinity among group members, even when it is only partial, provides them with a basis for collective action.

Indeed, individuals clustered around these groups exercise their agency to constantly negotiate the social conditions through which they make sense of reality as well as of themselves. Viewed in this way, identities are “fluid, dynamic, negotiable, [and] always in the making” (*ibid.* 2013: 45). Its emphasis on agency over structural conditions as well as the potential of agency to bring about change at both individual and social levels is the main reason why Baker’s approach has been regarded as a “generative conceptualisation of activism” (Pérez-González 2010: 263). This generative approach enables us to examine the formation of collective identities within groupings of amateur mediators, while recognising the potential for individual members to mobilise other aspects of their identity on the basis of their ongoing social interaction with each other.

Acknowledging the explanatory power of a generative approach to translation activism, Pérez-González (2010, 2103) further suggests examining the role of amateur subtitlers (a category that remains underexplored in Baker’s research) within the emerging global networked media environment. Drawing on insights from media sociology, Pérez-González (2010: 270) describes amateur subtitlers as “agents of chaos” engaging in a “non-linear model” of interaction and collaboration as they appropriate, mediate and recirculate media content to

promote their own political or aesthetic agendas. He argues that the potential disruptive impact brought by the “chaos” of amateur agency on dominant patterns of translation flow and practice deserves more scholarly attention, so that “any potentially idiosyncratic feature of activist subtitling is adequately theorised at this incipient stage in the development of translation activism” (*ibid.*: 284).

This is the aim of this chapter, which attempts to develop a systems approach framework that can enrich our understanding of the dynamics of collective identity formation and management in amateur subtitling networks. This approach is mainly informed by complexity theory, which concerns itself with systems that exhibit complex characteristics (outlined in **section 3.2**). Originally developed in the context of physical and biological sciences, the theory has been applied to social science and management theories (introduced in **section 3.3**). Informed by this work, **section 3.4** proposes a new conceptualisation of fansubbing online communities by combining insights from existing literature on the concepts of online community, collective identity, communities of practice, and human values. The final section of this chapter outlines the research questions driving this study.

### 3.2. Characteristics of fansubbing networks as complex systems

Complexity theory is the study of ‘complex adaptive systems’ (Holland 1996). A complex system<sup>25</sup> is defined as “a dynamic network of many agents (which may represent cells, species, individuals, firms, nations) acting in parallel, constantly acting and reacting to what the other agents are doing” (Waldrop 1993: 145). Complex systems, whether they are found in the natural world or in human societies, universally exhibit certain characteristics, among which the most critical are ‘self-organisation’ (Ashby 1947) and ‘emergence’ (Hofkirchner 1998).

Self-organisation is usually understood as the process by which a system comes into existence out of an initially disordered collection of random conditions (i.e. order through randomness or fluctuations) (Nicolis and

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<sup>25</sup> Complexity scientists vary somewhat in their use of the terms “complex systems” and “complex adaptive systems” to describe systems that are intrinsically open, dynamic, and non-linear. The term “complex system” is used in this thesis.

Prigogine 1989, Prigogine 1980, Haken 1978, 1982); or the process by which the system maintains and reproduces itself through the autonomous interaction of its agents (i.e. self-reproduction or ‘autopoiesis’) (Maturanna and Varela 1980). In either case, system-wide properties and behaviour arise from the local interactions of the system’s agents that adapt in response to the impacts they believe that their own actions and the actions of others will have on the system. Such an appearance is called emergence, in which the system as a whole behaves in a way that indicates more than just the sum of its parts. The most robust and long-lasting systems are said to be poised at ‘the edge of chaos’ (Waldrop 1993), a state which provides the systems with both the stability and the flexibility needed to adapt to changes in their surrounding environments.

Besides being able to produce self-organised, emergent behaviour, complex systems possess other qualities, including:

**Complexity:** A complex system consists of a large number of diverse and autonomous agents interacting with each other in a non-linear and interdependent way (Goldstein 1999, Heylighen 2002, Foukia and Hassas 2003, Mostefaoui *et al.* 2003). When there are a lot of simultaneous and non-linear interactions in the system, it is difficult to keep track of causal relationships between agents, and consequently, the future state of the system is hard to predict.

**Novelty:** Complex systems are full of novelty and experimentation. Due to the lack of centralised control which facilitates unhindered, instantaneous communication between agents, they are able to rapidly come up with different possible solutions to a problem (Heyligen 1989, Odell 2002). In other words, novelty arises from the synergy of interacting agents, and cannot easily be explained in terms of the behaviour of single agents.

**Feedback loops:** Feedback loops are created when a system acts on inputs (e.g. energy, matter or information) from the environment to achieve outputs (Ashby 1947). Feedback loops tell the system what rules to follow in order to guide its own behaviour while responding to changes it senses from the environment. Observance of these rules leads to recurring patterns of relationships between agents. These recurring patterns constitute the structure of the system, resulting in the appearance of a coherent organisation in such a way that ‘boundary

conditions' (Heylighen 2001) – understood as environmental constraints to which the system must respond or adapt – are formed. The system's 'identity' (Heylighen *et al.* 2007) – i.e. what distinguishes the system from its environment – is defined along those boundary conditions.

***Nested hierarchy:*** Large and long-surviving complex systems usually exhibit nested or hierarchical structure<sup>26</sup>. During processes of self-organisation in such systems, agents tend to form themselves into subassemblies to simplify complex problems into smaller pieces or 'modules' (Heylighen 1989). These stabilised subassemblies are recursively combined into higher order assemblies until all the system's agents are 'aligned' more or less into an organised whole (*ibid.*). This is why "nearly all large systems can be very nearly decomposed into nested or hierarchical elements" (Simon 1973: 7), which can be thought of as "'levels' or 'layers' in structural terms or 'subsystems' in systems terms" (Robbin 2011: 17).

***Co-evolution:*** a complex system changes in response to both its internal dynamics and 'environmental stimuli' (Hofkirchner 1999) sensed by its agents. The environment to which the system responds consists primarily of other systems<sup>27</sup>. Since every system takes all other systems as its environment, systems co-evolve as they adapt to their environment, mutually adjusting themselves to reach a state of long-term sustainability (Kauffman 1995).

Through a complexity theory lens, the proliferation of amateur translation communities, such as fansubbing groups, on the Internet can be interpreted as an unexpected consequence of, or rather, an emerging response to the one-way flow of media content from the industry to consumers. As a complex system itself, the media industry is interacting and co-evolving with other systems (e.g. economic, cultural, political and technological systems) and their components

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<sup>26</sup> Holling (2001: 396), on the other hand, proposes to use the term "panarchy" to represent "a hierarchy as a nested set of adaptive cycles". For him, the term "hierarchy" is "burdened by the rigid-top-down nature of its common meaning", whereas "panarchy" would "capture the adaptive and evolutionary nature of adaptive cycles that are nested one within each other across space and time scales" (*ibid.*). He wants to "transform hierarchies from fixed static structures to dynamic, adaptive entities whose levels are sensitive to small disturbances at the transition from growth to collapse and the translation from reorganisation to rapid growth" (*ibid.*). While "hierarchy" is used in this thesis, the meaning implied by the term is congruent with the term "panarchy".

<sup>27</sup> For instance, in biological evolution, the environment in which a species evolve consists of natural systems, including the climate, vegetation, predator-prey relationships.

(e.g. media companies, socio-cultural groups, political organisations, and providers of technologies), which are also complex systems themselves.

Even before the arrival of the Internet, the media system already exhibited intricate connections with providers of technologies, content producers and distributors, regulators from government or other institutions, and media consumers. Content is created by producers (and sometimes translated for the target audience) in studios, and flows downward through controlled channels to consumers. These channels include radio, television, cinema, and retail and wholesale chains, all of which distribute content in various formats produced by providers of technologies, often according to the rules (e.g. copyright and censorship laws) set by political and legal institutions. Consumer feedback in terms of revenue, subscriptions, comments and reviews, in turn, affects the future business strategies and models for content production and distribution.

Such intricate connections are multiplied by the Internet both globally and geometrically, triggering the emergence and exponential growth of participatory consumption practices embedded in decentralised P2P networks. Through such networks, content can be shared, edited and translated by adding a great diversity of voices, and re-circulated by ordinary consumers, often without the approval of copyright holders and media regulators. As one such emerging behaviour, fansubbing represents a disconnection between the bottom-up, technology-enabled socio-cultural norm of free sharing and the top-down, centralised regulatory approach favoured by content owners and policy-makers in pursuing their economic and political interests. In other words, the old (the existing media system) serves as the precondition for the appearance of the new (the phenomenon of fansubbing propagated through numerous P2P networks), but the old cannot determine the exact development of the new, which, at least in China, has been proved so far difficult to control both through copyright laws and political censorship.

Fansubbing networks usually begin operating as semi-organised or completely random assemblies of individuals. Such networks would appear to exhibit qualities that are typical of self-organising systems. First, a fansubbing network is complex, in the sense that it is often formed by many individuals with diverse backgrounds, life experiences and beliefs. These individuals find each



other around a common interest (i.e. fansubbing), and voluntarily engage in activities revolving around the selection, translation and distribution of audiovisual content on the Internet in order to achieve certain goals. These goals may take on various forms, such as the desire to enjoy global media products as soon as they are released in the original countries; to effect aesthetic or social change through their acts of translation; or simply to enjoy the fun of creating fansubs. Based on their different goals, participants make self-informed choices regarding their performance within the group, both influencing and limiting each other's actions.

Second, fansubbing networks tend to be robust, full of novelty and experimentation. Unlike their professional counterparts who often rely on routinised approaches to problem-solving, participants in a fansubbing network can exhibit unorthodox practices – based on their co-creative experiences and subjective interpretations of audiovisual texts – if they encounter a roadblock. Thanks to communication technologies, fansubbers can communicate almost instantaneously, experiment with various possible responses to a problem, and quickly come up with a solution that produces a result that is often better than what could have been achieved individually. This allows fansubbing networks to capitalise on the uncertainty prevailing in their environment and generate new patterns of behaviour while retaining some sense of self-determined identity.

Third, fansubbing networks resemble non-linear systems with feedback effects. Interactions in a fansubbing group often unfold in a non-linear and decentralised manner. This is not only because participants are connected through the Internet, which, by its nature, is decentralised, open, and interactive. A fansubbing network is also decentralised because it is often held up collectively by participants without the involvement of external agents to design, construct or maintain the organisational structure of the network. Initially, members in the fansubbing group would (inter)act more or less randomly based on whatever feedback they happen to receive from each other and from outside their group.

Some of these (inter)actions, however, are maintained and normalised, as they are found to be able to minimise friction and maximise synergy in achieving

common goals. Such interactions give rise to a networked structure that represents stabilised patterns of connection between group members. In order to maintain these patterns, a set of common rules is often established, whether in terms of preferences of colours, fonts and subtitling strategies; favourite audiovisual genres to be subtitled; and Internet facilities and subtitling software to be used. These rules bind group members together and enable the appearance of a coherent organisation that tends to maintain its own identity and external boundaries despite the non-linear, dynamic interactions between group members. Moreover, these rules are likely to evolve based on their success in changing social conditions to which the group must adapt in order to survive and thrive.

Last but not least, robust and long-lasting fansubbing networks are likely to exhibit a hierarchical, multi-level structure, where a number of relatively stable assemblies of participants are formed. In this way, different modules or tasks involved in the subtitling process can be accomplished in parallel to reduce the time scales for problem-solving. As noted by Díaz Cintas and Muñoz Sánchez (2006: 39), the different tasks (e.g. obtaining source material, translating, timing, and proofreading) that the fansubbing process involves can help to avoid “the inaccurate communication of information between the several participants”, and “reduce the risk of errors cropping up in the target text”.

The characteristics possessed by fansubbing networks as complex systems demonstrate the potential to adopt a systems approach to the study of the organisational dynamics in fansubbing and other participatory translation networks. If such networks are to be studied as self-organising complex systems, it is necessary to have a deeper understanding of the sociological applications of complexity science. While accepting “the work-in-progress nature of complexity science” (Ramalingam *et al.* 2008: 6), scholars in the field of sociology have begun to develop new approaches to the study of a range of social, political and economic phenomena through a complexity lens. Some of the scholarly work is reviewed and discussed in section 3.3.

### 3.3. The sociological applications of complexity theory

This section focuses on two scholars whose work is informed by complexity theory and revolves around networked forms of organisation in the new media environment of advanced Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). These scholars are Christian Fuchs (social self-organisation theory) and Elinor Ostrom (common-pool resources management theory). What links them together is their recognition of the complexity underpinning the relationship between new media technologies and social development. According to Fuchs (2006: 111), “there are non-linear relationships between causes [i.e. technological innovations] and effects [i.e. social activities]”:

[o]ne cause can have many different effects and one effect can be the combined result of many causes, small causes can have large effects and large causes small effects, i.e. effects are conditioned, but not determined by given structures, they have a certain degree of unpredictability and chance.

For Ostrom (2007: 15181), the social impacts of technologies are not only “non-linear in nature”, but also “cross-scale in time and in space, and have an evolutionary character”.

If technologies make a difference to our communication practices, then, surely, the same technologies are also bound to make a difference to translation practices (Littau 2011). Technologies are not only tools with which translators conduct their business, but also the “medial carriers” that store, transfer and embody texts (*ibid.*). This means that when a text is translated, the material medium that embodies the text is also subject to translation. Insofar as it is not only texts but also their material carriers that get translated, translation needs to be considered against the larger media environment in which it is being conducted.

This is particularly true in our information and knowledge-based society, where the universal convertibility of binary code makes it possible to convert words, images and sounds into the universal language of code, thus facilitating the wide and rapid dissemination and hence the translation of a large variety of digital content (e.g. books, photos, music, games, videos, etc.). It follows then that the space of global digital communications is a space of translation and we

are living in “a translation age”, insofar as the changes brought by the advent of ICTs in virtually every area of our life “are to be placed under the sign of convertibility or translation” (Cronin 2013: 3). As translation moves to the centre of our digital life, “we need more than ever to understand how technology has affected and continues to affect our being-in-the-world, including our perpetual state of ‘translatedness’ in a globalised technosphere” (Littau 2011: 262). The work by scholars such as Fuchs and Ostrom can offer some new perspectives regarding the impact of ICTs on society.

### 3.3.1. Social self-organisation theory

Informed by complexity thinking and Gidden’s (1984) notion of ‘duality of structure’, Fuchs (2004: 191) conceptualises modern society through what he calls “a dialectical theory of social self-organisation”. According to this theory, society is a self-organising, complex system with human beings as its agents<sup>28</sup>. The overall evolution of society is a self-organising process that involves both a diachronic and a synchronous aspect. The diachronic development of society refers to moments of social instability and crisis, during which the existing social system will be replaced by a new one through the actions taken by human individuals (i.e. order through fluctuations or systems on the edge of chaos). However, one cannot fully predict when or in what form the new system will emerge, since the individuals may choose many possible ways to react during the crisis and to create new conditions that eventually give rise to a new social system. Such diachronic moments, or moments on the edge of chaos, have occurred time and again throughout our history. As described by Waldrop (1993: 12) in his book *Complexity*:

[t]he edge of chaos is where centuries of slavery and segregation suddenly give way to the civil rights moment of the 1950s and

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<sup>28</sup> Luhmann’s work (1990, 1995) is another important development of systems thinking in Sociology. Informed by the idea of autopoiesis in biology, Luhmann conceives society as an autopoietic or self-referential system with communications, instead of human beings, as its components. For Luhmann, subsystems (e.g. political, economic, cultural and media) function as closed networks of communication without human intervention, and hence, it would be impossible for subsystems to affect or interact with each other. Luhmann’s theory helps to legitimise neoliberal ideologies that defend the absolute autonomy of the marketplace as well as the self-responsibility of individuals for their own problems. This has resulted in precarious living conditions for a large part of the world population. As Fuchs (2007b: 32) notes, “the consequence of Luhmann’s exclusion of humans and their interests from his theory is a blindness for social problems that created an affirmative uncritical theory that describes society as it is, not also as it could be”.

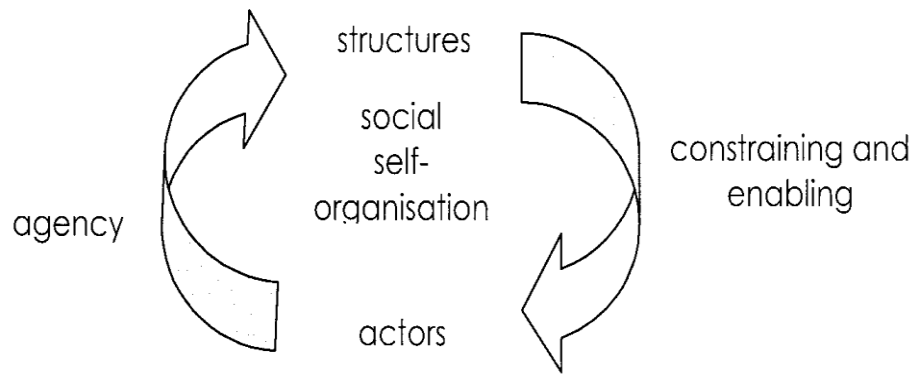
1960s; where seventy years of Soviet communism suddenly give way to political turmoil and ferment; where eons of evolutionary stability suddenly give way to wholesale species transformation. The edge is the constantly shifting battle zone between stagnation and anarchy, the one place where a complex system can be spontaneous, adaptive and alive.

When a society that evolves along the edge of chaos is re-structured into hierarchical structures with temporary stability, it enters phases of synchronous development or “self-recreation” in Fuchs’s (2002: 42) terms. Fuchs (*ibid.*) sees self-organisation as “self-structuring of matter” in physical systems, and “self-structuring as well as self-maintaining” of living things in biological systems<sup>29</sup>. When it comes to social self-organisation, it is more than just self-structuring and self-maintaining. It is additionally “self-creative” (Fuchs 2002: 2), because the individual human beings that make up the social system are “reasoning, knowledgeable agents with practical consciousness” (Fuchs 2003c: 34). They have the ability and, to a great extent, the freedom to choose, design and create desirable conditions of their own life. This “freedom of conscious creation” (Fuchs 2002: 3) is a property that cannot be found in physical or biological systems.

Synchronously, the process of social self-organisation/recreation involves conscious, creative, intentional, planned human activities as well as unconscious, unintentional and unplanned activities (Fuchs 2003c). Together, they give rise to new social qualities that cannot be simply explained or fully forecasted by looking at the decisions and actions taken by individual agents – a bottom-up process that Fuchs (2003c) calls “agency”. The newly emergent qualities, in turn, function as structural conditions that “enable and constrain” (*ibid.*: 146) individual actions and thinking. The permanent bottom-up “agency” and the top-down “constraining and enabling” constitute the basic cycle of synchronous social self-organisation/recreation (see Figure 3.1).

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<sup>29</sup> An example of self-structuring of matter in physical systems is the Bénard phenomenon, where particles in a special liquid, when heated at a certain temperature, arrange themselves into a honeycomb-shaped structure (Fuchs 2003a). Examples of self-structuring/maintaining include the formation of organs and tissues out of a set of mutually activating genes during embryological development (Kauffman 1993), ant hills (Johnson 2002), and swarms of birds (Gamazine *et al.* 2003).



*Figure 3.1 The basic cycle of social self-organisation/re-creation (Fuchs 2004: 185)*

Within the social system, Fuchs (2010a: 25) further identifies five interconnected and interacting subsystems – the ecological, economic, political, cultural and technological subsystems – on the grounds that

[i]n order to survive, humans in society have to appropriate and change nature (ecology) with the help of technologies so that they can produce resources that they distribute and consume (economy), which enables them to make collective decisions (polity), form values, and acquire skills (culture).

In other words, “the re-creation of society results in qualitative moments such as the economy, politics and culture that form subsystems with their own relative autonomous logic and way of functioning” (Fuchs 2004: 185). These subsystems, in turn, exert a dominant influence back on social actions and relationships. This downward influence, according to Fuchs (2003c), is consistent with Giddens’s (1984: 25-26) argument that “the structural properties of social systems are both medium and outcome of the practices they recursively organise” and “they both enable and constrain actions”. The dialectical causality between social structures and actors is what underlies the overall evolution of society. Individual actors cannot fully steer the direction of social development because they are constrained by the existing social structures, but through agency and intervention, they can create desirable structural qualities during social self-recreation or find alternative paths for social development during phases of instability (Fuchs 2004).

In today’s global information and knowledge-based society, ICTs – in particular, the Internet and new digital media – amplify human actions so

profoundly and significantly that they affect all subsystems of society in both transcendent and threatening ways. As put by Fuchs (2003b), “the new technologies are embedded into an antagonism” (*ibid.*: 158) between the Internet “as a Global Alliance Net of Co-operation and a Global Meganet of Domination” (*ibid.*: 152), fostering both positive opportunities and negative risks. This antagonism is an expression that can be found in all the other subsystems:

[an] ecological antagonism between knowledge-based technology supporting ecological sustainability and ecological degradation, an economic antagonism between knowledge as open source and commodity, a political antagonism between e-democracy and big brother, and a cultural antagonism between global cultural wisdom and global cultural manipulation spread by the Internet (Fuchs 2005b: 25).

Within the context of translation, the omnipresence of digital sources and the ever-changing set of digital translation tools have also resulted in an antagonism, or to put it in Cronin’s (2013: 6) terms, a “bidirectionality” between “the mass provision of translation by global translation providers and local initiatives to promote alternative forms of translation” as instanced by various forms of collaborative, participatory and community-based translation initiated by ordinary users of technologies. It turns out that translation’s engagement with technology not only facilitates, in Fuchs’s (2005b: 25) terms, the “de-localisation and disembedding” of communication across time and space – and hence the reshaping of our society. Through that engagement, translation also contributes to the re-embedding and localisation of disembedded communication, in the sense that the globally circulated knowledge and information on the Internet are embedded into local actions by the recipients in their specific socio-cultural contexts.

Since the overall social re-creation process is still shaped by the logic of competition, exclusion and domination, there is a lack of “subjective self-organisation in the sense of self-determination, participation and direct democracy” (Fuchs 2003a: 56). However, the dialectical notion of social self-organisation suggests that the future is only conditioned but not fully determined by the past, and that through human agency and intervention, we

can increase the possibility of realising a sustainable and participatory society based on cooperation, inclusion and self-determination (*ibid.*). In an age of translation where our being-in-the-world is “being altered by new configurations in the virtual reality of the global web” (Cronin 2012: 136), the emerging phenomenon of participatory translation must be monitored and analysed in order to keep track of this new trend and have a solid and updated knowledge of the current landscape of the translation industry.

### 3.3.2. Common-pool resources management theory

Common-Pool Resources (CPRs) are “natural and human-constructed resources” (e.g. fisheries, forests, and irrigation systems) (Ostrom *et al.* 1999: 278), in which one person’s use subtracts from the amount of resource units available to others; and it is necessary, but often difficult and costly, to prevent users from overusing CPRs. As a result, CPRs are characterised by “subtractability and difficulty of exclusion” (*ibid.*). Due to these two characteristics, users of a CPR are likely to face free-riding in two forms: “overuse without concern for the negative effects on others, and a lack of contributed resources for maintaining and improving the CPR itself” (*ibid.*).

For Hardin (1968: 1244), few users would voluntarily give up free riding, given the risk that others will not cede from this economically rational but resource-depleting behaviour. Consequently, users of a common resource (i.e. an open-access property regime) are caught in an inevitable process that leads to the problem of resource degradation, or the so-called “tragedy of the commons” (*ibid.*). According to Hardin (*ibid.*), the only way to prevent this ‘tragedy’ is either through privatisation or government regulation. Since it was first articulated, Hardin’s argument has been applied by many policy-makers and scholars to rationalise government ownership and centralised control of many common-pool resources.

Unlike Hardin’s view that users of CPRs are short-term, profit-maximisers who are homogenous in terms of their possessed information, skills and cultural views, Ostrom’s perspective of CPRs recognises human beings as “self-conscious” agents with the ability to establish and sustain “reciprocal cooperation” to overcome the tragedy of the commons according to “locally



crafted rules as well as evolved norms” (Ostrom *et al.* 1999: 280). Through extensive empirical studies of self-governed irrigation and forestry groups, Ostrom and colleagues (Ostrom 1990, 1999, 2000; Ostrom *et al.* 1999) suggest that local and regional CPRs can be successfully managed by individuals within the groups.

By examining successful efforts and failures in managing CPRs, Ostrom (2002) identifies a number of design principles that characterise robust, long-enduring self-governed groups:

- group boundaries are clearly defined;
- rules that govern the use of a CPR are well matched to group members’ needs and local conditions;
- members have the opportunity to participate in the modification of the rules;
- rule violators receive harsher punishments each time they break the rules (i.e. ‘graduated sanctions’);
- the group has its own monitors to audit CPR conditions and appropriate behaviour;
- group conflicts or conflicts between the group and those outside it can be resolved through low-cost mechanisms;
- external authorities recognise the group’s rights to devise its own rules however minimal the recognition is.

In the case of fansubbing groups, thousands of fansubbers voluntarily donate their privately owned resources (e.g. computers with high-speed Internet access, audiovisual content, and servers that store the content) to produce and distribute subtitled work with the knowledge and even hope that the public can also benefit from their efforts. In this sense, the work of fansubbers is privately produced but publicly available, and therefore, meets the non-excludable dimension of both public goods and CPRs.

If the public downloads the work distributed by a fansubbing group for personal use, the work will still be available for others to download.

Nevertheless, if the work is appropriated by commercial media outlets, manufactures of pirated audiovisual products or even fansubbers themselves in an attempt to privatise it, its availability to all would be threatened. Furthermore, if no one in the fansubbing group contributed his/her private resources to maintain and update the group's repertoire of audiovisual content, the benefits that would stem from the group's collective resources would eventually diminish. In this sense, resources shared in a fansubbing group are in fact vulnerable to usage, and need to be protected from potential appropriation while remaining open and constantly updated.

As far as fansubbing groups in China are concerned, they are faced with another looming threat from the Party-state, which often invokes censorship and copyright laws to crackdown file-sharing activities and stifle individual freedom of expression in the name of achieving "harmony" (see section 2.3.2). Under such circumstances, it is worth examining how robust, long-lasting fansubbing groups protect and sustain themselves, or rather whether successful self-governed groups of CPRs exhibit the same or different design principles as identified by Ostrom (see section 6.3).

All in all, the tragedy of commons only occurs when people "cannot communicate and have no way of gaining trust through their own efforts or with the help of the macro-institutional system within which they are embedded" (Ostrom 2000: 46). Through communication and cooperation, people will have the confidence to invest in collective activities, knowing that others will also do so. Apart from developing social bonds and common rules to sustain cooperative behaviour, this also requires building trusting relations as the most essential norm. As Petty (2003: 1913) puts it, "relations of trust lubricate cooperation" and therefore save money and time that people would otherwise invest in monitoring each other.

New information and communication technologies have been instrumental in facilitating groups of geographically dispersed individuals to engage in collaborative, community-based mediation practices that challenge the control that nation-states and media industries had traditionally exerted over media flows. By working together to challenge the *status quo*, amateur mediators are co-constructing "affinity spaces", defined as "highly generative environments,

from which new aesthetic experiments and innovations emerge” (Jenkins *et al.* 2006: 9), for the negotiation of their individual and collective identities (Baker 2013, Pérez-González 2010). Then, how is collective identity formed and maintained over time in the absence of face-to-face interactions between activist mediators? What qualifies these groups as “communities”, rather than virtual assemblies of loosely connected individuals? In order to account for the dynamics driving the processes of collective identity construction and maintenance in fansubbing online communities, a working definition of such communities is presented in section 3.4.

### 3.4. Fansubbing online communities as self-organising systems

This section starts by situating fansubbing online communities within current academic debates on the concepts of communities of practice, virtual community, collective identity, and human values; and develops a working definition of fansubbing online communities by taking into account complexity-informed perspectives on social systems (section 3.3.1) and common-pool resources management in self-governed communities (section 3.3.2). It is argued that this working definition can help to uncover and describe social dynamics pertaining to collective identity building in online settings, such as those of fansubbing networks.

#### 3.4.1. Communities of practice

Fansubbing, whether it refers to fan-based subtitling of Japanese *anime* or a wider range of audiovisual genres, is perhaps the most prominent example of participatory translation practices fostered by the rapid pace of globalisation and advances in digital technologies such as BitTorrent and P2P file sharing (Leonard 2005, Pérez-González 2006). Except for a small fraction of fansubbers who may gain tangible benefits in return for their work<sup>30</sup>, the

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<sup>30</sup> Occasionally, some Japanese producers and distributors partner with previously unauthorised fansubbing sites by promoting and broadcasting some of their fansubbed work to allow for an almost simultaneous release of selected *anime* products overseas (Rebuck 2008, Denison 2011). There are also cases where broadcasters feature fansubs on their commercial DVDs (Dwyer 2012). Besides, “individuals or groups may burn fansubs onto DVDs or acquire Asian counterfeits and auction them on eBay in any market” (Hatcher 2005: 537). These commercialisation activities associated with fansubbing demonstrate “the power of fan activities to effect serious change within the media and translation industries” (Dwyer *ibid.*: 236).

majority of them engage in the fast-paced production of high quality subs driven by a not-for-profit spirit. Their constant pursuit of speed and quality has “placed them in closer competition with the most significant industries that create their objects of fandom”<sup>31</sup> (Dennison 2011: 15). As fansubbing networks move closer to mainstream industries and spread globally, their heterogeneity and geopolitical complexity are also becoming more visible (Dwyer 2012, Dennison 2011). Nowadays, thousands of fansubbers are providing subtitled versions of a broad range of media products in diverse target languages for viewers embedded in different national, geographical and linguistic constituencies. By promoting their own fan causes and spreading their common interests and discourses, fansubbers also “offer a new model of fan community”, where best practices in areas such as “choice of titles, speed and quality of translation, technology, longevity and web ‘presence’” are starting to emerge (Dennison *ibid.*: 15). Fansubbing groups are thus being increasingly conceptualised by certain scholars (e.g. O’Hagan 2009) as communities of practice, where participants can acquire in-depth genre expertise and a sense of community.

Communities of practice, in brief, are groups of people “bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise” (Wenger and Synder 2000: 139). Scholars working in the domain of Communities of Practice (CoP) have pointed out that CoP are different from traditional organisations and learning situations along the following lines: 1) different levels of knowledge and skills are often simultaneously presented in such communities (Wenger 1998); 2) learning often takes place in real-world context by solving authentic problems, and involves collaboration and teamwork (Johnson 2001); 3) learners are engaged in the negotiation of goals for the collaborative learning processes they are part of (*ibid.*); 4) CoP develop their activities in “an environment of safety and trust” (Johnson 2001: 45); and 5) the community’s knowledge is greater than individual knowledge (Gherardi and Nicolini 2000).

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<sup>31</sup> For instance, there are cases where the quality of the fansubbed translations is “beyond what the *anime* companies themselves are able to provide on their legit releases” (Koulikov 2008), available at *Fansub – the death of anime?* <http://www.animenewsnetwork.com/convention/2008/anime-expo/industry-roundtable-fansubs-the-death-of-anime> (last accessed 01 March 2013).

Communities of fansubbers would appear to share some of the features of CoP. These comprise social arrangements in which both experienced and novice members learn by participating in community activities (Johnson 2001). In addition, CoP revolve around artefacts, which are the products, processes, technology, and media that are jointly created by community members (*ibid.*). Like CoP, fansubbing networks provide the basis for learning through members' participation in fansubbing activities. During group activities, fansubbers have to synthesise their diverse individual skills and knowledge in order to establish common meanings for their participatory experiences, which are worked out and transformed into jointly produced artefacts (e.g. fansubbed work, tools, procedures, and strategies in solving problematic situations). In the case of CoP, this process, known as "reification", involves "giving form to our experience by producing objects that congeal experience into "thingness" (Wenger 1998: 58). In the case of fansubbing communities, the reification process is mainly achieved via the collaborative creation of fansubbed work.

Fansubbing networks also extend and problematise the definition CoP in several ways. Firstly, traditional CoP are mainly focused on professional practices that enrich knowledge shared by community members, who are already professionals or would-be professionals in their fields (Lave and Wenger 1991). On the other hand, fansubbing networks are characterised by amateur practices motivated by common interests in certain genres of media products. Secondly, while traditional CoP are place-based and have place-based membership that separates those within a community from those outside it (Johnson 2001), fansubbing online communities are organised by individuals who identify each other through shared activities around consuming media products through subtitling. Last but not least, since members in a fansubbing network cannot see each other, non-verbal cues (e.g. physical distance, eye contact, and voice volume) of face-to-face communication become less dominant in the text-based virtual environment, allowing greater individual autonomy and freedom of expression. In contrast, traditional CoP often emphasise group dynamics over individual expression (Johnson 2001). Since the virtual nature of fansubbing networks is what makes them a special type of communities of practice, gaining a better understanding of the notion of

“virtual community” is paramount when studying fansubbing and other community-based translation practices on the Internet.

### 3.4.2. Virtual community

The term “virtual” in “virtual communities” indicates that the necessity of being physically local to take part in communication and community-building practices is eliminated due to the development of communication technologies, particularly the Internet. Since all interaction and production processes in fansubbing groups are mediated by the Internet, the Internet applications<sup>32</sup> used by group members play a crucial role in shaping the ways in which they organise their activities and build their communities. Consequently, the classification of these applications in relation to their fulfilled social actions constitutes a top priority in studying organisational dynamics in fansubbing online communities.

Traditionally, the Internet has been conceived as a “technological system of networked computer networks” (Fuchs 2005a: 39). But viewing the Internet as purely a technological system does not take into account that this technological structure “cannot be separated from its human use and the permanent creation and communication of meaningful information” generated by users of the Internet (*ibid.*). Applying concepts associated with evolutionary complex systems, such as self-organisation, emergence and information, Fuchs (*ibid.*) conceptualises the Internet as a self-organising system that consists of a technological infrastructure and interacting human actors; the infrastructure is both the medium and the outcome of the interactions between human actors. Fuchs and colleagues (Fuchs 2010b: 760, Fuchs and Hofkirchner 2005, Hofkirchner 2002) further identify three overlapping evolutionary stages involved in the development of the Internet, namely “Web 1.0, Web 2.0, and Web 3.0”. These notions are based on the idea of information production as a threefold dynamic process, involving cognition, communication, and cooperation stages (Fuchs 2010a).

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<sup>32</sup> A web or Internet application refers to any application that runs in a web browser, such as websites, Internet podcasting, Real Simple Syndication (RSS), mailing-lists, bulletin board systems, real-time messaging, and Google Apps (Nations 2014).

**Cognition**<sup>33</sup>, the activity of the human mind” (Fuchs 2011: 202), happens when individuals relate themselves to events and changes in the environment, during which environmental stimuli are received and interpreted in such a way that “individual information” (Fuchs & Hofkirchner 1999) such as individual values, beliefs, rules, knowledge and wisdom are generated and accumulated. Individual information can help individuals to make decisions in situations where they must act in order to solve problems and create new situations that they consider appropriate, fair and pleasant (*ibid.*). Cognition is social in the sense that “it is permanently confronted with social facts and is the foundation for creating and recreating social facts” (Fuchs 2011: 202).

The existence of individual information, however, does not necessarily entail that the actions taken by the individual are socially meaningful ones (Fuchs & Hofkirchner 1999). Actions are ‘social’ insofar as they take account of the behaviour of others and are thereby oriented towards others (*ibid.*). As a result, social relationships are established insofar as the action of each individual takes account of that of the others and is oriented in these terms (*ibid.*). Since an actor A can take account of the actions of B without B considering those of A, social actions are a necessary but not sufficient condition for social relationships (*ibid.*).

In order for behaviour to trigger social relationships, there should be “a meaningful symbolic interaction” mediated by the act of **communication** (Fuchs 2010b: 772). During the process of communication, signs and symbols are given certain meanings by individuals who share those meanings among themselves. “Communication, in other words, is social action that makes use of symbols” (Fuchs 2011: 202). Those shared meanings constitute “social information” (Fuchs & Hofkirchner 1999), and serve as the guiding principles for individuals’ social actions and interactions. Examples of social information include “social norms, laws, values, and rules” (some rules do not need to be codified since they can exist in the form of traditions or habits) (*ibid.*: 19).

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<sup>33</sup> As is also the case in Fuchs’ work, this thesis uses the term “cognition” from a social psychological perspective. From this standpoint, the term “cognition” generally refers to mental operations involved in perceiving, interpreting and understanding the social world, including the relations between ourselves and others (Sternberg 2008).

If the interacting individuals coordinate their actions in such a manner that they jointly create a social information structure, where everyone involved in its application has “the same opportunity and means” to create situations from which everyone can benefit, the resulting structure is characterised by cooperation (Fuchs & Hofkirchner 1999: 19). **Cooperation** is “a process in which several humans act together in order to achieve a goal or a process of joint actions that produces a shared consciousness of belonging together” (Fuchs 2011: 202). Cooperative social information is thus “an emergent quality of the social system in the process of self-organisation”, during which the involved social actors “determine the occurrence, form, course, and result of this process on their own” (Fuchs & Hofkirchner *ibid.*). For Fuchs and colleagues, cooperation is the highest form of social activity that distinguishes a community from a social group. This, they contend, is in line with Tönnies’ (1988: 69) argument that the very existence of a community rests on “the consciousness of belonging together and the affirmation of the condition of mutual dependence”, whereas a social group usually refers to “the objective fact of a unity based on common traits and activities and other external phenomena” (*ibid.*: 67).

Overall, the production of information in society is a dynamic process that involves three forms of social activities (i.e. cognition, communication and cooperation), each relating to others “in a way that reflects and resembles the build-up of a complex system” (Fuchs 2010a: 50). Cognition is the prerequisite for communication, which is the precondition for cooperation. Based on this notion of information, Fuchs (*ibid.*) identifies three evolutionary stages during the development of the Internet:

- Web 1.0: a self-organising system of cognition, where Internet applications are used as the medium that affects our ways of thinking and allows us to accumulate individual information and knowledge. Examples are websites, Internet podcasting, P2P file sharing, and RSS.
- Web 2.0: a self-organising system of communication, where Internet applications are used as the medium that allows us to interact, as well as to exchange and accumulate social information. Examples are e-mail, discussion forums, chat, blogs and online rating systems.



- Web 3.0: a self-organising system of cooperation, where Internet applications are used as the medium that allows us to tackle problems that we could not solve individually, to create new information and knowledge through our joint efforts, or to form cohesive social relations that are bound by feelings of togetherness. Examples are Wikipedia and other similar wiki-based platforms, shared workspace applications such as Google Drive, and networks of knowledge/communities of practice where content and information are shared and jointly produced.

These three relatively distinct levels of sociality facilitated by networked technologies are encapsulated within one another, i.e. each level is integrated into and preserved by the next one, until the highest level, that of a web-mediated system of human cooperation, is reached. The term “web” here not only refers to the World Wide Web, but also to “any information network that enables human action and interaction” (Fuchs 2011: 203).

In this light, a fansubbing online community can be seen as a self-organising system where cooperative information, mainly in the form of fansubbed audiovisual content, is produced during web-mediated social activities of cognition, communication and cooperation among geographically dispersed participants. During cognition, the raw, un-translated audiovisual texts, as environmental stimuli, are consumed by group members using Web 1.0 applications (e.g. P2P file sharing, BitTorrent, or video streaming devices). Consequently, individual information, such as subjective viewing experiences, cultural and genre expertise, and linguistic knowledge related to the original audiovisual products, is generated and shared within the group during communication mediated by Web 2.0 applications (e.g. e-mails, online forums, instant messaging devices). Such commonly shared experiences and knowledge are further enhanced and put into practice during collaborative subtitling processes with the help of Web 3.0 tools (e.g. shared subtitling software, collaborative real-time editors, and shared workspace platforms), thereby turning the raw audiovisual resources into fansubbed products that integrate and reflect the information and knowledge generated during cognition, communication and cooperation processes in the fansubbing group.

Based on the types of temporality supported by communication technologies, they are further classified by Fuchs (2010b) into synchronous or asynchronous technologies. Examples of synchronous technologies include instant messaging software, chat rooms, and collaborative real-time editors; asynchronous technologies include websites, e-mails, bulletin board systems, shared workspace systems and Wikis. Based on the modes of communication mediated by these technologies, they can be further classified into one-to-one (o2o), one-to-many (o2m), or many-to-many (m2m) technologies. Combining the above classifications with the three types of social activities facilitated by technologies, the overall forms of Internet applications that might be used in a fansub virtual community are summarised in Table 3.1.

	<b>Synchronous</b>	<b>Asynchronous</b>
<b>Cognition (Web 1.0)</b>	Video streaming and P2P file sharing tools (o2o, o2m, m2m)	Websites (o2m) Real Simple Syndication (RSS, o2m)
<b>Communication (Web 2.0)</b>	Instant messaging (o2o, o2m, m2m) Audio/video chatting (o2o, o2m, m2m)	E-mails (o2o, o2m) Online forums (m2m) Individual blogs (o2m) Group blogs (m2m) Social networking services (o2o, o2m, m2m)
<b>Cooperation (Web 3.0)</b>	Real-time editing tools (m2m)	Shared workspace (m2m) Shared subtitling software (m2m)

*Table 3.1 A typology of web applications in fansubbing networks*

Since the term “virtual community” incorporates both technological and social aspects, describing the types of technological applications employed by a fansubbing network is not enough to account for its organisational dynamics. One has to consider the social dimension of such communities. In particular, what makes an assembly of networked individuals a community? In other words, what is an online community?

Although online communities have been studied by numerous scholars from various perspectives, there is still a lack of consensus around formal definitions of online communities, largely because the term “community” has been hard to

define<sup>34</sup>. Nevertheless, previous studies seem to agree that the definitions of community can be traced back to the one given by Tönnies (1912, 1967, 1988). As mentioned in section 3.4.2, Tönnies (1988) points out that “community” is about an awareness of mutual dependence, intimacy, and feelings of togetherness. Tönnies’s notion of community is stressed by Fernback (1999: 217) in studying online communities by suggesting that:

[n]ot all virtual social gatherings are communities. Without the personal investment, intimacy, and commitment that characterises our ideal sense of community, some online discussion groups and chat rooms are nothing more than a means of communication among people with common interests.

For Fernback (*ibid.*: 46), virtual communities are collectivities “driven by the principles of democracy and egalitarianism in its use of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC), not necessarily in terms of the content of postings in cyberspace”. Etzioni and Etzioni (1999: 241) further note that virtual communities would require a “commitment to a set of shared values, mores, meanings, and a shared historical identity – in short, a culture”. For them, an online community is “a web of affect-laden relationship that encompasses a group of individuals” (*ibid.*). People who “meet” for the first time on the Internet should be only considered as “aggregates or groups” but not as communities, because they may not share social bonds or a similar culture (*ibid.*). Only when there is “a sense of community”, defined as “a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (McMillan and Chavis 1986: 9), can virtual social groupings be considered as “real” communities (Bakardjieva & Feenberg 2002). Online communication will then become an effective part of members’ lives in the formulation and maintenance of a collective identity (*ibid.*).

Previous studies that focus on collective identity construction and maintenance in virtual environments have found that the sense of shared collective identity experienced in real world collective actions can be also experienced by at least

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<sup>34</sup> Hillery (1995), for instance, reviewed ninety-four different definitions of community.

some participants within various online settings<sup>35</sup>. Based on previous studies, Wellman (2001: 2031) argues that virtual communities can, and do, constitute “real community” by noting that

[c]ommunity, like computers, has become networked. Although community was once synonymous with densely knit, bounded neighbourhood groups, it is now seen as a less bounded social network of relationships that provide sociability, support, information, and a sense of belonging.

Then, what is “collective identity”? What elements of collective identity are needed for a group of people to define themselves as a community? These questions will be addressed in section 3.4.3.

### 3.4.3. Collective identity

Despite the lack of consensus on how to define collective identity, previous discussions of the concept invariably suggest that its essence resides in a sense of “we-ness”. The latter not only allows actors within a field of action to define “who we are”, but also sustains and mobilises their collective action in pursuit of common goals. This sense of “we-ness” is a set of “cognitive definitions” (Melucci 1995: 44) developed by a group of social actors, concerning the orientations of their action and “the field of opportunities and constraints in which the action takes place” (*ibid.*). Such cognitive definitions are always accompanied by an emotional dimension and even a moral dimension consisting of feelings of a common cause, satisfaction, faith or fear that motive actors to “act together in the name of, or for the sake of, the interests of the collectivity” (Snow 2001: 4, Melucci 1995, Polletta & Jasper 2001).

Moreover, collective identity is an “interactive” and “learning” process (Melucci 1989, 1995) established through actors’ “collective agency” (Snow 2001) to solve problems set by the environment during the course of their action. Outcomes of this collective agency can be manifested in many ways, including forms of organisation, membership criteria, leadership patterns,

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<sup>35</sup> Examples include but not limited to Internet Relay Chat (IRC) (Roberts, Smith & Pollock 1997), Multiuser Domains (MUD) (Clodius 1997), e-mail discussion groups (Kot 1999), bulletin boards (Dunham, *et al.* 1998), e-learning programs (Haythornthwaite, Kazmer & Robins 2000), and newsgroups (Baym 1995, Blanchard & Markus 2004), etc.

resources, communication channels, and technologies of communication (Melucci 1995). These structural properties function as “boundary markers” that “distinguish the collectivity both internally and externally” (Snow 2001: 7). Although participants’ cognitive definitions of their collective identity can be fluid and subject to negotiation and modification during their ongoing collective (inter)actions, the structural properties that mark the collective identity, as well as whatever subsequent ones emerge, “constitute objects of orientation and interaction” within the field of action (*ibid.*).

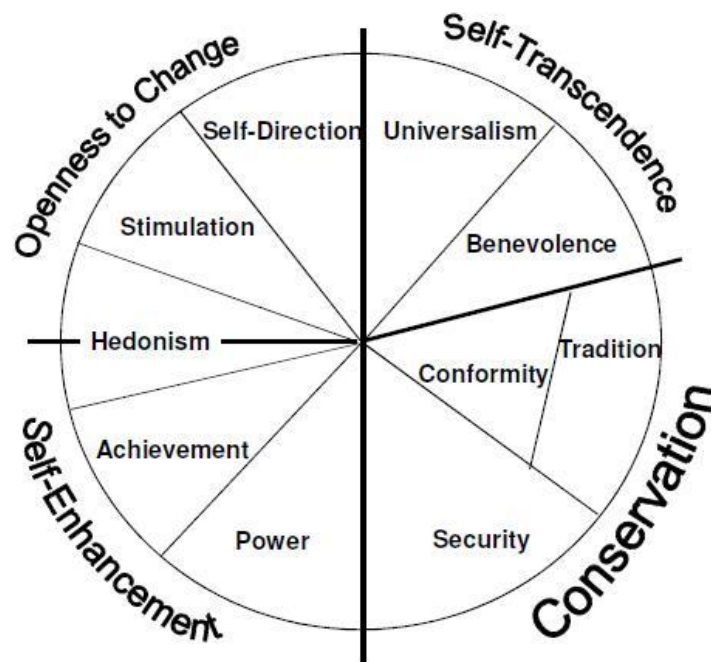
Based on previous literature, it can be said that collective identity is constituted by a shared sense of “we-ness” and a corresponding action, i.e. collective agency. The former can be reflected in the words expressed by participants about their experienced sense of community, motivations to participate (informed by the contextual constraints that shape the field of their activities), goals to be achieved during their participation, and their emotional connections with each other. The latter – collective agency – is often implied, rather than directly articulated, by a set of properties that characterise the organisational structures created by participants to sustain their sense of “we-ness” and guide their actions.

#### 3.4.4. Basic human values

As discussed in section 3.4.3, collective identity deals with a sense of “we-ness” shared among a group of individuals engaging in a collective action, their motivations to participate in this action, and the values that underlie and drive them to achieve their goals. The motivations to participate are often influenced by the specific contextual factors (i.e. environmental stimuli in systems term) in which these individuals are embedded, and thus, are likely to be expressed in terms of specific aims and objects. Contrarily, values are, by definition, “the cognitive representations of desirable, abstract goals” (Roccas *et al.* 2002: 789, Schwartz 1992, Smith and Schwartz 1997). They are deeply-embedded motivational sources (Schwartz 1992), enduring over time and transcending specific situations.

In social sciences, values have played a pivotal role in explaining the motivational bases of behaviour and attitudes among individuals, cultural

groups and societies (Durkheim 1964, Weber 1958). As much as values are important, there seems to be a lack of consensus regarding what constitutes human values, and whether these components are culturally universal. Recent empirical studies conducted by Schwartz (1992) and colleagues (Smith and Schwartz 1997) suggest that a universal set of values exists across different cultures. Often articulated in the form of goals, these values represent three universal requirements for human existence to which all cultures must be responsive: 1) needs of individuals as biological organisms; 2) needs of social coordination; and 3) group survival and welfare needs. From these three universal requirements, Schwartz (2012) derives ten basic personal values and organises them along two bipolar dimensions (see Figure 3.2): 1) “openness to change” vs. “conservation”; 2) “self-enhancement” vs. “self-transcendence”.



*Figure 3.2 Relations among ten basic personal values (Schwartz 2012: 9)*

The first dimension establishes a contrast between values that emphasise independent thought, action, feelings, and desire for change (self-direction, stimulation, hedonism), and values that prioritise self-containment, adherence to the past, and resistance to change (conformity, tradition, security). The second dimension articulates the conflict between values that emphasise the welfare and interests of others (universalism, benevolence), and values that focus on one’s own interests, success and dominance over others (achievement,

power). Overall, these values are arranged along a continuum: the closer any two values are placed around the circle, whether in a clockwise or counter-clockwise direction, the more similar their projected goals; the more distant, the more antagonistic their goals. While the ten basic values and their interrelationships may be universal, individuals and groups differ greatly in the relative importance they attribute to these values. In other words, different social groups have different values “hierarchies”.

Since values are structured by importance relative to one another, the values cherished by a group of individuals form an ordered system of priorities that guide their goal setting, behaviour and commitment. For the present context, Schwartz’s theory of basic human values is employed to explain the relationship between the desirable goals expressed by a group of Chinese fansubbers for engaging in the fansubbing practice, and the types of values they prioritise. These values are what characterise them as fansubbers and define who they are as a group.

To further situate this study within complexity-informed perspectives on networked society, section 3.4.5 proposes a working definition of fansubbing online community for the analysis of collective identity construction and maintenance in such communities.

#### 3.4.5. A working definition of fansubbing online communities

Drawing on complexity-informed perspectives on social systems (section 3.3.1) and common-pool resources management (section 3.3.2), and informed by insights from existing literature on the concepts of ‘communities of practice’ (section 3.4.1), ‘virtual community’ (section 3.4.2), ‘collective identity’ (section 3.4.3), and ‘human values’ (section 3.4.4), this study conceptualises a fansubbing online community as a self-organising system characterised by three distinct yet interrelated sets of attributes (i.e. a common set of Internet applications, social practices, and a sense of collective identity) shared among community members.

To begin with, the most obvious or superficial set of attributes (level 1) refers to the types of Internet applications used by a fansubbing group to manage its online presence and facilitate group activities. A community is formed at this

level in the sense that members are sharing the same cognitive, communicative and cooperative technologies during the production of subtitles, knowledge and information related to their selected audiovisual products.

The second and less obvious set of attributes (level 2) pertain to a range of structural properties derived from the ongoing collective (inter)actions among group members. These properties mainly include membership requirements that define the criteria by which members can recognise themselves and others; hierarchical levels for the division of labour required in a series of comparatively independent and specialised modules designed by the group to solve coordination problems; a leadership style that reflects the extent to which decision-making is monopolised by few members at the higher levels of the hierarchy or shared by the whole group; and rules of conduct, routines, habits, and rituals that guide members' actions in the virtual space of the group to ensure a long-term, sustainable usage of their common resources. A community is formed at level 2, in the sense that members not only share the same technological applications, but also share similar socialisation experiences by engaging in the same practices that are unique to the group. Such experiences are also a learning process by which individual participants gradually acquire the interests, topics, values, norms, skills and knowledge – in short, the group's culture – that is expected from them, as they try to gain membership of the group.

The third level refers to a sense of community or a “we-ness” associated with shared meanings and emotional attachments attributed by members to their group. Here, the fansubbing group meets Tönnies's (1998: 69) definition of community, in the sense that it acquires, beyond a common technological infrastructure and shared social practices, a sense of collective identity that “rests in the consciousness of belonging together and the affirmation of the condition of mutual dependence” among community members. If this collective identity can create attraction among members and sustain their actions, it can also explain some member's exodus from group activities once they discover the discrepancies between their expectations and the reality they experienced during participation. As a result, not all fansubbing online communities can reach the third level, because sustaining collective identity requires great efforts on the part of the individuals to make sense of and adjust



to group expectations and experiences, as well as collective efforts to manage, without suppressing, individual differences. As collective identity arises from the complex, non-linear interactions among group members and requires continuous management, adjustment and even reconstruction, one cannot fully predict its emergence, trajectories and impacts on individual members' behaviour. Some of them may continue their online interactions and develop a feeling of togetherness; others may end the online contact and even leave the group.

Based on the above discussion, a working definition for fansubbing online communities formulated in this study could be articulated as follows: A fansubbing online community is a self-organising system in which a common technological infrastructure (level 1) enables members' collective (inter)actions that result in the emergence of shared social practices and resources governed by rules of conduct (level 2), through which active cooperation, collective identity and feelings of togetherness may emerge (level 3).

### **3.5. Conclusion**

Applying the working definition proposed in section 3.4.5, this study formulates four core research questions and corresponding sub-questions (see Table 3.2). Since not all fansubbing groups can reach the third level of community, the first priority is to investigate the presence/absence of collective identity and the meanings that members of the fansubbing group under study attach to it. For this purpose, four sub-questions are designed to find out: 1) whether group members experience a sense of belonging and togetherness; 2) what motivates them to participate; 3) what goals or visions they want to achieve through fansubbing; and 4) how they describe their emotional attachments to or relationship(s) with other members.

The second core research question focuses on the resulting organisational structure of the fansubbing group. Specifically, it seeks to gauge the extent to which properties discernible at the structural level reflect the shared definitions articulated by members about their sense of community. To achieve this, three sub-questions are devised to examine: 1) the membership criteria in the chosen fansubbing group; 2) its organisational layers (structured hierarchically or

horizontally); and 3) the mechanisms developed by members to govern their collective resources (informed by Ostrom's design principles for the successful management of common-pool resources). These structural properties can reveal interesting issues, such as the degree of openness; leadership styles; prevailing power structures; the division of modules and roles; and rules of conduct (both written and unwritten) that set the scope of members' actions with respect to their social environment.

The above structural properties, in turn, exert downward influences on individual members' behaviour during their actual socialisation processes within the group. Such processes are also learning experiences by which individual participants learn to manage their expectations about being fansubbers in the group; reduce uncertainties and anxieties about their expected roles and responsibilities; reproduce organisational norms and values; and to make sense out of such experiences. In other words, maintaining commitment over time requires ritualised practices to reassert and manage collective identity. Thus, the third core research question aims to establish the kinds of practices, rituals and habits developed by the fansubbing group to sustain and manage its identity. To address this question, a sub-question is formulated, which focuses on the socialisation of new members in order to uncover how they learn about and adapt to collective expectations about their behaviour during their continuous interactions with both the social and material components in the fansubbing group. In this way, we can identify the trajectories of collective identity formation in the group.

The last core research question pertains to the technological aspect of the fansubbing group, and aims to find out what forms of networked technologies are deployed by the group to facilitate the formation and management of its collective identity. For this purpose, two sub-questions are designed, which revolve around: 1) the types of Internet applications used in/by the group; and 2) the rules developed by the group to regulate the use of these technologies.

Answers delineated from the above four core research questions are used to address the overarching question of this study:

*How does an online assembly of Chinese fansubbers create and sustain a sense of community through their collaborative subtitling activities?*

Since a fansubbing group is conceived as a self-organising system embedded in and intertwined with the overall self-organisation of the social system, the group's identity and the associated meanings that members attach to it reflect the social conditions in which the group operates. Moreover, this collective identity can provide a powerful impetus and orientation for the broader movement of participatory culture through online co-creative activities mediated through translation. Hence, findings from this research project will shed some important light on identity formation and community-building among Chinese netizens and media consumers for a more participatory culture in an increasingly networked China.

Three types of commonalities expected to be shared in a fansubbing online community	Research Questions (RQ) and sub-questions
<p><i>Level three<sup>36</sup></i>  <i>A shared sense of collective identity</i></p>	<p><i>RQ 1: Does a sense of collective identity exist among members in the fansubbing group under study and, if so, what does it mean for them?</i></p> <p>1.1. Do members feel or experience a sense of belonging and togetherness?  1.2. What motivates them to do fansubs?  1.3. What goals or visions would they like to achieve by fansubbing for their group?  1.4. How would they describe their relationship(s), if any, with other members?</p>
<p><i>Level two</i>  <i>A shared social space</i></p>	<p><i>RQ 2: How is this collective identity manifested in the group's organisational structure?</i></p> <p>2.1 What are the membership criteria of the group?  2.2 What are the organisational layers that feature in the group under study?  2.3 What mechanisms are developed by the group to govern its collective resources?</p> <p><i>RQ 3: How is this collective identity maintained through collective group-specific practices?</i></p> <p>3.1 How do new members learn about and adapt to the group's expectations about their behaviour as they integrate into the group?</p>
<p><i>Level one</i>  <i>A shared technological infrastructure</i></p>	<p><i>RQ 4: What forms of digital networked technologies are deployed by the group to facilitate the formation and management of its collective identity?</i></p> <p>4.1 What types of cognitive, communicative and cooperative Internet applications are deployed by the group?  4.2 What are the regulations developed by the group concerning the use of these technologies?</p>

*Table 3.2 Research questions formulated based on the working definition of fansubbing online communities*

<sup>36</sup> Since not all fansubbing groups can reach the third level of community, the first priority is to investigate the presence of a collectivity identity in the chosen fansubbing group, and the meanings that group members attach to this identity.

## Chapter 4 Methodology

### 4.1. Introduction

Driven by the research questions outlined in Chapter 3, this study deploys several methods to investigate collective identity formation and management in fansubbing online communities. These include conducting a questionnaire with various participants in my chosen fansubbing group to find out how they describe their sense of community. My study also relies on participant-observation and description of what activities are actually carried out in the group, and how these activities contribute to a sense of belonging and togetherness. When observation, direct participation are involved “to write a people, to help construct a people’s identity by writing them” (Hess 1992: 4), ethnography stands out as a potentially suitable methodology. As a form of social research that relies on first-hand knowledge of social processes gathered *in situ*, ethnography allows researchers to experience and interpret, from the inside, how groups of individuals see things and do things as they do (Atkinson and Hammersley 1994).

However, when an online group becomes an object of ethnographic research, there are several issues that need to be addressed: how to get access and participate in a virtual site; how to deal with the collection and analysis of heterogeneous digital data (e.g. texts, audio-visual data, etc.); and how to apply traditional standards of human subject protection in a virtual environment where activities are carried out in the absence of face-to-face communication. In order to tackle these challenges, the method of netnography is applied in this study. This chapter outlines what netnography is and why it is chosen for my project (**section 4.2**); how I select and enter my fieldsite (**section 4.3**); what/how data are collected and analysed (**section 4.4**); and what potential ethical issues are at stake in this project, as well as the solutions that may help to address such issues (**section 4.5**).

#### 4.2. The method of netnography

The term ‘netnography’<sup>37</sup> (i.e. ‘ethnography on the Internet’) is coined by Kozinets (1998). Originally developed in marketing and consumer research to identify and understand needs and decision-making influences of online consumer groups, netnography has been applied and adapted by many social scientists with various research interests in online cultures and phenomena<sup>38</sup>. Kozinets (2010: 366) defines netnography as:

a written account resulting from fieldwork studying the cultures and communities that emerge from on-line, computer mediated, or Internet-based communications, where both the fieldwork and the textual account are methodologically informed by the traditions and techniques of cultural anthropology.

The above definition suggests that netnography extends traditional ethnography to the study of online communities and the cultures that operate within and across them. As such, netnography emphasises “immersive, prolonged engagement” with members of an online culture in order to understand their daily lives and create a “thick” description of their world (Kozinets 2010: 60). Like ethnography, netnography is flexible and “promiscuous” (*ibid.*: 42), and can involve a combination of various research techniques and approaches, including participant-observation, interviews, discourse analysis, archival data collection, and videography, to name just a few (*ibid.*).

However, adapting traditional ethnographic techniques to the investigation of online spaces is far from a straightforward matter. Kozinets (2010: 68)

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<sup>37</sup> The term ‘netnography’ is but one of the many terms coined by scholars studying online communities. Other terms include ‘virtual ethnography’ (Hine 2000), ‘digital ethnography’ (Jones 1999), ‘cyber-ethnography’ (Ward 1999), and ‘webnography’ (Puri 2007), all of which are coined in an effort to imply studies that intend to adapt traditional ethnographic methods to the online environment. Kozinets (2010) argues that investigating social groups that exist only virtually is critically different from studying groups in the physical world: research on the first type of groups must be conducted in an online context by means of computer-mediated technologies. He therefore develops a new type of method under a new name (i.e. ‘netnography’) associated with a specific set of methodological guidelines to enhance the researchers’ awareness of entrée, participant-observation, data collection and analysis protocols, as well as the idiosyncratic ethical dimension of online settings.

<sup>38</sup> Examples of netnographic studies of online cultures and groups include online identity and sexual expression (Correll 1995, Turkle 1995), game-playing (McMahan 2003), personal web-pages (Schau and Gilly 2003), file-sharing online communities (Molesworth and Denegri-Knott 2004), open source (Hemetsberger and Reinhardt 2006), consumer creativity and ‘prosumption’ (Füller *et al.* 2007; Kozinets *et al.* 2008), and consumer resistance (Dalli and Corciolani 2008), etc.

summarises four major differences between face-to-face and computer-mediated interactional encounters:

- ‘alteration’: interactional modes may be altered by the specific nature and constraints of the technological media in which they occur;
- ‘anonymity’: interactions are often initiated and developed anonymously online<sup>39</sup>;
- ‘accessibility’: there are many online forums and social networking sites that researchers can access without approval from a community gatekeeper<sup>40</sup>;
- ‘archiving’: online conversations can be automatically archived by computer technologies.

These differences create a very unique context for conducting ethnographic research online and require adjustments of traditional ethnographic methodologies to suit the various cultures represented on the Internet. Consequently, the use of “netnography” signals the researcher’s attempt to emphasise the importance of Computer-Mediated Communications (CMC) in the lives of online community members, and to acknowledge that “netnography has its own uniquely adapted set of principles and procedures that set it apart from the conduct of face-to-face ethnography” (Kozinets 2010: 60).

The online environment in which fansubbing – a social phenomenon largely revolving around CMC and online communities – operates sets this study apart from face-to-face ethnography in three ways. First, the lack of physical presence associated with a fansubbing online community has changed the nature of participants, in the sense that all the physical interactions are replaced

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<sup>39</sup> Recently, users have been using their real identities on some social networking sites, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr in the West, or Renren (a Chinese site modelled on Facebook) and Sina Weibo (Weibo has been trying to enforce a ‘real-name policy’ among its users) in China. Nevertheless, anonymity is still relevant to online platforms where interactions are primarily carried out anonymously between strangers who identify each other through pseudonyms and become semi-known contacts by participating in sporadic episodes of interaction with the same individuals. Some well-known platforms for virtual interaction in China include Baidu Tieba (a BBS-based online community), and QQ (a service that incorporates various forms of online communication, e.g. blogs, games, instant message, and chatrooms).

<sup>40</sup> The term ‘community gatekeeper’ normally designates “the person or group who has the authority to negotiate and approve research access in a group or an organisation” (Lindlof and Taylor 2010: 101).

by computer-mediated written communications under (semi)anonymous conditions.

Second, since I am not physically co-present with my participants, the nature of observation has also changed. I can only “observe” what is happening by interpreting synchronous/asynchronous messages posted by geographically distant individuals. While the spatial/temporal flexibility afforded by communication technologies allows me to access a great amount of automatically archived and transcribed interactions anytime and from anywhere, it also raises issues pertaining to *selection* (which archived data to pursue in the sea of information); *verification* (how to verify the identity of and the information created by a person in virtual settings); and *validity* (how to ensure that archived documents and interactions are accurately interpreted in the absence of physical and non-verbal cues of emotional expression). Third, the blurring of public and private spaces that information and communication technologies have brought about means that not only can users post their own private information online, but they can also publicly access private information from others (Kozinets 2010). This private-public hybrid feature of the online environment presents new ethical issues around the privacy and confidentiality of online users (García *et al.* 2009, Kozinets *ibid.*).

Netnography is thus chosen to signal that this study focuses on the cultural artefacts, social practices, and identity involved in social activities unfolding *on the Internet*. Indeed, capturing the rich online manifestations of my research participants’ activities is more important than observing their actual physical behaviour. The fact that the most relevant identity for this study is the person who presents him/herself in an online community and plays a role within it means that his/her offline identity is only a secondary concern in the context of this project<sup>41</sup>.

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<sup>41</sup> To be clear, this is not to say that we should draw a line between offline/real and online/virtual identity, or between the ‘offline’ and ‘online’ worlds, but rather that our corporeal bodies and social relationships with others are increasingly dependent on various kinds of techno-social platforms. In fact, the anonymity afforded by many social media platforms allows a person to express certain desires or characteristics that might be unacceptable or even illegal in offline contexts. Thus, online expressions of identity can sometimes be more revelatory of a person’s ‘true’ or hidden self and intentions than what a prosaic observation of his/her everyday offline life might divulge (Jones 1995, Turkel 1995).



### 4.3. Fieldsite identification and entrée

Kozinets (2010) formulates a set of guidelines for doing netnography in online communities. He suggests that a netnographic research project should at least involve the following six steps: definition of research questions; fieldsite identification and ‘entrée’<sup>42</sup>; data collection; data analysis; ensuring ethical standards; and reporting findings (*ibid.*). This section focuses on step two, i.e. how I identified my fieldsite and developed strategies to enter the site.

#### 4.3.1. Locating the fieldsite

One of the advantages of doing ethnography online is that the ethnographer does not need to travel long distances to find and study a cultural group or rely on an influential personal introduction to enter the group. As argued by Kozinets (2010: 88), “the nascent netnographer’s best friend is the judicious deployment of a good search engine” in selecting a virtual fieldsite. Nevertheless, there are many search engines available on the Internet, each having its own set of merits. This diversity can result in significant variations in terms of the search results for fansubbing groups with a presence on the Internet. Consequently, developing sound criteria to choose an appropriate search engine represented an important first step.

I opted to use the Chinese language search engine 百度<sup>43</sup> (Baidu, [www.baidu.com](http://www.baidu.com)), mainly because my research focuses on fansubbing groups organised by Chinese media fans subtitling for fellow online fans and audiences located mainly in Mainland China. Baidu allows for the use of Chinese language search terms, both characters and pinyin, to locate information, news, websites and various forms of multimedia content according to the local tastes, preferences and needs of Chinese Internet users (Baidu Story 2012). When it comes to Chinese fansubbing groups, their names usually contain three Chinese characters “字幕组” (*zimuzu*, meaning

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<sup>42</sup> Within the context of this dissertation, the term ‘entrée’ is used following Kozinets (2010: 190), who refers to “the process of initial entry into a new culture or community” on the Internet.

<sup>43</sup> The name of the search engine “百度, *baidu*” (meaning “hundreds of times” in Chinese) is inspired by a poem written in the Song Dynasty to represent a persistent search for the ideal (see *The Baidu Story* at <http://ir.baidu.com/phoenix.zhtml?c=188488&p=irol-homeprofile>) (last accessed 08 April 2015). Currently, Baidu is the largest Chinese search engine, and is frequently referred to as ‘the Google of China’.

“subtitling group” in Chinese). Since Baidu is specially tailored for the searching habits of Chinese Internet users, conducting a keyword-based query of “字幕组” on Baidu is bound to generate highly relevant information about fansubbing groups operating in China.

Besides, Baidu is the most-used Chinese search engines in the world, reaching 95% of Internet users in China as well as other Chinese-speaking users from 138 countries worldwide (CNNIC, 2010). As is also the case with many Chinese Internet companies that have thrived following the government’s deployment of “the Great Firewall of China” to block many popular Western sites, Baidu has also benefited from China’s ban on Google after the government imposed filters on Google’s search results<sup>44</sup> (Batjargal 2010). Since then, Google has lagged far behind Baidu in terms of Chinese market share and popularity among Chinese netizens. The results that Baidu generates for the search item “字幕组” are likely to be among the most frequently searched ones by Chinese Internet users.

互动百科 (*hudongbaike*, or Baïke [www.baïke.com](http://www.baïke.com)) is another service launched by Baidu immediately after Wikipedia was blocked by the government in 2005. It is a Chinese language online encyclopaedia with almost the same business model as Wikipedia and is embedded in Baidu’s search engine. A keyword-based search of “字幕组” using Baidu’s search bar returns a list of results about Chinese fansubbing groups, including an article<sup>45</sup> (whose title includes the keywords “字幕组”) from Baïke. The article is written and updated collaboratively by Chinese Internet users, drawing on their knowledge of those fansubbing groups that have gained visibility and popularity among Chinese netizens. Among the 14 best-known groups listed in the article, I selected YDY 伊甸园字幕组 (*yidianyuan* or YDY, literally “the Garden of Eden” in Chinese), and TLF 字幕组 (*The Last Fantasy* or TLF) as potential fieldsites (see Figure 4.1).

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<sup>44</sup> In Mainland China, Google’s URL is Google.cn. Chinese users can search information through Google.cn, but the results are manipulated under the agreement between Google and the Chinese government: any search results that the government finds sensitive and objectionable are blocked.

<sup>45</sup> The article is available at [http://www.baïke.com/wiki/%E5%AD%97%E5%B9%95%E7%BB%84&prd=so\\_1\\_doc](http://www.baïke.com/wiki/%E5%AD%97%E5%B9%95%E7%BB%84&prd=so_1_doc) (last accessed 15 December 2014).

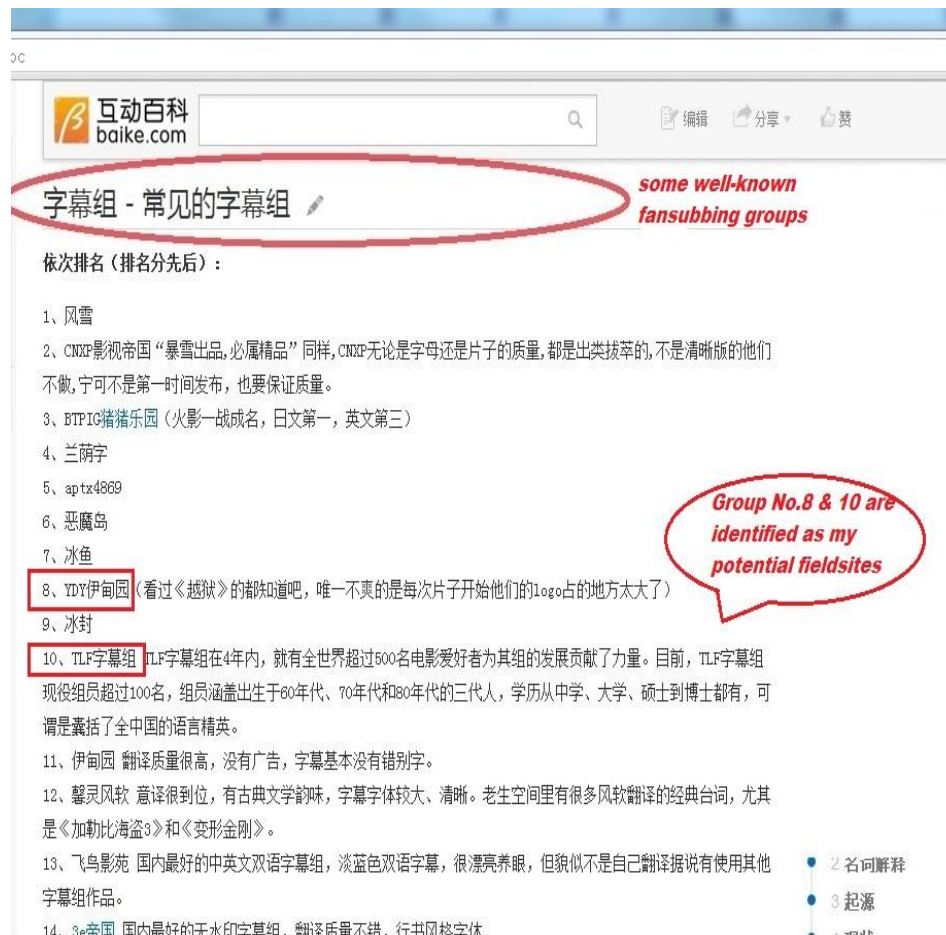


Figure 4.1 List of best-known fansubbing groups in China (Baike.com search engine)

YDY was chosen as a potential fieldsite because it is among the earliest and most famous fansubbing groups established by Chinese media fans. The groups has attracted in the past considerable media attention. For example, in 2006 *The New York Times* reported how a fansubbed version of American TV series *Prison Break* was widely distributed on the Chinese Internet in near-real time due to the diligent work of YDY<sup>46</sup>. Focusing on this well-known and long-enduring group was likely to yield good insights into the existence and maintenance of a collective identity across individual group members. Another potential fieldsite – TLF fansubbing group – was chosen because, as described in the article listed as search result 10 in Figure 4.1, TLF’s participants are heterogeneous: they belong to different generations (mainly born in the 60s, 70s and the 80s), have different educational backgrounds (ranging from high school students to PhD holders), and are based in different geographical

<sup>46</sup> The title of the article is ‘Chinese Tech Buffs Slake Thirst for U.S. TV Shows’: [http://www.nytimes.com/2006/08/09/world/asia/09china.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/08/09/world/asia/09china.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0) (last accessed 28 November 2013).

locations (including overseas Chinese media fans). Exploring the formation of a collective identity among such a diverse set of participants could help me explain whether/how a sense of community can be created and sustained by socially and geographically disparate individuals through their collaborative subtitling activities.

Fans are usually early adopters of new media technologies as a means of “carving out a social space that serves their own subcultural needs” and “attracting public notice” (Jenkins 2003: 556). With the rapid development of digital networked technologies in China, it is envisaged that Chinese media fans have adapted various forms of social media to fulfil their communicative needs and enlarge their groups’ influence. Thus, in addition to Baidu search engine, I also used one of the most popular social networking sites in China, i.e. Sina Weibo<sup>47</sup>, to identify other relevant fansubbing groups for my research. Sina Weibo allows users to establish interest groups that send feeds to their followers in the form of texts, photos, videos, and music. Feeds that manage to attract attention are often redistributed to other Weibo users, thus enabling the original feeds to virally spread beyond a group’s core followers.

I used Weibo’s search bar to conduct a keyword-based search of “字幕组”. Results showed that many fansubbing groups (including YDY with 1.6 million Weibo followers and TLF with 65005 followers) mentioned in the article found via Baike had group accounts on Sina Weibo. This confirmed that, while building and relying on settled online communities to create fansubs for their favourite content, Chinese fansubbers often join multiple social networks to keep in contact with each other and their target audiences. Based on the search results, another two fansubbing groups 人人影视 (*renrenyingshi*, known as “YYeTs”<sup>48</sup>, with 1.33 million followers) and 破烂熊字幕组 (*polanxiong*, literally “ragbear”, with 90 thousand followers) were identified as other potential fieldsites, on the basis of their number of followers on Sina Weibo.

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<sup>47</sup> At its height, Sina Weibo had more than 600 million registered users and around 60.2 million daily active users in early 2013 (Custer 2014). However, after a government crackdown on the online spreading of rumours and the arrest of several high-profile Sina Weibo account holders, activity dropped precipitously in 2014 (*ibid.*).

<sup>48</sup> The term “YYeTs” is short for “*yīng yīn*” (影音 literally means ‘audiovisual’ in Chinese) and “enjoy TV shows”.

Combining a general search engine (Baidu) with a social networking site (Sina Weibo) ensured an adequate coverage of fieldsites that were relevant to my research topic. Eventually, I narrowed down the pool of potential fieldsites to four fansubbing groups: YYeTs, YDY, Ragbear and TLF. Before deciding which one best suited my project, I visited these groups' websites anonymously to gain a general understanding of their characteristics, such as history, size, participants' profiles, and genre speciality. According to Burnett and Bonnici (2003), the 'FAQs' (Frequently Asked Questions) or 'About us' sections on the website of an online group usually provide a broad definition of its history, topics of interest, goals and identity. Consequently, I began by visiting the 'FAQs' and/or 'About us' sections on each group's site. Besides, I read through the subtitled work (saved in digital subtitle files<sup>49</sup>) published on each group's platform to learn more about their speciality in terms of the genre and source language(s) of their subtitled products. I also compared forum statistics (i.e. the number of registered members in and the number of daily visitors to their websites) displayed on these groups' discussion boards, to gain a better understanding of their size and degree of activity in terms of the average number of posted messages per day.

In the end, TLF was chosen as the fieldsite for my study not only because of its diverse participants, but also because of its subtitled work. Unlike other groups that focus on subtitling Hollywood blockbusters, Japanese *anime*, or popular foreign TV programmes, TLF is more attentive to media content that contributes to civic education, such as online open courses produced by top-ranking overseas universities (e.g. Yale and Harvard) and documentaries produced by foreign broadcasters (e.g. BBC, PBS, National Geographic and Discovery Channel) or independent film makers. Among the hundreds of foreign documentaries subtitled by TLF, many appeared (judging by their titles) to contain either politically or sexually sensitive content, e.g. *Mao Tse Tung: China's Peasant Emperor*; *Ai Weiwei Never Sorry*; *Born into Brothels* – *Calcutta's Red Light Kids*; and *Whores' Glory*, to name just a few. As for the online open courses subtitled by the group, many of them touched upon topics

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<sup>49</sup> Unlike traditional "hard" subtitles embedded into the footage of a video file, digital subtitles or soft-subtitles can be saved as a separate file usually in .sst (SubStation Alpha) or .srt (SubRip) format, depending on the subtitling software used by each fansubbing group (Mangeot and Giguët 2005). Such subtitles can be superimposed on the footage, but still appear indistinguishable from hard-subtitles.

related to social justice, human rights, European civilisation, and Western politics and law. Although these documents and online courses may not directly manage to mobilise the public to seek and bring about socio-political change, they did serve the purpose of prompting reflection among their viewers and educating them about civil rights and democracy.

The content selected by TLF indicates that its members are taking on a more civic role that is not only about entertaining, but also about enlightening the Chinese public by offering them alternative knowledge and perspectives. Investigating the group's collective identity should reveal to what extent fansubbing – as a form of participatory culture – has succeeded in extending its scope of influence to the broader civic and possibly political spheres in China.

Unlike the other three groups, whose members' Online Identities (IDs) remain hidden on the websites, TLF has an entire webpage called “译者名录” (*yizheminglu*, meaning “List of Translators”, <http://sub.eastgame.org/译者墙>) dedicated to its members. The page lists all the pseudonyms of TLF's fansubbers, together with the number of subtitled projects they have been involved in. Clicking on each pseudonym further leads to a page that displays detailed information about the subtitling work done by the person using that pseudonym, the roles (i.e. translator and/or proofreader) played in those subtitling projects, the names of the subtitled films or TV programmes, the number of times the released work has been downloaded, users' comments, etc. The visibility of the members' pseudonyms on TLF's website suggests that the group is more assertive about their visibility as volunteer translators engaged in the translation and distribution of subtitles for public consumption. The group's website serves as a platform for individual members to gain a sense of public recognition and accumulate knowledge about what it means to be a volunteer translator by reading comments from others outside the group, while asserting their presence as members within the group. In this sense, TLF's online platform provides more opportunities for identity formation, and hence is a more suitable site for me to study the construction, trajectory, and performance of individual/collective identities.

Another factor that sets TLF apart from others is its resistance to adverts. To cover their expensive running costs, other groups rely heavily on advertising

revenues – which they receive by agreeing to place commercial banners and pop-up ads on their platforms. TLF is the only group that has so far refused to host any commercial-related information on its site (except for its recruiting ads). All the maintenance costs of the online platform hosted by TLF are covered by group members themselves. Choosing TLF as the fieldsite for this study may better reveal what mechanisms are in place to sustain participants' motivation to continue contributing their own resources to the group.

Last but not least, few scholars have visited and studied TLF, whereas YDY, YYeTs and Ragbear fansubbing groups have been studied, although not from a netnographic perspective, by different scholars (e.g. Tian 2011, Boyko 2012, Meng and Wu 2013) in the recent past. I was mindful that members in these groups might be “tapped out” by recent research efforts and therefore may not accept further research overtures (Kozinets 2010). As a result, I decided against using them again as, to do so, I would have to persuade these groups that netnography could deliver more rigorous results than previous studies.

While identifying the fieldsite for this study, I started writing my fieldnotes. The role of fieldnotes is discussed by Kozinets (2010: 114), who notes that:

[w]riting fieldnotes contemporaneously with interactive online social experiences is important because these processes of learning, socialisation, and acculturation are subtle and our recollection of them becomes rapidly diluted over time.

My fieldnotes written while identifying fieldsites were used as a source of reference to help me find an appropriate way to enter TLF fansubbing group. Entrée strategies and process are presented in section 4.3.2.

#### 4.3.2. Making the first contact with TLF

The spectrum of options available to researchers wishing to become involved in an online fieldsite usually range from a purely ‘observational’ or ‘passive’ approach (e.g. Beaven and Laws 2007, Brownlie and Hewer 2007, Füller *et al.* 2007, Maulana and Eckhardt 2007) to a fully participative one (e.g. Kozinets 1998). Prior to my entrée, it was necessary to decide the extent to which I had to become engaged in TLF fansubbing group. As suggested by Kozinets (2006: 135), netnography is “an adaptation of participant-observational ethnographic

procedures”. Consequently, it is the participative approach adopted by netnography that differentiates it from a simple gathering and coding of qualitative online data. Removing the participative component from a netnographic study would eliminate the opportunity to fully immerse oneself into and make sense of the lives of research participants. Plus, it is difficult for fieldworkers to establish trust with participants in virtual setting without presenting themselves and following the normative interactive practices as one more participant.

This is particularly true when the theory applied to describe the dynamics of fansubbing online communities is social self-organisation. Under this theory, a fansubbing network is conceived as a self-organising system that reproduces itself through the dialectic between the technologies and socio-cultural practices which they mediate. In order to really understand this mutual productive relationship, not only did I need to observe the outcomes of my research participants’ actions, I also had to be in their worlds and experience their daily activities as if I was one of them. Only in this way could I gain a sense of membership, and establish how participants (fail to) create a sense of belonging and shared identity through their ongoing subtitling activities. Compared to ‘covert studies’ (Langer and Beckman 2005) of online communities, the position of active participant-observer would allow me to deploy netnographic methods more fully, and thus enhance or improve my theoretical understanding of participatory translation networks.

While trying to identify potential fieldsites, I visited the websites of fansubbing groups anonymously. As a result, the fieldnotes written during the identification process are mainly observational records about TLF’s history and membership requirements. The group’s homepage<sup>50</sup> (see Appendix I for the screenshot of the homepage) provides a link to a PDF document called “了解 TLF – 忆” (*Getting to Know TFL – Memories*), which outlines the birth and early development of TLF. The document is written by twelve veteran members sharing their personal memories about the time they spent in the group.

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<sup>50</sup> The URL of TLF’s homepage is <http://sub.eastgame.org/> (last accessed 08 April 2015). This contains a link to 《了解 TLF – 忆》 (*Getting to Know TLF – Memories*) (available at: [http://sub.eastgame.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/了解\\_TLF\\_字幕组-TLF\\_元老回忆录.pdf](http://sub.eastgame.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/了解_TLF_字幕组-TLF_元老回忆录.pdf)) (last accessed 08 April 2015).



According to this document, TLF was established in the late 90s when technologies such as P2P file-sharing and DivX codec were becoming popular on the Internet (see section 2.3.1). Influenced by the drive to facilitate “free flows of information” advocated by Western (0-day) warez groups, a small group of friends in China created a file-sharing site to support unrestricted file-sharing activities among Chinese netizens. At the time, buying computers and paying Internet surfing fees were already a luxury for many Chinese people. In this context, the cost of purchasing expensive copyrighted computer software or games was prohibitive<sup>51</sup>. As a result, the content distributed by the group was mainly computer games and software, rather than subtitled audiovisual content. By donating money, hard disks, servers, and technical skills and knowledge, members in the group were able to improve their file-sharing techniques and widen their influence. Despite some obstacles<sup>52</sup> during its early development state, group leaders still believed that, through their persistent efforts and endeavours, the dream of becoming a leading warez group in Asia may come true, even if that dream was almost like a fantasy at the time – the reason why the group names itself ‘TLF’ (i.e. *The Last Fantasy*).

With open source software and game packages becoming mainstream, TLF also shifted its focus to foreign audiovisual products that were unavailable to Chinese audiences due to the strict censorship and import quotas imposed by the government. In 2002, the group was “reborn” as a volunteer subtitling

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<sup>51</sup> In the late 90s, GDP per capita in China was only RMB 7159 (USD 1154) (China National Economic and Social Development 2013). At the time, a genuine Microsoft Office 2000 licence, for instance, retailed at RMB 6000 (USD 966) in China. This made it difficult for individuals to afford genuine software or copyrighted computer game discs (Zhang 2012). Besides, the cost of using information infrastructures in China was much higher than that in other countries during that period. The monthly cost for 1MB/s broadband in China was USE 13.1, which was four times more expensive than in the U.S. and four hundred times more than in Hong Kong (*ibid.*).

<sup>52</sup> While the group’s file-sharing activities triggered the redistribution of widely popular content among Chinese netizens, their activities also drew some unwanted attentions. According to the document *Getting to Know TFL – Memories* stored on TLF’s blogging site, in 2001, for instance, the group received a letter from Microsoft’s legal representative, threatening a lawsuit for copyright-infringement. Meanwhile, Western game companies were strengthening anti-piracy efforts by collaborating with their governments to take down warez groups engaged in cracking and distributing illicit video game products. This affected TLF’s activities since a large amount of games distributed by the group had been first acquired from Western warez groups. Besides, an internal conflict was fought within TLF between pro-commercial members – who proposed changing the group’s site into a commercial platform by charging fees to group members and introducing ads on their website – and anti-commercial members – who preferred maintaining the not-for-profit nature of their file-sharing activities. In the end, the departure of pro-commercial members, who took their donated FTP servers with them, would almost lead to the collapse of TLF.

group under the same name, i.e. TLF. The reincarnated group did not distribute copyrighted content directly to the public, since the content could be downloaded from many P2P sites such as *The Pirate Bay*. Instead, it chose to provide information about some newly released foreign films and TV programmes (e.g. country of origin, genre, plot, director, reviews written by TLF's members) and Chinese subtitles (saved as .srt file) to the public, who would otherwise not be able to fully enjoy their downloaded content.

TLF has now become one of the most influential fansubbing groups in China. Compared to other large groups such as YYeTs, Ragbear, and YDY, TLF maintains a stronger position against commercialisation, since all the maintenance costs of the online platform hosted by TLF are covered by group members, particularly core and veteran members (see section 4.3.1). As described by a former leader of TLF at the end of the document *Getting to Know TLF – Memories*<sup>53</sup>:

最后，期望各位后进能继续发扬字幕组伟大的理想和目标，同时也不要忘了历来多位版主们的汗水辛劳。以后的字幕组 TLF 乃至国内的 fansubbing scene 都将是你们年轻人的天下。我只希望到时候能轻轻一挥衣袖，不带走一片云彩。(Page 16)

We hope everyone in this group will carry forward the hopes of the group's founders to build the group into a community. Meanwhile, do not forget the hard work and contributions made by previous members. The future of TLF and the fansubbing scene belongs to young people in this country. *I just hope I leave quietly as I came quietly/without taking so much/as a piece of cloud* [emphasised added].

The lines in italics are taken from a well-known poem (*Goodbye Again, Cambridge*) written by Xu Zhimo, a 20<sup>th</sup> century Chinese poet who is romanticised as having pursued love, freedom, and beauty all his life. By quoting the famous lines in Xu's poem, this former leader of TLF sends a clear message that membership in TLF is voluntary, and everyone's contribution in the group is also voluntary.

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<sup>53</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all the excerpts of text collected from TLF's online platform and quoted in this dissertation have been translated by the author.

After becoming familiar with TLF's history, I read through the content written in the “ 招 募 ” (*zhao mo*, meaning ‘recruitment’) section (<http://sub.eastgame.org/招募>) on its website in order to find out how to join the group. In this section, there is a list of answers to some frequently asked questions by the public, such as joining requirements, membership benefits, and the email address to reach and contact the group (see Appendix II for the screenshot of the recruitment page). According to the answers, anyone can join the group as long as s/he is a media fan interested in fansub-related activities; has a certain knowledge of a foreign language; is able to strike the right balance between fansubbing activities in the group and offline social life; has a certain amount of free time; and has the equipment required to access the Internet. Anyone who thinks they meet these requirements can contact the group through the email address displayed on the recruitment page. Prospective members expressing an interest in the group will be invited by e-mail to take an entry test, which involves the creation of Chinese subtitled versions for a set of video clips in English<sup>54</sup>. Those who pass the entry test can become members of TLF, access the group's online forum, and enjoy a number of benefits, including the opportunity to communicate with like-minded people and share common interests; experiencing a rewarding sense of achievement after the completion of each subtitling project; and the enjoyment of the sizeable collection of foreign media content stored on the group's File Transfer Protocol<sup>55</sup> (FTP) computer servers. The group also makes it clear on its recruitment page that TLF is a not-for-profit organisation and does not offer any material reward or monetary remuneration to its members in return for their involvement in the group's fansubbing activities.

Based on what I have learnt about the fansubbing group, I have developed a set of entrée strategies to guide my first contact with the group:

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<sup>54</sup> The group usually sends its potential participants six video clips in English – each lasting around 10 minutes – excerpted from different film genres (e.g. animation, action, drama, science-fiction, documentary, and musical). The rationale to choose different genres is to examine how potential participants recognise and use different registers and styles of expression when subtitling. The video clips, their corresponding English subtitles (saved as .srt files), the subtitling software application used by the group, and instructions on how to install and use the software are included in the email.

<sup>55</sup> Compared to P2P-based file-sharing networks where materials can be shared between users directly rather than accessed from a particular site, a FTP-based file-sharing network, such as TLF's online forum, can provide a much safer and organised file-sharing environment. In the latter type, network users must provide their unique IDs and passwords to log into specific file-sharing spaces to download or upload media resources.

- *Do not make a distant entrée, be genuine.* Judging from the content of the document *Getting to Know TLF – Memories*, the atmosphere in the group is very friendly and sincere. I therefore decided to disclose my motivation to study collective identity formation and management in the group as a researcher-participant, and introduce myself genuinely as one of the participants by avoiding excessive use of academic jargon. Indeed, the use of academic terms may signal that I am an outsider who has little interest in the community other than using it as a “resource” to complete my own academic project.
- *Do not assume you know more than the community members, be humble.* Since the group has been part of the fansubbing scene for more than ten years, it must have accumulated a great deal of hands-on subtitling experience and knowledge along the way, particularly in terms of cultural and genre expertise. I also assumed that they must have developed robust techniques to rip the original content from a DVD or VCD source, compress video files, synchronise subtitles with a video, and distribute subtitles across multiple media platforms. Feeling that members in the community must know much more about their own culture, I concluded that humility was a must-have attitude on my part, as that would encourage more sincere feedback from community members.
- *Working towards the set of values cherished by the group.* Based on the spirit of free-sharing advocated by the group on its website, I decided to contribute my own skills and knowledge to the betterment of the group, and ensure this intention was clearly signalled in my first email to the group.
- *Abide by the rules of the community.* I would declare in the email that I was willing to follow the rules and norms established by the group. Besides, I would also make it clear whether I met the recruiting requirements stipulated by the group.

Applying the above strategies, I made the first contact with TLF in 2012 by sending the group a self-introduction email (see Appendix VI); after passing the group’s entry test, I received permission to join in and study it. Since then, I

have actively engaged in the group's activities. Whilst participating in the group, I started considering which data should be collected for this study. This aspect of my project is discussed in detail in section 4.4.

#### 4.4. Data collection and analysis

According to Kozinets (2010), the types of data collected by netnographers are interconnected with their chosen degree of engagement in the online fieldsite. Depending on their degree of participation (ranging from passive observation to active interaction with research participants), netnography may rely on up to three types of data: 1) 'archival data', i.e. the pre-existing computer-mediated communications, documents, and other multimedia content generated by group members, which are collected by the researcher as an observer; 2) 'elicited data', i.e. materials co-created by members and the researcher who participates in group activities as one of the members; and 3) 'fieldnote data', i.e. written accounts of the researcher's observation and/or participation experiences during the entire study.

In order to gain a reliable and in-depth understanding of collective identity-building in TLF, I adopted a participant-observational approach. This required me to observe participants' activities by tracking and gathering the content and conversations they generated in their capacity as TLF members. More importantly, I felt I had to immerse myself and participate in the group's everyday activities. On the whole, the collection of data for this project involved capturing all three kinds of data mentioned in the previous paragraph.

##### 4.4.1. Elicited data

In order to answer the first core research question (**i.e. Does a sense of collective identity exist among TLF fansubbing group members and, if so, what does it mean for them?**), a questionnaire was created via the web-based survey programme SelectSurvey.NET<sup>56</sup> and sent to the email addresses of potential participants. Upon receiving the email and clicking the questionnaire link contained in it, the respondent was directed to the webpage where s/he could complete the questionnaire. An inductive approach was adopted to

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<sup>56</sup> The software is available for students in the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Manchester.

analyse responses (written in Chinese) gathered through the online questionnaire. Data segments, which could be words, phrases, and sentences, were coded according to the themes suggested by the text itself. Similar themes were then combined into more general themes until I was able to identify meta-themes that can be used to address the first core research question.

Potential participants were selected based on their levels of group engagement (i.e. new, active, and core members). By including in my data sample different membership categories, corresponding to different hierarchical levels in the group's organisation, I was able to maximise the changes of gaining a better understanding of the group's collective identity (if any). TLF defines its 'new' members as those who are going through a probation period and have yet to contribute in the group's subtitling projects. 'Active' members are defined as those who have completed their probationary period and posted more than 50 messages (provided these messages are constructive and useful for the betterment of the group) on the forum. Finally, 'core' members are usually group leaders responsible for the well-functioning of the entire group. Through deep immersion, I was able to build rapport with various participants, and invite them to take part in the online questionnaire that constituted the elicited data for this study.

My reasons to use online, rather than face-to-face, questionnaires are as follows. First, participants rely heavily on various forms of networked technologies in their daily fansubbing activities, so much so that they are quite used to and comfortable with computer-mediated communications. Second, online questionnaires allow participants more time to think about the questions and review or edit their answers. Last but not least, questionnaires that contain open reflective and semi-structured questions allow me to secure qualitative descriptions of the participants' sense of shared identity and how the latter influences and is influenced by their daily subtitling activities.

In order to improve the clarity of the questions contained in the questionnaire and rehearse the data collection procedure, a pretesting of the questionnaire was conducted with five TLF members, who were identified as pilot respondents with membership categories similar to those of the target respondents that the final questionnaire was designed for. During the pilot

stage, four open-ended questions (written in Chinese) were devised: 1) whether they experience a sense of togetherness; 2) what motivates them to join the group; 3) what goals they would like to achieve through their participation in TLF; and 4) how they would describe their relationships with other group members.

Pilot respondents were asked to provide their answers to these questions and their comments on the questionnaire. In particular, they were asked whether 1) they were willing to answer each question; 2) they clearly understood what was being asked; 3) they encountered any technical problems in accessing the questionnaire webpage created through SelectSurvey.NET; and 4) the time taken to answer the questionnaire was reasonable. Neither their answers nor comments resulted in any change of the questionnaire. Appendix VII shows the final version of the questionnaire (translated here into English).

#### 4.4.2. Archival and fieldnote data

The archival and fieldnote data collected during my fieldwork were mainly used to address the second, third, and fourth core research questions that this study aims to respond. Driven by RQ2 (i.e. **How is the collective identity of TLF fansubbing group manifested in its organisational structure?**), a set of documents stored on the TLF's website and forum were collected. These documents mainly included:

- 1) the "Recruitment" page<sup>57</sup> that provides a list of answers to some commonly asked questions about TLF and the requirements to join the group;
- 2) the "Declaration" page<sup>58</sup> that outlines the basic policy regarding the use of subtitles created and published by TLF on its website;
- 3) a post entitled "Basic rules of conduct for TLF members"<sup>59</sup> published on the group's forum, introducing membership hierarchies and

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<sup>57</sup> <http://sub.eastgame.org/招募> (last accessed 29 March 2015) (see Appendix II for the screenshot of the page).

<sup>58</sup> <http://sub.eastgame.org/声明> (last accessed 29 March 2015) (see Appendix III for the screenshot of the page).

<sup>59</sup> See Appendix IV for the screenshot of the post.

guidelines for progress, as well as rights and responsibilities associated with different types of membership;

These archival data can help to identify and describe characteristics of the group's governance structure in terms of *membership criteria*, *layers of organisation*, and *the mechanisms that sustain and govern collective resources* – three aspects that were explicitly addressed by the three sub-questions under RQ2.

Based on the dialectical theory of social self-organisation, the group's structural arrangements can be accounted for as the result of sustained collective interaction among participants, during which they construct and align individual actions and identities with collective processes and goals. The resulting organisational structure, in turn, governs the behaviour, relationships and material elements that lie at the heart of TLF's everyday operations; consequently, the group's organisational structure ultimately facilitates the formation of its collective identity. Besides, ritual practices are emphasised by social movement scholars (e.g. Polletta and Jasper 2001) as another important aspect that helps to maintain commitment and strengthen cohesion between actors in a field of action over time. In order to explore the rituals and conventions governing group activities in TLF, and answer RQ3 (i.e. **How is this collective identity maintained through collective group-specific practices?**), both archival and fieldnote data were collected. These consist primarily of:

- 1) a post entitled “Instruction for newbies”<sup>60</sup> published on TLF's forum, describing special rituals and requirements for new members during their probation period;
- 2) my fieldnotes about my own observations and socialisation experiences.

While recording my fieldnotes, I was particularly interested in new members' and my own participation processes. These fieldnotes help to address a sub-question under RQ3: *How do new members learn about and adapt to the expectations of their roles and responsibilities during their continuous online interactions within the group?*

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<sup>60</sup> See Appendix V for the screenshot of the post.



In addition to the group's organisational structure and ritual practices, the digital networked technologies employed by a virtual community also play a crucial role in facilitating the formation of a sense of "we-ness" among geographically dispersed individuals. Focusing on the technological dimension of TLF fansubbing group, RQ4 aims to find out: **What forms of digital networked technologies are deployed by the group to facilitate the formation and management of its collective identity?** For this purpose, fieldnotes are recorded in order to identify *what types of Internet applications (cognitive, communicative, and cooperative) are used by the group* – the first sub-question under RQ4. Besides, archival data – a post entitled "Basic rules of conduct for TLF members" posted on the group's forum – are collected in order to answer *what regulations are developed by the group to guide the use of these technologies* – the second sub-question under RQ4.

#### 4.4.3. Conducting fieldwork

It should be pointed out that while this netnographic study involves participant-observation and recording fieldnotes, i.e. two interconnected activities that comprise the core of traditional fieldwork (Emerson *et al.* 2011), the virtual environment makes online fieldwork different from that of face-to-face ethnography. Researchers in traditional fieldsites often experience "deep ambivalence" (*ibid.*: 20) when recording fieldnotes. On the one hand, they wish to preserve the immediacy of the moment by writing jottings as events or interactions are enacted in the fields; on the other hand, they may feel that note-taking would "ruin the moment and plant seeds of distrust" among research participants (*ibid.*).

However, the thorny issue of recording notes while maintaining authentic engagement with those studied seems to be solved in online sites where everything (and everybody) is presented and mediated by texts. This means that fieldworkers can observe online events and activities in an unobtrusive manner. The fact that Internet-based interactions are often automatically archived by computer technologies means that researchers are very much freed from note-taking and transcribing conversations as well, since computers' memory seems to be the ultimate field recorder (Kozinets 2010).

That being said, a netnographer still has to learn and follow normative practices pertaining to online interaction and self-presentation to avoid awkward or tense encounters, as well as the remote possibility of being deceptive when studying and interacting with an online community. On the Chinese Internet, it is a common practice among Chinese netizens (including the participants in this study and my own case) to have different pseudonyms in different forums and social media sites (e.g. Baidu BBS<sup>61</sup>, Sina Weibo<sup>62</sup>, Douban<sup>63</sup>, and QQ<sup>64</sup>). Hence, the pseudonyms that I used on these sites are kept unchanged when I interacted with the project participants across these platforms. I, like my participants, created a new pseudonym after joining TLF fansubbing group to present a new facet of myself as a fansubber. Just like my participants, I used that pseudonym to interact with group members during daily subtitling activities and to identify myself as the author of my subtitled work. While most of my participants use avatars (e.g. cute animals or cartoon characters) as their profile pictures, I always posted a picture of my face, along with the disclosure of my university affiliation and details of my research project, in my personal profile to ensure they were aware of my double capacity as both a participant and researcher in the fansubbing group.

Rather than being a distanced participant-observer, I treated my membership in TLF as a privilege and saw myself as a ‘neophyte’ (Kozinets 2010) willing to learn from my participants so that I could blend in as quickly as possible. To this end, I followed Walsh’s (1998: 253) advice to “establish a large degree of ordinary sociability and normal social intercourse” with members of the community. Specifically, our relationship was built naturally through the subtitling projects that we worked on together. Our conversations often unfolded in chatrooms we created through QQ Instant Messenger (each chatroom is set up to facilitate coordination of one project). We usually started out informing each other the progress of our own tasks (e.g. timing, translating, proofreading, or publishing). We also discussed the problems we had encountered and came up with ideas to solve them. Quite often, our interactions easily moved onto other topics – both mundane, such as the

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<sup>61</sup> Baidu BBS website: <http://tieba.baidu.com/> (last accessed 11 November 2014).

<sup>62</sup> Sina Weibo website: <http://www.weibo.com/login.php> (last accessed 11 May 2015).

<sup>63</sup> Douban website: <http://www.douban.com/> (last accessed 01 May 2015).

<sup>64</sup> QQ website: <http://www.qq.com/> (last accessed 10 May 2015).

weather, news and celebrities; and sensitive topics around sexuality, pornography, depression, and domestic politics.

While taking part in these random and spontaneous conversations, I never forced or cajoled my participants to reveal sensitive information about themselves. Neither was I judgemental about the views they shared on sensitive topics. I always “listened” intently before typing any of my words, and shared as much about myself as they shared about themselves in order to be as relatable to them as possible. Being part of China’s first Internet generation (i.e. the post 80s) and having been raised in a typical one-child family, I could easily empathise and relate to my participants, as well as their hopes and fears, pressures from family, school, and society. By following the normative practices of self-presentation and interaction of the research community, blending in through genuine and respectful communications, being as relatable as possible, and being familiar with Chinese culture and society, I made my participants feel that they are interacting with someone just like themselves rather than being researched.

A typical day in the fansubbing group would involve me translating or proofreading subtitles, using the group’s subtitling software on my computer, while having multiple conversations with group members across QQ chatrooms, the group’s online forum, and other popular social networking sites which included mainly Weibo and Douban. The group is most active from 6.30pm to 1.30am (Beijing Time), when most of my participants get off work/school. When there were few or no new projects for us to do, we would still keep interacting randomly on these platforms.

While the Internet and digital devices allowed me to be embedded in the group’s world at all times, from any location, I was faced with several technological challenges. For example, I had to decide which tools to use to capture and manage various forms of digital data (e.g. text, images, sound and video) across multiple social media sites. Besides, I had to find a way of adding reflective notes and insights while capturing digital data, so that the data (e.g. a particular image or message) could be adequately contextualised and interpreted. As far as this issue is concerned, Kozinets (2010) recommends a range of computer programs facilitating the qualitative study of audiovisual

material, such as NVivo and Atlas.ti. Both of them allow netnographers to capture, store and analyse digital data, while adding reflective fieldnotes along the way. After spending a great amount of time to become familiar with NVivo, I decided not to use this complex software application as it could actually get in the way of the data collection and analytical processes.

During my fieldwork stage, I used different tools to document my observations on the participants. I relied heavily on the note-taking software application Evernote<sup>65</sup> to organise my archival and fieldnote data. This software application, along with other social media applications (e.g. QQ, Sina Weibo, and Douban) used by my participants, were installed on the devices (a Windows laptop and an iPhone 4) that I used to conduct my fieldwork. Evernote Web Clipper was further added as an extension tool for the desktop browser (Chrome) that I used to visit TLF's online platform and other social networking sites (Sina Weibo and Douban) frequented by group members. Web Clipper allowed me to clip any digital artefact (e.g. text, posting, image, or other multimedia files) that I found interesting on a webpage that I was browsing. Web clips are saved as they appear on the original pages and as notes in my Evernote account, together with the URLs of the pages those clips were taken from. This means that I could always go back to the original pages to gain a sense of the situational contexts of captured data.

With Evernote, I could add my own comments in each clipped note. The comments usually referred to the nature of the clipped material, the meaning of the material to participants, my interpretation of the material, and an analysis of the material. All the fieldnotes created and saved in my Evernote account were indexed with titles and tags, which thus became searchable and filterable. This provided me with keyword-based search results that could inspire or remind me of any other related notes stored in Evernote. The synch feature of Evernote means that notes stored in my Evernote account could automatically be synchronised between my computer and smartphone when they were both connected to the Internet. Even when I did not have my laptop with me, I could still visit my fieldsite, and add or edit notes through the Evernote app installed on my mobile phone. Combining a traditional computer with a smartphone allowed me to immerse myself fully in the daily life of TLF fansubbing group.

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<sup>65</sup> Evernote website: <https://evernote.com/> (last accessed 09 April 2015).

Apart from asynchronous communications on multiple social networking sites, participants in TLF stay connected using QQ real-time messaging service, which is the primary social space for them to engage not only in group discussions about issues and problems encountered while carrying out their subtitling projects, but also in spontaneous conversations about a variety of non-translation related topics. Simply by logging into my QQ account via my computer or smartphone, I could check, search, and export the group's chat records through the Message History function provided by QQ. Compared to asynchronous messages posted on the group's forum and other public online sites, messages in QQ tended to be more private and intimate. Insofar as collecting communications from QQ chatrooms (see section 4.5) could breach ethical regulations, I immediately transferred all recordings to an encrypted hard drive and deleted them from my devices (computer and smartphone).

While conducting the online questionnaire, I set the security level as "Force Anonymous" in SelectSurvey.NET. to avoid potential breaches of the participants' privacy (see section 4.5), This means that all my respondents' personal details (e.g. email address) were removed from and became untraceable in their responses. To further minimise digital traces of our interaction, responses were exported as an Excel file (as allowed by the software) to an encrypted hard drive, and deleted from my SelectSurvey.NET account and my computer.

#### **4.5. Potential ethical issues and solutions**

This study involves participant-observation in an online social group, where data – particularly the elicited data collected through the online questionnaire – were obtained through my contact with participants in this research project. Therefore, the execution of this project was bound by the principles of research ethics enforced by the University of Manchester. Although such principles were adhered to at all times, I was mindful that a number of ethical challenges may arise when working in an online environment. Informed by previous literature on Internet research ethics (Bassett and O'Riordan 2002; Bruckman 2002, 2006; Buchanan 2004; Kozinets 2010; Walther 2002), I developed a set of solutions to potential ethical issues that may arise while carrying out my project.

#### 4.5.1. Ethical issues related to archival and fieldnote data

In the field of online research ethics, there has been much debate on whether computer-mediated encounters should be considered as instances of public or private interactional communication. While some scholars call for a clearer delineation between public and private in relation to the Internet (e.g. Frankel and Siang 1999), others argue that “technically there can be no such delineation” as people often share private materials in various public online spaces (e.g. online forums and social networking sites) (Bassett and O’Riordan 2002: 243). Still others argue that “oftentimes the Internet is used as a type of textual publishing medium, and culture members are fully aware of this public function” (Kozinets 2010: 141). Taking into account previous debates and research experiences in the domain of Internet ethnography, a number of scholars claim that decisions have to be made on a case-by-case basis. Accordingly, guidelines for Internet research ethics should be more flexible to acknowledge not only the spatial nature but also the textual nature of the Internet (Bassett and O’Riordan 2002; Bruckman 2002; Kozinets 2010; Walther 2002).

Many scholars contend that the collection and analysis of archived CMC do not strictly correspond to what Walther (2002: 207) would regard as a “human subjects research”, i.e. research “in which there is any intervention or interaction with another person for the purpose of gathering information, or in which information is recorded by the researcher in such a way that a person can be identified directly or indirectly with it”. Walther (*ibid.*) argues:

Any person who uses publicly-available communication systems on the Internet must be aware that these systems are, at their foundation and by definition, mechanisms for the storage, transmission, and retrieval of comments. While some participants have an expectation of privacy, it is extremely misplaced.

Kozinets (2010: 142) further points out that analysing archives and communications in online communities “is not human subjects research *if the researcher does not record the identity of the communicators and if the researcher can legally and easily gain access to these communications or archives*” (emphasis in the original). Therefore, the collection and analysis of

archival data (i.e. documents and asynchronous messages stored on TLF's platform) involved in this project qualify for 'human subjects exemption' (*ibid.*), because: 1) the collected materials from the group's website are publicly available; 2) the asynchronous messages stored on the group's forum – despite not being available for those outside the group – were gathered after I gained the permission to join the group and access its forum; and 3) the aim of analysing these messages was to identify features of the group's organisational structure, which does not involve the recording of either the real name or pseudonym of the person posting the message.

Apart from collecting archival data, this project also required me to communicate with participants in QQ chatrooms for the purpose of gathering observational fieldnotes about members' socialisation experiences. Our interactions in QQ chatrooms often meandered into the emotional realm, as members often talked about the private or hidden side of their lives. Quoting these communications in my dissertation was helpful to reveal a great deal about how continued online interaction, even when this is originally driven by private interests around media culture and subtitling, make it possible for individuals to find like-minded others on the Internet. Although these are initially strangers to each other, they normally end up opening up and even developing emotional attachments to each other.

Compared to the TLF's forum, where members can access, view, or post relatively formal messages adhering to a set of group rules, the group's QQ chatrooms are more private spaces encouraging informal communications. QQ chatrooms are thus places for members to debate freely and openly the issues they have encountered while subtitling, to share private information under semi-known identities (i.e. pseudonyms), or to express personal emotions and feelings in a manner that may not be deemed culturally or morally acceptable by traditional institutions, such as family, school, and the Party-state. By exposing aspects of their personal life, participants become vulnerable to some extent. After all, they trust fellow TLF members with personal information that they do not expect to be read by those outside the chatrooms. Consequently, they may react with anger if their words were quoted in a research publication.

Even though “not all research methods or results need please subjects” (Bruckman 2002: 225), I still had to carefully consider the implications of any decision that could jeopardise the trust that participants had placed on me. While my project is not about politically engaged amateur subtitling, conversations unfolding in the group’s QQ chatrooms could easily border on being politically sensitive or socially transgressive. Since such conversations could be considered sensitive by traditional institutions, quoting participants’ conversations without disguising their identifying details (e.g. QQ accounts, pseudonyms, and real names) could increase their vulnerability and expose them to risks such as being shamed by their family, friends or other online contacts they met on the Internet. As such, I decide to paraphrase their QQ messages as much as possible when quoting these messages in my findings. If direct quotation is necessary, I ensure all communicators’ identifying details are removed.

Another ethical issue involved in this project is whether credit should be given to my participants when quoting their subtitled texts (collected as observational fieldnotes) in my dissertation, or they should be treated as vulnerable human subjects by hiding their identifying details. The following factors are taken into account:

- 1) On the Internet where everyone can be an “author” and an “artist”, “the creative process and the ability for self-expression matter more than the product” (Bruckman 2002: 226). In this sense, any content creators (including professionals and amateurs) certainly have the right to receive credit for their creative and intellectual work.
- 2) Fansubbing is considered as a copyright infringing activity in countries (including China) subscribing to the *Berne Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works*. This, however, remains a controversial issue as fansubbers, particularly *anime* fans, have actively debated the ethics of what they do based on the non-commercial nature of their activities, the cross-cultural value of their mediation activities, and the belief that their work actually helps to promote a show for its producers (Hatcher 2005).



- 3) In China, Internet censorship is extremely “pervasive” and prioritised over copyright regulation. Although the fansubbing group under study does not engage in online activism through subtitling, some of the politically or sexually sensitive content translated by group members may put them in the potential danger of being sanctioned by the government.
- 4) Online pseudonyms function like real names since people care about the reputation of their pseudonyms. Besides, pseudonyms are often traceable to real names because people may use some parts of their real names as their pseudonyms, or disclose information linking their pseudonyms and real names (Bruckman 2002, Kozinets 2010, Langer and Beckman 2005). Even if the researcher only uses the online pseudonyms without revealing the actual names of her research subjects, a motivated person may still find ways to trace the real names.

Judging from the above factors, the potential risk is higher than the potential benefit if credit is given to research participants whose work contains sensitive content and subjects that are censored by the Chinese government. Crediting these participants may put them at the risk of administrative sanctions or repression. In cases where participants’ subtitled work is entertainment in nature and does not touch upon censored subjects, their pseudonyms are still kept unknown for the reason that fansubbing is regarded, although arguably, as illegal according to the *Berne Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works*. Revealing participants’ names, even if using their pseudonyms, may put them at the risk of copyright sanctions, as pseudonyms are often traceable to real names. In the end, all the subtitled work quoted in the final write-up is anonymised, so that anyone who deliberately seeks to find the person who creates the work would be unlikely to do so.

#### 4.5.2. Ethical issues related to elicited data

Regarding ethical issues involved in collecting elicited data, Kozinets (2010: 151) points out:

In general, as a netnographer interacts normally in the online community or culture, that is, as she interacts as other members do

on the site but also takes fieldnotes of her experiences, there is no need to gain informed consent for those interactions.

Although the elicited data, i.e. online questionnaires, collected in this study are interactions carried out between me and my participants, such interactions do not fit into those that would normally happen in an online community. Hence, I need to obtain the informed consent of potential participants in order to conduct the questionnaire. The consent form is written based on the format provided by my school (School of Language, Linguistics and Cultures, University of Manchester), namely *Consent Form for Participants Taking Part in Student Research Projects* [v.2494]. As my research participants come from non-English speaking countries, the form is translated into their mother language, i.e. Chinese. The consent form is structured as follows (see Appendix IX):

- The name of my educational institution
- My name and contact details
- The title and the purpose of my PhD project
- What the participant is expected to do during the research
- Procedures to ensure confidentiality

Potential participants are also informed in the consent form that they are free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without detriment to themselves. The consent form (both English and Chinese) is sent to each potential participant as an attached file via email.

Another issue related to the elicited data collected for this project is the ethic of quoting participants' words from questionnaires in the published account. In Reid's (1996) study of an online group for survivors of abuse, some informants agreed to speak to her in online interviews on the condition that they would be named. Although she acceded to their wishes, she ended up putting her research participants at risk. As noted by Reid (*ibid.*: 172):

The often commented upon disinhibiting effect of computer-mediated communication could conceivably lead people to agreeing to or even insisting on a kind of public exposure by which they may

eventually be harmed. The allure of self-revelation can be strong in any circumstances. ... In online environments where consequences to actual lives of participants can be hidden behind the illusion of a virtual/actual dichotomy, this tendency towards uninhibited behaviour can make the social researcher's job seemingly easier and thereby place an added burden of responsibility on his or her shoulders.

Reid's experience indicates that 1) the researcher should never reveal participants' real names in the written accounts for their own protection, and 2) it is the researcher, not the research participants, that should decide on a case by case basis whether to make public revelation of research participants' online pseudonyms. As mentioned in section 4.5.1, pseudonyms function like and are often traceable to real names. Any viciously motivated outsider or even group members themselves can easily figure out who is who when participants' pseudonyms are revealed. Therefore, I must carefully consider if there is any sensitive or embarrassing information contained in participants' words. For instance, one of the most prolific fansubbers in the group spends an excessive amount of time in subtitling to the detriment of his personal relationships in the offline world. In this case, I should disguise the participant's pseudonym when making a direct quotation. If the risk of revealing pseudonyms is found to be acceptable, once the potential benefits of making the revelation are considered, they will be kept in my write-ups.

To make my participants aware of potential risks involved in exposing their identifying details in the final published account, the following information is provided under the heading of "procedures to ensure confidentiality" in the consent form:

To protect your confidentiality, your real name will not appear in the final published account. Occasionally, quoting your words would be necessary. In this case, a fake name (different from your online pseudonym) is assigned to you if your quoted words contain sensitive information. The purpose is to protect you from potential harm or embarrassment because a motivated person or other group members deliberately seeking to find your identity could do so through your online pseudonym when it is shown in the written account.

#### 4.6. Conclusion

The main purpose of this project is to deepen the understanding of identity formation and community-building among Chinese amateur mediators for a more participatory culture in an increasingly networked China. My research focus and questions require me to go deep into a fansubbing online community formed by Chinese media fans, and make sense of their world through deep immersion.

The technologically- and textually-mediated environment in which the group operates presents several technical and ethical challenges that make the nature of participant-observation in this project different from that of traditional ethnography. To better tackle these challenges and also to signal that my focus is fansubbing culture that mainly exists online, netnography – a method designed by Kozinets (2010) to study online cultures and communities – is adopted to investigate how participants in a Chinese fansubbing group named TLF make use of the technological and cultural resources available to them as they make sense of themselves and their fansubbing activities.

In order to engage in this understanding, I use the specific procedures and standards developed by Kozinets (2010) for accurate and ethical conduct of netnography. Like Kozinets (*ibid.*: 60), I believe that “referring to netnography as a particular practice beyond ethnography is significant”, because it signals that “this particular research follows in a specified, distinct, common set of methodological procedures and protocols that have been agreed upon by a community of scholars” (*ibid.*). My hope is that anyone interested in community-based translation practices should be able to replicate and refine the netnographic techniques I have deployed. As non-professional translation networks continue to permeate globally, the value of netnographic accounts of technologically mediated communications, translation practices, artefacts (e.g. translated texts), rituals and values involved in these networks is only going to magnify in the future.

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to assume that we could gain a complete picture of community-based translation practices through a pure netnography. I adopt the view of Fuchs (2005a: 54) that the Internet is “an open system where technological structures are connected to social structures” and virtual

communities are embedded into and interconnected with locally specific social contexts. This means that the meanings and social structures created by participants in any amateur translation networks inevitably reflect, relate to, and influence the broader society in which they operate. To further address the significance of fan and amateur powered translation, it might be useful to adopt a “blended ethnography/netnography” (Kozinets 2010: 65) to study how/whether sustained engagement in processes of self-mediation in a digital space has generated civically oriented actions that unfold in offline contexts among individual participants. This would require, apart from netnography, traditional ethnographic techniques such as face-to-face observation and interviews. As put by Kozinets (*ibid.*: 63), netnography is an approach “that is sometimes used as a stand-alone technique and, at other times, used as a part of a larger study that includes in-person interviews, fieldwork, and perhaps other methods”, depending on the theoretical orientation and research questions of the researcher. I hope that future research will build on this work, and continue to enrich our understanding of non-professional translation both theoretically and methodologically.

## Chapter 5 Sense of collective identity in TLF

### 5.1. Introduction

This chapter presents and explores the data collected through my online questionnaire between May and July 2013. The questionnaire aims to establish whether the subtitling activities of TLF members are driven by the existence and perception of a collective identity; and if so, what meanings TLF members attach to their shared identity. Responses to the questionnaire are used to address the first core research question formulated in this study:

**Does a sense of collective identity exist among TLF fansubbing group members and, if so, what does it mean for them?**

To answer this question, four open-ended questions (drafted in Chinese) are included in the questionnaire<sup>66</sup>:

- Q1: Do you feel or experience a sense of belonging and togetherness in TLF fansubbing group?
- Q2: What motivates you to do fansubs in the group?
- Q3: What goals or visions would you like to achieve by fansubbing for TLF?
- Q4: How would you describe your relationship(s), if any, with other members? Do you know them through your participation in group activities or from other contexts, e.g. offline, work, school, or other settings?

Potential participants were selected based on their degree of participation and their type of membership to ensure that their collective identity (if any) represents a cross-section of the membership categories and degrees of participation found in TLF. Three types of potential participants were identified: new members, active members, and core members. As defined in TLF's rules of membership<sup>67</sup>, new members are those with a low degree of participation (i.e. posting less than 50 messages on the group's forum since the

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<sup>66</sup> See Appendix VII for the translated questionnaire.

<sup>67</sup> Details of the group's membership rules are introduced and discussed in *Chapter 6 Collective identity management in TLF*.

day they joined the group); active members are those with a medium degree of participation (i.e. posting more than 50 messages); and core members are usually the group's forum moderators and administrators managing daily interactive behaviour on the forum.

The questionnaire was prepared for online completion using the survey software application SelectSurvey.NET. A series of emails were sent to 56 potential participants who agreed to take part in the study. Attached to each email was a link to the online questionnaire. 40 questionnaires were completed and sent back to the researcher, which represents a participation rate of 71%. Out of the 40 participants, 24 were new members, 10 were active members, and 6 were core members. The age groups of the 40 participants fell into the following four categories: 21-25 years old (57%), 26-30 (23%), 31-35 (10%), and 36-40 (10%). In terms of their academic qualifications, 70% of them held an undergraduate degree, 15% held a postgraduate degree, and another 15% had an overseas education background. In terms of their employment, 29 participants stated their occupations in the questionnaire. Among them, 15 were employed, with their occupations ranging from teacher, company staff, government worker, to self-employed businessman; the remaining 14 were university students. Demographic data thus suggest that TLF is dominated by well-educated youth<sup>68</sup> coming from all walks of life.

Questionnaire responses were scrutinised in search for themes signalling the presence and attributes of collective identity within TLF. Four major themes were identified: 'A sense of belonging'; 'Fulfilling personal needs'; 'Integrating personal needs with group needs'; and 'Developing emotional attachment'.

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<sup>68</sup> Unlike its English equivalent, the Chinese term 'youth' 青年 (*qingnian*) encompasses a wide age range (from 15 – 38 years old) (Liu 2010). Since this study strives to understand Chinese fansubbers, the concept of youth defaults to its Chinese definition.

## 5.2. A sense of belonging

As defined in Chapter 3 section 3.4.4, a fansubbing community is formed through a self-organizing process whereby different individuals are drawn together by shared interests around fansubbing. These individuals gradually organise themselves into a coherent whole by weaving together meaningful social relationships. As these relationships intensify, a shared identity or a sense of “we-ness” arises that bonds these individuals together and defines who they are as a community. Nevertheless, not all individuals share the group’s values and identity: the meanings they attach to their own and other’s actions are produced through non-linear and complex interactions, and require constant negotiation and adjustment. A sense of togetherness only exists when there is a certain degree of overlap between individuals’ interpretations about the meanings of their actions.

Since not all fansubbing networks can qualify as communities clustered around feelings of togetherness, the first priority is to investigate whether there is a sense of belonging that is shared among members from TLF fansubbing group. In order to assess their self-declared feelings of togetherness, participants were asked in the question:

### **Q1: Do you feel or experience a sense of belonging and togetherness in TLF fansubbing group?**

Their answers suggest the presence of a positive sense of belonging based on their perceptions of 1) “being part of TLF”; 2) “being (emotionally) attached to TLF”; 3) “being honoured to be in TLF”; and 4) “being a ‘TLFer’”. Table 5.1 shows details of how participants articulate these four perceptions (i.e. the left column) and a number of exemplary expressions (i.e. the right column) for each category<sup>69</sup>.

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<sup>69</sup> In this table, participants are identified by numbers (e.g. P20). Further information for participants’ answers quoted in this chapter and the original Chinese version can be found in Appendix VIII.



Four feelings of belonging		Exemplary expressions
<i>Being part of TLF</i>	Explicit mentioning of “sense of belonging” (P 2, 4, 21)	I have a strong sense of belonging to TLF (P 2).
	Comparing the group to a family (P 18, 20, 32, 33, 35)	TLF is like a big warm family (P 20).
	Feeling one fits in the group (P 7, 14, 27, 34)	I feel like a fish in water here (P 7). I feel warmly welcomed instead of being excluded, although I am still a newbie (P 34).
<i>Being (emotionally) attached to TLF</i>	Comparing one’s relationship with the group to one between lovers (P 6, 8, 19, 24, 25, 38)	My relationship with TLF is like a sentimental love story full of sweet memories (P 8). It was a destiny for us [the participant and the group] to meet each other and I cherish this destiny (p 25).
	Expressing intimacy towards the group (P 5, 17)	I have a natural feeling of intimacy towards the group (P 5).
	Showing one’s loyalty to the group (P 1, 9, 10, 38, 39)	I will stay here [TLF] as long as TLF exists (P 10).
<i>Being honoured to be in TLF</i>	Expressing self-perceptions of privilege and pride towards one’s membership (P 3, 23, 26)	I am honoured to be one of the members in TLF (P 3). I am very proud to become one of the group members (P 23). It is my privilege to get involved in doing fansubs and know so many people from all works of life (P 26).
	Expressing a willingness to contribute (P 22, 31, 36, 37)	I feel I owe much to the group because I did not contribute enough (P 22). Sometimes I am worried that my contributions were not enough to live up to the golden reputation enjoyed by the group (P 37).

<i>Being a “TLFer” (P 13 15, 28, 40)</i>	I am a TLFer (P 13). I consider myself as one of the TLFers (P 15, 28).
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*Table 5.1 Categories of feelings of togetherness and exemplary expressions*

**“Being part of TLF”** is one of the feelings through which participants expressed their sense of belonging to the group. The most straightforward expression within this category was the explicit use of the term “归属感” (*guishugan*, meaning “sense of belonging” in Chinese) by participants, e.g. “I have a strong sense of belonging to TLF” (P2). Also, the term “家庭” (*jiating*, “family”) was used by some respondents to describe the group as a “big harmonious and warm family” (P35), where “everyone is like brothers and sisters” (P32) who “are closely connected to each other” (P33); and where one can “indulge in the family atmosphere and gain a sense of security” (P18). Other statements that articulate the participants’ feeling of group membership included: “I feel like a fish in the water here [TLF]” (P7); “I feel warmly welcomed, instead of being excluded simply because I am a newbie” (P34); “I feel we are a dynamic organisation full of energy and vitality” (P27); and “this place [TLF] opens a window of hope and brings a ray of light in my lonely life” (P14).

**“Being (emotionally) attached to TLF”** is another feeling expressed by members about their sense of togetherness and relationship with the group. Some of them compared this relationship to that between two intimate lovers, while others expressed their commitment to the group in terms of their determination to stay within the group. The intimate feeling held by participants towards their group can be illustrated by statements such as: “I knew I loved you [TLF] before I met you” (P6, 19); “we [the participant and TLF] were destined to meet each other” (P24); and “I have an instinctive feeling of intimacy towards the group” (P5). Examples of the participants’ commitment to the group can be found in statements such as: “I will stay here [TLF] as long as TLF exists” (P10); “For me, TLF is a place where I put down roots and grow” (P9); and “I will be here [TLF] till the end of the world” (P38).

**“Being honoured to be in TLF”**, and hence willing to act in the group’s best interests, is another way in which participants expressed their shared sense of

belonging. Terms such as “光荣” (*guangrong*, “honoured”), “自豪” (*zihao*, “proud”), “荣幸” (*rongxing*, “privileged”) were used by participants to describe the importance they attached to their membership of TLF. This sense of honour is also expressed in terms of the participants’ hopes to better meet their group’s needs and thus maintain the reputation enjoyed by the group. Some even felt “愧疚” (*kuijiu*, “guilty”) or “亏欠” (*kuiqian*, “owe too much to”) the group because they “did not contribute enough” (P22), and “received more help from others [than they could ever give]” (P36). Others wanted to improve their performance so that they could “live up to the golden reputation enjoyed by TLF” (P37).

**“Being a ‘TLFer’”** constitutes the fourth heading under the collective sense of solidarity experienced by TLF’s fansubbers can be subsumed. The English term “TLFer(s)” was used by participants to describe the feeling of being a part of something bigger than oneself. Examples include: “I am a TLFer” (P13); “I consider myself as one of the TLFers” (P15, 28); and “I feel grateful that I am a TLFer” (P40).

These four perceptions of ‘togetherness’ (“being a part of TLF”, “being (emotionally) attached to TLF”, “being honoured to be in TLF”, and “being a ‘TLFer’”) were articulated by 36 out of 40 respondents. This confirms the view held by McMillan and colleagues (McMillan and Chavis 1986, McMillan 1996) that communities have a psychological dimension. This involves the participants’ feeling and faith that they fit in the group and have a place there, a perception of acceptance by the group, and a willingness to make sacrifices for the group.

4 out of the 40 respondents (P11, 12, 16, 30) noted that they failed to perceive a sense of belonging. The main reasons for this are two-fold: the lack of interaction with other group members; and the lack of energy and time to be actively involved in group activities, as illustrated by their answers:

Q1-P11: I don’t feel a strong sense of togetherness. I consider myself as basically a free-rider who eats, sleeps and watches videos subtitled by TLF every day.

Q1-P12: I am quite amazed by the fact that I am still doing fansubs occasionally, as I am approaching the big 30 and do not have enough time and energy to actively engage in the group's activities anymore.

Q1-P16: My time in TLF is far from satisfactory, because I often find it difficult to engage in conversations with others due to our lack of commonalities.

Q1-P30: I seldom speak with other members, and tend to focus only on translating my favourite media content.

### **5.3. Fulfilling personal needs**

Based on the notion of self-organisation, members of a fansubbing network are understood as autonomous (selfish) agents. In order to maximise their individual gains, they constantly react to, influence and are influenced by changing opportunities and constraints created by connections and interactions within/across their network. The autonomous nature of agents suggests that there is always a certain calculation between costs and rewards involved in their actions. It then follows that a positive sense of togetherness only exists if the individual-group association is rewarding for group members. To find out what is rewarding about doing fansubs in TLF, participants were asked the following question:

#### **Q2: What motivates you to do fansubs in the group?**

Responses to this question suggest that the sense of community perceived by TLF's members initially arises from their private interest in foreign films and TV shows, and hence the desire to consume these products. The immediate benefit derived from doing fansubs in TLF is accessing the group's sizable collection of foreign content while translating it. Over time, they also gain other rewards, such as a sense of achievement, self-fulfilment and creative fun, from their fansubbing activities. Some participants, particularly those who hold the status of core members, are driven by a sense of obligation to activate others to become involved in group activities. While participants' motivations for fansubbing are different, they all share a strong belief that creating fansubs

in TLF can go some way towards satisfying their personal needs, which acts as an attractive force drawing individuals closer to the group.

### 5.3.1. Searching for unavailable foreign content

Reflecting on their lives prior to joining TLF, many participants noted that they had felt very stifled by their respective social circles. Consisting mainly of parents, teachers, and peers, such circles offered limited opportunities for emotional self-expression. Participants used different terms to describe their feelings of isolation, including 孤单 (*gudan*, 'lonely'), 寂寞 (*jimo*, 'lonely'), 无聊 (*wuliao*, 'bored'), and 郁闷 (*yumen*, 'depressed'). They typically felt that sharing their feelings with people they knew would be impractical. As one participant put it, "nobody would understand and care about [my feelings]" (P2).

This is a common issue in collectivist societies such as China's, where emotional expression is discouraged as a sign of weakness (Bond 1993). Unlike individualistic societies where self-expression and the achievement of personal goals are regarded as primary sources of satisfaction with life, collectivist cultures tend to emphasise one's social roles and obligations over personal expressions and individual interests (Chiao 2009). In such contexts, expressing one's personal needs openly is often discouraged, as doing so could be interpreted as a threat to authorities in collectivist societies.

Chinese appear to be more oriented towards a collectivist self rather than an individualist self (Chu 1979). This collectivist self is heavily shaped by Confucian principles (as appropriated by the Communist Party), which value obedience to authorities as a means to maintain social stability. This is a self that is deeply embedded in a network of social relationships known as 关系 (*guanxi*), which is based primarily on blood ties and reciprocal obligations built over time through continued exchanges of favours between significant others. Under the *guanxi* regime, individuals are expected to behave appropriately by exercising emotional self-restraint and fulfilling the expectations and obligations dictated by the relationship between themselves and others, particularly those with higher social status. Constrained by interactions within their respective *guanxi* networks, individuals' existing social circles reinforce

emotional restraint and offer little room to explore their identities beyond those domains favoured by authoritarian institutions, such as family, school, and the state. Confucianism, combined with an authoritarian government that tries to suppress expressions of personal needs and interests, contribute to the social isolation experienced by many questionnaire respondents. Further exacerbating such feelings is the fact that most of them come from one-child families, with no siblings to talk to.

However, none of these participants responded to their feelings of loneliness by shutting down emotionally. Instead, they started to look for information that was often not available in their existing social circles, but resonated with their personal interests. Before the advent of the Internet, pirated foreign films and TV shows sold by street vendors in VCD or DVD formats provided a space for them to explore their interests and identities through Western entertainment products. One participant (P6), for instance, recalled that she filled her lonely time by watching pirated DVDs, so much so that she became “a loyal customer of an [underground] DVD shop”. By gaining access to foreign media products, participants like P6 began to learn about foreign cultures, and develop new ways of thinking and being. Consequently, they also began to make sense of themselves in the light of these new ideas.

This identity-through-entertainment was accelerated by the introduction of the Internet in the 90s, as media content could now be downloaded through file-sharing networks. At that time, Chinese Internet users were predominantly young (79% were between 20 and 29) and well educated (70% were university students) urbanites, whose online activities revolved around: communication (e.g. email, forum discussions, and chat); browsing recreational sites; downloading videos; and gaming (in descending order of popularity) (Du 1999). Like these early Internet users, most participants in TLF were also early adopters of technology and spent a great amount of their college time searching for sites where they could obtain information related to their favourite foreign media content<sup>70</sup>. Some of them wanted more information about Japanese *anime*, some were interested in Western films and TV programmes, and some wanted

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<sup>70</sup> Many Chinese youth often had their first Internet experiences after beginning their university studies, as higher education institutions provided them with easy access to the Internet. Alternatively, university students can go to Internet cafés outside the campus without letting any teachers or parents find out.

to know more about sex and sexuality. While their information needs were different, they were effectively driven by a shared agenda: searching for foreign audiovisual products that were not provided by official media outlets in China.

Describing himself as an early Internet user attending Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications during the 90s, P1 recalled his experiences of downloading video files from the Internet. Being a university student without expensive hard-drive storage space made it impractical for him to store large files on his personal computer. Nevertheless, he began enquiring how many male students across Chinese universities (including his) configured their universities' servers (where storage space was abundant) to anonymously store and share video files. He then began to upload media content via the intranet of his university, because he regarded consuming foreign content as a sharing activity: "the more we shared [upload], and the more we could choose from".

Apart from sharing content through university intranets, participants also gravitated towards commercial sites where they could download a greater number of media products and freely discuss their private interests with disparate, yet like-minded individuals. Xunlei, VeryCD, and Douban were among the most frequently mentioned commercial platforms in the questionnaire. Subsidising their operations with advertising revenue, Xunlei and VeryCD are two state-approved web services that allow users to use their pseudonyms to share media files via BitTorrent. Douban is a popular social networking site among fans of Western and Japanese entertainment. On Douban, fans can post (comments of) reviews of their favourite music, books, films, TV programmes and celebrities; easily find other users with overlapping interests by looking at each other's profiles; and create numerous fan groups specifically for their shared interests. Like Xunlei and VeryCD, Douban is dominant in the practice of pseudonymity, i.e. interactions are carried out under anonymous conditions among users who refer to each other's pseudonyms rather than given names.

The anonymity afforded by these commercial sites as well as university intranets configured for file-sharing explains why participants found such networks appealing: they can explore and discuss their private interests away

from the watchful eyes and interference of people from their offline social circles. The apolitical nature of these networks – China’s Internet censorship means that most of the information and content exchanged within/across these networks is recreational and fandom-driven – makes them safe sites for participants to explore their identities. By consuming foreign media content available on various file-sharing sites, they also got the chance to know about the existence of TLF fansubbing group and its translated work.

As mentioned in Chapter 2 section 2.5, China’s Party-state only imports a limited number of foreign media products which are distributed and translated (often dubbed) exclusively by media conglomerates owned by the state (e.g. CCTV, and China Film Distribution Company). On the other hand, most (subtitled) foreign content shared by users via P2P networks is unavailable through official media outlets, and is thus often translated by media fans from numerous fansubbing groups. However, the quality of the translated subtitles can be very uneven. As pointed out by some participants, the use of wrong Chinese characters, missing punctuation, and other errors could often be observed in Chinese subtitles created by fansubbers. Such translation and editing infelicities were described by participants as “so annoying that you wanted to punch the screen” (P13). Through their obsessive consumption of fansubbed work, they gradually developed a personal preference for TLF’s work, not only because of the content itself, which was described as “interesting”, “thought-provoking” and “intellectually stimulating”; but also because of the high quality of translation provided by the group. In the end, they all decided to join TLF, because doing so allowed them to access a great amount of content stored on the group’s FTP servers while translating the content. By creating subtitles themselves, they could also avoid their previous unpleasant viewing experiences when watching the poorly subtitled work created by other fansubbing communities.

Under a cultural paradigm that reinforces collective moral obligations and obedience to authorities, participants are looking for a way out of their stifling *guanxi* ties that are either mired in a complex web of obligations or bound by rigid social conventions, both of which offer little possibility of emotional self-expression. Consequently, they find an alternative way to cope with their feelings of loneliness: consuming foreign media products. Watching these



products is not only a genuine source of comfort, it also galvanises them to examine new ways of thinking and being in relation to the information contained in the media products they consume. Accessing new information motivates them to search for more content, which is often not provided by official media channels. Instead of feeling resigned to a highly controlled media environment, they become resourceful and share video files through university intranets, learn how to use file-sharing protocols on P2P networks, as well as create pseudonyms to explore their private interests across social media platforms. While most media products consumed by participants are entertainment programmes, the very act of searching for media content that is not available through official media outlets is transforming them from passive consumers into active information searchers. Through their exposure to online platforms where information is searchable and accessible, they gradually acquire a sense of agency that motivates them to search for more “hidden information” and eventually to join the fansubbing group.

Unlike their older generations who often lack time and digital literacy skills to engage in participatory consumption activities and are confined within narrow social circles, participants spend most of their college time on multiple online platforms, forming loose affiliations with unknown individuals and communities of interests. Such flexible affiliations enabled by the rise of social media are consistent with Rainie and Wellman’s (2012: 12) notion of “networked individualism”, which designates the existence of individuals outside local groups and their engagement in multiple networks formed around personal interests. Such individuals “must calculate where they can turn for different kinds of help – and what kind of help to offer others as they occupy nodes in others’ extended networks” (*ibid.*). Once participants become members of TLF, the question then arises: will they be able to commit themselves to translating the group’s media resources in the long-term, given that their main reason to join the group is to consume the resources? As illustrated in section 5.3.2, the enormous sense of achievement gained through their involvement in fansubbing activities drives participants to remain involved in such networks, and hence satisfy the need to demonstrate their competence and reputation.

### 5.3.2. Gaining reputation

Building one's reputation as a fansubber was mentioned extensively across new and core members as a motivation to contribute. This motivation was largely associated with a shared view of fansubbing as something prestigious to do, and hence fansubbing skills as a sign of competence. One participant (P19), for instance, described TLF as a site attracting “crouching tiger[s] and hidden dragon[s]” – a Chinese idiom that describes martial arts experts with special hidden talents. Here, the idiom was used to show the admiration P19 had for “the profound language skills and extensive cultural knowledge” demonstrated by fellow members.

According to P4, TLF was formed by people possessing a high foreign language (particularly English) proficiency: “some passed the Test for English Major Band Eight [i.e. the highest level for English major students in China], some scored high marks in IELTS, TOEFL, or GRE [i.e. an admission test for graduate schools in the United States], and some were studying in overseas universities”. Against the backdrop of this fascination for the prestigious status of fansubbing, gaining reputation was highly regarded by participants as a way to signal their status and competence as fansubbers.

Traditionally in the West, fans are often stereotyped as untrustworthy, obsessive, and abnormal due to the low cultural status of their embraced fandom (Jenson 1992). By contrast, the mutual admiration and respect held among participants in this study suggests that the current fansubbing scene in China is fuelled by an elite ideology. As shown by the demographic data discussed at the beginning of this chapter, most participants are well-educated young urbanites. These youth are the primary beneficiaries of China's open-market reforms. Consequently, they are more affluent, more literate, and have much more leisure time to explore their personal interests than people from marginalised groups, such as rural residents and migrant workers. Since the means required to engage in participatory consumption activities such as fansubbing are still confined to a very small portion of Chinese, the fansubbing culture in China is marked by an elite status.

Another factor contributing to the participants' desire to build their reputation is related to the fact that they often experienced a low sense of achievement in

their offline social circles. In collectivist societies such as China, shame is often used to regulate social norms (Bedford 2004). From an early age, children are socialised by parents into the idea that a person's identity is "established by the notion of behaving according to *li* (properly)" (Cheng 2012: 17), i.e. standards that "individuals hold for themselves and the standards they recognise that other people have come to expect them to uphold in order to maintain their reputation" (Bedford *ibid.*: 38). Failure to live up to these standards will bring shame to oneself and everyone in one's immediate social circle, which is known as 丢脸 (*diulian*, literally 'loss of face'). One way for parents to teach their children the importance of avoiding *diulian* is through popular Chinese proverbs that emphasise conformity over individuality: "The bigger the tree, the heavier the wind"; "People are afraid of being famous, like pigs are afraid of being fat"; "The bird who sticks out its head gets shot", etc. The fear of doing something that could be seen as *diulian* prevents youth from freely expressing themselves in ways that may counter traditionally accepted social norms.

By joining the fansubbing group, participants start to overcome the fear of speaking up commonly experienced among Chinese youth. The anonymity of the Internet helps to alleviate this fear by allowing them to use anonymous online identities to express themselves in the company of strangers who are also doing the very same thing. In the absence of their overbearing parents and judgemental friends, they are learning how to "stick their heads out" by promoting themselves through subtitling their favourite foreign content. In their responses to the questionnaire, they used different expressions to describe their sense of achievement when watching their subtitled work with their pseudonyms attached to it: "a special feeling", "a strong sense of satisfaction", "an incomparable sense of achievement", and "a great sense of self-competence".

This great sense of self-worth and consequently a positive self-image were reinforced by the positive feedback that participants received from their fellow members and online audiences. For many participants, translating subtitles was not an easy job. As put by P19, "watching a film only takes you a couple of hours, whereas translating a film takes you days of hard work". Like P19, other participants often "spent hours of [their] leisure time" "checking mistakes and

polishing words and sentences” in their subtitled texts. Sometimes, they “had to play a [video] text hundreds of times” while translating it. Such subtitling experiences often made them feel “exhausted” and “nauseous”. However, whenever they received good feedback from other members or users who downloaded their work via P2P networks, they felt “pleased and satisfied” that “[they were] recognised and praised by others”, even though such recognition was afforded to their subtitler pseudonyms. They also felt that their hard work “was damn worthwhile even though nobody was paying money for [their] work”. Recognition was regarded as an “exclusive privilege” that could never be understood by people from the participants’ offline social circles. As put by P10:

Q2-P10: My friends often make fun of me because I am doing this [fansubbing] for free, but I don’t give a damn. Instead, I am thrilled because they will never experience the wonderful feeling when seeing your own [translated] subtitles being displayed in a movie.

In their presumption of global media products, participants are far from “duped victims of media corporations” (Banks and Humphreys 2008: 404). Fully aware that they are working for free, they take advantage of the cultural and technological resources available to them to translate foreign content in exchange for something less tangible: gaining recognition. It then seems unconvincing to conceptualise consumer co-creators as unknowing subjects exploited by global media capitalism. As pointed out by Banks and Deuze (2009: 429), this approach often ignores the ability of participants themselves “to see through the charade and identifying the ‘real’ nature of the unfolding relations” between corporations and consumers.

On the surface it may seem that the participants’ desire to acquire a reputation is no more than an extrinsic motive to showcase their elite status as fansubbers within the Chinese fansubbing scene. However, they have also gained a sense of achievement that was previously unavailable to them by expressing themselves through their subtitled work. The sense of self-worth that comes from translating one’s favourite foreign media content is further intensified by the positive feedback from fellow members and audience. This gives way to a self who is able to exercise the agency required to boost one’s reputation in a community of one’s choosing. This self differs greatly from one’s old self who

is often afraid of speaking up due to the anxiety of bringing shame to oneself and one's extended social circle.

While the anonymity enabled by the Internet can encourage abusive behaviour like bully and stalking (Cheng 2012), users like TLF's participants can also take advantage of anonymity to express themselves, knowing that what they say or do will not be associated with their real names. As a result, participants feel freer to explore their identities in the realm of their own imagination, but outside the realm of traditional social norms.

### 5.3.3. Enjoying the creative fun

Participants, particularly active and veteran members, described their fansubbing activities as a challenging and yet hobby-like activity. Many reported the freedom that came with doing fansubs in TLF fansubbing group: 1) their membership of the group was totally voluntary and they could opt out at any time; 2) they were free to choose any text (posted on the group's task list) to translate whenever the time suited them; and 3) there were no hard and fast rules imposed on their translation styles.

Such experiences of freedom stand in sharp contrast to the rigid social environment found in their offline lives. Since the day they were born, their social behaviour and activities, like everyone else in China, are kept in 档案 (*dang'an*, 'personal dossiers'). Instituted by the Communist Party to track and scrutinise performances and attitudes of Chinese citizens, *dang'an* documents almost everything from a person's family background, political activities, education (including teachers' reports), employment history (including employers' reports), to criminal convictions. Sealed in a brown envelope, the document follows the person everywhere as s/he moves from schools to work places, and is held by these institutions under the supervision of local Public Security Bureaus. Through the *dang'an* system, institutions become the legitimate representatives for individuals.

On the other hand, the possibility of being able to join an organisation where everyone is free to do things of their own choice facilitates free association among participants. Unlike membership processes in formal organisations, such as the Communist Youth League of China, becoming a member of the

fansubbing group represents a shift from top-down processes of affiliation to voluntary, and more importantly, fun-driven forms of socialisation. Terms such as “interesting”, “fun”, “enjoyable”, “intellectually stimulating”, “engaging”, and “challenging” were used among participants to describe their fansubbing experiences. They reported that over a sustained period of doing fansubs in the group, they gradually developed a desire to identify audiovisual texts that would be more challenging but rewarding to translate. Among such texts, Open Yale Courses (OYC)<sup>71</sup> was mentioned most frequently.

Initiated by Yale University to provide free-of-charge video lectures via the Internet, the OYC series cover a wide range of subjects in both the sciences and the humanities, from American Studies to Physics, English, Philosophy, Political Science, Sociology, and more. Each course is recorded in its entirety as it is presented to Yale students. In 2010, several well-known fansubbing groups in China (including TLF) began to translate some course series and publish Chinese subtitled versions on their own platforms. According to accounts provided by TLF’s participants, they were attracted to such educational content for various reasons. Some wanted to improve their English language skills. Others, particularly participants who were science and engineering students, wanted to engage with philosophical questions (e.g. through the “Death” course offered by OYC) in order to better understand themselves and the world. Others wanted to take the courses as a warm-up before studying abroad. While their needs for knowledge were different, they all felt that OYC offered them an opportunity to explore knowledge beyond the boundaries of their local educational system.

Examination-oriented education has long dominated the educational system in China (Dello-Iacovo 2009). Regulated and prescribed by government authorities, officially sanctioned curricula are designed to meet the nation’s needs rather than to facilitating students’ personal fulfilment (*ibid.*). As an irrefutable dogma, the prescribed course content encourages teacher-centred and rote teaching/learning methods, while failing to foster self-expression, critical thinking, and capacity for initiative. In order to succeed in examinations and ascend to the next level of study, students are labouring under heavy

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<sup>71</sup> Detailed information about Open Yale Courses is available at “About Open Yale Courses”: <http://oyc.yale.edu/about> (last accessed 11 April 2015).

homework and high stress levels. The pressure on students to score high marks in exams is further exacerbated by “the economic reforms and the increased stratification of society as well as One Child Policy which has increased the weight of expectation on each child” (Dello-Iacovo 2009: 242). Previous research reveals that 21.6% of primary students and 32% of secondary students are suffering from psychological problems, while many “successful” university students often lack self-esteem, social skills, adaptability or resilience (Zhang 2002). Embedded in a highly regimented and controlled educational system, Chinese students have little time to enjoy their hobbies and know little of life beyond their school walls.

However, the exposure to new and alternative content on the Internet, such as the OYC series, triggers an awakening wish to question authority figures (e.g. schools and teachers) that were once deemed to be infallible. This growing awareness of the importance of individual agency and its concomitant drive to acquire knowledge ultimately results in a search for answers, but also in the proliferation of yet more questions. In fact, seeking intellectual enlightenment via Western educational content is a typical practice not only among participants in TLF. As observed by Xia (2013: 133), China’s rigid educational system and conservative information sharing culture stand in sharp contrast to the open ideals of OYC, their inviting course content and unique style of instruction. As a result, the OYC series has attracted multiple groups of Chinese online viewers, “ranging from young college students to more senior people and covering varying professions” (*ibid.*). More interestingly, their consumed course content is not delivered through traditional platforms, such as institutional websites, in China. Instead, all the courses are translated and published by Chinese fansubbers across various entertainment websites. As a result, foreign educational programmes have ironically become part of the entertainment-oriented content published on popular sites in China.

The popularity enjoyed by foreign educational content among Chinese media fans confirms the view held by scholars such as Barra (2009) and Dwyer (2012) that the activities of “fansubbers” have expanded and new forms of interplay are currently emerging between amateur subtitling and a wide range of fandoms: *anime*, international films and TV series. In the case of Chinese fansubbers, their objects of fandom can be very diverse and may even include

educational products as part of this quest for knowledge. This, again, confirms the view held by Barra (*ibid.*) that fans may be more motivated by their desire to learn, e.g. by improving their foreign language skills, than their love for the media content itself.

For TLF's participants, being able to consume and translate foreign educational content not only satisfies their hunger for knowledge and enjoyment of intellectual discovery. It also encourages them to delve deeper into their subtitling activities. In their questionnaire responses, they described many instances where they encountered challenges while translating the OYC series. Sometimes, they had to watch a course video hundreds of times to fully understand the content, because the talking speed of the course instructor was too fast to follow, or the accent was too difficult to understand. Sometimes they spent days searching for and reading books or electronic materials in order to fully understand the meanings of certain new concepts and terms before they were able to translate them into Chinese.

Participants reported that, over time, their knowledge and foreign language skills developed, allowing them to become more confident and self-sufficient in solving the problems they encountered during the process of translation. They stated that part of the fun of fansubbing was about becoming fully engrossed in solving problems, whether about synchronising subtitles with a video, coming up with an appropriate translation for a word or sentence, or generally being able to implement the best solution in the final product. Such experiences explain why many participants saw fansubbing as an engaging, hobby-like activity. Some even went so far to compare the activity to an addiction. As put by P16:

Q2-P16: Fansubbing has pretty much become an addiction for me. Whenever I find my favourite [audiovisual] text from the group's task lists, translating the text becomes my top-one priority. Even when I am at work, I will still keep thinking about translating the text. Whenever I see my finished work, I will have a huge sense of satisfaction. I will be over the moon if my work is praised by someone. Of course, I also feel exhausted after each task, thinking I will take a break for at least one month. However, I cannot help but keep checking the group's task list to hunt my next favourite text. If



I spot one, I will quickly return to the old habit. I often spend countless nights asking myself: why can't I have a job translating subtitles? Yet, deep down I know that even if I had this job, it still could not beat doing fansubs in the group where I have the freedom to choose which text to translate and how I want to translate it. My friends and family often ask me: "Why do you keep doing this [fansubbing] if you are not paid?" Whenever they say things like this, I will shrug my shoulders and ignore their words, thinking: you will never know the joy of doing fansubs.

The priority given by P16 to fansubbing may imply his lack of interest in building relationships with people from his social circles. However, the point here is to show that consuming foreign content while translating it has become something so personal that it almost dissolves the distance between the participant and his object of fandom. Previous research on music and sports fans in the West also shows that fans often "entertain a highly personal relationship with their fan object" (Sandvoss 2005: 100). According to Sandvoss (*ibid.*), if fans privilege their fandom over any other forms of social interaction, then this is illustrative of the degree to which their fan object "functions as an extension of self and is constitutive of their identity".

In this sense, the foreign content consumed and subtitled by participants like P16 is not merely an external object or text. It becomes part of their sense of self through their intense interactions with their favourite content during processes of consumption and mediation. Viewed in this way, their final work functions as a reflection, if not a "narcissistic performance", of the self in the search for "the enjoyment of the glamorous and the outlandish, of fame and glory in their object of fandom" (Sandvoss *ibid.*: 114).

By turning subtitled texts into extensions of themselves, TLF's participants give their fansubbing activities an inherently private and personal nature, removing such activities from the logic of monetary exchange. The money they spend on bandwidth and hardware required for file-sharing, not to mention the time and efforts they invest in subtitling, will then often stand in no relation to the affectivity that they attach to their translated texts.

Within the field of audiovisual translation, the affectivity involved in amateur mediation is highlighted by Pérez-González (2012: 338) as a crucial factor that

empowers fansubbers to “performatively intervene” in their very production in ways that often mould media experiences to fit their own as well as viewers’ expectations. In this respect, TLF’s members have also devised a set of subtitling rules to guide their fansubbing practice. These rules are explored in detail in Chapter 6, section 6.4.

#### 5.3.4. Giving back to the community

Through their prolonged involvement in fansubbing activities, participants became more comfortable and confident in establishing their reputations while enjoying the fun of their creative work. Over time, some of them began to develop a feeling that they were not just joining the group, but becoming part of the group. This induced a sense of obligation to give back to the community. Such feelings were mostly typical among core members, who identified themselves as 元老 (*yuanlao*, a term that literally means ‘chief seniors’, but that in this context refers to TLF fansubbing group leaders).

They explained that, like everyone else in the group, their fansubbing activities initially started out of boredom and loneliness. Even during their early stage of participation in the group, they still preferred to do their work individually: downloading the group’s media resources, consuming content subtitled by other members, or translating their favourite content to build their reputation and accumulate knowledge. As their competence and performance kept improving, they gained status, esteem, and support from fellow members. This, in turn, motivated them to become more involved in activities that not only benefited themselves, but the entire group.

As described by core members, although their avatars identified them as forum administrators or moderators, they were actually doing almost everything: from looking for raw materials, translating, and proofreading; to coordinating members’ activities, recruiting, disseminating the group’s work across social media platforms; and, of course, maintaining the forum. When they were too busy to do all these things, they often asked other members to help them out.

This did not mean that, as *yuanlao*, they were able to impose choices on others. Instead, their leadership was established through their continuous contributions (in terms of quality and quantity), and consequently the recognition and

support based on what they had accomplished. As a result, they felt that they were more capable of performing complex tasks that few in the group could accomplish, and therefore had more impact on the group. This perceived sense of self-efficacy spurred them to contribute further, because doing so strengthened their belief that they were able to make a significant influence on everyone in the group. It was this sense of self-efficacy that made them feel obliged to act in the group's best interests that were often of personal significance.

One thing emphasised by core members in the questionnaire was the importance of respect, including respect for the contributions made by individual members, their freedom to do things that suit them best, and their decisions to move in or out of the group. Since no one was forced to do things if they were not interested in or did not have time or energy, it was difficult to sustain members' participation over the long term. As explained by core members, some people joined the group just for free-riding, and others disappeared after realising how demanding fansubbing was, leaving their tasks unfinished. There were even people who disappeared after applying to join.

As group leaders, they felt obliged to maintain the overall stability of the group, and coordinate cooperation between group members. To do so, they had to learn how to assess the trustworthiness and reliability of fellow members, so that those who were able to really help out over the long run could be identified. They also learned how to communicate and liaise effectively with different individuals, in order to avoid misunderstandings and conflicts, and create an engaging environment where people would feel stimulated to participate and be held accountable.

According to core members' accounts, another of their responsibilities as group leaders was to enlarge the group's reputation by circulating its work across as many platforms as possible, while protecting the work from being reused without crediting the subtitlers. It may seem paradoxical that, on the one hand, they want to make their translated subtitles universally accessible and yet, on the other hand, they have a strong sense of ownership over their work. Nevertheless, if we understand their work as an extension and a narcissistic performance of the self (as discussed in section 5.3.3), then it becomes obvious

why they feel so strongly about their work. It is something that they are proud of and want to be recognised and praised for. It is also the combined fruit of their labour, knowledge, skills and passion invested during processes of creation, and consequently, they want to take credit.

Since making the group's translated subtitles universally accessible means anyone can use and redistribute the subtitles, it is difficult to prevent the subtitles from being appropriated for commercial use or modified without crediting the "legitimate" authors. According to the accounts provided by core members, overcoming this difficulty was almost next to impossible on the Internet. Nevertheless, they still felt obliged to protect every member's work from modifications that might harm the individual's as well as the group's reputations. They devised different strategies to do so, such as assigning members' pseudonyms to their contributions; creating a crediting webpage to list and promote everyone's work; drawing their audiences' attention to credits and authorship attribution issues through the group's website, etc. All these practices (which are explored in detail in Chapter 6) are oriented towards receiving wider attention from users on the Chinese Internet.

Such attention-seeking practices support the view held by Lanham (2006) that we are currently living in an "attention economy", as the centre of gravity of property has shifted from physical property to intellectual property. Facilitated by communication and networked technologies, media consumers are becoming "acute and swift economists of attention" (*ibid.*: 17), participating in co-creative practices and seeking wider ownership over their intellectual property. Instead of monetary rewards, what are being exchanged, in the case of TLF's members, are wider opportunities to access information, intellectual stimulation, a sense of self-worth and self-efficacy, social connections, and of course, public attention.

However, it should be noted that these fansubbers are still helping to promote the industry that often treats them as intellectual thieves and exploitable commodities. In this sense, their non-profit fansubs production can be also explained as a way to evade the risk of being accused of profit-making by means of copyright infringement, or as a way to maintain autonomy, self-governance and relative freedom from commercialisation: they can be left

alone to publish what they want and be free of professional constraints such as respecting the rights of the original content creators.

Internet users who get their hands on subtitles released by the group are quite often potential contributors, or in Bruns's (2008) term "producers", who utilise, comment, and re-circulate subtitles created by TLF. In doing so, they are helping to iterate the distribution process of the group's "products". Most likely, they may become loyal consumers of these products and even decide to join the group – something that had actually happened to all questionnaire respondents.

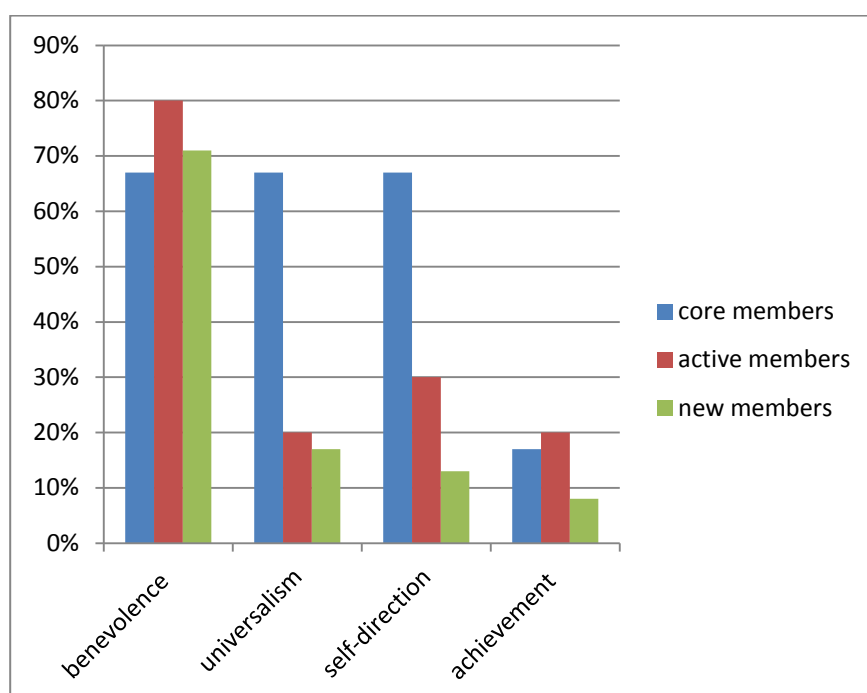
#### **5.4. Integrating personal needs with group needs**

Accessing foreign media content, establishing a public reputation, having fun and enjoying the support of fellow group members are rewards that participants can gain by fansubbing for TLF. These rewards function as what scholars of complexity call 'environmental stimuli' (Hofkirchner 1999) that draw agents (i.e. members) closer to a system (i.e. TLF fansubbing group). Nevertheless, in order to act in a more coherent and orderly way, agents need to be united by more general and enduring goals that function as an integrative force. These motivational sources, that guide (inter)actions within a system over a more sustained period of time, are conceptualised by social scientists as values (see section 3.4.4).

By constantly interacting with each other while they attempt to fulfil their personal needs, TLF's participants start to form and attribute meanings and goals to their interactive experiences and joint actions. Sharing some or many of these goals allows for the development of a shared identity that defines who they are as a group. While the previous section 5.3 explains *why* they contribute, this section focuses on *who* they are, and what types of personal values are activated and prioritised through sustained subtitling activities. For this purpose, participants are asked in the third question devised in the questionnaire:

### Q3: What goals or visions would you like to achieve by fansubbing for TLF?

Responses suggest TLF's members are united under four major goals: 1) enhancing the stability and welfare of the group; 2) spreading the fun and beauty of fansubbing; 3) pursuing free and independent thinking and action; and 4) demonstrating competence as a fansubber (in descending order of relative importance). From these goals, four kinds of values (see section 3.4.4) are derived: benevolence, universalism, self-direction, and achievement (see Figure 5.1).



*Figure 5.1 Values shared among participants in TLF fansubbing group*

As shown in Figure 5.1, benevolence, defined as the goal of “preserving and enhancing the welfare of those with whom one is in frequent personal contact” (Schwartz 2012: 7), is a primary value held among (29 out of 40) respondents. This suggests that the group’s smooth functioning is regarded as the most basic prerequisite for individual members’ subtitling activities. Participants who identify themselves with the value of benevolence are characterised by their voluntary concern for the group’s stability and betterment, and their loyalty and commitment to each other. As exemplified by P10 and P32’s responses:

Q3-P10: It has been ten years since TLF was established. In the next ten years, I hope TLF can produce more and better fansubs as long as we stick together and work hard.

Q3-P32: I am very happy to see that there are many people sharing similar values, interests and topics in the group. I hope we as well as TLF can go as far as possible.

While the value of benevolence involves creating cooperative and supportive in-group relationships, the value of universalism entails concern for the welfare of those in the larger society, and the appreciation of love and beauty (Schwartz 2012). Indicators of this value are found in the responses of 10 (out of 40) participants. In these responses, they acknowledge that helping more people enjoy the fun and beauty brought by fansubbing is one of their main goals. Ultimately, this goal is encapsulated in the group's slogan quoted by several participants: “分享创作之乐，共赏字幕之美” (‘SHARE THE FUN OF CREATION AND APPRECIATE THE BEAUTY OF SUBTITLES’).

Compared to active and new members, core members tend to attribute greater importance to universalism (see Figure 5.1). This indicates that the sources of motivation for core members have shifted from serving personal and group needs towards wider social needs in terms of promoting equal opportunities to access and enjoy foreign content translated by TLF. Overall, participants sharing the value of universalism would appear to be driven by a desire to make high-quality subtitles available for the public to enjoy. As illustrated by the responses given by P5 and 37:

Q3-P5: I want to help [foreign] film-lovers to better understand the films through my subtitles. This is the driving force that motivates me to do fansubs. A good film can help people think and grow. Nothing can give me more satisfaction than helping people to better enjoy a film and get entertained with the help of my subtitles. I would be truly honoured if my work could bring to people a spiritual experience and prompt them to reflect on their own lives.

Q3-P37: I want to inspire viewers with my translations. Whenever I'm doing fansubs, I always have a mixed feeling of hope and fear. I hope my subtitles are helpful for the audience, but I fear that they

will be misguided if I made any mistake in the subtitles. So I always make sure there is no mistranslation in my subtitles.

Apart from promoting in-group stability and facilitating wider access to subtitles created by TLF, freely expressing oneself while creating subtitles is another goal emphasised by a significant percentage (25%) of participants. The value derived from this goal is self-direction, i.e. “independent thought and action – choosing, creating, exploring” (Schwartz 2012: 5). Participants who emphasised this value are characterised by a high level of affectivity attached to their translated texts, as illustrated by expressions such as “we are doing our own subtitles”; “create subtitles that belong to yourself”; and “be true to yourself during translation”. Besides, they all felt that their fansubbing community was a place where they can freely explore their interests and express their ideas “without chains”. As illustrated by some of their responses:

Q3-P1: The most important thing about doing fansubs in TLF is that we are doing our own subtitles.

Q3-P2: As long as you are sincere and genuine, you can create subtitles that belong to yourself. Doing fansubs is not about finishing tasks. It is about being honest and true to yourself during translation.

Q3-P8: People are always yearning to be free, [like birds] soaring in the sky and [like fishes] swimming in the sea, full of dreams without chains. As we are still young, we should go and chase our dreams. And it is to this piece of sky [TLF] that my dreams belong to.

Demonstrating or improving one’s skills and competence as a fansubber is ranked as the fourth most mentioned goal by 5 out of the 40 participants. This goal is at the heart of the value of achievement, i.e. “personal success through demonstrating competence according to [group] standards” (Schwartz 2012: 5). Participants who prioritise achievement as a value are concerned over their performance to maintain or enhance their own as well as the group’s reputations. Typical examples are (excerpted from answers to Q3):

Q3-P3: I will continue to improve myself under the glory of TLF.



Q3-P16: I need to integrate more within TLF. First, my technical skills are still not good enough. Second, I need to establish more social connections and influence within the group. However, so far, I do enjoy the lovely and intimate atmosphere of the group.

Overall, the four value types (benevolence, universalism, self-direction and achievement) held by participants reflect who they are as a group, and what their fansubbing activities mean to them. Individual participants may align themselves with one or several values, depending on the weight they allocate to each value. P35, for instance, only mentioned the goal of enhancing the stability of relationships between fellow members (i.e. benevolence). P4, on the other hand, held several values derived from the goals he wanted to achieve. These two participants' full responses are presented below:

Q3-P35: I hope that all the brothers and sisters in this group can, hand-in-hand with each other, create a splendid future for the group [value of benevolence].

Q3-P4: People tend to distinguish themselves from the crowd based on how they label each other. Instead of labelling TLF as “a fansubbing group”, I want to use “sharing, fun, caring and supporting” to label TLF [benevolence and universalism]. TLF is not just a virtual group, but a group formed by real people. Although I only know the pseudonyms of my fellow members instead of their real names, their selfless dedication to the group's fansubbing activities is the source of my sense of belonging. They are the reason why I am still staying in the group and continuing to work hard for the group [benevolence]. I always try my best to create the best subtitles [self-direction]. I hope everyone in the group can still be together enjoying each other's company and doing fansubs in the future [benevolence].

### **5.5. Developing emotional attachments**

By negotiating goals with each other, TLF's fansubbers have succeeded in striking a balance between the costs and benefits derived from their fansubbing activities, leading to the formation of a collective identity that strives to overcome authoritarian controls over social relations, information flows, self-

expression, and self-achievement. The group's collective identity brings to the fore a sense of belonging and togetherness. Nevertheless, the meanings that participants ascribe to their sense of "we-ness" cannot just be reduced to cost-benefit negotiation and calculation. As put by P4 (see also in the previous section 5.4), "TLF is not just a virtual group, but a group formed by real people" who, like every human being, have emotions, feelings, love and fear. This is why scholars (e.g. Melucci 1995) of collective action contend that a certain degree of emotional attachment is required in defining a group's collective identity. In order to investigate the degree of emotional attachment developed among TLF's participants, the fourth question formulated in the questionnaire reads as follows:

**Q4: How would you describe your relationship(s), if any, with other members? Do you know them through your participation in group activities or from other contexts, e.g. offline, work, school, or other settings?**

Responses show a strong sense of mutual connection shared among participants, as illustrated in their comments that emphasise "friendship", "comradeship", and even feelings of "kinship" held towards each other. Based on the participants' descriptions, engaging in TLF's subtitling activities allowed them to build friendships with people sharing similar interests, passions and values. Such experiences were highly cherished, because they were often unavailable in members' pre-existing social circles. As put by P8:

Q4-P8: Under this sky [TLF], there are numerous battles [subtitling projects] being fought [carried out by TLF's subtitlers] every day. During such processes, our friendships are strengthening day by day. I like to call my fellow members comrades-in-arms. Although some of them have left this battlefield [TLF], I still chat with them like old friends whenever we meet [online]. After all, we have fought and sweat together in the past. "Selfless dedication", "free sharing", and "unconditional love" – these are things that are hard to find in our society. Several years ago, I joined the group with my dreams. Fortunately, I met a group of people sharing the same dreams and beliefs. More fortunately, these dreams still remain the same until now, although a lot of people keep joining and leaving

the group. For me, all fellow members are my dear friends and comrades from the moment they join the group.

Apart from “friends” and “comrades”, kinship terms, such as “brothers and sisters”, were used by many participants to describe their emotional bonds. As expressed by P19:

Q4-P19: In the [Chinese] film *My Brothers and Sister*, the father tells his children that “We are snowflakes falling from the sky. As soon as we fall to the ground, melt into water and freeze together, we will never be separated”. All my brothers and sisters in TLF are just like snowflakes falling from the sky, and TLF is the place where we melt together.

The intimate connection experienced by participants regardless of their spatial and temporal distances resonates with Anderson’s (2006) ‘imagined communities’, a term designating virtual groupings whose members do not have to meet face-to-face in order to feel connected to each other. In the case of TLF, metaphors such as “battlefield”, “sky”, or “snowflakes melting together” were used by participants to describe their mental images of affinity with other members of this virtual group. Still others, such as P36, compared the group to “a stretch of fertile land fuelled with the boiling passion of each TLFer”. All these expressions illustrate well how computer-mediated communications can “[dissolve] distances by reembedding social relationships that are disembedded in space-time” (Fuchs 2005b: 15).

From the perspective of self-organisation, the emotional attachment experienced by participants can be understood as an emergent quality previously unavailable in their existing social circles. In other words, it is a quality that is not pre-given, but the result of the dynamic interactions among agents in a complex system **over time**. It then follows that this quality emanates from shared events and activities that induce and strengthen a feeling of togetherness. The more important the shared events are to those involved, the stronger the bonds they build.

Participants’ responses confirm that their emotional attachments with each other are developed over time, along with their integration processes in the group. On the basis of the participants’ responses, there appear to be three

crucial steps of integration: 1) passing the group's entry test called “新人测试” (‘newbie’s test’); 2) going through the “新人实习” (‘newbie’s probation period’); and 3) engaging in various sub-teams with different functions and roles to facilitate daily group activities.

For many participants, taking the group's ‘newbie’s test’ amounted to their “first intimate contact with TLF”. The test was an important event that distinguished them as members of TLF from outsiders. Associated with this distinction was the dramatic change of feelings before and after the test. Before the test, they felt “nervous”, “anxious” or “apprehensive”, because they worried that their performance was not good enough to let them join the group. After they passed the test, they felt “proud”, “happy”, “thrilled”, and had “a strong desire to contribute”.

In addition to the ‘newbie’s test’, the ‘newbie’s probation period’ was another initiation ritual mentioned by many participants. Based on their accounts, after they passed TLF’s entry test, they all went through the group’s ‘newbie’s probation period’. The duration of this period could range between a few weeks or several months, depending on individual participants’ performance. During their probationary period, each newbie was assigned to a more experienced member who acted like a supervisor offering suggestions, support and feedback.

According to the participants’ responses, their supervisors had played an indispensable role in their integration into the fansubbing group. A TLF member whose pseudonym was X was the supervisor that most participants referred to. Based on their comments, X was one of the group’s core members. Although X was a male, his fellow members preferred to call him “Sister X”, or “Auntie X”. This was because X was a “loving”, “caring”, “responsible” and “selfless” person in the eyes of many participants. As such, X often reminded them of the qualities of a mother figure. As commented by P33:

Q4-P33: Sister X is like a tireless computer terminal. Whenever I send an email to him, or ask him for help during my group tasks, I always get his reply immediately. Like a big sister, he glues everyone closer together and makes TLF feel like a big family.

Like X, other senior members who assumed the role of supervisor were referred to and described as a group of unpretentious, supportive and adorable people. As put by P13, “there is actually no such thing as bosses in TLF”. While going through their probationary period, participants were also influenced by the quality of selfless dedication shown by senior members towards the community’s needs. As recalled by P32:

Q4-P32: I was a part of the subtitling project that translated the movie *Toast*, i.e. my first subtitling task. After the release of the Chinese subtitles, I found that the work was shamelessly appropriated by [a commercial video site] PPTV without giving credit to our group and subtitlers involved in the project. I was quite furious and found myself unable to accept this fact. However, my supervisor X told me that “real heroes should not be remembered by their names but their deeds”. I still remember these words vividly today.

The importance that senior members attributed to altruism and its influence on new members’ attitudes towards voluntary translation were also mentioned in P33’s response, in which she recalled an anecdote that happened during her probationary period:

Q4-P33: My first task was subtitling Yale Open Course series, which just happened last year during my summer holiday. The task was so demanding and exhausting that I almost spent the whole summer translating the course content. When submitting my work to my supervisor, I complained briefly to her. She replied as follows: “I’m sorry to put you through this, but there is nothing I can repay you with other than with these two words: ‘thank you’”. These words touched me so much that they made me cry a lot. I kept asking myself: “Why should she say sorry to me? I am the person who volunteered to translate. Isn’t she also contributing and working hard without getting a single penny? To whom could she complain?”

Through the ‘newbie’s probation period’, and with the help of TLF’s core members, new members gradually develop a common understanding of what the group is about and what is expected to be a group member. As described by P25, TLF is not only a fansubbing group, but also “a place full of idealists”:

Q4-P25: During my probation period, I got the chance to know many senior members in the group, such as X, Y, and Z. “Sister X” is a busy guy, and yet he always volunteers to do any chore for the group whenever there is nobody available or willing to do it. Y is a fierce girl who is very strict on newbies. But each time you hand in good quality “homework”, she becomes a totally different person who loves sharing everything she knows, from fashion to computer games, with you. Z is a good young fellow full of passion and energy. Besides managing the fansubbing group, he is busy with fund raising for poor kids in [China’s] rural areas. They make me feel that TLF is a place full of idealists.

According to participants’ accounts, after they completed the probation period, they were allowed to join various sub-teams in TLF, based on their personal preferences. These sub-teams mainly included “recruiting”, “training camp”, and four other teams specialised in subtitling four types of audiovisual content: “TV series”, “films”, “open courses”, and “documentary”. Daily interactions in each team were carried out in their respective chatrooms set up through QQ. By interacting within and across various sub-teams in TLF, participants gained more chances to develop and enhance their relationships with each other. In doing so, they also acquired a common understanding in terms of the functionality, tradition, and feature of each sub-team. As described by P19:

Q4-19: Each sub-team has its own unique function and feature. “Recruiting” team is used for attracting newbies by publishing recruitment information on the Internet, and organising the “newbie’s test”. “Training camp” is used to help newbies become familiar with everything in the group so that they can fit in as quickly as possible. One interesting ritual in the “training camp” is that new members will be asked to send their photos as soon as they join the chatroom as a way to prove the information they provided about their gender in their personal profiles. In terms of the “nursing home” [i.e. a nickname used among TLF’s members to refer to the ‘TV series’ sub-team, because a lot of participants in this team are senior and core members], discussions are extremely active and cover a wide range of topics.

According to another participant's (P10) account, conversations held in the "nursing home" chatroom usually began in the morning and continued until midnight every day. Members in the chatroom not only talked about their translated TV shows, but were also busy "discussing their own love life or sexuality; sharing experiences of raising cats, dogs, or even babies; or complaining about pressures from school, work or family". Due to these diverse topics, P10 felt that the 'nursing home' was more like "a place to hang out and chat with people from all walks of life, such as students, company workers, and lot of geeks and pretty girls".

Taking advantage of the affordance of anonymity offered by QQ (i.e. communications are carried out between users using their pseudonyms rather than real names), participants were able to engage in interactions where they all started out as unknown contacts; they then became semi-known contacts, which finally turned into online or even offline friendships. Under anonymous or semi-anonymous conditions, participants felt safer and freer to share aspects of themselves in ways that they could not imagine sharing with people from their restrictive social circles or with their real names.

Based on my own participation experience, TLF's fansubbers spent a lot of time just "messaging around" within and across their QQ chatrooms every day. It was precisely this "messaging around" that led to more genuine forms of sociality such as friendship and community. Using their pseudonyms, and in the company of a group of unknown or semi-known people, they were much less constrained by the social norms of behaving according to *li* ('properly') and maintaining *mianzi* ('face') without emotions. Neither did they exhibit the fear of speaking up. Under anonymous online identities, they talked about issues inspired by their consumed and translated content. A significant proportion of such content could be regarded as borderline, whether because it is socially transgressive or politically sensitive. They also shared secrets, told stories, flirted, or pretended to be someone from the opposite sex. As they found that they had more in common with members from the fansubbing group than with their offline contacts, they felt less lonely and transferred their emotional affiliations and trust to the new social connections that they were building within TLF.

Such socialisation experiences serve as an emotional safety net that allows TLF's members to openly discuss and share their feelings, ideas and life stories, which, according to McMillan (1996), are the riskiest and valuable manifestations of self-disclosure within a community. Once members feel safe from shame and insecurity, they are more likely to move on to the stage of enjoying the fact of 'giving' for its own sake. This, as pointed out by McMillan (*ibid.*: 322), is "the unexpected and unpredictable culmination of telling the truth together, trusting one another, and making mutually rewarding bargains". As a result, members of a community are more willing to invest time and energy into group events that resonate with values cherished by the group.

One of such events mentioned by many participants was a project initiated by TLF to translate an American TV series drama called *24*. Based on the participants' accounts, the workflow for this project could be described as follows. After the premiere of an episode at around 9:30 pm. (Easter Standard Time) every Monday, the footage and its corresponding ripped subtitles were released by overseas 0-day warez groups. Around 10:00 am. (Beijing Time) every Tuesday, the content and the original subtitles were already gathered by TLF's subtitlers. Once the raw material was prepared, they began to divide the whole subtitling task among themselves by taking charge of different roles, e.g. timing, translation, proofreading, and publishing. The whole subtitling process for each episode usually took just a few hours, which means that the final work was often released the same day around 2:00 pm. (Beijing Time) for Chinese online viewers to enjoy. P8 recalled his experience of taking part in subtitling *24* in the following terms:

Q4-P8: *24* was one of the few TV series translated by TLF in order to show that we are not only good at producing high quality subtitles, but also at releasing subtitles in the fastest possible time. Every Tuesday afternoon, we gave up lunch and napping, and gathered in front of our computers, waiting for the raw material to be gathered and made available by our fellow members. Within just a few hours, the translated episode was ready to be released. Although the subtitling process was stressful and exhausting, the results were fruitful and fulfilling. Due to the success of translating *24*, TLF attracted a lot of loyal fans and excellent fansubbers.



Undoubtedly, this project was one of the most glorious periods in the history of TLF.

As shown by P8's account, the "fruitful and fulfilling" experiences that members gained from subtitling 24 encouraged them to make personal sacrifices (e.g. giving up lunch and napping) in spite of the "stressful and exhausting" subtitling process. The more sacrifices they made during a shared event, the more emotionally involved they are. As described by P12:

Q4-P12: All the members involved in translating 24 were my comrades in arms. One of them whom I call "Brother B" was my best partner and buddy. We cooperated together and translated two seasons of 24. During our collaboration, he never missed subtitling a single episode. I felt like he was always on the other side of the Internet when translating each episode, no matter whether I got online or not. Even today, I still remember the painful yet joyful time we spent together.

The scrutiny of the participants' answers to Q4 reveals several important factors that contribute to the formation and reinforcement of emotional connections among TLF's subtitlers. First, **boundary markers** (e.g. initiation rituals, shared lingo and memories, and people playing important roles during socialisation processes) create a safe space where participants can freely explore their interests and express themselves. This safe environment encourages them to build trusting relationships and share genuine feelings and opinions through **sustained online interactions**. As their relationships intensify, they are more willing to **invest efforts** for the joy of giving rather than getting during daily group activities. This leads to **positive participatory experiences** that become parts of the group's collective heritage.

#### 5.6. Building a researcher-participant relationship

In order to encourage TLF members to participate in the questionnaire and openly talk about their sense of collective identity, I spent over four months building rapport and creating social connections with them before conducting the questionnaire. During my first contact with the group, I introduced myself and explained my project to the group's leaders who also acted as gatekeepers granting access to the group's members-only forum and QQ chatrooms. The

entr   strategies (see section 4.3.2) that I devised to guide me on how to write my self-introduction email proved effective as I gained full access to the group and the approval to study it from the gatekeepers.

This approval, however, did not entail a sustained, community-wide acceptance of my presence. As Hine (2005: 20) aptly points out

[e]stablishing one's presence as a bona fide researcher and trustworthy recipient of confidences is not automatic, and varies depending on the cultural context under investigation. The doubts of informants, the risks to which they feel research may expose them, and their expectations of online relationships may vary widely between settings.

This means that if relationships of trust do not develop with research participants, they are likely to remain suspicious or even hostile towards the researcher, who may be treated as an inconvenience, or worse, an intruder to their normal activities. As a result, it is unlikely that they are willing to share openly about their experiences and views; or that the researcher will develop a thorough understanding of the social meanings that they attach to their activities.

Further exacerbating the doubts of my informants about their role in and utility to my research project is the fact that they are operating at the mercy of Chinese censors, who could invoke censorship or copyright laws to suppress their fansubbing activities. They could suspect me of having an ulterior motive to collect their personal information that may put them at the risk of copyright and censorship sanctions. To relieve their doubts, they were told in the consent form (see Appendix IX) attached to the questionnaire that the purpose of the questionnaire was to obtain information on their sense of collective identity, and that they were assured of the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses (see section 4.5.2).

In order to further align my research interests with those of the group and ease the concerns of the gatekeepers, I also explained to them how, by sharing answers provided by participants in the questionnaire with the rest of the members, the group as a whole may have a chance to know what being a 'TLFer' means to them. In doing so, I was granted permission by the

gatekeepers to create a threaded message titled *Share your experiences and feelings about being a TLFer* on the group's forum. Those involved in the questionnaire were invited to share their views about this topic as much or little as they wanted by replying to the threaded message. The reason for letting my informants, rather than myself, share their views was to avoid me revealing any experiences that they described openly in the questionnaire but may not feel comfortable sharing in front of group leaders or other members<sup>72</sup>. In this way, I also established myself as an independent researcher-participant, so that group members would not feel that I was merely an agent speaking for the gatekeepers and/or my informants. Since the message was created on May 2013, it has so far (July 2015) been replied to by 61 members (34 of them were those involved in the questionnaire) and read 2180 times<sup>73</sup>.

While clarifying or “selling” the research project to my participants to reduce their anxieties was one thing, how to ensure their frank and open responses in the questionnaire presented another challenge. Without establishing myself as a “bona fide” and “trustworthy” researcher (Hine 2005: 20), participants could still be unwilling to talk frankly in the questionnaire. Also, given the fact that I was not physically co-present with my participants during the entire fieldwork, I could remain invisible to them without getting myself involved in their daily online interactions.

In order to make myself visible and credible to my participants, I sought to follow certain guiding principles common to ethnographic approaches, namely: 1) the need for the ethnographers to “establish a large degree of ordinary sociability and normal social intercourse” with research participants (Walsh 1998: 253), and 2) “a commitment to try and view the object of enquiry through attempting some kind of alignment with the perspective of those who participate in the research” (Horst and Miller 2006: 167).

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<sup>72</sup> To protect my informants from potential embarrassment, they are informed in the consent form (see Appendix IX) that fake names (different from their online pseudonyms) are assigned to them when their responses are quoted directly in this thesis.

<sup>73</sup> According to the “List of Translators” displayed on TLF’s blogging site, there are currently 1008 members in TLF (see <http://sub.eastgame.org/译者名录全>) (last accessed 13 August 2015). Among them, 160 members, who have been involved in 10 or more subtitling projects initiated by the group, are listed as the most active (<http://sub.eastgame.org/译者墙>) (last accessed 13 August 2015).

To put the first principle into action, I followed the most common practice for self-presentation and communication in TLF, i.e. pseudonymity, that is, TLF members, by default, used pseudonyms to address and interact with each other across their forum, chatrooms, and other social media platforms (see section 4.4.3). I also followed the norm, where participants often felt comforted by referring to each other with a wide array of endearment terms (e.g. brother, sister, and sweetie) that have been traditionally reserved for close family members or friends, rather than online contacts.

To align myself with participants in the research community (principle 2), I described my academic background and experience in (audiovisual) translation in my personal profiles on social media platforms that I used to interact with my participants. This allowed me to convey to them that I shared similar interests and experiences in subtitling. In fact, most of my participants showed little interest in my academic identity as a PhD candidate in Translation Studies. Instead, participants and in particular, the group's leaders were most interested in getting to know me as one of their fellow members and my experience as a subtitler whose skills and experience could satisfy their needs to recruit reliable contributors to produce quality subtitles. As a result, they were particularly welcoming to me as someone who was able to help them achieve their organisational goals.

Through my regular contributions to a variety of tasks (e.g. timing, translating, and proofreading) involved in the group's subtitling projects, my presence in the group was normalised. In doing so, I also developed closer relationships with group members (see section 4.4.3 for details of how I engaged in the group's daily interactions). Despite the efforts I put towards building rapport with my participants, it was they themselves who ultimately formed their impressions on me – not just me as a researcher, or a participant, or a netnographer – but me as a person. Knowing that digital and social media technologies provided them with an opportunity to access and learn more about various aspects of my digital self that I presented on my social media sites (e.g. Sina Weibo and QQ blog), I wrestled with whether to manage my privacy settings on these sites to determine which aspects of my identity I would reveal to my participants. In the end, I chose to open up my online profiles in such a way that my digital data (e.g. my blogs, photos, comments and messages) that

was available to my friends and family was also accessible to my participants, in order to reflect the openness that I expected from them.

During my fieldwork, TLF members frequently visited my social media sites and left comments on my newly added pictures or blog posts. I also “liked” or commented on their status updates. Such interactions allowed us to keep up-to-date with each other’s latest news (e.g. academic anxieties, newly found jobs, budding love relationships, travels, etc.), granting us more opportunities for social exchange and mutual investigations. By the time I conducted the questionnaire, I had amassed quite a number of QQ friends and Sina Weibo followers from the fansubbing group. These connections became useful, not only as a way to ensure a high participation rate and sincere responses in the questionnaire, but also as a way to form a genuine bond with the group in the context of virtual settings.

### **5.7. Conclusion**

Findings derived from the questionnaire data suggest that the fansubbing group TLF easily fits Tönnies’s (1998: 69) definition of community, i.e. a group based on “the consciousness of belonging together and the affirmation of the condition of mutual dependence”. A great majority of participants are attracted to the fansubbing group because it offers them a sense of togetherness, a feeling that they are part of a larger community dedicated to a set of common goals: supporting each other; expanding access to the group’s work among wider audience; and promoting freedom for self-expression and personal fulfilment.

For most participants, their fansubbing activities begin out of a basic desire for identity exploration through consuming foreign media products and human connection. Initially, this desire is fulfilled by two activities facilitated by digital communication technologies: accessing foreign content via P2P networks and sharing interests with unfamiliar, yet like-minded, people across various social media platforms. Encountering sites where information is accessible and shareable through informal modes of interaction leads them to recalibrate their expectations of open information, which ultimately motivates them to join the fansubbing group TLF.

Even in the absence of monetary rewards, participants experience a great sense of satisfaction from their fansubbing activities in TLF, knowing that they can 1) immediately access their favourite foreign content, 2) express themselves through their translated texts, 3) enjoy fun and intellectual stimulation, and 4) boost their visibility and reputation within the fansubbing scene in China. These are rewards previously unavailable and therefore extremely precious to individual participants. While fulfilling their personal needs, they also start to form meaningful connections with fellow members through sustained collaboration and interaction. As their relationships intensify, a shared identity emerges that unites them as a community. When they perceive themselves as a community, they are willing to act in the group's best interests as a way to express their commitment to their community.

While none of them see their acts of volunteer translation as inherently political, these acts themselves are empowering, because participants gain a greater sense of agency from translating foreign content that is not available in their pre-existing social circles by collaborating with a large number of socially and geographically disparate individuals. Through such activities, they become active information searchers/producers/mediators/distributors instead of passive information consumers. This shift leads them to form a new set of moral principles that prioritises values such as universalism and self-direction. These values not only reflect their expectations for equal opportunities in terms of information accessibility and self-expression, but also their sense of self.

Unlike an old and lonely self that is afraid of openly expressing interests and ideas that may counter dominant social norms, TLF's fansubbers are reconfiguring more open and freer selves through their participatory subtitling activities. As pointed out by Duncombe (1997: 12), the central idea of participatory culture lies in its "emphasis on the practice of doing it yourself". By engaging in self-initiated subtitling activities, TLF's participants are redefining who they are, who they want to affiliate with, and how they want to achieve their shared goals. In doing so, they are transforming from passive consumers to active citizens, who are more likely to reach out to strangers with similar interests and backgrounds on the Internet, and build communities to collaborate on making their private interests or concerns public.

## Chapter 6 Collective identity management in TLF

### 6.1. Introduction

Following the analysis of TLF's subtitlers' sense of shared identity, as articulated in their responses to a questionnaire, this chapter presents and discusses the archival data collected during my observation as a participant in TLF fansubbing group – with the aim to investigate the governance mechanisms developed by the group to maintain and strengthen its collective identity. Here, the term “governance” is understood from the perspective of individual participants within the fansubbing group, as opposed to those external to the group (e.g. government authorities and media institutions). For its part, the term “governance mechanisms” refers to the structural properties or conditions of the group as a self-organising system, i.e. “the means of achieving direction, control, and coordination of wholly or partially autonomous individuals or organisational unities on behalf of interests to which they jointly contribute” (Lynn *et al.* 2001: 6).

To coordinate actions and achieve common goals, TLF's subtitlers may, in theory, organise themselves to devise and enforce mechanisms to maintain and manage their collective identity. Theoretically, the group may govern itself in a distributed or decentralised manner: individual participants should all contribute to the emerging governance structure of their organisation, and no one should be in absolute control. In order to find out whether TLF actually operates in this manner, archival data stored on its online platform were collected. These data mainly revolve around: membership criteria devised by TLF to attract and filter potential participants (**section 6.2**); rules to manage resources shared within the group (**section 6.3**); rules regulating processes through which new members come to understand and participate together in group activities (**section 6.4**); and the types of Web applications deployed by the group to build its platform and rules governing the members' use of these applications during their daily interactions (**section 6.5**).

## 6.2. Membership criteria

For a self-organising group, the need to coordinate individual actions to develop optimal synergies requires certain rules regarding what behaviour and actions are obligatory, acceptable or forbidden. In particular, if the group can set up certain boundaries, such as who is in and who is out, and who group members should collaborate with, TLF will have succeeded in taking the first step towards cooperation.

From the perspective of systems theory, boundary conditions are essential for a system's long-term survival, because the system is only what it is by virtue of its differentiation from the environment. In other words, the fansubbing group TLF is only what it is through its contrasting relation to those outside the group. To find out whether and how TLF has created certain boundaries to maintain its collective identity, a set of digital documents stored on the TLF's platform were collected. Specifically, these documents were related to the "entry requirement", "joining processes", and "benefits" (see Appendix II) described on the recruitment page on the group's blogging site; and 'membership categories' and 'guidelines to progress' (see Appendix III) posted on the group's members-only forum. All these data are translated and summarised in Table 6.1.



Boundary rules	Descriptions	Data source
<b>Entry requirements</b>	<p>Potential participants must (listed as the original order in the Chinese text):</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Be fans or enthusiasts of foreign media products, and interested in translating media products</li> <li>2) Have at least some basic knowledge in foreign languages</li> <li>3) Have enough time to engage in the group's activities</li> <li>4) Have necessary tools to get online</li> <li>5) Be able to balance their online and offline lives</li> </ol>	
<b>Joining processes</b>	<p>Potential participants are required to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Make contact with the group's gatekeeper, and describe one's personal information regarding the group's five entry requirements</li> <li>2) Receive the reply email from the gatekeeper, and take the entry test by creating Chinese subtitles for a set of video clips (these clips are attached in the email together with the original subtitles, subtitling software, and instruction on how to use the software)</li> <li>3) Pass the entry test, and obtain a digital invitation code and register on the online forum by filling the group's registration form</li> </ol>	<p>"Recruitment Q&amp;A" page on TLF's blog (see Appendix II)</p>
<b>Members benefits</b>	<p>By joining TLF, members can (listed as the original order in the Chinese text):</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Communicate with others by sharing similar interests</li> <li>2) Acquire a great sense of achievement after each subtitling task</li> <li>3) Enjoy the fun of creating subtitles, and express oneself</li> <li>4) Access media resources stored on TLF's online forum</li> <li>5) <b>TLF is a non-for-profit fansubbing group, and does not offer any material reward</b> [bold in the original text].</li> </ol>	<p>"Recruitment Q&amp;A" page on TLF's blog (see Appendix II)</p>

<b>Membership categories</b>	Membership categories within the group is classified hierarchically based on merit and effort (in ascending order):	
	1) “Newbie”	“Basic rules of conduct for TLF members” posted on the group’s forum (see Appendix III)
	2) “Active Member”	
	3) “Intermediate Member”	
	4) “Advanced Member”	
	5) “Forum Moderators”	
	6) “Forum Administrators”	

*Table 6.1 Boundary rules in TLF fansubbing group*

Data analysis suggests that TLF’s boundaries are characterised by a multi-layered model that resembles the shape of an onion. Accordingly, members are organised in layers and progress from the periphery to the core of the community. To begin with, the five ‘entry requirements’ (see Table 6.1) listed on TLF’s recruitment page allow the group to attract prospective participants while still preserving aspects that bring them together: being **fans** of foreign media products; having a certain amount of **knowledge** of foreign languages; having the **time** and **tools** required for fansubbing; and possessing the ability to **balance online/offline life**. These requirements also allow potential participants to assess whether they fit the criteria to join the group.

Upon deciding to join the group, prospective participants need to go through a series of ‘joining processes’ (see Table 6.1). According to my participant-observations, the first step is for prospective participants to write an application email to the group, highlighting whether they meet the five entry requirements listed by the group on its blogging site. Upon receiving the email, the group’s gatekeepers will instruct the applicants of the next step (i.e. taking the group’s entry test) by emailing them a zipped file named ‘TLF 翻译测试’ (TLF Translation Test). The file consists of six video clips (with each lasting for around 10 minutes) excerpted from English-speaking films; the corresponding English subtitles (saved as six .srt files) ripped from the original films; the group’s subtitling software application namely SrtEdit (saved as an .exe file); and a PowerPoint file illustrating how to install the application and use it to create and sync subtitles with the original video. The applicants are given seven days to create Chinese subtitles for the video clips and send the subtitles (saved as six .srt files) back to the group’s gatekeepers, who will then evaluate the quality of the subtitles and decide whether to grant the applicants permission to join the group.

In my case, the video clips I was asked to translate were excerpted from films belonging to different genres, including *Source Code* (sci-fi); *Corpse Bride*, *Mary and Max*, *WALL-E* (animation); *Home* (documentary); and *Battle Los Angeles* (action). To finish the whole translation task within seven days was quite demanding even for someone like me, who had already had some experience in using digital subtitling programmes (e.g. Swift and Starfish Isis) to create and edit subtitles. For one thing, I had to spend hours getting familiar with the group's subtitling software, whose interface and keyboard shortcuts for writing, editing, positioning and time-coding subtitles were different than those of the programmes that I was accustomed to. Besides, I had to come up with different subtitling strategies that were appropriate to the genres of the films being translated and their target viewers, in order to create Chinese subtitles that reflect the linguistic features of the original film (e.g. its style of discourse, density of dialogue and pace), and meet the reading speed of Chinese audience. Moreover, I had to find appropriate solutions to deal with the technical and textual constraints when subtitling various kinds of information (e.g. written verbal elements, subtitles, background song lyrics, and information on the soundtrack) presented simultaneously on the screen.

To a great extent, my experience of taking the entry test designed by TLF can explain why, as group leaders mentioned in the questionnaire (section 5.3.4), there were many people who disappeared after their first contact with the group, i.e. they gave up during the test as they realised that they actually did not possess the basic technical and linguistic skills required to join the group. From this perspective, the entry test also serves as an important filtering mechanism for the gatekeepers to recruit reliable participants.

After the entry test, an invitation code is issued as a confirmation for those who pass the test. Using the invitation code, they can register to access the group's online forum. Upon joining the forum, the first thing they need to do is to introduce themselves to existing members on the forum by filling a registration form (see Table 6.2 for an example). As shown in Table 6.2, the registration form elicits information on 10 items (on the left) and the corresponding information provided by a new member on those aspects (on the right). Such items address the members' foreign language proficiency, experience in translation, education or occupation, favourite genres of media products, etc.

According to the information provided by newcomers about their foreign language skills and qualifications, a large majority of them hold either CET-4 or CET-6 certificates<sup>74</sup>. There are also quite a few members who are studying towards a university degree in English and hold TEM-4 or TEM 8 certificates<sup>75</sup>. Among them, some claim to have acquired qualifications for languages other than English (e.g. Japanese, French and German)<sup>76</sup>.

ID: Anonymised Posted at 16:10, 27-07-2013	
1) Certificate(s) of Foreign language proficiency test(s)	CET-6 & TEM-4
2) Experience in translation	I have some experience in translating thesis abstracts and subtitles.
3) Education/occupation	Undergraduate, specialising in English.
4) Usual time online	8.00 to 18.00, Monday to Saturday during August.
5) Contact information	[The member's email address and other contact information are redacted to preserve anonymity.]
6) Average free time each month	Available throughout the whole August.
7) Favourite genres of media products	Inspirational stories, urban stories, comedy, disaster, and action.
8) Advice & suggestion to TLF	Please provide more learning materials on how to improve one's subtitling techniques.
9) Does your ID have any special meaning?	My ID is inspired by the [Japanese] film <i>Paradise Kiss</i> .
10) How did you learn about TLF?	Searching subtitles on the Internet.
11) Anything you would like to mention?	The time I have available to do fansubs might be slightly adjusted after my summer holiday.

*Table 6.2 Registration information of a newly joined member in TLF fansubbing group*

<sup>74</sup> CET, i.e. College English Test, is an English test for university students in China, who are doing courses other than English. The test consists of two levels: Band Four (CET-4) and Band Six (CET-6).

<sup>75</sup> TEM, i.e. Test for English Majors, is a mandatory test for English majors in China. It contains two levels: TEM-4 (Band Four), and TEM-8 (Band Eight), which is the highest level.

<sup>76</sup> During their four-year undergraduate education, English majors in China can choose to study a foreign language other than English and take proficiency tests in their chosen languages.

Since an individual's registration form is visible to the whole group, many newcomers are more than happy to provide very detailed information about their qualification(s) of foreign language(s) as a way to show off before the rest of the group. This practice is consistent with the 'elitist' ideology expressed among participants in the questionnaire regarding their status as TLF's fansubbers (section 5.3.2).

Apart from registering themselves on TLF's forum, new members are invited to the group's QQ chatroom called '新人群' ('newbie's group'). For first time newcomers to the chatroom, they need to go through a two-step process of identity verification: 1) introducing themselves by telling their pseudonyms to existing members in the chatroom; and 2) uploading pictures of themselves as a way to confirm personal details (e.g. age and gender) described in their QQ profile pages (see Figure 6.1 for the page layout).

*Figure 6.1 QQ personal profile page*

In my case, the first thing I did when entering the chatroom was to introduce myself by explaining my reason to join the group and revealing my real name, in order to let group members know my identity as a researcher-participant. Unexpectedly, most of the replies I received read as follows:

- Replay 1: [Is Dang Li] your real name!?
- Replay 2: A-drop-of-sweat-on-a-face emoticon [to show embarrassment at my revealing my real name].

- Replay 3: So, there are indeed some cute newbies who introduce themselves by telling us their real names. Smiley face emoticon.
- Replay 4: Let us know your pseudonym, please!

This was when I realised that the norms of using pseudonyms to address each other and maintaining a state of anonymity were so strong among TLF members that even when they met someone like me, they still preferred to treat me as one of their fellow members and not to ask me for my real name.

Another thing that struck me as interesting was that no one in the chatroom showed interest in my research project. Instead, they could not wait to find out my gender and what I look like by urging me to upload a picture of myself. The first picture I showed to them was declined, as they pointed out that in the picture, I was wearing a pair of sunglasses which blocked half of my face. So I had to upload another picture to ensure that this time there was nothing concealing my face.

After passing the picture test, I was warmly addressed by members using my pseudonym, or terms such as ‘dear sis’, and ‘MM’ (an Internet slang pronounced as ‘*mei mei*’ in Chinese, which usually refers to ‘little sister’). Besides, members showed great interest in identifying if there were any commonalities shared between me and them. Some of them asked which foreign language I spoke or what genres of foreign films and TV programmes were my favourite; others looked for overlaps of personal information described in our QQ profiles, such as birthday, zodiac sign, horoscope, blood type, and geographical location (see Figure 6.1). There were still others who seemed to be more interested in helping me get familiar with who was who (e.g. leaders, senior members, forum moderators and administrators) in the chatroom. Such interactions were visible to everyone in the chatroom, making it easy for anyone interested in the topics being discussed to initiate further conversations. In this way, both newcomers, such as me, and existing members were able to quickly bond and form close relationships.

The Chinese subtitles created by participants to get them through the TLF’s entry test, the registration information posted by newcomers on the group’s forum, as well as the various aspects of their identities shared within the chatroom ‘newbie’s group’ communicate a whole host of social cues of a

person's credibility, digital/foreign language skills, personalities, attitudes, interests, and more. By making a great effort to verify and assess the legitimacy and trustworthiness of prospective participants under anonymous conditions, the fansubbing group ensures that the individuals being recruited are the most trustworthy ones.

Newcomers also gain a sense of security and emotional attachment by fulfilling the group's rituals of trustworthiness and presenting themselves as reliable individuals to existing members. This is reflected by the dramatic change of feelings from "anxious and nervous" to "proud and thrilled" experienced by participants before and after joining the group (section 5.5). Such emotions and experiences help to form an invisible web of trust that holds a loose network of individuals together, turning them from unknown into semi-known contacts. In this way, they can better coordinate their actions during the processes of translation by identifying with whom they want to collaborate, which genres of media texts they prefer to work with, and when they are available to translate, based on their shared commonalities and interests.

### **6.3. Rules to manage group resources**

Despite TLF's highly selective recruitment processes and the awareness among new members that the group "does not offer any material reward" to its subtitlers (see Table 6.1), TLF still manages to attract a lot of individuals. As revealed in section 5.3, individuals participate in order to fulfil their various personal needs. Among these, gaining immediate access to audiovisual resources (some of the content is already translated by existing members) stored on the group's forum is the biggest attraction for new members to join TLF.

According to section 3.3.2, the audiovisual resources (including translated subtitles contributed by members) shared within a fansubbing group resemble 'Common-Pool-Resources' (CPR) (Ostrom *et al.* 1999) in terms of two features: 'subtractability' – the resources provide diminished benefits to everyone in the group if they only consume without updating or translating the resources; and 'difficulty of exclusion' – it is difficult and costly to keep non-contributors from accessing the resources once they are uploaded on the

Internet. Further threatening the availability of the group's media resources is the fact that they are subject to copyright regulations as well as the Internet censorship laws imposed by Chinese media regulators, who may crackdown on any unauthorised practices involving the production and sharing of content deemed objectionable by the authorities. This presents a potential problem of 'free-riding' (Hardin 1968), where individuals members only consume the resources for short-term individual gains without taking the risk of contributing their private resources for the long-term thriving of the group.

To overcome this problem, the group needs to come up with solutions on how to sustain and mobilise members' long-term contributions. In the case of TLF fansubbing group, possible solutions mainly include: 1) specifying benefits that are exclusive to its members but not to outsiders; 2) devising ways to promote the work of members, while protecting such work from potential appropriation for profit-making purposes; and 3) defining members' rights associated with consuming the group's resources.

#### 6.3.1. Specifying members' benefits

Regarding the benefits that are exclusive to TLF's members, the group makes it clear on its recruitment page that "it is a non-for-profit subtitling group and does not offer any material reward to its subtitlers". But those who apply to join the group can still enjoy the following four benefits: 1) meeting and communicating with like-minded individuals; 2) acquiring a great sense of achievement; 3) enjoying the fun of creation and self-expression through subtitling; and 4) accessing media content stored on TLF's servers (see Table 6.1).

Judging from the information that TLF provides on new members' benefits, the group has managed to cover both long-term (i.e. fun of creation, affiliation with like-minded people) and short-term (i.e. access to the group's repertoire of media content, sense of accomplishment) rewards that newcomers might be looking for. Since these benefits are described by members themselves based on their experiences as participants in the group, they are likely to present those benefits very effectively, and hence increase the chance to attract new members. The data presented in section 5.3 also confirm that rewards, such as freedom of



self-expression and self-fulfilment, intellectual stimulation, and fun, are mentioned by many respondents in the questionnaire as their “exclusive rights” gained from creating fansubs for TLF. Thus, the membership benefits described in TLF’s website are indicative of a ‘self-reflexive agency’ (Giddens 1991) that is capable of striking the balance between achieving collective goals and creating opportunities for self-development.

One of the benefits guaranteed by TLF to its members is the access to media files stored on its password-protected forum, set up through FTP servers donated and maintained by existing members. For those individuals looking for their favourite media content, the password to the group’s online forum is like the key to a treasure chest. By restricting the sharing of video content within its members-only forum, TLF also sets up a boundary, separating what is given away (subtitles in .srt format) and what is retained (original video content). In this way, the group has managed to shield itself from potential disputes over unauthorised video distribution.

Viewers outside the group who want to get their hands on the video content can do so through other P2P networks (e.g. *The Pirate Bay*). The downloading speeds of such networks are often much slower, either because of the high number of visitors on these P2P sites, or the firewall settings for servers that these sites use. Another reason for the slow downloading speeds afforded by these networks is that the video files hosted on these sites are much larger compared to those stored on TLF’s forum – which have often been compressed to smaller sizes by TLF’s compression team without sacrificing the quality of the image to facilitate file-sharing among group members.

### 6.3.2. Promoting and protecting collective work

The subtitles created by TLF’s members are simultaneously released within and outside the group. To protect the released subtitles from appropriation or modification without crediting TLF’s subtitlers, the group has stipulated a “copyright regulation”, which is displayed in a section called “Declaration” (see Appendix III) on its blogging site:

This website is only used to distribute subtitles for sharing and communication. We welcome any individual or organisation to use

our subtitles, as long as they respect the principle of free-sharing and give credit to our group and translators. While using our subtitles, please do not delete the crediting information we insert in the subtitles.

Our translators reserve the right to modify their translated subtitles. While modifying our subtitles, please credit our translators for their hard work. **We consider it a disgraceful act to delete the credits of our translators while using their work** [highlighted in red in the original Chinese version].

What is interesting about TLF's "copyright regulation" is that its purpose is to keep the group's released subtitles freely and publicly available. This stands in sharp contrast to traditional copyright laws that mainly serve as a means to privatise media content. While allowing redistribution and modification of the subtitles released by TLF, the group also emphasises the importance of crediting the "legitimate" authors, who, in this case, are TLF's subtitlers. Even though TLF's "copyright regulation" is not legally binding and cannot prevent the modification and appropriation of subtitles without the group's approval, it is meant to ensure that anyone who violates the regulation feels guilty for having acted against the free-sharing spirit and undermined the hard work of TLF's subtitlers. In this sense, the "copyright regulation" can still exert some moral influence by normalising acceptable content-sharing behaviour both within and outside the group.

In emphasising the importance of sharing without necessarily receiving anything in return, except for crediting the authorships of translated subtitles, the regulation communicates a clear message to the public: TLF is a fansubbing group that cherishes the values of information openness, individuality and creativity. By publishing the regulation on its publicly accessible blogging site, TLF is likely to gain more attention for and recognition of the validity of these values among its audience members, as noted in the participants' responses to the questionnaire about the goals they pursue through fansubbing (section 5.4).

The way in which TLF regulates the usage of its collective work (i.e. the released subtitles) resembles a type of "consumer entrepreneurialism" (Banks and Potts 2010: 258), where media consumers become more like

entrepreneurial deal-makers, negotiating the terms for the exchange of their co-created content and seeking ever-wider ownership claims to it. Despite its not-for-profit agenda, TLF is still helping to spread commercial media products that the industries want to promote. In other words, there exists a symbiotic relationship between peer-based and market-based models of content production and distribution, where the former is not completely immune to, and is thus likely to be influenced by, the commercial logic of the latter. This symbiotic relationship is evident in TLF and is manifested in its strategies to promote and safeguard its “brand image”, which, in many ways, mirror commercial practices.

One strategy devised by TLF is to promote the work of individual fansubbers via a crediting page called “List of Translators” (see Figure 6.2) on its blogging site. On this webpage, the pseudonyms of TLF’s fansubbers together with the number of their translated work are displayed in eye-catching colours and in a descending order based on the amount of work done by each fansubber. By acknowledging contributions on an individual basis, TLF has managed to preserve members’ independence and autonomy. For individual members, they can also enhance their reputations by having their pseudonyms and work recognised both within and outside the group.



Figure 6.2 List of translators

Another strategy developed by TLF to enhance its “brand image” is to create a set of “trademarks”, including a logo and a slogan, to ensure that its group name, collective work, and core values are clearly recognised by online viewers. As shown in Figure 6.3, the homepage of the group’s blogging site consists of four parts: banner, navigation menu, content area, and web syndication which allows users to subscribe the update of subtitles translated and released by TLF. On the left of the banner is the name of the group’s site: TLF 中文字幕站” (‘TLF Chinese Subtitles Station), under which is the slogan that advocates the group’s core values: “分享创作之乐，共享字母之美” (‘SHARE THE FUN OF CREATION AND ENJOY THE BEAUTY OF SUBTITLES’). On the right of the banner is the name of the fansubbing group, “TLF 字幕组” (‘TLF Subtitling Group’) together with its logo.



Figure 6.3 Homepage of TLF's blogging site

Under the banner is a horizontal navigation menu consisting of a set of tabs that link to (from left to right):

- 1) The group's password-protected online forum
- 2) Released subtitles for Yale Open Courses series/Films & TV series/Documentaries
- 3) Declaration
- 4) Recruitment
- 5) List of Translators
- 6) A search box

Under the menu bar is a sentence written in green that re-emphasises the importance of crediting the authorship of TLF's released subtitles during the processes of redistribution and modification:

We welcome everyone to give us feedback about our released subtitles, point out our mistakes, and help us improve. Please do not delete our translators' credits during redistribution and modification.

The content area of the webpage is used to publish subtitles released by the group (ordered from the latest to the earliest). The group's logo, which functions as a "trademark" to indicate the source of the "products", is displayed again on top of the content area. Within this area, each released subtitle file is published as a message post. As shown in Figure 6.3, the original and Chinese names of the film *Freier Fall* are displayed as the heading of the message, under which is the time when the message was posted and the pseudonym of the person who posted the message. The content of the message consists of two parts: the film's poster, genre and original language (on the left); and information regarding the subtitles created for the film (on the right):

- 1) Translator's pseudonym
- 2) Proofreader's pseudonym
- 3) The corresponding video file published within the group's forum
- 4) The link to download the released subtitles

What is noticeable is that the group's name "TLF" is part of the file extensions of both video and subtitle files, signalling the source of the work. While the video file is only available for group members to download, the subtitle file can be downloaded by anyone by just clicking the link. Within each downloaded subtitle file, there are usually seven documents (see Figure 6.4):

- 1) Simplified Chinese subtitle in .srt format
- 2) Traditional Chinese subtitle in .srt format
- 3) Original subtitle in .srt format
- 4) Bilingual subtitle (in original language and simplified Chinese) in .srt format

- 5) TLF's recruiting ads in Microsoft Word format (with the same content displayed in the "Recruitment" page)
- 6) TLF's "copyright regulation" in .txt format (with the same content displayed in the "Declaration" page)
- 7) A summary of the released work in .txt format (see Figure 6.5)



*Figure 6.4 Documents included in the subtitle file for the film Freier Fall*



*Figure 6.5 Summary of a released work*

As shown in Figure 6.5, the group's name "TLF" is mentioned once again in both English and Chinese at the top of the document to signal the source of the released subtitles. At the bottom of the document is a sentence written in Chinese that re-emphasises again the group's strong position against the commercialisation of its released subtitles:



The subtitles are only used for sharing and communication. Any commercial and piracy uses are strongly prohibited. Violators are subject to penalties.

On the right side of TLF's blogging site (see Figure 6.3), a set of web feeds, such as Google, Yahoo and Bloglines are provided for users to keep track of the group's updates on newly released subtitles. Those who are registered users of Sina Weibo can also follow TLF's latest information announced on its micro-blog on Sina Weibo. The group's logo is used as the profile picture of its Weibo account, allowing its name and symbol to be universally recognised by Sina Weibo users.

Overall, the ways in which TLF protects and promotes its "brand image" resemble what marketing researchers would call "co-branding" (Grossman 1997), i.e. creating a parent product (i.e. the released subtitles of the fansubbing group) using multiple brand names (the reputations of individual fansubbers within the group). Accordingly, the logo of the parent product and multiple brand names are displayed together on the same website, so that consumers can see that the whole production process is a joint enterprise. Nevertheless, the group's purpose of "marketing" its final "products" is not to make profit but to promote reputations of individual fansubbers and expand their exposure to wider audiences, while disseminating the group's ethos of free-sharing and communication among media consumers. More importantly, by creating consistent source identifiers (i.e. group logo, name, and slogan) to ensure that the final "products" remain intact during processes of redistribution, the group is likely to better preserve and boost its collective reputation among users across popular social media platforms.

### 6.3.3. Defining membership categories

The boundaries set up by TLF to filter participants and guard members' work indicate the existence of a dynamic interrelationship between social actors and the market economy. Embedded in a collectivist society driven by an open market capitalist system, TLF's members contribute voluntarily to the creation of fansubs out of various motivations, such as access to their objects of fandom, recognition from target audiences, and the fun they derive from this creative endeavour. Such motivations cannot be monetised directly, and hence almost



operate in an invisible market, or as Banks and Potts' (2010) term, a "shadow market". According to these scholars (*ibid.*), this invisible side of market, as illustrated by the ways in which TLF's subtitlers enhance their individual reputations as well as their group's "brand image", is not to be confused with a purely non-market behaviour. Instead, it is an emerging consumer agency resulting from the dynamic and complex interaction between "economic and cultural factors" (*ibid.*: 206):

[e]ach affects the other such that consumer co-creation emerges in respect of the practices, identities, social norms, business models and institutions of both market-based extrinsically motivated exchange relations, and culturally shaped intrinsically motivated production relations.

This dynamic co-evolutionary relationship becomes more evident in the ways TLF defines membership categories associated with consuming audiovisual content stored on its FTP servers. To a large degree, TLF's collection of media content is a scarce resource that is hard to obtain from the strictly state-controlled media market surrounding the group. Moreover, the availability of the content depends on global media industries that produce the content in the first place, and overseas file-sharing networks that make the content accessible on the Internet in the second place. The content is then enclosed by TLF, becoming a highly-valued resource around which all the subtitling and interactive activities revolve in the group. Since TLF only has a very limited number of FTP serves to store its collection of media content, this already scarce resource becomes even more strained and vulnerable to overuse if everyone wanted to consume, and nobody showed willingness to renew and translate media content.

Ensuring the sustainability of the group's media resources requires either privatisation or externally imposed rules to regulate the use of the group's resources, both of which are problematic because: a) the group's ethos of free-sharing prevents itself from privatising its collective resources; and b) the group is formed by socially and geographically disparate individuals who support the idea and practice of free association, which makes it difficult to regulate members' behaviour when they consume the group's media resources.

These problems suggest that without hierarchical control within the group itself, it is difficult to ensure the long-term usage of its resources.

An investigation of TLF's power dynamics reveals that its members are structured hierarchically into various levels (see Table 6.3). According to the group's "Membership Categories" posted on its forum, there are six categories of membership in TLF. Depending on their membership levels (ranging from new/active/intermediate/advanced members, to forum moderator and administrator), members are allocated a certain amount of bandwidth with which to connect to the group's FTP servers. Besides, members within each category are granted specific reading privileges when accessing messages posted on the group's forum.

<b>Membership status</b>	<b>Entitled rights</b>
Newbie	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- FTP downloading speed: 50kb/s, single-threaded<sup>77</sup></li> <li>- Can read and reply messages in two forum sections: 1) TLF Forum Affairs, and 2) TLF Media Zone</li> </ul>
Active member	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- FTP downloading speed: 100kb/s, single threaded</li> <li>- Can read and reply messages in three forum sections: 1) TLF Forum Affairs, 2) TLF Media Zone, and 3) TLF Subtitle Zone</li> </ul>
Intermediate Member	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- FTP downloading speed: 100kb/s, multi-threaded<sup>78</sup></li> <li>- Can read and reply messages in three forum sections: 1) TLF Forum Affairs, 2) TLF Media Zone, and 3) TLF Subtitle Zone</li> </ul>
Advanced Member	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- FTP downloading speed: 200 kb/s, multi-threaded</li> <li>- Can read and reply messages in four forum sections: 1) TLF Forum Affairs, 2) TLF Media Zone, 3) TLF Subtitle Zone, and 4) TLF Application for Moderators and Administrators</li> </ul>

<sup>77</sup> Under a single-threaded file transfer mode, users can only send or receive a single file at a time.

<sup>78</sup> Multi-threaded file transfers can both send and receive multiple files at the same time.

Forum moderator & administrator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Unlimited FTP downloading speed</li> <li>- Can access all the five forum sections: 1) TLF Forum Affairs, 2) TLF Media Zone, 3) TLF Subtitle Zone, 4) TLF Application for Moderators and Administrators, and 5) TLF Management Section</li> </ul>
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*Table 6.3 Membership status and rights in TLF fansubbing group*

This hierarchical structure is reinforced by a merit-based virtual monetary mechanism, through which the rights granted to individual members are proportional to their inputs. By contributing to the group's subtitling projects or posting informative and constructive messages on the group's forum, members can accumulate a set of merit badges – Management Position (only for members whose membership status is above 'Advance Member'), Number of Posted Messages, Prestige, Gold Coins, and Contribution Value – all of which are used to represent the amount of contributions and membership status of individual members. These merit badges are visible to everyone in the group. Figure 6.6 is a screenshot of a message posted on the group's forum which aims to teach members how to identify each other's status. As shown in Figure 6.6, merit badges are displayed under one's avatar. Among these digital badges, "prestige" is described as "an important attribute that distinguishes Active Members from Newbies". In order to become Active Members, newbies need to accumulate 50 points of "prestige", mainly by participating in forum discussions and posting messages (each message equals one point of "prestige") in designated sections on the forum. Newbies without enough "prestige" points are considered inexperienced to undertake the group's subtitling projects by themselves; they have to be guided and supervised by more experienced members during the subtitling process.



Figure 6.6 Attributes of membership status in TLF fansubbing group

Active Members can upgrade their status either by posting messages to accumulate “prestige”, or engage in group tasks. These involve either providing the source content to be subtitled or translating existing content that other members have contributed to accumulate “contribution value” – through which they can progress to higher membership levels (e.g. Intermediate Members, Advanced Members, etc.). An individual’s “contribution value” is described in Figure 6.6 as “a golden attribute” of membership status, as it can be exchanged for “gold coins”, i.e. the group’s virtual currency that allows members to “buy” extra amounts of bandwidth when they download/upload video files through the group’s servers.

Advanced Members can become involved in group management tasks by accessing a section called “TLF Management” on the group’s forum, where discussions are centred on management issues. Advanced Members can offer their suggestions and advice on these issues by posting or replying to messages. In this way, they can increase their “prestige”. Based on their performance during discussions and accumulated “prestige” points, Advanced Members can apply for the management position of Moderator or Administrator to supervise activities on the entire forum and make group-wide decisions.

By implementing bandwidth throttling on its FTP servers to limit individual members’ upload and download rates, TLF has effectively avoided the overloading of its file-sharing network. Bandwidth throttling thus compels members to progress from lower levels to higher levels of membership where bandwidth amounts are less restricted or even unlimited. This layered control system for file-sharing is combined with a merit-based virtual monetary

mechanism, thus allowing the group to reward individual contributions with commensurate status, responsibilities, and rights to engage in an array of group activities. In this way, members can be motivated to progress gradually from peripheral participants to core decision-makers, with their perceptions of authority (i.e. the legitimacy of one's influence) evolving over time from the one that focuses on specific task-related skills and competence to the one that emphasises community-building contributions.

This change of perceptions of what constitutes a legitimate member is reflected in participants' responses to the questionnaire (section 5.3) regarding the motivations that drive their voluntary acts of translation. Amongst these motivations, accessing the group's repertoire of media content, building reputations, enhancing expertise and expressing oneself by translating one's chosen audiovisual content are mentioned by almost all participants as the reasons for their voluntary contributions. Besides, participants who are core members and hold group management duties have developed a sense of self-efficacy – understood as a perception that they are more capable and flexible to perform tasks that few could accomplish, and hence have more influence on the overall development of the group – through their sustained contributions. The reputation and sense of self-efficacy that come with their (past and present) performance motivate them to act in ways that benefit the entire group, not just themselves.

While on the surface it may seem that the group's hierarchical membership categories and meritocratic leadership style are two clashing organisational models, it is precisely this mixed governance model that ensures the group's longevity. This indicates that hierarchical rules are necessary for a self-governed organisation to sustain the interest and commitment of autonomous (selfish) agents, so as to avoid the potential problem of free-riding and achieve a more sustainable management of collective resources. Furthermore, a hierarchical organisational structure combined with a merit-based system of promotion and leadership can be more enabling than coercive. Indeed, it can prove more effective by ensuring a more democratic process of group interaction among various types of members, and hence motivate their sustainable investment in group activities.

The two seemingly contradictory governance models developed by TLF are actually an expression of what Fuchs (2003b: 158) describes as the antagonism between the Internet “as a Global Alliance Net of Cooperation and a Global Meganet of Domination” due to the unequal distribution of power and resources during processes of social self-organisation. In the case of TLF, traditional models of commercial production where monetary mechanisms are often associated with hierarchy still exert some influence on the choices available to group members to govern themselves. However, it is through monetary mechanisms that a new and hybrid organisational model is being generated within TLF, which is oriented towards principles of equal opportunity, performance evaluation, transparency and accountability.

These principles differ greatly from the Chinese traditional *guanxi* norm, which requires one to treat each individual differently based on a history of exchanged favours. Rather than suppressing movements of ‘commons-based peer production’ (Benkler 2006), the state-controlled and market-oriented Chinese media institutions can operate as a generative force for the emergence of novelty. This element of originality can be understood in terms of the ways in which Chinese media consumers, such as those in TLF fansubbing group, organise their peer production processes and govern their collective resources. By taking in their hands the power to control the means of media creation and reallocating commercial media resources on their own, TLF’s participants, are transforming from passive media consumers to active media co-creators and producers.

Instead of acting as anti-hierarchical or anarchic agents, TLF’s subtitlers are more like active entrepreneurial co-creators, codifying their own rules to build and maintain their infrastructural resources. There are leaders too but their leadership is in constant flux, since it is their performance and merits that build their reputations and status in the community. By donating their private resources, skills and knowledge, TLF’s participants are creating an alternative space where resources are held in common and utilised for the production of joint products (i.e. fansubs). More importantly, such products are distributed freely for the benefit of the public.

Since producing high-quality subtitles for the public is one of the major goals pursued by TLF, coordinating individual efforts and ensuring the quality of the end products require more than just endogenous levels of trust and reciprocity, particularly when members' interactions are limited by the virtual environment and hence often lack spontaneous discussion with and real-knowledge about each other. To maintain the long-term viability of fansub production calls for the regulation of the processes through which new members can eventually become recognised contributors. This is explored and discussed in detail in section 6.4.

#### 6.4. **Integration rules**

TLF has developed a set of rules (both explicit and implicit) to govern its members' integration processes, with the aim to transform them into 'successful' subtitlers. Generally, these rules can be summarised as dealing with two aspects: 1) quality control, and 2) production organisation. Instead of exerting control over individual actions, these rules strive to achieve the opposite: encouraging individual autonomy while preserving interdependencies between members.

##### 6.4.1. Quality control

Rules related to how TLF controls the quality of members' translated subtitles are written on the "Recruitment" page on its blogging site. According to this page, a proofreading procedure has been devised by TLF: texts translated by a member must be proofread by another member who has already "accumulated a lot of experience in translating subtitles". Another aspect emphasised by TLF is that members should treat the process of translation as "a process of creation" by becoming fully engrossed in the fun of creation and refusing to "sacrifice quality for speed":

Proofreading is an indispensable procedure to ensure the quality of subtitles. Only seasoned members who have accumulated a lot of experience in translation can be proofreaders. We always put the quality of our subtitles above everything else and never sacrifice quality for speed. Please remember that in TLF, subtitling is not

about completing a task. Instead, it is about enjoying the process of creation.

Further details about the requirements to qualify as a proofreader are written and published as a post titled *Instructions for Newbies* (see Appendix V) on the group's forum. According to the content written in the post:

Only excellent translators who are recommended by forum moderators or administrators can become probationary proofreaders (in the future, proofreading test might be introduced in selecting qualified proofreaders). Provided that the performance of probationary proofreaders during their first two tasks is recognised by the rest of the group, they can become official proofreaders.

#### 6.4.1.1. *Implementing probationary mechanisms*

New TLF members need to go through a similar probation mechanism called “Newbie’s Probation Period”. During this period, newbies need to complete a series of training tasks devised by TLF to enhance their translation skills and develop a common understanding about the subtitling standards expected by the group. Each newbie’s performance is monitored by a senior member (with membership status being at least “Active Member”), who acts like a supervisor to help the newbie solve problems encountered during his/her probation. The length of newbies’ probationary periods depends on their performance: their supervisors have the final say to decide whether they can ‘graduate’ successfully or should go through a longer probation time. After ‘graduating’, newbies become ‘official’ translators who can translate any text they like without supervision.

A detailed introduction about the training tasks involved in the newbies’ probation period is written in the post *Instructions for Newbies* (see Appendix V) published on TLF’s forum. First, newbies are required to read the learning materials hosted by the group’s forum, in order to get familiar with the group’s history, and build some general understanding about the tools and skills required to carry out their daily subtitling activities in TLF. These learning materials include documents such as *Memo of TLF Fansubbing Group*, *Dictionary of Transliteration of English Proper Nouns into Chinese*, *Learning How to Synchronise Subtitles in Ten Minutes* – all of which are written and



contributed by existing members based on their experience as participants in the group.

Next, newbies are required to review subtitles translated by existing members, i.e. what TLF members refer to as “peer review”. During this activity, newbies can select and watch any two audiovisual texts translated by any existing member. After this, newbies are asked to post their opinions about the quality of the translations under a thread called *Newbie’s Training: Peer Review*. Judging from the interaction described as part of this thread of messages, peer reviewing not only allows new members to build a common understanding of the group’s favoured subtitle formatting and translation styles. It also encourages existing members to engage with new members by discussing the quality of their previous work so that they can constantly improve their skills and knowledge. Quite often, existing members take newbies’ ideas and suggestions to heart. This is illustrated in Table 6.4, which features a conversation held between a newbie (‘N1’) and a senior member (‘S1’) under the thread *Newbie’s Training: Peer Review*, about a dialogue in the film *People Like Us* translated by ‘S1’.

**The original dialogue (between the main character Frankie and her son’s school teacher) and the Chinese subtitles created by ‘S1’ (with back translations provided by the author)**

Teacher: Why do you think that was?  
 你觉得这是为什么?  
 Frankie: I’m sorry. Why do I think what was?  
 不好意思, 什么意思? [Back translation: I’m sorry. What do you mean?]  
 Teacher: Why he never cried? Why do you think that was?  
 为什么他从来不哭? 为什么你这么觉得?  
 Frankie: I don’t know yet.  
 我也不知道 [Back translation: I don’t know as well.]

**The conversation between ‘N1’ and ‘S1’ about the translation of the above dialogue**

N1 (posted at 18: 57, 02-02-2013):

I don't think "I'm sorry" should be kept in Chinese, as it sounds a bit redundant and unnatural in Chinese. What's more, "I don't know yet" should be translated into "I still don't know" or "You tell me", because "yet" means "not ready". Anyway, reviewing the translated work *People Like Us* took me four hours. This made me feel that neither translation nor proofreading is an easy job. If I graduate from my probation period, I swear I will treat my translation job seriously and never cause troubles to proofreaders.

S1 (posted at 00: 04, 06-02-2013):

Thank you so much for taking such a long time reviewing my work! I totally agree with your suggestions on my translation. I couldn't believe I was so stupid to translate "yet" into "as well". Many thanks for pointing out my mistake.

*Table 6.4 A conversation held between a newbie and a senior member during peer review*

After taking part in the peer review stage, newbies are asked to translate TED Talks stored on the group's forum. Newbies can select any one of the video clips available in the group and create Chinese subtitles for the video. The translated subtitles (saved in .srt format) are posted under a thread called *Newbies on Trail: Subtitling TED Talks*. In this way, the work created by newbies can be evaluated by their supervisors, who will post comments on the quality of the translation by replying to their 'students' messages. Judging from the discussions held under this threaded message, 'supervisors' often speak quite frankly and bluntly about any mistakes and errors made by their 'students' in their translations. Nevertheless, such comments are very friendly and informal as they are mixed with a lot of kind jokes and words of encouragement, as exemplified by the conversation between a newbie ('N2') and the newbie's supervisor ('S2') illustrated in Table 6.5:

N2 (posted at 21: 48, 01-03-2013)

1. The video I subtitled is mainly about education systems in different countries.
2. By translating the video, I realised that translation is not an easy job. I was exhausted after the translation.
3. Here is my translated subtitles [the downloading link of the subtitles].

S2 (posted at 00: 55, 02-03-2013)

[Back translations are provided by the author.]

I just finished checking your translated text to the 75<sup>th</sup> line, but I already feel you really need to re-do the whole translation. Let me tell you why. Take the following two sentences for example:

00:01:12,983 --> 00:01:16,683

And the world didn't stop in the 1990s.

直到 19 世纪 90 年代，这种全球化才停止

[Back translation: And the world didn't stop in the 1890s.]

How could you do this, my sweetheart? There is a total 100 years' gap between 1990s and 1890s.

00:03:55,793 --> 00:04:00,159

Canada in North America is doing really well.

南美的加拿大表现突出

[Back translation: Canada in South America is doing really well.]

Open your eyes, my darling. Canada in South America? You must be kidding me.

All in all, I've already spotted a lot of mistakes while watching your translated video within just the first four minutes. I've corrected all your mistakes to the 74th line. You need to check the rest of your translation and send it back to me. Don't worry. Take your time.

*Table 6.5 A conversation between a newbie and a supervisor*

Based on the performance and commitment shown by newbies during subtitling TED Talks, their supervisors can decide if they can move on to the final stage of their probation period, i.e. application to become an 'official' TLF translator. During this stage, newbies need to reflect in writing about the feelings and ideas they have gained from their probation period, and share such experiences under a thread called *Application for becoming an official translator*. Newbies often expressed the idea that going through the probation process was a rewarding experience, because it allowed them to experience the group's friendly and supportive atmosphere; become familiar with the types of

media products that the group is working on; and develop a thorough understanding of what it takes to be a qualified translator in TLF. Newbies also stated that all the training tasks they accomplished during their probation period provided them with an opportunity to reflect on and improve their own translation skills and performance by gaining constant feedback not only from their supervisors but also from other members in the group. This made them realise how important it is to be supportive to each other so that they can keep learning and improving together as a group. Table 6.6 is a typical example of the way in which newbies report on their experience as probationers.

ID: weila (posted at 23: 30, 18-01-2013)

Aspects of my probation experience:

1. The translated version of a media text should be as smooth and easy to understand as the original. This is the most important lesson I learned during peer review and translating TED Talks.
2. When translating dialogue lines, translators should keep the dialogues as colloquial as possible in Chinese, so that they appear natural to Chinese audiences.
3. The translator's Chinese language skills actually play a crucial role in determining the quality of the translated subtitles. To improve my Chinese, I still need to read a lot of Chinese literature works and learn from senior members.
4. TLF is a lovely fansubbing group where everyone is supportive and helpful to each other. I hope I can fully integrate in the group and continue to learn from others in the future.

*Table 6.6 Applying for becoming an official translator in TLF*

Like every newbie in the group, I was also assigned to a supervisor whose pseudonym is disguised here as S to protect confidentiality. Instead of saying “I was assigned to S”, it would be more appropriate to say that we found each other. As I became more embedded in the group, I learned that during newbies’ probation period, they must take the initiative to approach senior members and ask them if they would act as a supervisor. This process of finding one’s supervisor was dubbed by group members ‘*baodatui*’ (literally ‘hug the leg’, a Chinese idiom meaning “make one’s success on the strength of someone else’s”). According to the tips I received from existing members who had experiences of supervision or being supervised, “It was easy to ‘hug the leg of a supervisor’” as long as “s/he was available to supervise you” and “you were comfortable and compatible with each other”.

Accordingly, I expressed my wish to find a supervisor in the chatroom by posting a message, asking if I could “hug the leg of a supervisor” and, if so, whether there was anyone available to let me do so. Seeing my question, several senior members popped up in the chatroom, sending messages that either expressed their regrets of being too busy to be my supervisors, or agreed to supervise me on the condition that we were compatible with each other in terms of our favourite audiovisual genres, otherwise, they would lack interest or experience to share their genre expertise with me. After several rounds of negotiations, a student-supervisor relationship was established between me and a senior member S.

Under the influence of traditional Confucianism, the unquestioning obedience and respect students have for their parents also extend to their teachers, who are addressed as ‘*shifu*’ (literally ‘master father’) or ‘*laoshi*’ (literally ‘old master’) by the student in order to acknowledge the superiority of the teacher. Calling one’s teacher by his/her first name, on the other hand, is deemed as being disrespectful in Chinese society. Assuming that S, as my supervisor, would expect respect from me, as a subordinate student, I started by addressing S as ‘*laoshi*’ during our first meeting carried out in a private chatroom set up through QQ instant messenger. S responded by addressing me as ‘*qin*’ (a Chinese Internet slang meaning ‘sweetie’) and correcting the way I addressed her, “You’re welcome, but you do not have to be so polite. Just call me sister S [smiley face emoticon]”. The way S addressed me and the smiley face she sent to me really helped to break the ice, after which we quickly bonded with each other by talking about ourselves, for instance, where we were born and grew up, where we were living now, what we liked to do in our spare time, our favourite films, TV programmes, books, music, foods, etc.

Knowing my identity as a researcher-participant and my experience as an audiovisual translator, S did not ask me to go through the usual training tasks that newbies were required to accomplish. Instead, she recommended me to participate in the group’s ‘盲译比赛’ (literally ‘blind translation competition’), i.e. a competition in which everyone in the group was invited to provide bilingual (English and Chinese) subtitles for a source text without referencing its original English subtitles. The source text was randomly selected from one

of the episodes from *The Sex Education Show*, a Channel 4 documentary which had stirred up a lot of interests and conversations within the group.

Even though a majority of TLF members were young urbanites with more opportunities and better access to education, they still experienced a highly rigid and controlled school life, where there were few, if any, classes addressing sex education; and where open discussions about sex-related topics were not only prohibited but also stigmatised as socially and morally unacceptable or '*diulian*' (literally 'loss of face') (see section 5.3.1). This was why foreign programme such as *The Sex Education Show* was appealing among TLF members, as the show covered issues such as safe sex, body image, homosexuality and consumption of pornography among teenagers in the UK, and hence, resonated particularly strongly with members' curiosity or frustration in these areas. Being able to discuss the programme in an anonymous and virtual context also allowed TLF members to minimise the risks of being shamed for speaking up about sensitive issues.

The video content of the programme – while shared and watched by many members – had not yet been translated due to the unavailability of its original English subtitles, making it a more time-consuming and challenging task to provide Chinese subtitles for the content<sup>79</sup>. Seeing the programme's growing popularity within the group, the group's leaders decided to organise the above-mentioned competition as a way to attract and identify candidates to participate in the subtitling project of *The Sex Education Show*, so that the show could be better enjoyed by members and the wider Chinese audience as well.

All participants (including me) in the competition were given seven days to transfer the verbal information presented in the source text into both English and Chinese subtitles, during which they were allowed to watch the text as many times as they like. Since the text was from a British TV programme, there were many British accents that, even as someone who had lived in the UK for some years, I found hard to understand sometimes. Besides, the language in the show was quite explicit, containing many sexually sensitive

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<sup>79</sup> Usually, a foreign text is translated by TLF members based on its original subtitles that are either ripped from a DVD source or obtained from online subtitle database, such as Open Subtitles Database. In cases where the original subtitles are unavailable, members have to rely on their listening skills during the subtitling process.

words and phrases which I found tricky to translate. Considering that sex was still a topic seldom discussed in public among most Chinese people, I toned down the language in the source text and made my translations less explicit by using a lot of euphemisms for sexual terms in Chinese.

The efforts I put in the competition proved quite fruitful. According to the result announced by the group's leaders, I was amongst the top three winners of the competition. This performance earned me respect and trust from fellow members, including my supervisor S, who immediately granted me permission to graduate from my probation.

#### 6.4.1.2. *Developing a common understanding of “the best” translation*

By completing training tasks during their probationary period, newbies in TLF gradually develop an understanding of “the best” way to translate foreign texts into Chinese, which differs greatly from the one commonly shared among fansubbers (mostly fans of Japanese *anime*) from the West. Quite often, the authentic experiences of Japanese media products were preserved by *anime* fansubbers in their translated texts in order to avoid the ‘cultural odorlessness’ (Iwabuchi 2002, Leonard 2005) that characterises commercially subtitled *anime*. By contrast, the practice of fansubbing is seen by TLF's members as a means to express themselves while introducing foreign cultures to Chinese viewers. Consequently, they tend to make their translations more familiar to Chinese audiences in order to recreate an authentic atmosphere and achieve an authentic tone in their mother tongue Chinese.

For instance, under the thread *Newbie's Training: Peer Review*, newbies quote sentences translated by existing members as examples of good translations; such sentences are often authentic and vivid from the perspective of the Chinese audience. Table 6.7 shows some of the comments excerpted from newbies' postings:

<b>Subtitles quoted by newbies as examples of good translations</b> [Back translations are provided by the author.]	<b>Newbies' comments on the translations</b>
<p>Once you've done what you had to, they never let you do what you want to.          朝为贼，终身为贼          Back translation: Once a thief, always a thief [a Chinese idiom].</p>	<p>ID: tsunami (posted at 15: 12, 10-01-2013)</p> <p>By directly showing the character's identity (i.e. a thief) in the translation, the translator can help the audience better understand the content. Plus, the Chinese idiom is way more precise than the literal translation.</p>
<p>Like a rat in a trap, gentlemen.          这就像是瓮中捉鳖，是不是？          Back translation: Like catching a turtle in a jar [a Chinese idiom], right?</p> <p>You might have the wrong animal there, sir.          这只鳖好像会飞，长官          Back translation: It seems that the turtle can fly, sir.</p> <p>- Where is that masked...? - Speak of the devil...          - 那个戴面具的... - 说曹操...          Back translation:          - Where is that masked...? - Speak of Cao Cao... [Cao Cao is a Chinese warlord in the Eastern Han Dynasty, characterised as a prominent villain in the novel <i>Romance of the Three Kingdoms</i>.]</p> <p>and he shall appear.          曹操就到...          Back translation: Cao Cao arrives.</p> <p>- Sorry, Jim. I gotta... - Keep your head down?          - 对不起，吉姆，我必须 - 当缩头乌龟？          Back translation:          - Sorry, Jim. I gotta... - Like a turtle hiding in its shell [a Chinese idiom]?</p>	<p>ID: NickZeng (posted at 16:53, 01-02-2013)</p> <p>These translated sentences can help Chinese viewers better understand the content. The use of Chinese idioms also makes the translated subtitles more vivid and interesting.</p>



<p>You know the trouble I caused in this shirt?          知道我穿这件衬衫有多招蜂引蝶吗?          Back translation: You know how many bees and butterflies I attracted by wearing this shirt? [“Attracting bees and butterflies” is a Chinese idiom.]</p> <p>It’s all true, brother.          如假包换          Back translation: Replacement guaranteed if not genuine. [Due to the rampant spread of shoddy products in China in the late 90s, many manufacturers attracted consumers by making the promise that replacement will be guaranteed if the product is not genuine, which later became an idiom “replacement guaranteed if not genuine”.]</p>	<p>ID: annetian (posted at 00:34, 25-01-2013)</p> <p>The first translated sentence is the best one in the whole text. The second translation has been very well adapted to our national situation.</p> <p>I only have a little suggestion though, which is about the translation of the name of this film, <i>Liberal Arts</i>. The translator translated it into Broad and Elegant Education. This expression is often used among people living in Taiwan and Hong Kong. I don’t think people in Mainland China can understand the translation. I suggest the film’s name should be translated into <i>Love, a Compulsory Course</i>.</p>
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Table 6.7 Comments made by TLF’s newbies about good translations

The comments made by TLF’s newbies about what is a “good” translation suggest that “authentic translation” is understood differently by fansubbers from different cultures. Within China’s strictly censored and controlled media environment, officially imported and translated (often dubbed) foreign media products are already scarce. Even when media content is made available through official outlets, that content is often extensively censored, manipulated and re-edited during/via dubbing to suit the ideologies favoured by the political elite. As a result, Chinese audiences rely heavily on the subtitles created by fansubbers whose work is seen as a more loyal and authentic translation of the original content.

Within this specific context, Chinese fansubbers are more than fans of foreign media products, engaging in the act of volunteer translation out of their love for their fandom. They also become cultural introducers, selecting a wide range of foreign content that first and foremost resonates with their personal interests and values, and introducing such interests and values to Chinese viewers through their acts of translation. As such, Chinese fansubbers themselves may not subscribe to the foreignising style of translation. Instead, they are likely to opt for domesticating textual strategies to achieve vividness in their translated subtitles, so that the translations can facilitate and enhance their own viewing experience and that of the target audience they are part of.

As Table 6.7 illustrates, domesticating strategies, such as replacing Western cultural references with Chinese ones, making comments on Chinese social issues through the subtitles, and using Chinese idioms to make the translated texts sound more eloquent, are frequently employed by TLF subtitlers. In particular, the use of highly condensed Chinese idioms (prototypically consisting of four characters) is an effective strategy to overcome technical restrictions pertaining to the length of the subtitle and presentation time. As Chinese idioms often come from classical literature, historical lore or Chinese culture, using idioms in fansubs can also evoke Chinese cultural or historical allusions from which these idioms are derived, thereby retelling Western stories in an authentic Chinese cultural context. In this sense, TLF's fansubbers can be seen as "aesthetic activists", deliberately creating alternative forms of engagement with their mediated content "by projecting viewers [including themselves] immersively into the subtitled text (aesthetic subtitling)" (Pérez-González 2012: 341).

The proofreading and probation mechanisms devised by TLF to ensure the quality of its released fansubs clearly show that power in the group is not distributed in an absolute egalitarian manner. That power restricts individual actions in an effort to integrate them into the collective process of subtitling. This process, firstly and most importantly, involves one's learning and socialisation, both of which operate within the fluid interdependent relationships between newbies and experienced members, probationers and supervisors, and translators and proofreaders. It is through such processes that a shared identity and emotional connections are generated and enhanced, as illustrated by participants' questionnaire responses about their emotional attachments to the group developed during their probationary period (section 5.5).

#### 6.4.2. Production process

##### 6.4.2.1. *Aligning individual actions through subtitling rules*

In complexity sciences, "alignment" means that different agents (and therefore their actions) "point in the same direction", or "aim at the same target" (Heylighen 2013: 5). The alignment of individual actions is fundamental to

coordination in a self-organising system, as it ensures that these actions do not hinder, obstruct, or oppose each other. Within the context of the fansubbing group under study, alignment implies that agents (i.e. individual fansubbers) should agree at least on what their collective work should look like. In this respect, the fansubbing group TLF has created a set of explicitly written rules called *TLF Subtitling Rules*. Stored and published on the group's forum, the rules cover aspects such as requirements for subtitlers (either translators or proofreaders) and other miscellaneous points such as how to handle punctuation, numbers, italics and sound effects during subtitling. According to the rules, TLF's members are required to bear the following three aspects in mind:

- 1) subtitlers must be patient and responsible;
- 2) although handling details such as punctuation and numbers is simple and basic, details are extremely important. Typos and wrong Chinese characters can cause many troubles to proofreaders;
- 3) a translated text should meet three criteria, i.e. accuracy, neatness, and appropriateness, to help the audience better enjoy the video content.

The need for TLF members to “help the audience better enjoy the video content” signals the importance of aesthetic considerations in the group's agenda. Embedded in highly interactive and flexible digital networks, TLF's fansubbers, being active audience themselves, can be extremely responsive and, hence, adaptive to local conditions in terms of viewers' demands and preferences. Rather than treating subtitles as “signifiers and representation of narratives which seemingly are pre-existing to or transcend [a] film itself” (Curti 2009: 202), TLF' subtitlers are reflexively creating media representations that fit their own viewing experiences and ideas on their audiences, thereby turning their fansubs “into sites of narrative negotiation that allow for the ongoing co-construction of an affinity space with online audiences” (Pérez González 2013: 169).

On the other hand, the criteria informing the group's subtitling work, i.e. “accuracy and neatness”, indicate the adoption of professional Audiovisual Translation (AVT) practices by amateur mediators during their prosumption

processes. Even within China's highly censored and controlled media environment, blocked foreign media products (together with the original subtitles ripped from these products) are still able to enter the country. Access to the Internet allows media prosumers in China, including TLF's fansubbers, to circumvent the conservative censorship imposed on imported audiovisual products through dubbing, and adopt commercial subtitling practices like the ones used in the West. The influence of such commercial subtitling practices can be observed particularly in TLF's subtitling conventions concerning punctuation, italics, numbers, etc.

As shown in Figure 6.7, there are four lines of subtitles displayed as they are being edited in the subtitling software application (i.e. SrtEdit) used by the group. Each line consists of four parts: ordinal number, time code (in-time and out-time), source text, and target text. Following the group's rules of punctuation in subtitles, members are expected to ensure that: 1) English punctuation marks are replaced by their Chinese counterparts in Chinese subtitles; 2) a dash (-) is used to identify dialogic subtitles; 3) no punctuation mark appears at the end of a sentence, except for question marks; and 4) the convention normally used to signal interruptions or pauses (...) can be inserted in subtitles by using the keyboard shortcut 'shift+6', without having to type each sign individually.

**The Last Fantasy**

正确的字幕翻译格式如下（也就是一定要保持序号、时间轴、中文一行、空格行，这样的格式。）  
 （这些格式基本是现成的 不要随意更改即可）

序号→ 28  
 时间轴→ 00:01:39,900 --> 00:01:41,500  
 英文→ Sorry. Can you say that again?  
 中文→ 不好意思，你能再说一遍吗？  
 （字幕中标点符号一律使用全角表示，英文直接替换成中文）  
 （空一行）

序号→ 29  
 时间轴→ 00:01:41,510 --> 00:01:45,490  
 英文→ - I don't think I heard you right. - Carlos and I are back together.  
 中文→ - 我好像没明白你的意思  
               - 我和卡洛斯复合了  
 （两个人的对白一定要加-，即使原文英文没有也要加，中文对话“-”后空一格，分两行显示）

序号→ 32  
 时间轴→ 00:01:51,410 --> 00:01:53,490  
 英文→ Uh, you want the fondue set back? fine.  
 中文→ 你想要回那套火锅组？给你就是了  
 （字幕中句号一律用逗号表示，每条字幕末尾的逗号去掉）

序号→ 48  
 时间轴→ 00:02:32,770 --> 00:02:35,650  
 英文→ Look, we'll be back... someday.  
 中文→ 我们会回来的…总有一天  
 （省略号打法是微软拼音中shift+6，然后去掉一半，不推荐小数点）

Figure 6.7 TLF's punctuations conventions

Other miscellaneous points described in the group's subtitling rules also resemble commercial AVT practices to various degrees:

- 1) The title and the lyrics (where necessary) of a piece of music should be italicised. Italicised off-screen dialogue in the original subtitles are used for deaf and hard-of-hearing viewers. These subtitles can be deleted in the Chinese subtitles, because they are not going to be used for deaf and hard-of-hearing viewers in China.
- 2) Discourse particles, such as “Huh”, “well”, and “you know”, in the original spoken dialogue are often used to improve the flow of

colloquial speech or for pragmatic effect. They can be deleted in the Chinese subtitles.

- 3) Numbers (0 – 10) should be written in Chinese numerals [Chinese characters representing the numbers zero through ten]. Above that, use Arabic numerals.
- 4) Sound-effects, such as “PHONE RINGS” and “DOORBELL”, are used for deaf and hard-of-hearing viewers in the original subtitles, which can be deleted in the Chinese subtitles.
- 5) Proper nouns, such as people’s names and place-names, should be transliterated by using Mandarin characters to match the sounds of the original one, e.g. York (约克) [pronounced as ‘yue ke’ in Chinese].

What is noticeable about these miscellaneous points is how the group deals with subtitles for the deaf and hard-of-hearing featuring in the original programmes that they choose to translate. In mainstream commercial subtitling, particularly in the West, there are specific subtitling practices aimed at hard-of-hearing audiences, which involve speaker identification, and the conveyance of sound effects and music through the text of the subtitles. These practices, however, are not followed by TLF’s fansubbers, because their translated subtitles are not aimed at Chinese viewers who are deaf or hard-of-hearing. As a result, off-screen dialogue and sound effects in the original texts are expected to be deleted. Apart from this aspect, the group’s subtitling conventions are very much in line with those of Western professional AVT.

However, TLF has no strict rules concerning the formal features (e.g. fonts, type size, and colour) of translated subtitles. On the contrary, members often engage in active discussions on the forum by sharing screenshots of an array of formal experimentations that they have worked on in their translated subtitles as a way to show off their individuality as realised through their formal style choices. Figure 6.9 illustrates some of the screenshots posted by TLF fansubbers on the forum. As shown in Figure 6.8, some fansubbers prefer to create bilingual subtitles in both Chinese and English, but the font and size they use to display the Chinese subtitles are different (the first and second screenshots). Others prefer to create monolingual subtitles in Chinese, but

choose different colours (e.g. white or yellow) to display the Chinese subtitles (the third and fourth screenshots). While the Chinese subtitles in the first four screenshots are placed central at the bottom of the screen and are displayed in simplified Chinese, the Chinese subtitle in the fifth screenshot is written in traditional Chinese and is positioned left at the top of the screen as the karaoke-style running subtitle, together with the original Japanese subtitle displayed left at the bottom of the screen.

These screenshots show that the formal approaches adopted by TLF fansubbers are highly varied and individualised. This is consistent with what Pérez González (2012: 347) refers to as “the performance-oriented” nature of amateur subtitles due to fansubbers’ affective engagement with their mediated texts. In other words, fansubbed texts provide fans with sites for the expression of their identity through the deployment of a range of compositional variables (e.g. font typefaces, colours and sizes). This form of affective engagement is echoed in participants’ questionnaire responses regarding the aims that drive their fansub creation work. As illustrated in section 5.4, many of them used expressions such as “we are doing our own subtitles”; “create subtitles that belong to yourself”; or “[you have to be] true to yourself during translation” in their responses, all of which indicate that there is a high level of affectivity invested by participants in their translated texts.









Figure 6.8 Screenshots of various formal approaches experimented and posted by TLF's members

Rather than externally enforced or imposed by a single individual, the subtitling standards and conventions developed by TLF are the result of the bottom-up agency of individual members, based on the logic of trial and error. Through their sustained participation in collective discussions, they end up aligning themselves with and adhering to a set of shared rules. The faster and consistent their alignment with these collective preferences, the faster newly joined members will come to abide by and enhance such practices.

#### 6.4.2.2. Coordinating individual actions

In order to reap the full benefits of cooperation, individual agents in a self-organising system need not only to align their actions but also to complement their actions so that their combined efforts can achieve something that is more than the sum of its parts. This entails that different members in the fansubbing group perform different tasks, specialising in what they are most skilled at. The question then arises as to the role that the division of labour plays in this context: Who does what and when, so that each person can be assigned to the task that suits him/her best?

To solve this coordination problem, TLF has devised a decentralised mechanism based on modularity, through which a subtitling project is broken down into manageable modules (tasks), namely “original source”, “timing”,

“translation”, “proofreading”, and “publishing”. Members can self-select one or multiple tasks based on how well they believe they can perform their chosen tasks. Detailed descriptions of these tasks (see Table 6.8) are provided under a post titled *Instructions for newbies* (see Appendix V) on the group’s forum.

<p><b>Original source</b></p> <p><i>Duties:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Follow the latest information releases about foreign media content on the Internet</li> <li>- Provide the group with the original video content</li> <li>- Compress the original video file into a suitable size to facilitate its transmission among group members</li> </ul> <p><i>Required quality:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Being a fan and enthusiast of foreign media content</li> <li>- Familiarity with various file-sharing techniques</li> <li>- Being well-equipped with hardware devices and an Internet connection</li> <li>- Care and responsibility</li> </ul>
<p><b>Timing</b></p> <p><i>Duties:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Acquiring the original subtitles for video content</li> <li>- Synchronising the original subtitles with the video content</li> <li>- Saving the synchronised subtitles into a digital file (in .srt format)</li> </ul> <p><i>Required quality:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Familiarity with timing techniques</li> </ul>
<p><b>Translation</b></p> <p><i>Duties:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Translating original subtitles into Chinese</li> </ul> <p><i>Required quality:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Excellent language proficiency (both English and Chinese)</li> <li>- Having worldly experience and knowledge in order to better understand the plot and the meaning behind the original text</li> <li>- Excellent written literacy</li> <li>- Being meticulous and responsible</li> <li>- Capacity to access information online using Google, Wiki, and various online dictionaries</li> </ul>
<p><b>Proofreading</b></p> <p><i>Duties:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Optimising translated subtitles</li> <li>- Checking and correcting typos</li> <li>- Enhance the viewers' spectatorial experience</li> </ul> <p><i>Required quality:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Have all the qualities of a translator</li> <li>- A perfectionist</li> <li>- Good communication skills to help translators improving their skills</li> </ul>
<p><b>Publishing</b></p> <p><i>Duties:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Publishing the final product on the group's blogging site</li> <li>- Disseminating information about the subtitles released via Sina Weibo and other popular social networking sites</li> </ul> <p><i>Required quality:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Responsibility</li> <li>- Ability to publicise information effectively through social media sites</li> <li>- Having good summing-up skills</li> </ul>

*Table 6.8 Tasks, required actions and skill sets involved in TLF's subtitling activities*

By offering on its forum clear descriptions of each task as well as of the duties and required skill sets associated with each task, TLF is able to ensure that all group members can evaluate the extent to which their skills and competences meet the requirements to participate in a subtitling project, so that they do not misjudge their own abilities. Moreover, members can engage in tasks that they feel they are most good at and, hence, involve less effort. Most importantly, by allowing members to self-assign tasks that they are most able and most willing to perform, TLF has managed to achieve an efficient labour division among different individuals with a diverse array of motives, skills and knowledge, while doing so without a central controller managing task assignments.

While the division of labour coordinates individual actions that mostly take place simultaneously, it also articulates a decentralised workflow protocol which allows TLF to spontaneously co-ordinate actions that happen sequentially:

- 1) After an original video file is acquired by an individual in charge of appropriating an “original source”, the file will be converted by that person into a smaller size with a comparable picture quality to that of the original video content. The compressed video file will then be released by the same person as a message in a section called “TLF Media Zone” on the group’s forum. The message contains a brief introduction to the video file (e.g. details of genre, source language, and a synopsis of the plot) and the file’s downloading link.
- 2) The first person to respond to the message posted on the forum, claiming to have the skills of spotting, is entrusted with the ‘timing’ tasks. Upon finishing the task, the person will save the synchronised subtitles as a digital file in .srt format and release the file as a message in another forum section called “TLF Subtitle Zone”. Marked in green colour, meaning “to be translated”, the message contains the downloading link for the subtitle file.
- 3) The first person to reply to the above message expressing an interest, is charged with the “translation” task. The translated subtitles will be saved in a separate digital file in .srt format, and released under the same section “TLF Subtitle Zone”, via a new message complete with

the downloading link. The message is marked in blue colour, meaning “to be proofread”.

- 4) The first person (provided s/he is a proofreader) to reply to the above message expressing an interest is entrusted with the “proofreading” of the translated subtitles. The proofread subtitles will be saved in a new digital file in .srt format, and released in the same section of the forum (“TLF Subtitle Zone”) as a new message marked in black colour, meaning “to be published”.
- 5) The first person to respond to the above message showing their willingness to take on this duty is charged with the task of “publishing” the final product. The publisher will then release the final product via the group’s website for the public to download, and disseminate information about the released work across other social media platforms.

Figure 6.9 shows how tasks are marked and distributed within the section “TLF Subtitle Zone” of TLF’s forum. Within this section, each task is posted as a message, with its subject detailing the source text’s genre, English title, official release year, video format, and Chinese title. Green coloured messages (tasks) are waiting to be translated; blue coloured ones to be proofread; and black coloured ones to be published. The adoption of this standardised colour scheme for the message subjects helps members to recognise at a glance useful aspects of the task at hand and to decide whether to bid for the task. In this way, complex and ambiguous communications can be avoided as much as possible in the absence of face-to-face contact.

版块主题				
	[翻译] 动作\传记\剧情\运动 Rush 2013 720p BRip x264 AC3-EVO 极速风流	文风 2013-12-30	0/4	文风 18分钟前
	[校对] 剧情\传记 The Butler (2013) 720p BrRip x264 - YIFY 白宫管家	文风 2013-12-22	2/50	文风 昨天 20:30
	[已分配] 剧情\传记 JOBS (2013) 720p BrRip x264 - YIFY 乔布斯	文风 2013-11-14	1/38	david7fang 前天 22:08
	[校对] 喜剧\剧情 The Lifeguard (2013) 720p WEB-DL 800MB Ganoool 救生员	文风 2013-8-10	11/139	筱宸葵 前天 22:01
	[校对] 剧情\运动 Home Run (2013) 720p BrRip x264 - YIFY 本垒打	文风 2013-9-21	1/40	Elm 3天前 20:20
	[校对] 喜剧\动作\犯罪 The Family 2013 RC 720p BRip x264 AC3-FooKaS 黑帮家族	文风 2013-12-3	4/54	莫永恒 4天前 16:02
	[完成] 剧情 Fruitvale Station (2013) 720p BrRip x264 - YIFY 布鲁特韦尔车站	文风 2013-12-19	4/58	筱宸葵 7天前 21:18
	[校对] 喜剧\惊悚\奇幻 The Brass Teapot (2012) LIMITED BluRay 720p 700MB Ganoool 黄铜茶壶 (翻译已完成)	文风 2013-6-1	3/138	阿凡达川 2013-12-19 22:07
	[校对] 喜剧 The Details (2011) 720p BrRip x264 - YIFY 细节 (翻译已完成)	文风 2013-5-8	2/152	blueflying梦 2013-12-19 21:49
	[校对] 剧情 The Girl (2012) 720p WEB-DL 650MB Ganoool 女孩 (翻译已完成)	文风 2013-6-27	5/178	d811017 2013-12-19 21:49
	[已分配] 喜剧 Alan.Partridge.Alpha.Papa.2013.720p.BluRay.x264.YIFY 阿尔法爸爸	文风 2013-12-1	4/59	Hello_Agnes 2013-12-19 21:01
	[已分配] 超级魔术师 The Incredible Burt Wonderstone (2013)(翻译已完成)	文风 2013-6-10	3/127	david7fang 2013-12-19 20:13
	[已分配] 剧情\喜剧 The English Teacher 2013 WebRip XviD titler 英语老师 (翻译已完成)	文风 2013-8-22	4/139	david7fang 2013-12-19 20:12

Figure 6.9 Task distributions within “TLF Subtitle Zone”

Furthermore, TLF’s “first come first get” principle can help to avoid potential conflicts among members who would be interesting in carrying out the same task. Listing tasks via an asynchronous discussion board allows all the tasks to be examined by all members at any time. As soon as an assignment is taken by the first person to reply to the relevant task message, the response will be visible to the rest of the group, who will then keep looking for other available and suitable tasks. In this way, the whole workflow process is kept transparent among group members, who are constantly aware of what others are doing despite their geographical distance.

By combining several people’s efforts to carry out a subtitling project, the group can ensure that the project can be finished as fast as possible while attempting to preserve the quality of the final product. To better coordinate actions, those involved in the same project will “meet” each other in one of the group’s chatrooms (called “TV series”, “Films”, “Open Courses”, and

“Documentary”) set up through the QQ instant messaging application, depending on the type of the audiovisual product being subtitled in the project. Enabled by the affordances of QQ (e.g. text messaging, audio/video chat, and multimedia file-sharing), members can discuss any issues and problems encountered during the project in real time.

Figure 6.10 features an example of such discussions between two members (A and B) using QQ messenger. The discussion is about a problem encountered by A, regarding how to translate the following two sentences: “I usually cut the grass about once a week, every 10 days. When it gets really high, I try to keep it out of the pool”. A is not sure if the grass is cut once a week or every 10 days. The suggestion given by B is not to focus on how often exactly the grass is cut, but to simplify the sentences into “The grass grows really fast. I cut it about every 10 days”. This suggestion is accepted by A, who uses an emoticon (a kow-towing panda) to show respect and gratitude.



Figure 6.10 Real-time discussion carried out in QQ

Such synchronous communications are frequently held among TLF members during their daily subtitling activities, which not only facilitate the delivery of instantaneous feedback on ideas and the ensuing decision-making, but also encourage members to become more engaged with each other by creating a sense of immediacy and social presence. Participants' responses to the questionnaire also show that their online interaction within the group's QQ chatrooms not only involves discussions of their subtitling tasks, but also of other aspects of their lives, their feelings and ideas in ways that they would not have been able to share before joining the group (section 5.5). By sharing such common experiences, TLF's participants are able to develop emotional connections and build trusting relationships. Although TLF participants start out as unknown people, fellow members often become semi-known contacts. Ultimately, some of these contacts evolve into relationships that are as strong as friendships or even kinships.

Based on what has been discussed, it can be said that the production process in TLF fansubbing group operates via a model of self-organising coordination that consists of four components: alignment, division of labour, workflow and aggregation. Establishing shared subtitling rules (i.e. alignment) is the first step towards coordination, through which individual actions can be directed at the same targets. Alignment illustrates the mechanism of self-organisation at the most basic level: actions that are not successful will normally be varied, whereas successful actions will be maintained and even reinforced as explicit written rules of conduct. Through mutual alignment and adaptation, homogeneity can appear across individual practices within a group. The more individual actions are already aligned, the faster newcomers will begin to endorse and abide by the alignment.

Alignment is not enough to achieve the maximum synergy (i.e. the whole that is more than the sum of its parts) between participants in the fansubbing group. Indeed, synergy requires individual actors to interact and complement each other's contributions and expertise, so that they can achieve better results than they would have achieved alone. Synergy in TLF is achieved through the other three components of self-organising coordination: division of labour, workflow and aggregation. Division of labour ensures that a subtitling project is modularised into separate tasks that can be performed in parallel, so that



individuals can self-assign tasks that they are most skilled at and cost them least effort. Workflow coordinates separate actions sequentially, such that spontaneous follow-up can happen soon after the previous actions are completed. All these different actions and their results are integrated into coherent outcomes through aggregation, which involves proofreading and publishing. This makes it necessary to apply a certain degree of hierarchical control over social relations of production to ensure the cost involved in the final stage of proofreading is kept sufficiently low. What counts here is not so much how individuals are arranged hierarchically, but how their actions are mobilised towards shared goals, while doing so without external control and enforcement.

### **6.5. Rules of computer-mediated communication**

Unlike the centralised “command-and-control” model underlying the state-controlled media production, subtitling activities in TLF operate more like decentralised networks that are essentially bottom-up, peer-to-peer, and rely on everyone to pull their weight and make contributions. More impressively, group members are able to create trusting collaborative relationships under unknown or semi-known conditions while providing a large variety of translated subtitles for Chinese viewers clustered around various social media platforms. Such collaborative activities go beyond institutional boundaries and geographical constraints, raising questions of what and how digital networked technologies are used by the fansubbing group to reconfigure social relationships and facilitate collective identity formation in virtual settings. To answer these questions, an investigation of the design feature of TLF’s platform and rules that govern interactions carried on the platform was conducted during my fieldwork. The data gathered through my fieldwork are presented and discussed in the following sections.

#### **6.5.1. Design features of TLF’s online platform**

The Internet is traditionally considered as a purely technological system made up of networked computer networks. This notion, as pointed out by Fuchs and colleagues (Fuchs 2010b, Fuchs and Hofkirchner 2005, Hofkirchner 2001), ignores the fact that it is human activities that make the Internet work (see

section 3.4.2). According to these scholars, the Internet should be conceptualised as a self-organising system that consists of a technological infrastructure and interacting human actors; the infrastructure is both the medium and the outcome of the interactions between human actors (see section 3.4.2).

If the Internet is conceived as a self-organising system with social actors as its components, it is more reliable to characterise Internet applications according to the human activities they support rather than the services they provide. In this respect, the typology of Web applications proposed by Fuchs and colleagues (Fuchs 2010b, Fuchs and Hofkirchner 2005, Hofkirchner 2001) offers a simple yet valuable analytical tool for identifying the types of networked information technologies that underpin social activities in the fansubbing group under study (see section 3.4.2). Based on the conceptualisation of information as a threefold dynamic process of cognition, communication and cooperation (Fuchs and Hofkirchner 1999), Fuchs and colleagues (*ibid.*) identify three types of Internet applications

- 1) Web 1.0 as a medium that triggers cognition, e.g. P2P file-sharing sites, websites, online archives, and Really Simply Syndication (RSS).
- 2) Web 2.0 as a medium for human communication, e.g. email, bulletin board system, and blogs.
- 3) Web 3.0 as a medium supporting human cooperation, e.g. wikis, shared groupware, and multi-user dungeons.

Based on this framework, three types of Web applications are identified, which are used by TLF fansubbing online community to facilitate daily group activities:

- 1) Web 1.0: a file-sharing network based on the technique of password-protected file transmission between users and servers (i.e. FTP) to share media content within the group.
- 2) Web 2.0: a) a blogging platform created via a free and open source blogging tool (i.e. WordPress), functioning as the group's website to promote its translated subtitles towards the public and to attract

potential participants; and b) a bulletin board system set up through FTP servers to facilitate asynchronous communication between group members.

- 3) Web 3.0: a set of shared groupware (i.e. subtitling software application SrtEdit and QQ instant messenger) to facilitate the collaborative fansubbing process.

By employing an array of communication technologies, TLF is reconfiguring who communicates what and to whom within a technologically-mediated environment. The FTP file-sharing technology enables TLF's subtitlers to share foreign media content among themselves and, hence, control access to the means of fansub production. Being able to control and access information previously unavailable in a state-monitored media environment generates a greater sense of agency and awareness among group members of what they are doing (i.e. exploring one's private interests and expressing oneself through subtitling one's favourite foreign content) and how they are utilising their collection of media content in a more sustainable way. This leads them to create their own codes of self-conduct that prioritise values of meritocracy, transparency, equal opportunities and accountability. Not only do these codes permeate all membership levels of the group, but also reflect members' sense of shared identity.

The group's blogging platform created via the open source WordPress system serves as a (one-to-many) communication tool that allows the group to popularise its slogan (i.e. SHARE THE FUN OF CREATION AND APPRECIATE THE BEAUTY OF SUBTITLES) and final products (i.e. fansubs) among the public. Taking advantage of the RSS feed widgets afforded by WordPress, the group syndicates its blogging content as RSS feeds, thereby creating viral opportunities to attract a wider audience and potential contributors. Through a (many-to-many) web-based forum, the group can aggregate distributed information and intelligence in achieving common goals, thereby reshaping who and when to contribute information and content within the forum. The subtitling software application (i.e. SrtEdit) and QQ instant messenger not only allow TLF's members to have real-time collaborative subtitling activities despite their geographic distance, but also help them to

create trusting relationships under anonymous conditions by sharing their emotions, ideas and interests that they would not have been able to share with people from their immediate social circles.

#### 6.5.2. Rules of communication

Given the fact that the core participatory activities in TLF are carried out within and through its online forum, it is crucial for the group to ensure that members' behaviour and actions are governed in harmonic ways that yield useful outcomes. On the one hand, the group's online forum can help group members to coordinate their actions by offering advantages such as:

- 1) bringing shared problems and issues to the attention of all group members in a transparent and efficient way;
- 2) bringing together the expertise, viewpoints and approaches of individual members;
- 3) providing simultaneous access to group resources, archived documents and postings;
- 4) allowing communication to occur at any time and at irregular intervals;  
and
- 5) allowing group tasks to be carried out both in parallel and in sequence.

On the other hand, the fact that communication through the online forum takes place through written language presents several limitations due to the absence of face-to-face contacts. First, the lack of communicative cues (e.g. body languages and facial expressions) makes it difficult for members to perceive whether their words are understood by others. Consequently, complex and ambiguous messages are likely to cause multiple interpretations and even misunderstandings. Second, while the anonymity afforded by the Internet can encourage more expressive and affective interactions, it can also encourage flame wars (e.g. swearing, insulting and spamming) as members do not have to worry about acting "appropriately" according to the prescriptive social norms that govern most interactions in offline contexts.

Since computer-mediated communications weaken the social presence of the communicators, they are more likely to exhibit “uninhibited verbal behaviour” (defined as “frequency of remarks containing swearing, insults, name calling, and hostile comments”) than they are in face-to-face groups (Kiesler *et al.* 1984: 1129). Such uninhibited behaviour, if left unregulated, can lead to the frailty of distributed coordination in a self-governed online group that relies only on mutual trust and reciprocity.

To investigate how communications are regulated within TLF’s online forum, it is first necessary to look more closely at the structure of the forum. As shown in Figure 6.11, the group’s forum consists of five main sections, namely: 1) TLF Forum Affairs; 2) TLF Media Zone; 3) TLF Subtitle Zone; 4) TLF Application for Moderators and Administrators; and 5) TLF Management Section. TLF Forum Affairs is a section used to publish rules and group management issues. TLF Media Zone is a section for group members to share media resources and discuss viewing experiences. Members who want to sync the video content with original subtitles can also claim the timing task in this section. The section of TLF Subtitle Zone is used for members to express their interest in being allocated the other three tasks (i.e. translation, proofreading and publishing) that the group’s subtitling projects consist of. The training tasks designed for newbies during the probationary period are also carried out in this section. As for the section of TLF Application for Moderators and Administrators, it is used for members to apply for managerial positions in the group. The final section, TLF Management Section, is devoted to discussions on group development and management issues, which can be only accessed by forum moderators and administrators.



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今日: 64, 昨日: 426, 会员: 129796

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TFL 管理区

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**内部小组讨论区**  
TFL 工作人员报告工作量的讨论区

Figure 6.11 TLF's online forum

To ensure a positive organisational climate within its forum space, TLF has developed a set of explicitly written rules of communication, which are published in the form of a sticky post<sup>80</sup> titled *Basic rules of conduct for TLF members* within the section TLF Forum Affairs. At the beginning of this sticky post, there is an introduction called *To all TLF members*, outlining “the most basic and simple requirement” to be met by TLF’s members, i.e. familiarising themselves with and follow “the rules of the game”:

The most basic and simple requirement is that you must familiarise yourselves with what is written in this sticky post in order to understand the rules of the game you are expected to play within this forum. As the saying goes, “When in Rome, do as the Romans do”. If you think this simple requirement is too tough, then TLF might not be a suitable place for you. Some people tend to misinterpret the freedom of expression in a virtual setting, and want to have their own ways of doing and saying things in this forum without following the rules made by the group. Such people should note the following piece of advice: Don’t wait until you are forced to leave the forum to realise the importance of rule-abiding.

The introduction of *To all TLF members* is followed by a set of rules, namely *TLF forum constitution*, *TLF members’ codes of conduct*, and *Ten netiquettes*. *TLF forum constitution* stipulates four fundamental principles for members to comply with:

- 1) posts and replies containing reactionary and pornographic content and information are prohibited;
- 2) posts and replies including content and information against the government regulations and laws on Internet use are prohibited;
- 3) for details, see Regulation on Internet Information Service of the People’s Republic of China [the hyperlink to this piece of legislation is provided];

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<sup>80</sup> A sticky post (or sticky thread) is a message stuck or pinned to the top of a discussion board due to the importance of the message.

- 4) for more details, see China's Administrative Provisions for Electronic Bulletin Services on the Internet [the hyperlink to this piece of legislation is provided].

These principles are indicative of the scope of self-censorship exercised by TLF as a result of the pervasive control imposed by the Chinese government on the Internet. The government deploys a variety of measures, also known as the “Great Firewall”, to keep its control over dissidents or activists, censor insults to the state, and monitor users’ online behaviours for potential threats to the established ideologies favoured by the Communist Party (section 2.3.2). One of the characteristics of China’s Internet censorship regulations is that they are rendered in deliberately vague language to regulate all information and content that “might harm the state’s honour, cause ethnic oppression, spread rumours, disrupt social stability, spread pornography, undermine state religious policy, or preach the beliefs of evil cults” (Bauml 2010: 705). Given the broad spectrum of these censorship regulations, activities carried out on China-based websites are likely to be over-censored. To make things worse, “there is no effective remedy for the victims of wrongful censorship, since all the censorship procedures are done by administrative departments and not through courts” (Zhang 2012: 58).

To stay in line with censorship regulations, many Chinese Internet Content Providers often invoke self-censorship to prevent the transmission of politically objectionable or sexually explicit content. A similar self-censorship mechanism is also applied by the fansubbing group as a way to protect itself from the nation’s censorship system, and to remind group members that they are operating at the mercy of the government. As written at the beginning of *TLF forum constitution*: “All members must abide the state’s laws and regulations, which is essential to the existence of this forum”. The group’s self-censorship mechanism is further manifested in another set of rules called *TLF members’ codes of conduct*. These rules outline common expectations to be met by group members when they communicate with each other:

- 1) Abusive language is prohibited. Topics involving secession, separatism, rebellion, horror, disclosing state secrets, pornography, violence,



discrimination, insults, and anything endangering the stability of the society are prohibited.

- 2) Any form of commercial advertising, including the promotion of state-licensed commercial Internet Content Providers, is prohibited on the forum.
- 3) The avatar (i.e. the username, profile picture and self-description) must not contain content of pornography, advertisement, horror and politically sensitive information.
- 4) No spam [i.e. sending the same message indiscriminately and repetitively to large numbers of recipients] on the forum. Posting using more than one account is prohibited.
- 5) Unauthorised use of media resources storied on the forum for profit-making and selling forum accounts to others are prohibited.
- 6) Posts that libel, slander, or defame the forum, the group and group members are prohibited.

These codes of conduct are devised by TLF to raise members' awareness of the nation's Internet censorship and guide their behaviour and content of their postings to avoid state censors. These codes also aim to prompt members to adhere to the non-commercial ethos upheld by the group, authenticate their virtual identities for accountability within the forum, and build a transparent communication environment in a trustful and friendly manner. Provided that all members can follow the guidelines listed above, the group's subtitling work remains within the boundaries of apolitical and non-commercial activities. Moreover, the guidelines allow TLF to overcome some pitfalls of computer-mediated communication, such as the unproductive activity of spamming and the creation of multiple identities in a virtual setting.

To better tackle the challenges raised by the lack of real world physical cues in written, computer-mediated communication, the group formulates *Ten netiquettes*, which are:

- 1) Remember that you are communicating with human beings

- 2) Adhere to the same standards of behaviour online that you would follow in the offline world
- 3) When in Rome, do as the Romans do
- 4) Respect the time, energy and resources contributed by others
- 5) Make a good impression
- 6) Share your expertise and knowledge
- 7) Respect others' privacy
- 8) No flame wars
- 9) Forgive others' mistakes
- 10) Respect yourself first in order to respect others

Overall, the communication rules devised by TLF illustrate that a self-governed community of volunteer translators that rarely relies on external coercion can evolve into a full-blown organisation with well-tailored rules to sustain trusting relationships in an electronic environment. Since these rules are crafted by members themselves based on their reactions to local circumstances, they are more willing to make an effort to enforce and follow their own rules. Those who violate the rules may suffer not only the loss of credibility but also experience feelings of guilt and shame. This is particularly true if a rule-violator is sanctioned by someone performing a monitorial role, who can make the sanction immediately effective and publicise it widely within the group.

In this respect, TLF has created the role of forum moderators, who check on discussions in different sections of the forum. Based on how well they believe they can outperform existing moderators, anyone in the group can apply for the job to monitor activities in their self-selected sections of the forum. The applicants can post their applications under a threaded message entitled *TLF Application for Moderators and Administrators*, which is visible to all group members. The application usually includes the following information:

- a brief self-introduction;
- the name of the section that the applicant wants to monitor;

- the rationale for this choice;
- the member's plans to manage and improve activities in this section;
- enough evidence of previous contributions made by the applicant, e.g. messages s/he has posted on the forum and/or the number of tasks s/he has accomplished by participating in the group's subtitling projects.

Successful applicants will be selected by existing forum administrators, who will notify the applicants by email and announce the selection results on the forum. The newly selected moderators are then granted the right to modify messages posted within the sections they choose to monitor. Applying graduated punishments, moderators can sanction improper behaviour on their assigned forum sections by deducting certain points of a member's "prestige" each time s/he posts an improper message. The membership status of a repetitive rule-breaker will be downgraded until there is no "prestige" point left. In this case, the rule-breaker's membership status will be labelled as "beggar" and this status will be made visible to the whole group.

According to what I observed on the group's forum, the most common cases where members' prestige points were deducted for posting improper messages happened when they were downloading video files stored on the forum section: TLF Media Zone. In this section, each video file was published by its raw provider (i.e. the person responsible for providing the source material to be used for the translation) as a message, in which one could find the downloading link of the video file. The first person to reply to the message, claiming to have the skills of spotting, was entrusted with the 'timing' task (section 6.4.2.2). For those who just wanted to download the content to watch it, they were required to reply the message either by clicking a red heart emoticon appeared next to the downloading link to show their gratitude to the raw provider, or sharing their previous viewing experiences if they had already watched the content somewhere else (e.g. in the theatre). Otherwise, the downloading link would remain invisible to those who did not reply the message.

Nevertheless, there were still quite a few rule-breakers who neither clicked the red heart emoticon to thank the raw provider nor shared their viewing experiences. Instead, they replied to the raw provider by sending spamming or

short meaningless messages such as “@!#?@!”, “haha”, “Great!”, or “Can’t wait to watch the video”. Such members were described by forum moderators as belonging to the ‘*guan shui tang*’ (literally ‘irrigation party’), who filled the forum with low-quality messages which were called ‘*shui tie*’ (literally ‘watery posts’), causing nuisance and unnecessary network traffic on the forum.

The punishment for the *guan shui tang* was quite harsh: they could face having their prestige points cut in half each time they posted a *shui tie*. For two-time rule-breakers, it was often the case that their membership status would have already been downgraded to “beggars”. Borrowing the prevalent bureaucratic expressions e.g. ‘*tiewan*’ (‘iron-fisted’) and ‘*yanda*’ (‘crackdown’), in Chinese official speeches, the forum moderator in charge of TLF Media Zone posted an announcement as a warning to the *guan shui tang* (see Figure 6.12 for the screenshot of the announcement):

We [the group’s forum moderators and administrators] always hold an “iron-fisted” attitude towards the *guan shui tang*, who could face severe “crackdown” for posting *shui tie*. For those beggars whose prestige points are between -10 to -1, they are given only one chance to redeem their prestige by following the instruction written here: [the URL linking to the instruction]. We would also like to warn everyone in the group: Please cherish your ID and membership. Don’t wait till it’s too late to regret [a bunny emoticon with a remorseful face, crying “no” out loud].



Figure 6.12 Screenshot of the warning message for spamming behaviour

According to the instruction available at the URL displayed in Figure 6.13, “beggars” were deprived of the right to access the video files stored on the forum. In order to regain the right, they had to make an appeal under the threaded message titled *Regaining prestige* in the forum section: TLF Forum Affairs. The first message (see Figure 6.13) in this thread was written by the moderator in charge of this section, which read as follows:

Please use brief and clear language to reply this message by writing down why your status is downgraded to “beggar”, and how you think or feel about being banned from accessing the video resources in the group. Instead, you could also talk about how you understand the rule about clicking the red heart emoticon to show your gratitude to raw providers. Hope you can continue your journey and enjoy the experience of freely downloading videos in the group again [a smiley face emoticon].



Figure 6.13 Screenshot of the first message in the thread 'Regaining prestige'

There had been over 150 “beggars” making appeals under the threaded message *Regaining prestige*. Some of them, particularly new members, explained that they did not read thoroughly the rule regarding what they should do when replying to raw providers. As put by a newbie,

I thought I should reply by saying things such as ‘Thank you for providing the content’, instead of getting myself familiar with the rule of clicking the red heart to thank the source providers. Now I understood that a red heart was all that they needed and such a simply way to show gratitude could protect the forum from information clutter.

There were also quite a few old members making appeals to redeem their status. According to their explanations, they were “just too excited to click the red heart icon” when they saw their favourite videos being made available by raw providers. Instead, they sent the providers “a lot of words of thanks and appreciation to express feelings of gratitude”. As acknowledged by an old member,

I did know the rule, but I just couldn’t help myself to say ‘thank you’ to the provider of the video file for my favourite film. As a result, my prestige points were deducted by 30 points by the moderator. This punishment was fair and reasonable, since the reason why I liked this forum so much was exactly because it was free from unnecessary spamming messages. Please give me another chance, so that I, together with everyone in the group, could maintain the liveliness and order of our forum.

“Beggars” whose attitude and explanations were accepted by the moderator as sincere and honest were given a second chance to reclaim their deducted prestige points and regain the right to participate in activities carried out on the forum. For those whose appeals were rejected by the moderator, they had to make another appeal until proven acceptable by the moderator.

As the group’s forum moderators are selected among members themselves, members can rest assured that someone with enough experience and knowledge of the forum is monitoring the behaviour of others. This encourages them to engage in the normal activities on the forum without worrying that others are stepping on rules defined by the group. Since everyone has the chance to be selected as moderator or administrator implementing or improving communication rules on the forum, members are also more willing to follow their own rules.

Moreover, the enforcement of graduated sanctions ensures swift and commensurate punishments for both minor and serious offenders, thereby increasing the accountability of group members. The capability to escalate punishments also allows forum monitors to warn repetitive rule-breakers that if they do not follow the rules they will lose their reputation and may eventually be banned from having their voice heard in the group. By deducting one’s prestige points as a punishment, the sanction becomes effective as the prestige points have a direct impact on one’s access (in terms of the bandwidth) to the media content stored on the group’s servers (section 6.3.3). Meanwhile, as participants can make a mistake by accident, TLF considers that they all deserve a second chance to make things right. Through this effective and relatively fair sanction system, members can sustain and build their cooperation over time.

## **6.6. Conclusion**

This chapter sets out to present and analyse data related to the governance mechanisms developed by the fansubbing online community *The Last Fantasy* (TLF) to sustain distributed communication and collaboration among loosely connected individuals and enhance their sense of togetherness and shared identity. One of the most interesting overall findings shows that the fansubbing

group is not “tapping the wisdom of the crowds” – the idea that “many are smarter than the few” (Surowiecki 2004: vii) – inherent in the so-called mode of “commons-based peer production” (Benkler 2006) or “co-creation” (Banks and Deuze 2009) among ordinary users of networked technologies. Instead, the vitality of the fansubbing group lies primarily in the way it has chosen to govern the wisdom of networked individuals, with their contributions and expertise synthesised and directed towards specific goals through clearly defined rules. Specifically, these rules are devised to solve three types of organisational dilemmas facing the fansubbing network:

- 1) The problem of free-riding: long-term collective interests are at odds with the short-term interests of individuals who tend to maximise their immediate gains on the provision of collective benefits.
- 2) The coordination problem: how to ensure that individual actions can smoothly complement each other across time and space in the absence of central direction and control mechanisms, and yet manage to maximise synergy between these actions, minimise the costs of individual efforts, and foster further contributions?
- 3) The dilemma between trust and control, or trust and monitoring/punishment: can cooperative behaviour be sustained only through mutual trust and reciprocity without sanction and punishment, as too much control can result in too little trust?

These problems are solved through a set of governance principles applied by the fansubbing group, which can be summarised as:

- 1) **Clearly defined community boundaries** characterised by a multi-layered hierarchy of rights and duties that determine who can use the infrastructural resources that constitute the network in accordance with the amount of contributions made by the users, thereby allocating membership benefits proportionally to required inputs.
- 2) **A self-organising and spontaneous mode of coordination** between individuals during the production process of fansubs, through which a subtitling project is modularised into separate tasks that can be self-assigned by suitable individuals in achieving their aligned standards of



subtitling, thereby making individual actions more synergetic while ensuring that the cost of integrating modules into a final product is low enough.

- 3) **Deployment of multiple options of Web technologies** to create a collaborative network, where an internally enforced monitoring system combined with graduated sanctions are applied to regulate how information should be communicated, thereby encouraging mutual trust and cooperative behaviour in a technologically-mediated environment.

These principles are similar to some of the design principles identified by Ostrom (2002) (outlined in section 3.3.2) that characterise long-lasting and robust self-governed communities of CPRs, such as: **clear boundaries** that define legitimate users of a CPR (principle 1); **congruence** (i.e. rules that govern the use of the CPR are congruent with local social conditions; and the benefits gained by users from the CPR, as defined by the rules, are proportional to the amount of contributions required on part of the users) (principle 2); **collective-choice arrangements** (users can participate in modifying the rules) (principle 3); a **monitoring** system through which users can monitor each other's behaviour (principle 4); and **graduated sanctions** (depending on the seriousness and recurrence of a violation) that can be applied immediately to rule violators (principle 5).

When individual members believe that the operational rules they jointly configured are effective in producing collective benefits and that monitoring (other members and themselves) can protect them from internal conflicts and external interferences (e.g. the sort of institutional controls over the distribution and mediation of audiovisual products exercised by media companies and censors), they are more likely to make a sustained self-commitment to the maintenance of the group's infrastructural resources. Since these resources are the end products of collective efforts as well as the material means that members interact with and through, contributing to the creation and maintenance of these resources is as much as a concrete activity of production as a social act of identity construction.

Identity-building in TLF is a process that occurs through the progressive integration of participants as they interact with both the social and material

components of the community. The whole process is characterised by an emphasis on the importance of starting out humbly, before progressing to more significant accomplishments. From this perspective, the socialisation process in TLF resembles “legitimate peripheral participation” (Lave and Wenger 1991) in communities of practice, where both core and peripheral members establish trajectories of participation which “give meaning to their engagement in practice in terms of the identity they are developing” (Wenger 1998: 155). Through the probationary period of peripheral observation, newbies can assimilate the rules and values of the fansubbing group and observe the activities of senior members. To develop any further, they have to build an identity for themselves and become more visible to the rest of the group. As pointed out by Lave and Wenger (*ibid.*: 53), learning involves the construction of identities and “is itself an evolving form of membership”.

The process of identity construction in TLF illustrates that full participation in fansubbing activities is not only driven by the members’ love and domain knowledge of their objects of fandom, but on a complex learning and socialisation process. TLF is therefore not only a place for Chinese media fans to share their love for foreign media products by translating these products, but also a place for them to learn how to participate in collaborative translation activities, how to communicate and form trusting relationships with each other, and how to build an identity that can help them to incorporate their ideas into the group and spread them to a wider audience.

## Chapter 7 Conclusion

### 7.1. Introduction

The potential of new media and technologies to create participatory spaces for online communities of amateur translators has attracted much scholarly interest in the field of TS. However, there has been very little on-the-ground research on amateur translation in non-Western countries; similarly, there has been little work so far on how this might foster new forms of citizenship and collective action. One of the most interesting contexts in which to explore these issues is China, as it presents a complex media landscape shaped by an authoritarian government that encourages open market capitalism; the sudden influx of global media content into a highly censored Internet environment; and a history of repressed free speech and expression that might challenge the legitimacy of the Communist Party. These conditions create a unique research locus where both information flows and self-expression practices are constrained and unrestrained in contradictory ways.

As indicated in section 1.2, this study set out to address the following overarching research question:

*How does an online assembly of Chinese fansubbers create and sustain a sense of community through their collaborative subtitling activities?*

In order to facilitate a dynamic conceptualisation of fansubbing networks, this study adopted a complex systems approach by taking into account both the internal and external, structural and agency-driven aspects of the functioning of such networks. Informed by self-organisation theory, this study defined fansubbing online communities as self-organising socio-technological systems, which allowed for a multidimensional analysis of the dynamics of such communities at the individual, organisational, social, and technological levels. Specifically, four interrelated dimensions were identified as crucial for community-building in a fansubbing network: 1) a sense of collective identity shared by members about their common interests, experiences, goals, and solidarity derived from their fansubbing activities; 2) the organisational structure created by members through their collective agency; 3) the governance mechanisms devised by members to maintain their organisational

structure as it is; and 4) the technologies deployed by members to facilitate their daily group activities.

Accordingly, four more specific and interconnected questions were formulated, with each underscoring a different dimension involved in the process of collective identity formation in a fansubbing group. These questions were then addressed through the data collected during the netnographic fieldwork I conducted in the fansubbing online community *The Last Fantasy* (TLF). The remainder of this chapter discusses the key findings with regard to the proposed research questions, assesses the theoretical and methodological implications of this study, and recommends directions for future research.

## 7.2. Main findings

Since the existence of a collective identity is the basis for arguing whether a loose network of amateur subtitlers constitutes a community, the first priority of this study was to establish whether such a collective identity was present (or absent) in TLF – as shown in the first of my research questions:

### **RQ1: Does a sense of collective identity exist among TLF fansubbing group members and, if so, what does it mean for them?**

The responses provided by research participants in the online questionnaire (Chapter 5) show that both new and veteran members in TLF widely perceive the existence of a shared sense of identity. This sense of “we-ness” is characterised by the participants’ strong emotional attachment to their group, as well as their orientation towards a common set of goals that set out to accomplish through their acts of translation: 1) enhancing the stability and longevity of the group; 2) reaching a wider audience; 3) promoting self-expression during the processes of subtitling; and 4) demonstrating their competence as fansubbers (in descending order of relative importance).

These goals reflect a set of new values that TLF’s fansubbers would appear to adopt throughout the different stages of participation in the group’s subtitling activities: solidarity; free sharing; independent thought and action; and self-fulfilment. These values hold them together as a community and define who they are as a fansubbing group. For them, being a “TLFer” is, first and

foremost, an expression of their commitment to their community. It is also about expanding their personal interests and co-creative experiences beyond the group and reaching a wider audience; exercising independence and individuality; and constantly demonstrating/improving their skills and competence as TLF's subtitlers.

The sense of "we-ness" shared among TLF participants is the result of their collective agency enacted through their day to day subtitling activities. The manifestations of this collective agency are evident in the structural organisation of the fansubbing group. My second research question thus aimed to gauge the extent to which the group's structural properties (i.e. membership criteria, organisational layers, and mechanisms for collective resources governance) reflect the shared definitions articulated by members about their collective identity:

**RQ2: How is the collective identity of TLF fansubbing group manifested in its organisational structure?**

Despite the rhetoric surrounding participatory culture that "anyone can participate", data pertaining to the group's governance mechanisms (Chapter 6) show that TLF has devised a significantly selective procedure to identify "good and valuable" participants. As illustrated in section 6.2 'Membership criteria', only those who are passionate about fansubbing; have the time, energy, and equipment needed to connect to the Internet; and possess the required degree of proficiency in foreign language(s) and digital literacy can present themselves as competent and reliable participants. In order to upgrade their status in the group, participants must gain respect, not in terms of their social status, but of their ability to make a sustained contribution and demonstrate their potential for leadership through scrupulous peer review. While on the surface it may seem that TLF's membership requirements are quite strict, they help to ensure that experienced members are open to and respect fellow members whose performance is steadily improving.

Insofar as members' roles can evolve from newcomers to core members, the group's organisational structure is characterised by a fluid, multi-layered hierarchy. This fluid hierarchy can limit the ability of core members to truly "dictate" to others how to discharge their role, because core members can only

exert their influence on communal decision-making processes in directions which (through their sustained participation) they believe are beneficial to the group's overall development. In other words, the group's leadership is based on social ties that they form by being part of a community. This differs greatly from the traditional Chinese leadership style, which is predominantly based on *guanxi* networks that mainly consist of blood ties and selected relationships to favour.

As far as the group's mechanisms for governing its collective resources are concerned, the data analysed in section 6.3 'Rules to manage group resources' suggest that individual fansubbers, in their capacity as autonomous and selfish agents, are not necessarily willing to contribute their private resources to the betterment of the entire group without coercion or monetary incentives. As a result, collective action problems (e.g. free-riding, coordination, and lack of trust) are inevitable but soluble. As my study of TLF fansubbing group has shown, collective wisdom can be harnessed from a loose network of individuals to produce and make a more sustainable use of their resources, as long as: members can participate in designing their own operational rules (principle 1); these operational rules are enforced by monitors selected from members themselves (principle 2) using graded penalties (principle 3); group monitors and the penalties they impose make it possible to discriminate members who can contribute to and hence draw on the group's collective resources from less productive members (principle 4); the monitoring and penalties serve to effectively restrict the use of group resources (given local social conditions) (principle 5) and allocate the efforts needed to produce fansubs proportionately to a series of tasks involved in subtitling projects (principle 6).

Overall, TLF fansubbing group exhibits structural properties that reflect the dynamics of the collective identity underpinning the group. Functioning as boundary markers that bind the group together and make it distinct from other groups (both internally and externally), the group's structural conditions allow it to attract participants, maintain and allocate resources in achieving shared goals, divide and coordinate individual actions, and identify certain members to lead or manage group activities. Through the collective agency of individual members, the group's organisational structure is reproduced and reinforced.

The structure, in turn, exerts an important influence on members' actions. This is a permanent self-organisation process in which the group's structural conditions and its members' actions mutually produce each other in a self-reflexive way.

While RQ2 is focused on the group's organisational structure and its management processes, RQ3 is centred on the actual socialisation process of individual members. In particular, it aims to establish whether they engage in any ritualised practices to reassert their sense of collective identity:

**RQ3: How is this collective identity maintained through collective group-specific practices?**

The data analysed in section 6.4 'Integration rules' show that TLF's fansubbers are engaging in new forms of sociality and practices that allow them to build a sense of familiarity and trust with each other in a virtual context. Using their pseudonyms to interact with each other, TLF members feel more free to explore and express their interests through consuming and subtitling their favourite foreign media products. Nevertheless, they still have to figure out whom to trust, so that they can build meaningful and sustained relationships with fellow members, and solve problems that they could not tackle individually during subtitling processes. As illustrated in section 6.4, TLF members have developed a series of rituals to ensure they are recruiting and interacting with the most trustworthy individuals. New members must: 1) pass an entry test; 2) perform a visual verification by sending a picture of oneself; 3) go through probationary period; 4) engage in different sub-teams responsible for different modules (e.g. obtaining raw materials, timing, and/or translating) involved in the process of subtitling; 5) assume the role of proofreader by combining separate modules into the final translated texts for the purpose of distribution; 6) take part in the supervision and hands-on training of newcomers; and 7) become forum moderators and administrators. While not everyone needs to go through step 5 – 7, no can become a proofreader or a forum moderator without having gone through steps 1 – 4. Through these rituals, participants learn that there is a progression that separates outsiders from successful participants in the fansubbing group.

These normalised practices are reinforced by a merit-based reward system, through which members can accumulate the set of digital badges that they need to establish their status and gain trust from the rest of the group. By working only with fellow members who have gained merit-badges, TLF members can minimise the risks derived from interacting with hitherto unknown individuals they come across within the fansubbing group. More importantly, the emotional connections and shared experiences that they gain from carrying out these rituals become part of the group's culture. This forms an invisible web that holds them together, turning them from unknown contacts into acquaintances, and even close friends.

Digital networked technologies are a crucial factor that empowers TLF's fansubbers to reconfigure their collective relationships and build a sense of togetherness. The last research question focuses on the digital technologies (the Internet and the software applications that run on the Internet) deployed by group members to facilitate their community-building activities:

**RQ4: What forms of digital networked technologies are deployed by the group to facilitate the formation and management of its collective identity?**

Data presented in section 6.5 'Rules of computer-mediated communication' show that there are three types of Web applications deployed by the fansubbing group: Web 1.0 (a FTP-based file-sharing network); Web 2.0 (a group blogging site created via WordPress, a members-only discussion board, and an instant messaging QQ); and Web 3.0 (a subtitling application called SrtEdit). All these applications share one feature: they encourage users to connect people who do not have pre-existing relationships, using their pseudonyms instead of real names.

Communications mediated by these applications often take place anonymously. Take QQ, for instance. This application allows a user to create multiple accounts using different pseudonyms and false personal information, which, as a result, encourages the user to express him/herself in ways that may not be consistent with his/her identity in the offline world. This is different from other platforms such as Renren (the Chinese Facebook), where users are expected to create one account using genuine personal details (e.g. names, gender, age, and education) to interact with people they already know. Using anonymity to



organise their subtitling activities, TLF's fansubbers strategically maintain a boundary between themselves and those from their immediate social circles, knowing that what they say or do in the fansubbing group will not be judged or interfered with by people they know. Under anonymous conditions, participants in TLF are brave enough to step out of their *guanxi* networks; engage in collaborative translation and interactions with like-minded people; and build a community outside of their own lifestyle enclaves.

### 7.3. Implications of the findings for the Chinese society

As much as the Chinese government has been trying to control the Internet to its own liking, virtual borders are permeable. Blocked information and content are still able to enter China. Chinese media fans and consumers with access to the Internet, particularly those born in the 80s and 90s (the largest category of Internet users in China), are becoming involved in processes of media production, mediation and distribution through various virtual fansubbing communities. In the context of China, where political information and free speech are heavily censored and suppressed, it is precisely the recreational focus of fansubbing communities that keeps them relatively safe from Internet censors. These online communities provide Chinese fansubbers with a benign environment where they can practice new forms of social cooperation and association that they would not be able to do in offline settings.

TLF's fansubbers do not join the group to become activists, nor do they concern themselves with articulating ways to democratise China. Instead, they are driven by their interest in consuming and translating foreign content that suits their personal interests and taste. Over time, however, their co-creative activities may contribute to significantly transforming their country in several ways.

**First**, Chinese netizens who become involved in fansubbing activities transform themselves from lonely and isolated into more open and connected individuals. Through fansubbing, they meet like-minded people outside their restrictive *guanxi* circles and build online communities that are relatively independent from the institutions that govern their everyday offline lives. In doing so, they are developing a new set of values around solidarity, sharing,

self-expression, and self-direction. These values are increasingly divergent from Confucian principles of conformity, emotional self-restraint and adherence to authorities and the state-enforced collectivism which discourages the pursuit of self-interest. Nevertheless, Chinese fansubbers are not totally disconnected from institutions. For the most part, they do not want to violate the governmental legislation on Internet use; they even exercise self-censorship to prevent misconduct by fellow group members and shield their activities from potential sanctions. But at the same time, they do not necessarily comply totally with traditional values, particularly when these values conflict with those adopted through their fansubbing activities. This reflects a self that is not divided, but constantly negotiates the tension between Chinese collectivism and Western individualism.

**Second**, in building communities with fellow members, Chinese fansubbers are introduced to the idea and the practice of free association – membership of such communities is voluntary and anyone can opt out at any time. This is where civic engagement comes into play. Through the community they have become embedded in, they are able to mutually negotiate and align their personal interests with one other, and expand their influence in the wider society by providing the public with Chinese subtitles for foreign media products that have been either banned or extensively re-edited by Chinese media regulators. The high level of commitment demonstrated by Chinese fansubbers towards distributing their fansubs for the benefit of the public indicates that they are willing to risk engaging in potentially sensitive actions in the service of civic needs.

**Third**, through their continued involvement in fansubbing activities, even if these are purely recreational in nature or carried out for the purpose of self-expression, Chinese media fans and consumers have accumulated a multitude of digital and socialisation skills that are crucial to networked civic participation. They have learned how to circumvent China's Great Firewall to obtain blocked foreign content, and how to bypass censors to translate and re-circulate the content within the "Chinanet". In doing so, they also become more confident in assessing and building trust with unfamiliar yet like-minded individuals within virtual settings; communicating their ideas effectively with one another so that they can work together as a team during processes of

translation; and seeking wider recognition for their collective work among the Chinese public. The more active they become in their fansubbing communities, the more skills they acquire, and the more likely they are to perceive themselves as agents of change in their communities. Such experiences are preparing them to become civic agents with a repertoire of skills that would enable them to engage in more complex and civically oriented collective actions.

**Fourth**, by consuming/translating foreign content that is not available in China's media marketplace, Chinese fansubbers are likely to encounter information that the government regards as sensitive or subversive. Coming across what they may perceive as censored material presents them with a moral dilemma, as they realise the information that the government wants them to access is at odds with that narratives and values that their subtitled work conveys. Becoming aware of this conflict often leads them to readjust their perception of what counts as "good" information, and to reconstitute their own selves in the light of those new ideas and knowledge contained in the content they subtitled. In doing so, they recalibrate their moral compass and come to value the advantages of accessing open, transparent information. Ultimately, they are able to redefine who they want to be and how they should actually act to become that person.

The involvement of Chinese media consumers in fansubbing activities is bringing about processes of self-transformation, leading to the emergence of a new type of Chinese citizen who is highly skilled at acquiring, translating, disseminating information; adept at socialising with people from various backgrounds and with different interests; empowered to assess and build trust in the context of virtual settings; and able to join or form large online groups by strategically deploying various Web applications to enhance group dynamics. By finding ways to escape the constraining pressures of their *guanxi* circles and the authoritarian government, and becoming part of more inclusive communities of interest based on voluntary membership, Chinese netizens and media 'prosumers' are slowly laying the foundations for the development of a more sustainable public sphere, defined by Habermas (1996: 360) as "a network for communicating information and points of view".

For Habermas (*ibid.*), conversations in the public sphere usually start out as private rather than public matters, and are sustained by casual gathering places such as salons, coffee-shops, journals and newspapers. The modern day venues for this public sphere are replaced by digital platforms owned by commercial companies, where users' interactions primarily revolve around mundane topics, such as pop culture, music and video games. While Chinese fansubbers using these platforms often see them as relatively safe spaces where they can explore their private interests with like-minded people, some of them may eventually come to see these platforms as spaces for civic transformation. In this sense, the exploration of personal interests on commercially run digital platforms is conducive to the emergence and development of a public sphere in China.

Apart from the positive outcomes for Chinese citizens involved in the practice of fansubbing, their fansubbing experience also raises a number of new questions. Since participants in this study are, first and foremost, concerned with their in-group stability and cohesion – the relationships that they have been building may not transcend their group interests. For instance, what happens if some participants are no longer fans of certain media texts that are being subtitled by their group? Will they have to fake their interests in order to take part in group activities? Will the pressure to conform to their group's interests prevent them from leaving the group freely?

Also, participants in this study are primarily interested in exploring and expressing themselves by consuming and subtitled their favourite content. This ongoing exploration of one's self-expression could make them feel that they do not share any common connections with society at large. While they have developed many rituals on how to (inter)act in a virtual environment, these rituals may not guide them on how to live in the actual society. This limited engagement with communities of one's own kind and of one's own choosing may leave Chinese media consumers and fans with little incentive to work problems out when their relationships become boring or conflicted, or to connect with people who do not share similar lifestyles, attitudes and values. This could lead to a narrow and narcissistic expression of self-indulgence, creating self-absorbed citizens who are too busy with making their own market choices and pursuing their individual pleasure to participate in civil society.

Last but not least, the biggest threat to the fansubbing movement in China may be the Chinese government. As Chinese fansubbers develop their expectations for a more open media system, they may not just want to express such expectations to their fellow members and audiences. They may also want the government to be more responsive to their needs and interests. It is fair to say that the state has become more willing to tolerate and even embrace participatory fandom and consumption of external media cultures (e.g. popular movies, songs, video games and idols), because such consumption activities not only contribute to the country's economic boom, but are also likely to divert the public from the critical discourse of civic engagement that could threaten the state's legitimacy and stability (Fung 2009).

However, the government's capacity to accommodate participatory fan(sub) cultures does not necessarily entail its willingness to have an open dialogue with grassroots participants about their desires to go beyond the given cultural, economic, and political parameters. There are numerous cases where the authorities remain tolerant until they spot any systematic or large-scale groupings of fan communities that might threaten the social stability or the order of the market economy.

The most recent case at the time of writing this chapter (November 2014) was the temporary closure of many established fansubbing sites (including TLF and other well-known sites, e.g. YYeTs, mentioned in this thesis), following the government's efforts to further restrict the amount of foreign content that can be legally distributed in China<sup>81</sup>. Critics of the event pointed out that the crackdown was connected more to the government's desire to strengthen controls over what is watched by its citizens than tackling the piracy problem (Lin 2014).

The public passion for these fansubbing groups was evident in the many tributes and outpouring of thanks posted on Chinese social media sites, such as

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<sup>81</sup> In February 2015, TLF makes a comeback, and continues to create and publish Chinese subtitles on their group's blogging site for the public to download. All the original video content is transferred and stored on FTP servers owned by members living overseas and shared only among group members themselves. Around the same time, the website of YYeTs fansubbing group is also reopened, with an announcement that it has transformed into an online community that only provides news and information related to American TV series. As the largest fansubbing group in China, YYeTs is listed by the Motion Picture Association of America as one of the worst sources of online DVD piracy in the world (Olesen 2014).

Sina Weibo. A Weibo user, for instance, wrote: “Thank you for all the years of hard work. So grateful! [beating heart and crying face emoticons]” (Olesen 2014). Another user wrote that it would be a loss for everyone if fansubbing groups were to disappear forever, because the overseas educational and entertainment content subtitled by these groups had brought her “out of the shadows” and offered her “abundant fun” (*ibid.*).

In the face of a repressive government, Chinese media fans and consumers’ desires and efforts for a more open and transparent media environment may lose momentum. This could lead to a sense of apathy and indifference among these media enthusiasts as they have nowhere to channel their passion, expertise and commitment to build or participate in voluntary subtitling communities, which have played such an important role over the past decade in ushering a wave of global media content that aptly served as cultural references through which Chinese people express themselves and communicate with each other.

#### **7.4. Theoretical and methodological implications**

Collaborative, community-based translation is an emerging and fast evolving phenomenon in today’s digital world of instant communications and multimedia publishing. Many translation scholars (e.g. Cronin 2010, Littau 2011) have highlighted the potential of new media and technologies to turn community translation into “an instrument of human political intervention” (Cronin *ibid.*: 5), without, however, providing a coherent theoretical or methodological framework for the study of community translation as a technologically-inspired human activity. Theoretical and methodological limitations have constrained current research in several ways:

- Most studies tend to provide static “snapshot” accounts of various aspects of community translation activities (e.g. textual features of amateur output, technologies, workflow organisation, and motivations of amateur translators, to give but a few examples), yet the dynamics of this phenomenon are still not well understood.
- Any form of community translation carried out by any group of amateur translators is bound to influence/be influenced by their external

social conditions, yet the real-life situations that amateur translators encounter and how they internalise these situations in their everyday activities still remain under-explored.

- It is difficult to address this question without an insider's perspective. Innovative methods are crucial to gain this sort of insight, as they allow scholars to gain a thorough technical and cultural understanding of amateur mediators and the technological platforms in which they operate.

This study therefore is an attempt to go beyond these theoretical and methodological limitations. From a theoretical perspective, I consider complexity thinking as a good starting point to arrive at a dynamic, systemic conceptualisation of community translation. The rationale to adopt this thinking is that community translation is often practised in a large-scale, spontaneous and networked manner; and involves complex interconnections of humans with material artefacts, including digital texts, technologies, translation tools, and social and physical environments, to name a few. The simultaneously dynamic and systemic inter-relationships between all these elements can be effectively addressed by concepts (e.g. complex systems, self-organisation and emergence) drawn from complexity science for this is a discipline that provides researchers with a holistic perspective – “for seeing interrelationships rather than things, for seeing patterns of changes rather than static ‘snapshots’” (Senge 1990: 68).

Among scholars who adopt complexity thinking to explain complex social phenomena and problems, I find Fuchs and his theory of social self-organisation particularly suited to my research topic, as it offers a framework of how self-initiated, networked organisations (e.g. fansubbing networks) maintain and reproduce themselves (i.e. synchronous self-organisation) as a way to adapt to and change their environment (diachronic self-organisation). Central to Fuchs' theory is the idea that systems are self-organising, and are structurally coupled, that is open to other systems that constitute each other's environment. However, the ways in which agents operating in a system (including their actions and the resources that they build through their actions) are arranged is completely determined by the system's own internal processes

(i.e. its organisationally closed identity). The organisational relations between agents lead naturally to hierarchies, in the sense that agents form a multitude of subassemblies at different organisational levels in order to better cope with environmental complexity. The relationship between these levels is captured by the concept of emergence: higher levels incorporate qualities that are present on lower levels.

The implications of Fuchs's theorisation of systems for empirical studies of community translation are as follows:

- The idea that systems are self-organising and mutually adaptive provides a much more subtle and flexible way to understand community translation. It allows us to study the organisational dynamics within a system itself (i.e. a certain type of amateur translation networks), while still taking into account systemic interconnections between such networks and other systems (e.g. economic, political and cultural systems).
- The understanding that each system takes all other systems as its environment makes it possible to reject the presumption of hierarchical relationships between interconnected systems or phenomena (e.g. the idea that certain translation practices or their artefacts are "higher" than others). Rather, 'hierarchy' is understood as a naturally emergent consequence of the coordination between agents *within* a system (i.e. participants in an amateur translation network) as they react to changes from the environment.
- The relationship between different hierarchical levels (particularly the levels of individuals, structure and system) within a system is captured through the dialectical notion of emergence. The concept of emergence recognises that any given level of a hierarchy contains the qualities of lower levels as well as additional qualities of its own, but that each level has its own emergent patterns and governing rules, and hence, can be subject to individual analysis and interpretation through whatever method the researcher deems most effective.



The relationship between human practices and social structures has long been addressed by sociologists in various ways, whether in terms of Giddens's (1984) structure-agency theory or Bourdieu's (1984) notions of habitus, capital and field. Their attempts to deal with the macro-micro dialectic significantly overlap with the concept of emergence: how the enormous complexity of individual actions at the micro level can give rise to patterns of social relations and values at the macro level. The interplay between these sociologists' approach to the analysis of structural patterns and individual actions, on the one hand, with systems theory, on the other, has the potential to enrich our understanding of translation as a social practice. From this new perspective, translation is carried out by individuals who are both socially structured and structuring agents. This is particularly true given that globalisation and digitisation have created a digital global social space, where the notion of "society" as a nation-state with clearly demarcated economic, political and cultural boundaries is becoming increasingly obsolete. Complexity science, on the other hand, offers a new set of conceptual tools to help explain community translation, a phenomenon by its nature involves large-scale connections and collaborations beyond spatial, temporal and linguistic constraints.

As discussed above, a complex systems approach enables the theorisation of amateur translation networks as socio-technological systems where the social is intimately intermeshed with the technological infrastructures and material artefacts that constitute such networks. To uncover how these intertwined connections are integrated in amateur translators' everyday life and become meaningful to them requires innovative techniques and methods. Netnography was adopted in this study because its object of study, fansubbing, takes place in virtual online spaces. The highly flexible and hybrid nature of netnography meant that I could incorporate various techniques to examine the complex connections between people, digital artefacts and use of the technologies involved in fansubbing activities.

To a great extent, netnography has facilitated an in-depth and nuanced understanding of how fansubbing networks may self-organise into efficient, hierarchically structured systems. As clearly shown by the findings derived from my fieldwork, there are complex processes through which newcomers of a fansubbing group evolve into successful participants – essential to the very

success of the group as a whole. While the whole fieldwork was conducted from my home (in Manchester) via my digital devices (a PC and a smart phone), the research remained faithful to standard ethnographic practices. Through my observations and interaction with TLF members through the Internet, I was able to gain access to daily practices within my chosen research community.

Even though netnography has developed a set of methodological conventions (i.e. research planning, entrée, data collection and analysis, ensuring ethical standards, and presenting findings) for researchers to follow when conducting online ethnography, applying these procedures during my actual fieldwork was far from a straightforward process. There are two methodological issues that emerge as important and worth discussing. First, the notion of online ‘fieldsite’ as a pre-existing, discreet site a researcher enters and inhabits needs re-thinking when conducting netnographic research on amateur translation communities. My own experience indicates that the ‘fieldsite’ is an ongoing definition of the researcher’s trajectories of participation in the research community. In the early stage of my fieldwork, I only identified one online platform (i.e. TLF’s blogging site) as my fieldsite. As I became more enmeshed in the community, I realised that the community’s activities were not confined to one platform, but that they took place on multiple ones. As a result, the ‘site’ of my fieldwork expanded as it progressed. This confirms the view held by digital ethnographers like Hine (2007) and Burrell (2009) about the ‘fieldsite’ as a network or as the summing up of the connections that the researcher traces between people, things and (physical/virtual) places. Thus, to participate in the fieldsite is not about entering or walking into it, but about walking *with* – where “‘with’ implies not a face-to-face confrontation but heading the same way, sharing the same vistas, and perhaps retreating from the same threats behind” (Lee and Ingold 2006: 67).

In this regard, the participant-observation stance that I adopted in TLF fansubbing group proved to be effective as it allowed me to access the group members-only forum and QQ chatrooms, build rapport with my participants, and collect data to address my research questions. Nevertheless, my dual-identity as a researcher and participant inevitably entailed some tensions between my commitments to engaging in the group’s daily activities as one of

the participants and my commitment to maintaining a sufficient analytical distance from them. This presents another challenge in my study, as I found myself constantly struggling to find a balance between these two identities, trying to establish which one could provide me with the best opportunity to understand my participants. This was further complicated by my participants' access to social media, which allowed them to investigate my digital identity and form their own impressions on me.

Bearing this in mind, and from the very beginning, I openly described myself as a PhD candidate writing a thesis about the fansubbing group TLF and the fact that I was also becoming a "TLFer" in my online profiles: WordPress, Sina Weibo, QQ and Douban – social networking sites that were also popular among my participants. The privacy settings for my profiles on these sites were managed in such a way that TLF participants browsing them could gain access to archival data (e.g. photos, interactions and blogging posts) I had generated over several years once we 'friended' each other on these social networking sites. While this made me feel rather exposed at times, it was a small price to pay in return for the openness and reciprocity I experienced in my interaction with TLF members. It also allowed me to experience the vulnerability that participants in my study may feel while I was conducting my fieldwork – even when this was carried out in a virtual setting and participants could not reveal certain aspects of themselves (e.g. physical appearance, mannerisms) involuntarily.

My attempt to achieve maximum openness and reciprocity led to two major results: the group fully welcomed me as one of their own while, at the same time, my academic identity was clearly known to them. In this way, I was not only actively participating in the fieldsite, but also weaving myself into it by sharing my interests in translation, pop culture and media with my fellow participants during our daily subtitling activities. These interactions allowed me to build trust with fellow TLF members by presenting myself as a credible and trustworthy researcher-fansubber, and to benefit from my participants' sincere and thoughtful responses to the questionnaire.

Prior to the advent of the digital age, the researcher often exercised great control over which aspects of his/her identity were disclosed to the research

community. Research participants, on the other hand, often had little access to the researcher's personal details. Digital and social media technologies have the potential to mitigate such power imbalances by creating more permeable research relationships in which both the researcher and the participants can become objects of study. Based on my own experience, I would encourage other scholars interested in carrying out ethnographic studies of translation communities to connect with amateur translators by opening up their digital identities (albeit cautiously depending on the sensitivity of the research topic and the potential threat it may pose for both the researcher and the research subject). Indeed, our openness impacts our abilities to access the research community, to gather data during fieldwork, and to become a part of meaningful activities within that community. In doing so, we are also engaging in new forms of exchange and mutual investigation, thereby making a step forward into more equitable research relationships.

#### 7.5. **Future research**

While my study provides a theoretical and methodological model that can be useful to explore the dynamics of community translation and, in particular, those relatively stabilised networks of amateur mediators, more empirical studies across different cultures and social contexts need to be conducted to further test and refine this model. Further research should also explore what Pérez-González (2010) terms “*ad hoc* activist mediators” who use digital media and technologies in relatively spontaneous ways to form temporary translation communities for the purposes of short-term collective action.

These amateur mediators resemble what complexity scientists call “intelligent swarms” or “smart mobs” (Aingers *et al.* 2003, Rheingold 2002). Essentially, a smart mob is a self-organising group of like-minded people who coordinate their actions through the use of mobile communication technologies to achieve shared goals; significantly, they are able to pursue their goals without any one of them assuming a leadership role. Rheingold (2003: xiii) predicts that with the proliferation of mobile digital devices to connect to the Internet and the popularisation of wearable technologies, smart mobs will grow in numbers in the next decade. Smart mobs will be able to change “the way people meet, mate, work, fight, buy, sell, govern, and create”, and hence the way they

engage in the translation of various digital texts to bring about their desired social changes. Potentially, concepts drawn from complexity science can become valuable tools to explore the organisational tactics, power dynamics and relationships inherent in smart mob-driven forms of translation. This also makes it urgent to carefully interpret these concepts before they can be applied in the field of Translation Studies.

Due to time and space limitations, I was only able to focus on collective identity formation and management in one fansubbing group (TLF). Nevertheless, TLF is reasonably representative of the large, well-established fansubbing networks that fans of mainstream Western media content have formed in China. Existing fansubbing networks in the country are becoming more diverse in various ways (age, size of participants, and the genre of the content they choose to subtitle). Consequently, it would be interesting for future researchers to examine whether the community building processes that I have identified in this project can be observed in fansubbing communities that differ from TLF along one or more dimensions.

Furthermore, my findings from this study suggest that affective self-expression plays a significant role in motivating Chinese consumers to form or join networks of self-mediation. The next step is to investigate how such emotional factors affect the ways in which Chinese amateur subtitlers express themselves through/in their own self-mediated audiovisual texts. A closer textual analysis of their subtitled texts would reveal whether/how different visual and acoustic semiotic modes are affectively mobilised and mediated during the process of subtitling. To that end, multimodal transcription (e.g. Thibault 2000, Baldry and Thibault 2006) can be adopted as an effective methodological tool to shed light on how semiotic resources used in the source text are interpreted and deployed by Chinese fansubbers to convey their own communicative intentions.

Another potential area for future research would involve examining the possible consequences that arise from the involvement of Chinese media consumers in participatory, self-mediated online communities. These prosumers express themselves through the mediation of their favourite media content and explore their interests with like-minded individuals. Consequently, this could lead to the perception that the gap between their own communities

and other groupings formed by individuals from other sections of society is becoming ever wider. Specifically, this could result in the marginalisation of certain social collectivities, such as farmers and migrant workers, in China. This changing perception could intensify social stratification around wealth, education and occupation differences. Social stratification could potentially prevent Chinese amateur mediators from constructing solidarity through the relationships they build outside their fandom lifestyle. Whether they can channel their desire for self-expression into civic activism through their acts of translation definitely deserves future observation and investigation.

Perhaps, the biggest constraint for Chinese media fans' participatory translation activities is the Chinese government that wishes to maintain strong authoritarian control over media content while seeking the maximum share of the media market. Operating in a state-controlled and market-based media environment, Chinese amateur mediators inevitably face potential risks, such as legal disputes over the ownership of amateur translations distributed on commercial platforms; and government shutdown when sensitive information is translated and circulated by amateur translation networks. Due to these potential threats, the future development of such networks is largely uncertain. Future research should pay more attention to the inter-systemic dynamics between amateur translation networks, (domestic/foreign) commercial media companies, and the Chinese governance regime with respect to Internet censorship and online copyrighted content.

To conclude, this study is original in a number of fronts. First, it shifts attention from a traditional, reductionist paradigm towards the direction of complexity thinking that offers enough conceptual tools with which to explain the phenomenon of community translation both as emerging from particular complex human interactions and as being co-determined by complex contextual factors. Also, the methodological framework developed by this study has a strong potential for application in research on how ordinary users of digital technologies are engaged with self-mediation practices in their everyday lives. In a media environment where the boundaries between the individual, media technologies and day-to-day practices have collided, we need to more explicitly acknowledge that user mediated (audiovisual) media are being circulated and used in a variety of private and public, domestic and

international, isolated or connected spatiotemporal environments. The understanding of the role played by amateur translation on everyday media experience is therefore of increased importance. It is my hope that this research can help to enrich this understanding and will open up new lines of enquiry around the permeable and shifting boundaries between media production and consumption, public and private, fixed and mobile media use, or even between the senses of ourselves.

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# Appendix I Homepage of TLF's blogging site

TLF中文字幕站  
分享创作之乐，共赏字幕之美

字幕论坛 开放课程 剧集TVShow 纪录片 声明 招募 译者名录

请输入关键字...

欢迎各位同学对字幕组已经发布的作品进行纠错，反馈翻译问题，帮助我们改进  
请任何组织和个人在拿TLF字幕组的字幕进行二次加工制作时，能保留字幕组的译者信息

字幕组字幕发布变动公告

2013年3月6日 imp 23条评论



TLF字幕组的作品将首发于论坛，欢迎大家跟译者就电影和字幕问题进行交流  
论坛地址：点击访问  
NOTE:字幕如有更新，也于论坛为准  
best，谢谢支持TLF字幕组

原创

Game.of.Thrones.S05E04/ 冰与火之歌 权力的游戏 第五季第四集 鹰身人子之

2015年5月4日 雪梨 没有评论



【字幕翻译】托尼瀑谷神父 JasonLee freesand lydia萌 LordVader  
【字幕校对】LordVader  
【字幕统筹】饭离烨  
【对应版本】Game.of.Thrones.S05E04.HDTV.x264-Xclusive  
【字幕下载】Game.of.Thrones.S05E04@TLF  
[.....]  
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SRT, 原创, 简体中文, 繁体中文, 美剧, 英文  
freesand, JasonLee, LordVader, lydia萌, 托尼瀑谷神父, 饭离烨

Person.of.Interest.S04E19 疑犯追踪 第四季第十九集

2015年5月1日 雪梨 1条评论



【字幕翻译】lady5bird JasonLee 猫在江湖 飞翔的鸡  
【字幕校对】lydia萌  
【字幕统筹】饭离烨  
【对应版本】person.of.interest.419.hdtv-lol & Person.of.Interest.S04E19.720p.HDTV.X264-DIMENSION  
【字幕下载】普通版Person.of.Interest.S04E19@TLF  
[.....]  
Read more

SRT, 原创, 简体中文, 繁体中文, 美剧, 英文  
JasonLee, lady5bird, lydia萌, 猫在江湖, 飞翔的鸡, 饭离烨

Person.of.Interest.S04E18 疑犯追踪 第四季第十八集

2015年5月1日 雪梨 没有评论



【字幕翻译】JasonLee 猫在江湖 飞翔的鸡  
【字幕校对】lydia萌  
【字幕统筹】饭离烨  
【对应版本】person.of.interest.418.hdtv-lol & Person.of.Interest.S04E18.720p.HDTV.X264-DIMENSION  
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JasonLee, lydia萌, 猫在江湖, 飞翔的鸡, 饭离烨

Person.of.Interest.S04E17 疑犯追踪 第四季第十七集

2015年4月29日 雪梨 没有评论



【字幕翻译】lady5bird JasonLee 猫在江湖 飞翔的鸡  
【字幕校对】lydia萌  
【字幕统筹】饭离烨  
【对应版本】person.of.interest.417.hdtv-lol & Person.of.Interest.S04E17.720p.HDTV.X264-DIMENSION  
【字幕下载】普通版Person.of.Interest.S04E17@TLF  
[.....]  
Read more

SRT, 原创, 简体中文, 繁体中文, 美剧, 英文  
JasonLee, lady5bird, lydia萌, 猫在江湖, 飞翔的鸡, 饭离烨

Person.of.Interest.S04E16 疑犯追踪 第四季第十六集

订阅

加入TLF字幕组  
了解TLF-忆[PDF]

译者Top100(根据作品数量呈现)



TLF字幕组 其他

+加关注

#Game of Thrones# #权力的游戏 第五季#  
第四集 鹰身人子之 【字幕翻译】@托尼瀑谷神父 JasonLee freesand @Lydia萌fromTLF @赤毒舌LV 【字幕校对】@赤毒舌LV 【字幕统筹】@饭离烨 【字幕&影片下载】论坛 http://t.cn/RApRz23 字幕站 http://t.cn/RA1RTp W下周开始将随播出日程正常更新[求关注]



5月4日 16:43 转发 | 评论

#Person of Interest# 疑犯追踪第四季十八集  
【字幕翻译】JasonLee 猫在江湖 @Future\_默默Farm 【字幕校对】@Lydia萌fromTLF 【字幕统筹】@饭离烨 十九集 【字幕翻译】!

功能

链接

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评论RSS  
WordPress.org

T.L.F.主站

Meta

注册  
登录

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## Appendix II Screenshot of the “Recruitment” page on TLF’s site

TLF中文字幕站

分享创作之乐，共筑字幕之美

字幕论坛

开放课程

剧集TVShow

纪录片

声明

招募

译者名录

请输入关键字...

招募

2012年9月7日

关于TLF字幕组的问答

从字幕组元老们的回忆中全面了解TLF字幕组：TLF史记-TLF字幕组回忆录

Q：TLF字幕组是什么组织？都由什么人组成？

A：TLF字幕组是一个网络字幕翻译兴趣小组，由来自全球各地的华人影视及翻译爱好者组成，成员大多数是年轻人。

Q：TLF字幕组的历史？

A：TLF字幕组成立于2002年7月，是国内成立最早的网络影视字幕组之一。成立初期也是网络DivX影视开始流行的时候，最初以字幕分享开始，后来很快转入原创翻译阶段。从成立之初到目前成员累积达到数百人，活跃成员维持在几十人的规模。

Q：TLF字幕组主要做什么？

A：TLF主要将外文影视字幕翻译为中文包括时间轴制作，主要涉及电影、美国电视剧及大学开放课程，将来还可能涉及其他领域。TLF字幕组是翻译小组，不发布任何视频内容。

Q：TLF字幕组的工作流程是怎样的？

A：通常，成员向版主申请翻译某部影片，如果和其他成员没有冲突，版主会交给该成员原版本外文字幕，成员利用各种专用软件对照影片将外文台词翻译成汉语，完成后交给版主，版主再找有经验的成员（有可能是翻译本人）对照影片校对一遍，然后就可以发布了。有时会有多名成员合作完成一部影片的情况。

Q：TLF字幕组盈利不？

TLF字幕组从未有盈利的想法和做法，我们的组员多是学生和职场人士，从管理员到每一个组员都是利用闲暇时间投入，赚钱不是我们的目的，做出好字幕才是根本；如你所见，TLF上面没有一个广告，也不会对会员收费，和一些商业化的影视网站有本质区别。

Q：既然字幕组不盈利，那服务器等支出怎么办？

字幕组论坛服务器每年的成本费用在几千元左右，多是管理员，版主和TLF资深元老会员自愿掏腰包解决。

Q：好字幕是什么样的？

A：一份字幕的好坏并没有固定的标准，但是通常具有以下特点：时间轴准确；翻译忠于台词又不拘泥于台词，翻译者可以有所发挥，但是不能和影片表达的思想冲突，适当地方可以注释；言简意赅，不影响观看影片；没有错别字。

Q：TLF字幕组是怎样保证字幕质量的？

订阅

加入TLF字幕组

了解TLF-忆[PDF]

译者Top100(根据作品数量呈现)

andysawcc

land

blueflying

Yawa

游葵

繁星若尘

DeadZombie

pizzamx

Xepro

悠火飞云

zerogeass

Hearst

JasonLengjouxin

TLF字幕组

其他

+ 加关注

#Game of Thrones# #权力的游戏 第五季#

第四集 鹰身人子子【字幕翻译】@托尼瀑布

神父 JasonLee freesand @Lydia萌fromTLF

@赤毒舌LV【字幕校对】@赤毒舌LV【字

母统筹】@饭离牌【字幕&影片下载】论坛 h

ttp://t.cn/RApRzZ3 字幕站 http://t.cn/RA1RTp

W 下周开始将随播出日程正常更新[求关注]

A：程序上，校对过程必不可少，校对人员是经过很多翻译锻炼的资深成员。更重要一点，心态上，翻译者将翻译质量放在第一位，不以牺牲质量为代价追求翻译速度。在TLF字幕组，翻译是创作的过程，并非应付某项任务。

Q：加入TLF字幕组我能得到什么？

A：首先，TLF字幕组是一个兴趣小组，在其中您有机会和与您有同样爱好的人交流；其次，每完成一部作品，您都会获得巨大的乐趣成就感，翻译字幕最大的乐趣就在于，您参照原文给影片中的角色设计中文台词；再次，依托TLF论坛，TLF字幕组为您提供网络影视资源提供便利。**需要声明的是，TLF字幕组是非商业化字幕组，不提供任何物质报酬。**

Q：加入TLF字幕组翻译字幕需要什么条件？

A：一，您是一位影视、课程爱好者，并对翻译创作感兴趣，此条必须；二，您的生活和谐，兴趣爱好不能影响生活，此条也必须；三，您有一定的外语基础，此条没有硬性要求，只要您能创作出符合要求的字幕就好；四，您有一定的空闲时间；五，您有较为便利的上网条件。

Q：新人进入TLF字幕组后要做哪些事情？

A：首先介绍一下自己，和大家认识，然后版主会交给您一部影片或片段尝试翻译，完成后版主交给校对人员审阅，如果合格，您就成为了TLF字幕组的一员。积累一定的翻译经验并且翻译作品得到大家的认可后，您就具有了校对资格，成为资深成员。

Q：目前TLF字幕组最需要哪些人才？

A：目前最需要美剧CC字幕录制者；时间轴制作者，各语种翻译（尤其小语种）。

Q：我想加入TLF字幕组，应该怎样联系？

A：您可以发送邮件到[tlf\\_subteam@hotmail.com](mailto:tlf_subteam@hotmail.com)，您也可以加入交流群：176906007，根据里面提示，完成加入字幕组的流程；如果您是TLF论坛会员，也可以在论坛上直接pm版主诸星龟龟。在邮件或pm中希望您能简要介绍一下您的情况，包括大致英语水平，网络条件和空闲时间情况。

最后，祝您在**TLF**字幕组愉快！

本文的评论功能被关闭了。

5月4日 16:43

转发 | 评论

#Person of Interest# 疑犯追踪第四季十八集  
【字幕翻译】JasonLee 猫在江湖 @Future\_  
默默Farm 【字幕校对】@Lydia晴fromTLF  
【字幕统筹】@饭离牌 十九集【字幕翻译】I

## 功能

- 注册
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- 文章RSS
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- T.L.F.主站

## Meta

- 注册
- 登录



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主题由 NeoEase 提供, 精致 优化, 通过 XHTML 1.1 和 CSS 3 验证。

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## Appendix III Screenshot of the “Declaration” page on TLF’s site

The screenshot displays the homepage of the TLF Chinese Subtitle Station (TLF中文字幕站). The header features the site's name and logo, along with navigation tabs for various content types. The main content area is titled '声明' (Declaration) and dated November 14, 2012. It contains several paragraphs of text regarding the site's policies on original subtitles, sharing, and copyright. A sidebar on the right includes a search bar, a subscription button, and a section for the top 100 translators based on the number of works submitted, represented by a word cloud.

**TLF中文字幕站**  
分享创作之乐，共赏字幕之美

THE LAST FANTASY TLF 字幕組

字幕论坛 开放课程 剧集TVShow 纪录片 声明 招募 译者名录

请输入关键字...

### 声明

2012年11月14日

本字幕站是TLF字幕组唯一发布原创字幕的网站，从其他网站下载的TLF原创字幕我们不能保证其真实性。

本站提供的字幕仅限于交流学习目的，本站字幕欢迎个人和组织在不违背自由分享、尊重译者版权的基础上免费引用！引用字幕请保留字幕译者和来源信息！

原作者保留对字幕修改的权利，其他人修改本字幕必须保留原作者信息。**强烈鄙视使用TLF的原创字幕时，删除字幕译者信息的个人和组织！**

本站提供FTP字幕下载方式，请单线程下载，使用迅雷、QQ旋风、快车等下载工具下载可能会失败。

TLF字幕组长期招募各语种【英、日、韩、德、法、俄、意、西、其他】字幕翻译、听译及时间轴制作人员，待遇优厚。欢迎高手加盟！详情见本站招募页面。

本文的评论功能被关闭了。

订阅

### 加入TLF字幕组

### 了解TLF-忆[PDF]

### 译者Top100(根据作品数量呈现)

pp123, nsimz, 被展良, Fatso, 拉拉叫我爆爆, 浮夸, 熊能, yamdat, 牙疼, mehottou, 我不是小, illifool, constantine23, JasonLee, 六尺, Mavis, 心泉, EOKVader

# Appendix IV Screenshot of “Basic rules of conduct for TLF members” posted on TLF’s forum



# Appendix V Screenshot of “Instructions for newbies” posted on TLF’s online forum



THE LAST  
FANTASY

论坛

资源

指南

我的

设置

升级

资源

FTP

插件

导航

帮助

The Last Fantasy > 字幕组工作区 > 学习/分享成长 > 新手必读：新人转正&字幕组工作流程

返回列表

psjnz

发表于 2012-12-27 14:49 | 只看该作者

打印 字体大小: T 阅读看帖 跳转到 1 #



荣誉值  
TLF字幕组  
TLF HALFCD Team  
帖子 3425  
威望 1709  
金钱 2176  
贡献值 1515  
红心 5930  
注册时间 2009-3-30

新手必读：新人转正&字幕组工作流程

本帖最后由 psjnz 于 2013-8-7 14:35 编辑

为了更好地引导各位新人了解字幕组的工作流程和规范，特地开设此贴！一般而言，新人进入字幕组需要经历：

1. 新手测试
2. 新人训练
3. 参与翻译
4. 成为校对

四个环节

**Part1: 新手测试**

其中新人测试就是大家通过邮件获取的邮件测试资料，这里不再罗嗦，能看到这个贴说明你已经通过测试了

**Part2: 新人训练**

通过新手测试的同学，可以获得字幕组见习的身份，但此时还不是字幕组的正式成员，需要完成各项字幕组的各项训练和考核后才能正式晋升为字幕组的正式组员，开始自由认领翻译任务之旅。

新人训练的内容主要包括四块：字幕组资料阅读，文字阅读，观摩和试译

其中文字阅读是必修，建议大家养成阅读文学作品的习惯，这样翻译出来的字幕才会好，台词来源于生活

	内容	目的	URL
资料阅读	阅读相关的字幕组材料（必修）	了解字幕组的历史和理念 学习字幕组的历史和背景	<a href="#">链接</a>
电影观摩（2周内完成）	从字幕组的历史作品中挑选若干部作品进行赏析和学习，并对其中的不足进行分析和修正（必修）	学习字幕组的断点符号用法 学习句子翻译的处理技巧 培养中文和英文语感 掌握对字幕剪辑的方法	<a href="#">链接</a>
试译训练	实际短片字幕翻译（必修）	学习翻译手法	<a href="#">链接</a>
申请转正	完成上述各个环节后申请转正	正式成为字幕组成员	<a href="#">链接</a>

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<div>  <span>发布于 2013-2-24 22:10   只看该作者</span> </div>	
<div>  </div> <div> <p><b>字幕组</b>的各项工作和所需技能</p> <p><b>翻译</b></p> <p>工作内容：将外语字幕翻译成中文字幕</p> <p>所需技能：</p> <p>外语水平不错，英文要好；</p> <p>了解巴里夫人情，能把握人物台词背后微妙的心里；</p> <p>热爱生活，表达能力较好；</p> <p>细致用心，负责，有认真精神；</p> <p>查阅资料的能力强，会使用Google, wiki和各种网络词典</p> </div>	<div> <p><b>校对</b></p> <p>工作内容：在翻译的基础上进一步优化字幕，包括优化字幕的用户体验，查漏补缺，修正错误，优化表达</p> <p>所需技能：</p> <p>需要具备良好的语感</p> <p>需要有完美主义者的精神</p> <p>沟通能力好，能帮助翻译提升</p> </div> <div> <p><b>任务发布</b></p> <p>工作内容：第一时间关注国外新片网络发布情况，将任务、字幕、视频下载链接第一时间提供给给译者，并在其中起到翻译和校对之间的沟通桥梁作用</p> <p>所需技能：对电影，对新片狂热，关注各种渠道站，预览站</p> <p>对外语字幕质量有鉴别能力</p> <p>网站下载条件较好或熟知各类下载方式，能找到各种影片下载链接</p> <p>认真负责</p> </div>
<div> <p><b>字幕发布员</b></p> <p>工作内容：将字幕发至字幕站，对字幕组相关平台</p> <p>所需技能：用心负责</p> <p>发布字幕</p> </div>	<div> <p><b>微博发布员</b></p> <p>工作内容：将字幕组的作品推荐至微博等社会化媒体平台</p> <p>所需技能：懂社会化媒体营销</p> <p>认真负责</p> <p>文笔好，总结能力强</p> </div> <div> <p><b>时间轴</b></p> <p>工作内容：调整字幕时间轴以匹配不同版本的视频，将字幕文本制成标准的字幕文件</p> <p>所需技能：熟悉剪辑大法</p> <p>会制作时间轴</p> </div>

## Appendix VI Self-introduction email

[The email is originally written in Chinese and translated here by the author.]

Title: Apply to join TLF fansubbing group

Dear brothers and sisters in TLF fansubbing group,

I have been a media fan and user of fansubs ever since I watched the American TV show *Prison Break* subtitled by one of the earliest fansubbing groups in China. Before that, I did not know the existence of fansubbing groups. Being an English major who had only mastered text book English but had never exposed to more specialised argots and authentic expressions, I was extremely impressed by the remarkable language aptitude of many fansubbers when watching their translated subtitles. I was also amazed by the efficiency work done by many fansubbing groups, which allowed me to download fansubs almost immediately after the programmes were aired in the original countries. Ever since I watched the first fansubbed programme, I have become a devoted online follower and obsessive viewer of all kinds of foreign TV shows and movies subtitled and delivered by Chinese fansubbers. Waiting eagerly for the latest fansubbed TV episodes and sharing personal viewing experience with other online users have become an indispensable part of my everyday life.

Being a media fan and user of fansubs eventually influenced my decision to conduct research in the area of fansubbing. Right now, I am a PhD candidate at the University of Manchester, as part of a programme specialised in Translation and Intercultural studies. My research topic is focused on fansub culture and fansubbing networks in China. In order to know more about the fansubbing phenomenon, I have decided to participate in the fansubbing group TLF with the aim to reflexively think of my position both as a researcher and as a member of that community.

I have been lurking here for a while, observing your activities, learning a lot, and enjoying the vibe and atmosphere in TLF very much. I want to pop out of the lurker status to let you know that I want to join you, become one of your members, and perhaps find similar others by sharing our interests, knowledge

and skills. I think both time and necessary equipment to get online are not a problem for me.

If I got the pleasure to become one of you, I will strictly follow all the rules and norms in your group during my participation. I will also make my documentation on my activities available to any interested group members for their perusal and comments in order to make sure I get things right.

Looking forward to joining you!

Sincerely,

Dang Li

P.S.: If you are interested in my research or have any questions about the research, please feel free to contact me through the following ways:

Email: the author's official email address/ QQ: the author's QQ account/ Sina Weibo: the author's Sina Weibo ID

## Appendix VII Online questionnaire

[The questionnaire is originally written in Chinese and translated here by the author.]

<b>Personal information</b>
<b>What is your gender?</b>
<b>Which of the following age range do you fall into?</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- 20 and under</li><li>- 21 – 25</li><li>- 26 – 30</li><li>- 31 – 35</li><li>- 36 – 40</li><li>- 41 – 45</li><li>- 46 – 50</li><li>- 51 – 60</li><li>- 61 and above</li></ul>
<b>What is the highest education qualification you obtained?</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Primary</li><li>- Middle</li><li>- High</li><li>- Undergraduate</li><li>- Postgraduate</li><li>- PhD</li><li>- Other</li></ul>
<b>What is your occupation?</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Student</li><li>- Company employee</li><li>- Government employee</li><li>- Self-employed</li><li>- Other</li></ul>
<b>When did you join the community?</b>
<b>Please provide answers to the following four questions</b>
Q1: Do you feel or experience a sense of belonging and togetherness in

TLF fansubbing group?

Q2: What motivates you to do fansubs in the group?

Q3: What goals or visions would you like to achieve by fansubbing for TLF?

Q4: How would you describe your relationship(s), if any, with other members? Do you know them through your participation in group activities or from other contexts, e.g. offline, work, school, or other settings?

## Appendix VIII Quoted answers to the questionnaire

<b>Answers to Q.1</b>
<b><i>Being part of TLF:</i></b>
<p>P.2 我对 TLF 有份浓浓的眷恋和强烈的归属感。 I have a strong sense of belonging to TLF.</p> <p>P.4 我对 TLF 有种归属感。 I have a sense of belonging to TLF.</p> <p>P.7 我在这里感觉如鱼得水，所以我无可救药地喜欢上了 TLF。 I feel like a fish in water here. This is the reason why I like TLF so much.</p> <p>P. 14 这个地方为我开了一扇窗，给我的生活带来了一线光。 This place (TLF) opens a window of hope and brings a ray of light in my life.</p> <p>P.18 TLF 有种家庭的氛围，有种安全感，我很沉醉于其中。 TLF allows me to indulge in the family atmosphere and gain a sense of security.</p> <p>P. 20 TLF 有一种大家庭的温暖。 TLF is like a big warm family.</p> <p>P.21 我对 TLF 产生了依赖和归属感。 I have developed a sense of belonging to TLF.</p> <p>P. 27 我觉得我们是个有机的组织，充满了活力。 I feel we are a dynamic organisation full of energy and vitality.</p> <p>P. 32 TLF 是个大家庭，大家都像兄弟姐妹一样。 TLF is a big family, where everybody is like brothers and sisters.</p> <p>P. 33 TLF 是个大家庭，大家关系都很紧密。 TLF is a big family. All of us are closely connected to each other.</p> <p>P. 34 尽管我还是新人，但并没因此而被排斥，很温暖。 I feel warmly welcomed instead of being excluded despite that I am still a newbie</p>

here.

P. 35

我觉得 TLF 这个大家庭和谐而温暖。

TLF is like a big harmonious and warm family.

***Being (emotionally) attached to TLF:***

P. 1

哥一直都会在这里。

I will be here forever.

P. 5

我对这个组织有种天然的亲切感。

I have a natural feeling of intimacy towards the group.

P. 6

对于 TLF，可以说是 “I knew I loved you before I met you.”

The feeling I have towards TLF can be described as “I knew I loved you before I met you”.

P. 9

我会在 TLF 生根发芽。

TLF is a place for me to take root and grow.

P. 10

只要 TLF 在，我就在。

I will stay here (TLF) as long as TLF exists.

P. 8

我和 TLF 的关系就像一段缠绵悱恻的爱情故事。

My relationship with TLF is like a sentimental love story full of sweet memories.

P. 17

我对 TLF 产生了一种亲切感。

I have developed a sense of intimacy towards TLF.

P. 19

“与君初相识，犹如故人归。”若用一句话形容 TLF 给我的感觉，第一个附上脑海的诗句就是这个。

“I knew I loved you before I met you”. This is the sentence that jumps into my mind when I think about the feeling I have towards TLF.

P. 24

我和 TLF 的关系就像缘分一样，注定相遇。

We were destined to meet each other.

P. 25

就像缘分，我们注定相遇。我很珍惜这份缘分。

It was a destiny for us (the participant and the group) to meet each other and I cherish this destiny.

P. 38

我永远都会在这儿，直到世界末日。  
I will be here (TLF) till the end of the world.

P. 39  
TLF 在，我就在。  
I will stay here as long as TLF exists.

***Being honoured to be in TLF:***

P. 3  
能成为 TLF 的一员，我很光荣。  
I am honoured to be one of the members in TLF.

P. 22  
我很愧对字幕组，没能为它做太多的事情。  
I feel I owe much to the group because I did not contribute enough.

P. 23  
成为小组成员，我很自豪。  
I am very proud to become one of the group members.

P. 26  
我很荣幸加入字幕组，结识不同领域的达人。  
It is my privilege to get involved in doing fansubs and know so many people from all works of life.

P. 31  
进组一年多了，做字幕总是断断续续的，不过算算还是有六部了，也算做了点事儿。  
I have joined the group for more than one year. I translated six texts so far. Such contributions are small but meaningful.

P. 36  
亏欠 TLF 太多太多。大家总是帮助我，是他们帮助我成长。有他们真好。  
I owe too much to TLF, because I always receive the help from others. Thanks to their help, I can keep improving. It is wonderful to know these people.

P. 37  
有时总觉得自己拖后腿，总是害怕自己愧对于 TLF 的金字招牌。  
Sometimes I am worried that my contributions were not enough to live up to the golden reputation enjoyed by the group.

***Being a "TLFer":***



P. 13

我是一名 TLFer。

I am a TLFer.

P. 15/28

我觉得自己是一名 TLFer。

I consider myself as one of the TLFers.

P. 40

我很感谢所有一同奋斗过的 TLFer!

I am so grateful to each and every TLFer.

***Lack of sense of belonging:***

P. 11

我没有强烈的归属感。因为我基本上是个有吃有喝有 TLF 的电影看就天下太平的伸手党。

I don't feel a strong sense of togetherness. I consider myself as basically a free-rider who eats, sleeps and watches video subtitled by TLF every day.

P. 12

到现在还能继续做字幕，我觉得好神奇。不过毕竟也是奔三的人了，精力实在有限，干一天是一天吧…

I am quite amazed by the fact that I am still doing fansubs as I am approaching the big 30 and do not have enough time and energy to actively engage in the group's activities anymore.

P. 16

我在 TLF 渗透的还远远不够深。主要是交际局面还没有打开，看着聊得热闹的几个群，总也插不上嘴。

My time in TLF is far from satisfactory, because I often find it difficult to engage in conversations with others due to our lack of commonalities.

P. 30

我进组很少讲话，基本是单线联系做任务。

I seldom speak with other members, and tend to focus only on translating my favourite media content.

## Answers to Q.2

### P10

我是一个不怎么看美剧的人，只有在看老友记的时候知道圣城家园，然后朋友告诉我那些做字幕的人对每个典故都查得很清楚，我就想，竟然如此牛逼（当时我以为他们是纯听译的），上大二那一年，我全部用在吃喝玩乐看恶俗电影上了，到大三时，霸气侧漏的盗梦空间吸引了我，我看好片的意识觉醒了，终于通过豆瓣找到了 TLF。但是看到自己翻的字幕出现在电影里以后，有强烈的满足感。会有一两个人问我，有钱么，我说没有。我知道她们心里在偷偷嘲笑我，但我无所谓，我也可以在心里暗爽。自己的字幕作品被人放在片子里看，这种感觉你们怎么会懂。[My friends often make fun of me because I am doing this for free, but I don't give a damn. Instead, I am thrilled because they will never experience the wonderful feeling when seeing your own subtitles being displayed in a movie.] 室友说我每天晚上都开着电脑傻笑（我猜她们很无语）。

### P16

2010 年的某一天，朋友让我去试试做字幕。我就从此一脚踏进了字幕的江湖。对于我这样一只 70 后老猫来说，跑江湖是需要勇气的。数学专业出身，工作不用英语，自学能力又差，现在要和一群语言达人共事，再加上年纪老迈落后于时代，心里十分没底气。而翻译字幕这种事是会上瘾的。每次接到任务（每次听都觉得像特工组织），它的优先级就成了最高的，工作的时候也抓心挠肝地惦记着。当终于没日没夜把一部字幕熬出来的时候，自己先被自己感动得不行。如果一不小心再得到个把夸奖，就更不用提那种无与伦比的成就感了。当然，每完成一部字幕总会有疲惫不堪的感觉，心想这回我要好好休息了！起码一个月都不要碰字幕！其实还是忍不住隔三差五地去刷新任务清单，看见好片子就故态复萌。这就是为什么我常常在深夜里暗自垂泪：为什么老天就不能给我找一个翻译字幕的工作呢？我保证会投入全部的热情，一直做到白发苍苍的。。。不过其实我明白，就算真有这样一份工作，也无法和字幕组相比。我们在这里做的事情不止是翻译字幕这么简单，我们还分享各自五光十色的生活，分享单纯美好的快乐，和一点理想主义情怀。身边的亲友听我说起字幕组的事，每个人都是劈头就问：给钱吗？给你多少钱？不给钱啊？那不干！我装作无奈地耸耸肩，其实嘴边已经泛起一丝“我公益所以我骄傲”的微笑。[Fansubbing has pretty much become an addition for me. Whenever I find my favourite text from the group's task lists, translating the text becomes my top-one priority. Even when I am at work, I will still keep thinking about translating the text. Whenever I see my finished work, I will have a huge sense of satisfaction. I will be over the moon if my work is praised by someone. Of course, I also feel exhausted after each task, thinking I will take a break for at least one month. However, I cannot help but keep checking the group's task list to hunt my next favourite text. If I spot one, I will quickly return to the old habit. I often spend countless nights asking myself: why can't I have a job translating subtitles? Yet, deep down I know that even if I had this job, it still could not beat doing fansubs in the group where I have the freedom to choose which text to translate and how I want to translate it. My friends and family often ask me: "Why do you keep doing this if you are not paid?" Whenever they say things like this, I will shrug my shoulders and ignore their words, thinking: you will never know the joy of doing fansubs.]

### Answers to Q.3

P1

字幕翻译工作是个义务行为，于是很重要的要玩得开心，过得和谐。我们做自己的字幕[The most important thing about doing fansubs in TLF is that we are doing our own subtitles.], ‘分享创作之乐，共赏字幕之美’ [ ‘share the fun of creation and appreciate the beauty of subtitles’ ] 。

P2

比起 ps 哥，我在字幕组的经历要单纯简单的多。没找过源，没调过轴，没做过字幕支持，不会压片，不会发布，论起真正能为组里做的，简直比新人还要新。一直以来都只是个翻译，人渐渐地多了，又成了个小校对。水平不见得真的有多高，但是态度却真的有大不同。只要端正心态，诚实地对待自己，总能做出属于自己的字幕的。做字幕不是为了完成任务，而是为了对自己有个交代，为了让自己从中找到宁静[As long as you are sincere and genuine, you can create subtitles that belong to yourself. Doing fansubs is not about finishing tasks. It is about being honest and true to yourself during translation.] 。

P4

人喜欢给自己贴标签，把自己从人群中区分开来，TLF 的标签并不是字幕组，而且分享，是快乐，是相互关心共同成长。如果我们能做到这一点…TLF 对于我来说不是一个虚拟的概念，而是这些有血有肉的人。在 TLF 还有很多我们至今都不知道的默默奉献的人，这就是我归属感的来源。就算是为了他们，我们也得一起努力做下去。对于我来说，如果要做，就一定要比别人做的好，这是我的原则，不是我的目的。希望几年之后，大家一直都在。

People tend to distinguish themselves from the crowd based on how they label each other. Instead of labelling TLF as “a fansubbing group”, I want to use “sharing, fun, caring and supporting” to label TLF. TLF is not just a virtual group, but a group formed by real people. Although I only know the pseudonyms of my fellow members instead of their real names, their selfless dedication to the group’s fansubbing activities is the source of my sense of belonging. They are the reason why I am still staying in the group and continuing to work hard for the group. I always try my best to create the best subtitles. I hope everyone in the group can still be together enjoying each other’s company and doing fansubs in the future.

P5

我的字幕可以帮助爱电影的人正确理解电影。这是我做字幕的动力。好的电影能助人成长，让人思考。如果谁看了我的字幕，更好地理解电影，得到了娱乐，我已经很满足；但若能在字幕的帮助下，对生活有所感悟，那即是我最大的荣幸。

I want to help (foreign) film-lovers better understand the films through my (translated) subtitles. This is the driving force that motivates me to do fansubs. A good film can help people think and grow. Nothing can give me more satisfaction than helping people to better enjoy a film and get entertained with the help of my (translated) subtitles. I would be truly honoured if my translated films brought to people a spiritual experience and prompted them to reflect on their own lives.

P8

人，总是在向往自由。在天空中翱翔，在海洋中游荡，没有枷锁，却又胸怀梦想。年轻，有梦就要去追。而我的梦...就在这片天空 [People are always yearning to be free, [like birds] soaring in the sky and [like fishes] swimming in the sea, full of dreams without chains. As we are still young, we should go and chase our dreams. And it is to this piece of sky that my dream belongs to] 。分享创作之乐，共赏字幕之美[share the fun of creation and appreciate the beauty of subtitles]的时候，我虽无法记住每一个组员的 ID，可是每当翻到那时由我安排任务的翻译作品时，我都很有感触。TLF 对你来说也许只是简单的三个字母，但对于每一位 TLFer 来说，这个简单的字母组合却代表了一种精神，一份坚持，一个信念，还有一群知己。

#### P10

我也许错过了 TLF 第一个黄金时代，但是从未怀疑 TLF 会迎来第二、第三个黄金时代。有你，有我，有大家，我们可以低调地延续。最后展望一下未来，我希望 TLF 能一直低调地华丽下去，只要 TLF 在，我们就在。再过个十年，希望还有 TLF 的作品。

It has been ten years since TLF was established. In the next ten years, I hope TLF can produce more and better fansubs as long as we stick together and work hard.

#### P16

虽然我在现实世界已经老了，但在 TLF 的时空里还很年轻。我想要一直这样走下去，看看 TLF 在我的生命里会成为一个怎样的奇迹。目前，我的江湖影响力始终处于边缘地位，首先是技术不全面，不会找源不会压片不会做轴甚至不会发布。其次是参与度太差，小组讨论时，好多新词我都看不懂。不过我还是要说，字幕组的话就去 TLF 吧，它是最阳春白雪的[I need to integrate more within TLF. First, my technical skills are still not good enough. Second, I need to establish more social connections and influence within the group. However, so far, I do enjoy the lovely and intimate atmosphere of the group.] 。

#### P32

虽然我也是个新人，但是对这个字幕组现在有了感情。志同道合的人走在一起，有着共同语言。很高兴[I am very happy to see that there are many people sharing similar values, interests and topics in the group] 。总而言之，TLF 是个大家庭，大家像兄弟姐妹那样，在里面什么也不需要顾忌，有什么说什么。愿 TLF 越走越远 [I hope we as well as TLF can go as far as possible.] 。

#### P37

做了那么些课程，始终担心自己遗漏、混淆专业术语，也不知道这些课程有没有使观众受到启发。既希望又害怕别人指出翻译错误，希望，是因为好歹有人认真看了，害怕，是担心自己误人子弟[I want to inspire viewers with my translations. Whenever I'm doing fansubs, I always have a mixed feeling of hope and fear. I hope my subtitles are helpful for the audience, but I fear that they will be misguided if I made any mistake in the subtitles. So I always make sure there is no mistranslation in my subtitles.] 。

目前的这个课程做到了一半，深感字幕组管理之不易，时常有人领了任务玩失踪，至于拖稿更是家常便饭，想必现在的 ps 和以前的龟姐对这些问题更头疼吧。铁打的字幕组流水的组员，最可惜的是没能把高手留住。以后做新课程还是希望能有利害的高手从旁指导才好，更希望有前辈（温柔体贴的女前辈就更好了）能收我为徒好好调教一番。

## Answers to Q.4

P8

这片天空中，一眼望去，虽平静如镜，然而每天在这都要打响大大小小的数场战役。在不断的奋斗中，我们彼此的友谊日益深厚。

在我心中，我习惯以战友相称。战友之间的情感是独特的，虽然有人已远离战场，不过每当再遇见时，我能读懂他眼中的关怀与牵挂。这是一份很难割舍的情感，毕竟大家为此都拼尽全力，为之奋斗过。流过的汗水足以让彼此难以忘怀。

无私奉献、无偿共享、有爱分享，这些种种词汇在现实社会中已难寻觅。那年我怀揣梦想而来，幸运的是，遇到了一群拥有同样梦想、同样信念的人。庆幸的是，随着时间的推移，衰亡与新生虽不断在更替，却保持着一种平衡，让梦一直未变。

Under this sky, there are numerous battles [subtitling projects] being fought [carried out by TLF's subtitlers] every day. During such processes, our friendships are strengthening day by day. I like to call my fellow members comrades-in-arms. Although some of them have left this battlefield [TLF], I still chat with them like old friends whenever we meet [online]. After all, we have fought and sweat together in the past. "Selfless dedication", "free sharing", and "unconditional love" – these are things that are hard to find in our society. Several years ago, I joined the group with my dreams. Fortunately, I met a group of people sharing the same dreams and beliefs. More fortunately, these dreams still remain the same until now, although a lot of people keep joining and leaving the group. For me, all fellow members are my dear friends and comrades from the moment they join the group.

刚进组，就碰到个大家伙，那个不死的杰克鲍鱼兄。24 小时一第 5 季，这是字幕组为数不多抢首发的剧集，一堆人，每周二中午，不睡觉（时差），不吃飯的守在电脑前面，等着美国的兄弟第一时间把录制的 CC 字幕发过来。然后就是分配任务，制作时间轴，下载影片，翻译，校对。一般是 10 点拿到字幕，到最后 14 点左右发布。短短的几个小时的时间，我们让其他的字幕组都望而生畏。让大家看看 TLF 字幕组不止电影翻译的牛，美剧也在掌握之中。大家群策群力，周而复始的翻完了一季又一季，直到最后的第八季。可以说 24 小时成为了字幕组的招牌也成就了字幕组的辉煌。当时美剧刚在国内风靡，24 小时为字幕组拉来了不少的忠实 fans 和优秀的译者。虽然首发很辛苦，但是看着之后的累累硕果，鄙人欣慰啊。

24 was one of the few TV series translated by TLF in order to show that we are not only good at producing high quality subtitles, but also at releasing subtitles in the fastest possible time. Every Tuesday afternoon, we gave up lunch and napping, and gathered in front of our computers, waiting for the raw material to be gathered and made available by our fellow members. Within just a few hours, the translated episode was ready to be released. Although the subtitling process was stressful and exhausting, the results were fruitful and fulfilling. Due to the success of translating 24, TLF attracted a lot of loyal fans and excellent fansubbers. Undoubtedly, this project was one of the most glorious periods in the history of TLF.

P12

24 小时，我跟了 2 个季度，这些 ID 就是当年和我一块奋战的战友们。Bleache, B 兄是我和最熟捻的，因为配合了 2 季的 24，他几乎每集都不落下，我在时，他在。我不在时，他亦在。偶尔还会想到他，想到那年

一起奋战的日子，痛并快乐着。

All the members involved in translating 24 were my comrades in arms. One of them whom I call “Brother B” was my best partner and buddy. We cooperated together and translated two seasons of 24. During our collaboration, he never missed subtitling a single episode. I felt like he was always on the other side of the Internet when translating each episode, no matter whether I got online or not. Even today, I still remember the painful yet joyful time we spent together.

P19

电影《我的兄弟姐妹》里的父亲曾说过：我们都是天上掉下的雪花，本来互不相识，可落在地上，融成水结成冰，便再也分不开了。TLF 字幕组便是我们掉落土地[In the film *My Brothers and Sister*, the father tells his children that “We are snowflakes falling from the sky. As soon as we fall to the ground, melt into water and freeze together, we will never be separated”. All my brothers and sisters in TLF are just like snowflakes falling from the sky, and TLF is the place where we melt together.]，不管我们是因为什么原因加入字幕组，希望若干年后，大家都还在这里，为着同一个目标努力。

TLF 字幕组更是由一群可爱的人组成的。见习期毕业之后，PS 姐把我拉进了不同的 QQ 群，发现各群功能各异，特色鲜明。新人群是用来要新人 PP，再调戏一番的，工作组和校队组是用来找苦力的，老人群异常活跃，话题之广，口味之重，乃其特色 [Each sub-team has its own unique function and feature. ‘Recruiting’ team is used for attracting newbies by publishing recruitment information on the Internet, and organising the ‘newbie’s test’. ‘Training camp’ is used to help newbies become familiar with everything in the group so that they can fit in as quickly as possible. One interesting ritual in the ‘training camp’ is that new members will be asked to send their photos as soon as they join the chatroom as a way to prove the information they provided about their gender in their personal profiles. In terms of the ‘nursing home’, discussions are extremely active and cover a wide range of topics.]。

P25

组里面接触最多的就是 X 和 Y 了。X 是大包大揽，操卖白粉的心，连卖白菜的钱都不挣。Y 是辣手摧花以及一切，凡是不接活或者接了活跳票的，一概从群里踢出，非常有辣妹子的风范。不过你要是按时交作业的好孩子，倒也不用害怕，揽星阿姨会陪你打游戏的。Z 风风火火的，除了 TLF 这摊，还在搞一摊贫困生奖学金的事儿，非常令人尊敬。TLF 真是一个理想主义和理想主义者的地方

During my probation period, I got the chance to know many senior members in the group, such as X, Y, and Z. “Sister X” is a busy guy, and yet he always volunteers to do any chore for the group whenever there is nobody available or willing to do it. Y is a fierce girl who is very strict on newbies. But each time you hand in good quality “homework”, she becomes a total different person who loves sharing everything she knows, from fashion to computer games, with you. Z is a good young fellow full of passion and energy. Besides managing the fansubbing group, he is busy with fund raising for poor kids in rural areas. They make me feel that TLF is a place full of idealists.

P32

《吐司》这部电影还出现了小插曲，鉴于它是我的处女作电影，我隔段时间就会去网上搜搜它压制成片了没有。有一天还真让我在 pptv 上看到了，不过可惜的是我们字幕组的信息全给删去了，很不甘心，但是还是算了吧，像 X 说的那样，真正的英雄是不留名的，我至今还记得他的话 [I was a part of the subtitling project that translated the movie *Toast*, i.e. my

first subtitling task. After the release of the Chinese subtitles, I found that the work was shamelessly appropriated by [a commercial video site] PPTV without giving credit to our group and subtitlers involved in the project. I was quite furious and found myself unable to accept this fact. However, my supervisor X told me that “real heroes should not be remembered by their names but their deeds”. I still remember these words vividly today.]。和我一起搭档的，担任校队的是隐没的夏姬。我们在合作中产生了友谊。很喜欢她，哈哈，一个有气质，温润的女孩纸。想那时翻被盗的欲望的人名时，请教了群里好多的兄弟姐妹们，那倒是很好玩，哈哈。有点对不住喜马拉雅，课程翻译就翻了俩课就不翻了，哈哈，实在对那个没爱呀，不过那个翻译很锻炼人的逻辑能力的，等没有好看的电影了，再找你吧，哈哈。喜马拉雅是个不错的小伙子，哈哈，他要是大点就好啦，小女孩要把握住他呀，哈哈哈哈哈。他很认真严谨在校队《大象的眼泪》时，一条条罗列出来，让我学到了挺多的，不管是格式上的还是具体的翻译细节上。嘿嘿，很好。

### P33

龟电话不多，但每句话都说在点上，让我感觉很亲切。后来龟龟消失了，因为我没有 QQ，一直是单线联系，没人理我了，我就自己随风飘吧。忽然有一天，热情无比的 PS 老大出现了，他竟然把我头像那个无比可爱的大兔子看成是老鼠了。于是我流着瀑布汗回归了字幕组。感觉那个 X 姐好像就是个电脑终端，随时随地，不知疲倦，不管什么时候，只要你这边 EMAIL 一过去，马上就能收到他的回复，他让大家联系更加紧密，让字幕组更像一个大家庭[Sister X is like a tireless computer terminal. Whenever I send an email to him, or ask him for help during my group tasks, I always get his reply immediately. Like a big sister, he glues everyone closer together and makes TLF feel like a big family.]。

龟电话不多，但每句话都说在点上，让我感觉很亲切。记得第一次接的校对任务是个公开课，正好赶上放长假，我把整个假期差不多都用上了，那个那个那个真比自己重新翻译还累呀。交稿时忍不住对龟龟抱怨了两句，龟龟回复说：对不起，辛苦了。当时我感动的呀，那个眼泪是哗哗滴……人家凭什么对不起呀？人家有什么对不起我的呢？人家不也是一分钱不拿在那边辛辛苦苦的尽义务吗？人家又去跟谁抱怨呢？[My first task was subtitling Yale Open Course series, which just happened last year during my summer holiday. The task was so demanding and exhausting that I almost spent the whole summer translating the course content. When submitting my work to my supervisor, I complained briefly to her. She replied as follows: “I’m sorry to put you through this, but there is nothing I can repay you with other than with these two words: ‘thank you’”. These words touched me so much that they made me cry a lot. I kept asking myself: “Why should she say sorry to me? I am the person who volunteered to translate. Isn’t she also contributing and working hard without getting a single penny? To whom could she complain?”]

## Appendix IX Consent form

You are being invited to take part in a research which is being undertaken as a part of a PhD degree at the School of Arts, Languages and Cultures, University of Manchester by Dang Li. The purpose of this research is to find out the role played by amateur translation, as exemplified by online subtitling groups organised by Chinese media fans, in the development of a participatory culture in China. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Please ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Please note that your participation in this research is voluntary and that you are free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason and without detriment to yourself. Thank you for reading this.

1. **Who will conduct the research?**

The name of the researcher: Dang Li

School address: School of Arts, Languages, and Cultures, The University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester, M13 9PL

2. **Title of the Research**

*Amateur Translation and the Development of A Participatory Culture in China – a Netnographic Study of The Last Fantasy Fansubbing Group*

3. **What would I be asked to do if I took part?**

You will need to complete an online questionnaire that contains a set of open-ended questions related to your sense of shared identity in the fansubbing group. The open-ended questions will be structured around the following main aspects:

- Do you feel or experience a sense of belonging and togetherness in TLF fansubbing group?
- What motivates you to do fansubs in the group?
- What goals or visions would you like to achieve by fansubbing for TLF?
- How would you describe your relationship(s), if any, with other members? Do you know them through your participation in group activities or from other contexts, e.g. offline, work, school, or other settings?

The questionnaire will be created via SelectSurvey.Net and sent to you as an email, in which a URL link will direct you to the webpage where you can complete and submit the questionnaire. The probability of pain, discomfort or distress anticipated during the questionnaire are not greater in and of themselves than those ordinarily encountered in your daily life or during the performance of routine physical or psychological examinations or tests. However, you may experience inconvenience as you have to spend time to finish the questionnaire.

4. **How is confidentiality maintained?**

To protect your confidentiality, your real name will not appear in the final published account. Occasionally, quoting your words would be necessary. In this case, a fake name (different from your online pseudonym) is assigned to you if your quoted words contain sensitive information. The purpose is to protect you from potential harm or embarrassment because a motivated person or other group members deliberately seeking to find your identity could do so through your online pseudonym when it is shown in the written account.