

Fan Translation: A Look into the Chinese Fansubbing Group Beverly Fansub on Bilibili

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Abstract: The rapid development of information and technology has led to the emergence of numerous video platforms sharing. In parallel, Fansubbing groups have thrived, serving as influential channels for cross-cultural exchanges. This paper examines the contextual factors driving the expansion of Chinese Fan Translation, using Beverly Fansub as a case study. It explores the distinctive attributes of this Fansubbing group and investigates the significance and potential drawbacks associated with fan translation.

Keywords: Fan Translation; Fansubbing; Bilibili.

1. Introduction

When it comes to Fan Translation (FT), some think of it as a subbranch of volunteer translation. However, the latter emphasises more on “pro-bono work for non-governmental organizations such as charities (Evans 2020)”, while the former focuses on texts that are important for a particular group of fans (*ibid.*). Moreover, regarding fansubbing, Díaz Cintas and Muñoz Sánchez point out that it is “nowadays the most important manifestation of FT (2006:37)”. Fansubbing originated from the non-commercial translation of Japanese anime (Pérez-González 2014). With the increasing availability of the internet, “post-anime fansubbing emerged during the first decade of this century” (Pérez-González, 2020), which expanded to include TV series, films, and reality shows, etc. Fansubbing has therefore evolved into a global phenomenon in the modern world.

Under the guidance of FT theories and Audiovisual Translation (AVT), this essay adopts a case study approach by focusing on one Chinese fansubbing group, Beverly Fansub (BF), which has gained a large following by distributing the American reality show *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills* (RHOBH) on Bilibili, a platform that functions similarly to YouTube. More specifically, the essay examines and discusses: 1) the reasons behind BF’s emergence and development; 2) BF’s unique characteristics; 3) the significance of FT, as well as its “side effects”.

2. The Factors that Led to the Rise of BF

Unlike other countries, China does not have a motion picture content rating system. In order to prevent minors from scenes that contain sex, violence, or substance abuse, etc., the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) has implemented a number of regulations. For example, in 2014, SARFT issued a notice that requires all overseas films and TV series to be released in China to obtain a “Film Release License” or “TV Series Distribution License”. The notice also stipulates that “the total amount of foreign films and television dramas introduced and broadcast on a single website per year shall not exceed 30% of the total amount of domestic ones purchased and broadcast in the previous year (Qin and Liu

2016:2)” (This text has been translated from Chinese.). Even if some foreign films and TV series are approved for broadcast in China, they are usually edited and censored. Hence, the official programming of RHOBH in China faces difficulties from the start, not only because of the tight distribution policy in China but also due to RHOBH’s inclusion of ‘sexual’ content or scenes that display wealth.

After research, it was found that Youku was once the only official platform broadcasting RHOBH, but only Season 5 is available there at present. Apart from aforementioned, RHOBH airs regularly on Bravo in the United States (*The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills* 2020), and the subscription service Hayu also programs it in different countries (Hayu 2020). However, neither of these platforms are available in China. Apart from aforementioned, fans’ inability to understand English and lack of money may be other reasons that have contributed to the emergence of corresponding fansubs and are worth further investigation.

Due to the lack of officially translated RHOBH, along with the contribution of various sociocultural factors, BF has risen to become a dominant and well-reputed fansubbing group for delivering unofficial translations of RHOBH. As O’Hagan suggests, “the internet’s electronic connectivity allows networks of amateur translators to access source material, translate it, and distribute it globally” (2008:158). In this scenario, BF members who are abroad or have access to RHOBH download the resources and proceed with video compression. Besides these objective factors, subjectivity also drives BF. As highlighted by Condry, “fansubbers are motivated, in part, by a dedication to their craft and a desire for viewers to appreciate their sensibility” (2010:203). Driven by a transnational desire and the motivation to educate an inquisitive audience of fellow fans, BF members devote themselves to translating and disseminating RHOBH, leading to the rise and development of BF.

3. The Unique Features of BF

Bilibili is the home of BF. BF not only regularly updates videos on Bilibili, but also its new recruitment information, surrounding information, and fan interaction are all conducted on Bilibili. Therefore, deconstructing the translation features represented by BF should be framed within the context of Bilibili.

Bilibili is a video sharing platform where some videos are

original. Users can submit and watch videos, and while watching, they can add danmu (commentary subtitles) which feature real-time overlaying effects on videos for an interactive playback experience ('bilibili' 2020). And in the foreign film and television section of Bilibili, the majority of the content originates from America, Europe, Japan, and South Korea. The European and American videos are predominantly in English, with many having been translated into Chinese. These factors have contributed to the solid foundation for the growth of BF.

Based on view counts and subscriptions, BF has emerged as one of the most dominant fansubbing groups for delivering *RHOBH* on Bilibili. Unlike traditional fansubs, BF is able to earn money once it joins some of Bilibili's projects. This means that view counts, inserted digital coins, etc. will be converted into a certain amount of money [1]. Furthermore, as Dwyer summarises (2012), fansubbing has four essential characteristics: "formal innovation, collaborative methods, foreignization, and genre expertise". And BF has exemplified its genre expertise well. In addition to sharing *RHOBH*, BF also releases various videos related to *RHOBH*, other American shows, celebrity interviews, fashion and beauty videos, and so on. As a result, BF has become a certified We Media account on Weibo, which allows BF to generate revenue through advertising for sponsors or selling fan merchandise. However, as is shown, BF's monetisation practices deviate from the non-profit principles followed by some fansubbing groups.

Tymoczko concludes, "increasingly, translation is undertaken by teams whose only connection is a virtual electronic network" (2009:403). With regard to the BF team, only a rough picture of them can be drawn on the basis of BF's recruitment. In fact, little research has addressed the issue of who is doing FT (possibly due to the illegal nature of the activity), where they come from, their age profile, or even what motivates them (Evans 2020). Additionally, professional translators can themselves be fans (Dwyer 2012).



Figure 1. Banners for two additional positions

Generally speaking, fansubbers are divided into raw providers, translators, timers, typesetters, editors, proofreaders, and encoders (Díaz Cintas and Muñoz Sánchez 2006). As for the BF team, they specifically require two additional positions (see Figure 1 below), which are post-listening interpreters (since sources are usually without English subtitles) and individuals responsible for special effects. Furthermore, according to their recruitment requirements, fansubbers should be older than senior high school students (probably due to concerns about studying and minor protection). New members who do not have experience with proofreading or encoding will be provided with free training, but they must have an appreciation and knowledge of American pop culture in the first place. Prospective

translators will also be tested in advance. As stressed by Pérez-González (2020), the sustainability of fansubbing communities is predicated on the work of recruiters tasked with sourcing and sharing resources to train new members.

When it comes to concrete fan-translated works, subtitles vary in styles and are enhanced in the pictorial dimension, which is a result of fansubbers' genre expertise and familiarity with the expectations of the audience they belong to and work for (Pérez-González 2014). When examining BF's *RHOBH* series, the first notable feature is the headnotes displayed at the top of the video frame, which "deliver information that complement the content of traditional subtitles" (Pérez-González 2006, quoted in Pérez-González 2020) (see Figure 2 below). As a form of hypertext, headnotes emphasise viewers' ability to express their subjectivity and participation (Pérez-González 2014), though some viewers may regard headnotes as a contamination of the film or drama they are watching (Pérez-González 2020). Additionally, headnotes that are too lengthy can cause viewers to progress to the next scene before finishing reading them. To address this, BF could streamline headnotes and enhance their presentation to make them fit better with the picture. Despite these drawbacks, headnotes represent an innovative form of translation and reflect fansubbers' good intentions to spread culture.

What is also unique about BF, compared to other fansubbing groups worldwide, is that BF's subtitles are bilingual. (see Figures 1 and 2). Additionally, BF changes styles when referring to different scenarios, such as phone conversations and music (see Figure 3). When it comes to proper nouns, BF tends to keep their original forms (see Figure 4), but this is not always the case, which is a testament to the flexibility of fansubbing. Another distinctive feature of BF and other fansubbing groups on Bilibili is the use of danmu (see Figure 5), which is the dynamic superimposition of viewers' comments on the film they are watching and discussing, rather than under or next to the film display area (Howard, 2012, quoted in Pérez-González, 2020). As Chen and Zhang comment, "danmu is originally a military term suggesting intensive bombardment of a certain area. Its creator is the famous Japanese website Niconico. [...] Given danmu's simultaneous appearance, the majority of danmu focus on the same topic" (2017:107). Therefore, danmu can sometimes compensate for, modify, or spice up existing subtitles. However, a large amount of danmu will cover the entire video and steal the audience's attention. More seriously, some danmu can be very improper, random, and negative (ibid.:109). (This has been translated from Chinese)

The previous discussion focused on the "appearance" of subtitles. Now, we will discuss the "content". As Qian (2000) states, "the dialogues of the cast are restricted by mouthing, pause, and gestures, and body language is a part of audiovisual language" (This has been translated from Chinese.). Similarly, fansubbing must also connect body language to subtitles to achieve fidelity. Qian also notes that because of the broad audience, audiovisual dialogues need to be easy to understand, rather than using obscure or fancy expressions (ibid.). In this sense, BF's subtitles are not only easy to understand, but they are also funny and engaging by adopting and adapting internet memes, slang, etc. For example, when referring to one cast member who has full lips (due to plastic surgery) and is known for being outspoken and causing drama, BF names her as "Sis Mouth". Finally, unlike the foreignization strategy used in anime fansubbing, BF blends in with the aesthetics of the source text, as well as

adopting “commercial subtitling techniques such as domestication and homogenization” (Pérez-González, 2020).

In summary, FT exemplified by BF is unique and has many commendable features. However, its limitations require interdisciplinary research and management. Improving the platforms where FT originates, ensuring the legality and reasonableness of all FT aspects, addressing translation challenges, preventing cultural loss during translation, and promoting a more vibrant fan culture are all ways to enhance FT.



Figure 2. Subtitles are bilingual



Figure 3. During telephone conversations and music, subtitles change style as the scene changes



Figure 4. When it comes to proper nouns, BF tends to keep their original forms



Figure 5. Another distinctive feature of BF and other fansubbing groups on Bilibili is the use of danmu

4. The Significance and “Side Effects” of FT

The growth of FT can be seen as a form of dark energy,

operating through peer-to-peer file sharing networks and often dismissed due to its association with piracy and commodification, despite its productive potential. As is stated by Condry, “this dark energy is not unique to anime fandom, nor simply characteristic of online file sharing, but more broadly provides a way of conceptualising the fluid links between fans, media content, technology, and products (2010)”. Therefore, in this chapter, FT will be examined from both its energetic and dark aspects, with more emphasis on the former.

Starting with fan-translators, an experiment conducted by O’Hagan found that FT provides a positive environment for training translators (2008). With expertise in certain genres, fan-translators “desire to be a bridge between languages and cultures (Condry 2010)” and through the “share-and-share-alike (ibid.)” process of converting audiences into new fans, fan-translators ultimately contribute to the circulation and globalisation of cultures.

And catalyzed by medialisiation, FT speeds up deterritorialisation, resulting in an increased presence of social forms of contact and involvement that transcend the boundaries of a specific territory (Hernández Martí 2006). Although fan practices can pose a threat to commodification (Condry 2010), FT paradoxically also has a positive impact on the commercial market. Despite being illegal, FT is increasingly tolerated and even actively promoted by distributors and broadcasters (Pérez-González 2020). Relevant corporations can benefit from fan labor, which serves as free promotion of copyrighted texts and can lead to further sales of texts and merchandise (Evans 2020). In fact, copyright laws of FT develop unevenly within different countries. Besides, according to ‘safe harbor’, if the unlicensed copy is for education use or uploaders delete files immediately once being warned, etc., behaviour of these cases is considered as legitimate (Li 2015). (This has been translated from Chinese.)

Despite the challenges in enforcing copyright laws and questions of ethics or motivation, fansubs are technically illegal (Díaz Cintas and Muñoz Sánchez 2006). Additionally, as mentioned in the previous chapter, the actions of BF contradict the fundamental not-for-profit nature of FT, potentially disrupting the dynamics of the existing market. In short, as a form of dark energy, FT remains in a grey zone.

5. Conclusion

This article provides a valuable Chinese perspective for FT, especially Fansubbing Translation. FT, built by amateur translators, may not always produce perfect translations, its lack of stable quality standards allows for greater progress with impetus and subversive potential (Dwyer 2012). Moreover, as a result of globalisation, FT transcends borders, combining media, technology, culture, economy, and individuals to bring Translation Studies to a new level. To fully understand FT, interdisciplinary research must be furthered to better understand the complex fan culture that nourishes it. FT should then be studied within its broader social context, allowing Translation Studies to establish its own voice in the academic arena.

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