Where translation impacts: The non-professional community on Chinese online social media – A descriptive case study on the user-generated translation activity of Bilibili content creators

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Abstract
This study explored the user-generated translation activity in the context of the Chinese online social media. It focused on Bilibili content creators dedicated to translating public comments on China-related videos posted on international social media platforms such as YouTube, and creating videos featuring Chinese translated comments. Viewing their translation actions as events in a collective activity system, the authors collected data from 30 participants through a questionnaire and follow-up interviews with two participants who have recently worked on videos about China’s fight against Covid-19. All the data were analysed by using Engeström’s activity theory model to create an activity model showing how their user-generated translation activity was conducted. In this study, we observed that the participants, as the non-professional translation community on the Chinese online social media, were breaking down linguistic borders for fans and viewers, and

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postulated the possible interaction between the user-generated translation work and their better understanding of how the world saw China through grassroots expression of opinions.

**Keywords**
Activity theory, Bilibili content creators, online social media, the non-professional translation community, user-generated translation

**Introduction**

Throughout the history of China, five major translation waves have played an indispensable role in Chinese society and culture – the translation of Buddhist scriptures in the Sui dynasty (581–618) and the Tang dynasty (618–907); the translation of Western science and technology scholarship at the end of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644); the translation of Western humanities and social sciences scholarship at the end of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911); the translation of Russian works in the middle of the 20th century (from the late 1950s to the 1970s); and the massive translation endeavour since 1978, when China opened its door to the world (cf. Lin, 2002; Wang & Fan, 1999). Now, in the era of Web 2.0, the rapid expansion of access to knowledge and technologies as well as the growing reliance of the Chinese people on online social media (OSM) consumption have made it possible for individuals and groups who are not part of the professional translation community to take the ‘massive translation endeavour’ to a new level whereby their translated works can reach a larger audience in a much faster way via OSM platforms.

On popular Chinese online video-sharing platforms, the non-professional community, consisting of mainly amateurs who have not received professional training in translation and who may even have limited proficiency in any given language pair, is breaking down the national and linguistic borders for subscribers and viewers by providing translated (often subtitled) foreign media content and keeping them updated on global trending issues. In the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, their work is not confined to the translation of media content on this global fight. Some keep uploading self-created content showing how China’s efforts are perceived by the world through translating public comments on China’s fight against the virus published on international video-sharing platforms such as YouTube.

The present study describes and investigates the translation actions of such a group of content creators on Bilibili, a hub for user-generated content and a popular Chinese video-sharing site known for its participatory viewing experience. Inspired by the activity theory (AT), we depict content creators’ translation actions taking place on Bilibili as events in ‘a collective activity system’ to explain their ‘societal and collaborative nature’ (Engeström, 1999, p. 30), and provide a glimpse into this newly emerging form of user-generated translation (UGT) activity on Chinese OSM. This article begins by contextualizing the rise of the non-professional community in translation and the UGT activity on Chinese OSM; it then reviews relevant research and introduces the complex model of an activity system developed by Engeström (1987, 1999, 2001), before the case study is presented.

**Theoretical framework**

*The rise of the non-professional community in translation*

Scholars focus on different characteristics of the phenomenon of translation undertaken by individuals and groups who are not part of the professional translation community. This phenomenon
is often referred to as ‘user-generated translation (UGT)’ (O’Hagan, 2009; Perrino, 2009), ‘Web 2.0 translation’ (Austermühl, 2011), ‘community translation’ (O’Hagan, 2011), ‘volunteer translation’ (Pym, 2011a), ‘non-professional translation’ (Antonini & Bucaria, 2015) and ‘guerrilla translation’ (Dwyer, 2012, 2017). But no matter which term is used, there are two undeniable facts explaining why the rise of the non-professional community in translation is worth scholarly attention.

The non-professional community in translation reflects the concept of ‘prosumers’ (Cronin, 2013; O’Hagan, 2009), who are no longer passive consumers of translation works, but active producers who are ‘producing its own self-representation as a target audience’ (Cronin, 2013, p. 100). The first most well-established non-professional translation community – fansubbers of Japanese anime – came into being as early as the 1980s. At that time, Japanese anime lovers in the United States found that their craving for anime could not be satisfied by ‘the official often over-edited versions of anime typically aired in dubbed form on television networks outside Japan’ (O’Hagan, 2009, p. 11). Motivated by their own interest and the desire for easier and timely access to English-subtitled Japanese anime, some anime lovers started to subtitle their favourite anime for other fans. This practice of fan translation of Japanese anime is often credited as translation ‘by fans for fans’ (Díaz-Cintas & Sánchez, 2006, p. 51), and demonstrates the possibility of former consumers of anime turning into active producers; fansubbers are no longer passive viewers but rather active producers not only deciding which anime to be subtitled but also providing their own subtitles to be circulated worldwide.

The emergence of Web 2.0 and the developments in translation technology have helped this non-professional community expand to different areas in translation (e.g. video game localization), and further opened up translation ‘as an everyday online activity performed by self-declared translators’ (O’Hagan, 2017, p. 25), leading us to a world where ‘translation is no longer a special task left for special people’ but ‘one of the basic things you do with language’ (Pym, 2011b, p. 6). The most vibrant forms of non-professional translation are fan translation and crowdsourcing translation that have both prospered in the online environment. The former, growing out of fandom culture, refers to the volunteer translation practice done by grassroots internet users in the spirit of ‘free sharing of material by like-minded people’ (O’Hagan, 2009, p. 10). The most representative fan translators are fansubbers in non-English-speaking countries such as China, where voluntary subtitlers, by making the most of the ‘interventionist forms of subtitling’ (Pérez-González, 2013, p. 6) as well as the process of ‘democratization of technology’ and ‘technologization of democracy’ (Pérez-González, 2014), are providing domestic audience with timely subtitled media content from English-speaking countries (e.g. American and British TV dramas). The latter refers to the outsourcing of translation tasks ‘traditionally performed by professionals, to an undefined, often large group of individuals in the form of an open call’ (Pérez-González, 2014, p. 307). A typical case in point is the Community Translation Project launched by TED talks in 2010 to crowdsource the video translation to viewers around the world, which has generated a TED video library available in multiple languages, a key to TED Talks’ global success. The growing popularity of these two forms of non-professional translation has not only given birth to a large number of volunteer translation communities dedicated to harnessing the ‘collective intelligence’ (Lévy, 1997) to facilitate knowledge sharing and information flow across languages and cultures, but more importantly, it has also turned the internet into a ‘democratic translation environment’ (Desjardins, 2017, p. 6) where ostensibly, every grassroots internet user can become a member of the translation community.
UGT activity on Chinese OSM

Over the past two decades, the non-professional translation community in China has gone through a similar development path experienced by its counterparts in other countries. It was first motivated by fandom culture, popularized with the founding of different volunteer translation groups dedicated to subtitling foreign movies and TV dramas, and expanded its influence when large domestic websites crowdsourced translation to volunteer translation groups (cf. Cao, 2018).

Now, this non-professional community has been leveraging the thriving OSM to grow its popularity and influence. Internet users in China are very active on video-sharing platforms such as Sina Weibo and Bilibili. According to the 45th China Statistical Report on Internet Development, a semi-annual report issued by China Internet Network Information Centre (CINNC), by March 2020, 850 million internet users in China are using video-sharing social networking sites, accounting for 94.1% of the entire internet population in China (China Internet Network Information Centre, 2020). On popular Chinese OSM video-sharing platforms, an increasing number of groups and individuals have created user accounts under which they keep uploading self-created videos in such a way that their self-created content can reach a much larger audience in a much faster way.

In media studies, ‘user-generated content (UGC)’ is described as a specific activity in which ‘users’, as both ‘remediators’ and ‘direct producers’ of media content, are engaging in ‘new forms of large-scale participation in digital media spaces’ (Flew, 2008, pp. 35–36; Daniel et al., 2009, p. 574). Drawing on this idea, we use the term ‘user-generated translation (UGT)’ developed by Perrino (2009) and O’Hagan (2009) in this article to refer to the translation activity carried out by the non-professional translation community active on Chinese OSM video-sharing platforms. UGT is most appropriate in our case because the translation activity under study is carried out in the digital media space with a large-scale user participation – Bilibili, a video-sharing platform with 50.8 million daily active users on average; the translation is undertaken by unspecified self-selected individuals (O’Hagan, 2009), who, by harnessing Web 2.0 services and tools (Perrino, 2009), are ‘remediating’ linguistically inaccessible foreign media content and ‘producing’ videos with Chinese translation.

Relevant research

Recent years have seen expanded and deepened research efforts in the non-professional community in translation. To date, research has moved from early studies conducted by audiovisual translation specialists with an interest in the amateur subtitling process, distinctive subtitling practices of fansubbers and the effects of their interventionist agendas (Díaz-Cintas & Sánchez, 2006; Pérez-González, 2006, 2007; Pérez-González & Susam-Saraeva, 2012), to those extended to cover a wider range of areas, such as online social self-translation (Desjardins, 2019), in the flourishing non-professional translation activity. Scholarly efforts to examine the non-professional translation in the Chinese context have also shed some light on how this once academically overlooked activity develops in China. Some studies examine the wide choice of translation strategies adopted by amateur subtitlers (Lv & Li, 2015); some regard non-professional translation in China as a prominent social phenomenon and look into the dynamics of collective identity formation in Chinese fansubbing groups as well as their strategies to engage target audiences (Wang, 2017; Wang & Zhang, 2016, 2017); some focus on the volunteerism of Chinese fansubbing groups and their neoliberal work ethic (Davis & Yeh, 2017; Hu, 2012; Kung, 2016); and some explore new forms of non-professional translation activity, such as Danmaku subtitling (Yang, 2019), for
the technology-empowered non-professional translation in China is also expanding to different areas and taking on new forms. The present study hopes to contribute to the existing scholarship by exploring a newly emerging form of non-professional translation activity on Chinese OSM – translating public comments on China-related videos on international platforms and creating videos featuring Chinese translated comments.

The previous literature on non-professional translation has been an inspiration to the present study in three ways. First, the identity of the non-professional community in translation as the ‘prosumer’ has been widely discussed and well recognized (Cronin, 2013; Desjardins, 2017; Jiménez-Crespo, 2020; O’Hagan, 2009); second, advanced technological tools such as online translation tools have sparked the rise of the non-professional community in different areas in translation and enabled grassroots internet users to easily produce and publish self-created media content (Folaron, 2020; Wongseree, 2019); and third, with the rise of the non-professional community, translation is no longer a strictly work engagement but has become an online social activity in which the human actors, be they amateurs or professionals, interact virtually with other human actors and non-human actants in rendering content in a target language (O’Hagan, 2012).

Chinese OSM video-sharing platforms started to emerge in great numbers around 2005 and have attracted growing scholarly attention in recent years because of both the digital success stories of a few (e.g. Youku⁹ and Douyin¹⁰) and their growing impact on people’s lives. Researchers have traced the history of such platforms and illustrated how they have adapted in a changing industry landscape by acquiring professionally generated content (PGC), professionalizing amateur production (Zhao, 2016) and consciously elevating user participation through virtual communities (Hu et al., 2016). Researchers have also argued that such platforms could develop spaces for microfilm makers to present their films and build infrastructure to support creators by directing revenues to them (Gilardi et al., 2020); they have enabled grassroots creation and the formation of an ‘unlikely’ creative class in contemporary China (Lin & de Kloet, 2019); and they have worked as an ‘identity college’ for viewers, especially young fans, to perform various roles and explore hybrid identities (Chen, 2020). However, there is a paucity of research on UGT on such platforms even though most of them host a large number of fansubbed videos and have their roots in facilitating the flow of foreign media content unavailable in the official market (Zhao, 2016). Therefore, this study delves into this under-explored area and explores UGT as an online social activity in which participants, as prosumers, empowered by advanced technological tools, translate, create and upload user-generated media content to Bilibili.

**Bilibili content creators’ UGT activity: an AT approach**

An AT model developed by Engeström (1987, 1999) is adopted to systemize our discussion of Bilibili content creators’ UGT activity. As an interdisciplinary approach, AT originated from the work of Soviet psychologists and was later developed by Leontiev (1978) as a theoretical framework to explore the situated, object-oriented and tool-mediated aspect of human activities. Engeström (1987, 1999, 2001) modified AT and applied it to learning in organizations. He expanded Vygotsky’s (1980) classical triadic model of mediated act (see Figure 1) to a complex model of a collective activity system¹¹ (see Figure 2) focusing on complex interrelations between the individual subject and others in his or her community or who are taking similar actions. Unlike Vygotsky’s classical triadic model, Engeström’s model is not individually focused. The ‘subject’ is no longer one individual; instead, the one individual is placed into a group of people who are taking
similar actions. The ‘object’, being the central issue of the model, is what connects individual actions to the collective activity, while the projection from the ‘object’ to the ‘outcome’ gives broader meaning to individual actions. The ‘instruments’ are mediating artefacts such as concepts and material tools. The activity is mediated by the ‘division of labour’ and ‘rules’ that structure interaction within a particular ‘community’, such as OSM platform rules (cf. Engeström, 2001). The significance of examining an activity in such a complex model is twofold. First, this emphasizes that anything we do relies on a network of actants to make it possible; each actant has its own impact on the whole system, which means if any actant is removed from the activity system, the system will either cease to operate or function in a different way. Second, ‘sources of change and development’ for the activity system are ‘contradictions’ among elements (Engeström, 1999, 2001); the activity itself can be viewed as the resolution process of contradictions. As an analytical tool to recognize and analyse key elements of human activities, AT has been widely applied to both workplace and educational settings to ‘redirect[s] our gaze from what is going on inside the individual to what happens between human beings, their objects, and their instruments’ (Sannino & Engeström, 2018, p. 44). Thus, although UGT explored in the present study is largely the result of individual efforts, when we shift our focus away from the cognitive activity confined in one’s brain and make visible the seven key elements in the activity system, we see a group of people taking similar actions, that is, empowered by technological tools, they are all translating public comments on China-related videos posted on international platforms, creating videos featuring Chinese translated comments and uploading them to a popular Chinese OSM video-sharing platform.
In the present study, the Bilibili content creators’ UGT activity is thus portrayed as a complex and self-organized system in which a goal-directed subject, that is, content creators, interacts purposefully with different elements of the same system. Based on Engeström’s model, a central guiding question is proposed:

**RQ1.** How can Engeström’s activity system be applied to analysing the UGT by Bilibili content creators?

Considering the majority (19 of 30) of participants have been working on videos about China’s fight against Covid-19 over the past few months, we are particularly interested in exploring the ‘outcome’ of their UGT during this trying time. Therefore, another research question is proposed:

**RQ2.** What is the desired ‘outcome’ for their specific activity of creating videos featuring public comments on China’s fight against Covid-19?

**Methods**

We conduct a descriptive case study to systematically describe participants’ UGT activity as the initial enquiry into a newly emerging form of UGT on Chinese OSM – translating public comments on China-related videos on international platforms and creating videos featuring Chinese translated comments. In case studies, researchers usually collect detailed information of an activity ‘using a variety of data collection procedures over a sustained period of time’ (Creswell, 2009, p. 13). In the present study, we sent out questionnaires, collected answers and also conducted follow-up interviews to collect qualitative information, all of which took about 3 months in total. The questionnaire consists of 19 single-choice questions, 12 multi-choice questions and three open-ended ones. The follow-up interview, a semi-structured one guided by RQ2, intends to gather more information on the activity of creating videos featuring Chinese translated public comments on China’s fight against Covid-19.

**Procedure**

We used several key words in Chinese relevant to the translation of comments, such as ‘评论翻译 (comment translation)’, ‘译 (translation)’ and ‘评 (comment)’, for the fuzzy search of relevant videos on Bilibili. Then we checked uploaders’ online profiles and found more than 120 such Bilibili uploaders in total. After carefully viewing their profiles, we found 90 uploaders whose online activity fits the description of UGT. We collected their basic information including account names, the number of fans, as well as the number of views and likes of their uploaded videos (see Table 1).

Because there is no other way except for the message box on Bilibili through which we can contact uploaders, we registered a Bilibili account. Nonetheless, Bilibili has a strict censoring system which made it impossible for us to contact more than three content creators per day, otherwise the account would be blocked for 24 hours. Therefore, we contacted three uploaders per day and first asked them whether they were willing to participate and how they would like the questionnaire to be sent. Knowing some content creators preferred online questionnaires while others preferred paper ones for security concerns, we created both online and paper versions. We sent links of the online questionnaires to uploaders over the message box, and sent the scanned paper ones to them through enquired e-mail address. After more than 2 months of contacting and
follow-up communication, we sent out 90 questionnaires and received five answered paper ones and 25 online ones. The questionnaire is divided into different sections and centred on the RQs listed above. Questions all pertain to the seven key elements in the complex model of an activity system (see Figure 2), of which seven questions are about the ‘subject’, six about the ‘object’, four about the ‘instruments’, three about the ‘rules’, three about the ‘community’, six about the ‘division of labour’ and the other five about the ‘outcome’. There is one comment box below each of the single-choice and multi-choice questions in case the listed answer options do not cover what the participants have in mind.15

After the deadline for the submission of the questionnaires, we sent out follow-up interview invitations to participants who not only have large fan bases but also have uploaded videos about China’s fight against Covid-19 recently. We heard back from two of them and had follow-up

| Number | The number of fans | The number of likes | The number of views | Videos of China’s fight against Covid-19 |
|--------|--------------------|---------------------|---------------------|----------------------------------------|
| 1      | 32,000             | 265,000             | 649,000             | Yes                                    |
| 2      | 367                | 6472                | 564,000             | No                                     |
| 3      | 190,000            | 1,412,000           | 48,835,000          | Yes                                    |
| 4      | 340                | 36,000              | 1,048,000           | Yes                                    |
| 5      | 1418               | 2331                | 247,000             | No                                     |
| 6      | 25,000             | 158,000             | 4,930,000           | No                                     |
| 7      | 658                | 2897                | 659,000             | No                                     |
| 8      | 324                | 9616                | 523,000             | Yes                                    |
| 9      | 3101               | 40,000              | 1,790,000           | Yes                                    |
| 10     | 15,000             | 87,000              | 3,335,000           | Yes                                    |
| 11     | 44,000             | 284,000             | 17,190,000          | Yes                                    |
| 12     | 5756               | 86,000              | 5,921,000           | No                                     |
| 13     | 4136               | 93,000              | 7,610,000           | Yes                                    |
| 14     | 3032               | 26,000              | 833,000             | No                                     |
| 15     | 397                | 3338                | 226,000             | No                                     |
| 16     | 124                | 9759                | 429,000             | No                                     |
| 17     | 1863               | 18,000              | 1,761,000           | Yes                                    |
| 18     | 50                 | 1898                | 132,000             | Yes                                    |
| 19     | 15,000             | 73,000              | 17,795,000          | Yes                                    |
| 20     | 2288               | 34,000              | 495,000             | No                                     |
| 21     | 86                 | 1047                | 107,000             | No                                     |
| 22     | 46                 | 342                 | 18,000              | No                                     |
| 23     | 116                | 7862                | 371,000             | Yes                                    |
| 24     | 14,000             | 168,000             | 13,776,000          | Yes                                    |
| 25     | 44                 | 387                 | 23,000              | Yes                                    |
| 26     | 2572               | 28,000              | 3,758,000           | Yes                                    |
| 27     | 302                | 5789                | 315,000             | Yes                                    |
| 28     | 46                 | 1648                | 71,000              | Yes                                    |
| 29     | 956                | 16,000              | 621,000             | Yes                                    |
| 30     | 46                 | 1360                | 87,000              | Yes                                    |
interviews using the message box on Bilibili to dig deeper into their views about the specific activity of creating videos featuring Chinese translated public comments on China’s fight against the virus. Their remarks as well as answers to other parts of the questionnaire are discussed in the next section.

**Major findings**

**Subject: content creators on Bilibili**

In the activity system model for the present study, the subject is a group of content creators, who, with the help of instruments including online translation tools and video-editing software, translate public comments on China-related videos on international platforms, create videos featuring Chinese translated comments and upload them to Bilibili.

As shown in Table 2, most of the participants are well educated; all but two participants are non-professional translators who have not received professional training in translation; only one of them has undertaken translation-related work; and one is currently working as a full-time translator. On top of that, 19 of them have been working on videos of China’s fight against Covid-19 over the past few months and created 322 videos (as of 8 August 2020) showing how China’s efforts are perceived by users on international video-sharing platforms.

Because of UGT, participants are no longer passive consumers of videos but active producers. However, they never see themselves as translators but rather observant viewers who are eager to share what they view or read in another language, just as one participant revealed in the follow-up interview:

> I am not a translator. I never intend to be one. I just enjoy watching videos in English on YouTube. I believe I must have spent thousands of hours watching them. I also like leaving and reading comments, and of course, due to my poor English, I have to use an online translation tool. One day an idea just hit me that what if I collect some intriguing comments, translate them, make them into videos? I make no money out of it and compared with a social media influencer, I have a very small group of fans. I still enjoy it though. My friends used to think I’m doing something meaningless. But after watching my recent videos on how internet users in other countries perceive China’s fight against Covid-19, they became my fans.

**Object: the pursuit of hobbies and fanbase growth**

Fan economy is even more relevant in today’s society. Like other platforms such as TikTok on which fans can reward content creators with e-gifts, Bilibili also enables fans and viewers to reward uploaders, which does provide them an incentive to work. However, none of the participants in the present study believed that uploading self-created content to Bilibili generated the majority of their income and they could make a living as content creators. Twelve of them said uploading videos to Bilibili was their part-time job, through which they earned a small amount of income, while 14 said it was just one of their hobbies, and they did not make any money out of it. Two participants in the follow-up interview both revealed that even though being part-time content creators did bring them some extra income, they did not intend to turn a hobby into a career. Doing what they like for pleasure in their spare time is a major component of the ‘object’ for most participants.

Fanbase growth is another dominant object, as one revealed in the comment box below the question regarding the motive of their UGT:
| Number | Gender | Has received professional translation training | Highest degree received | Current student degree | Overseas experience | Was/is a professional translator | Full-time/part-time content creator |
|--------|--------|-----------------------------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1      | Male   | No                                            | High school diploma    | Undergraduate student | No                  | N/A                             | Part time                         |
| 2      | Male   | No                                            | High school diploma    | Undergraduate student | Yes                 | N/A                             | Part time                         |
| 3      | Male   | No                                            | Bachelor’s             | No                    | No                  | N/A                             | Part time                         |
| 4      | Male   | No                                            | Master’s               | No                    | No                  | N/A                             | Part time                         |
| 5      | Female | No                                            | Bachelor’s             | No                    | Yes                 | N/A                             | Part time                         |
| 6      | Male   | Yes                                           | High school diploma    | Undergraduate student | No                  | N/A                             | Part time                         |
| 7      | Male   | Yes                                           | High school diploma    | Undergraduate student | No                  | N/A                             | Part time                         |
| 8      | Female | No                                            | Bachelor’s             | Graduate student      | Yes                 | N/A                             | Part time                         |
| 9      | Male   | No                                            | Bachelor’s             | No                    | No                  | N/A                             | Part time                         |
| 10     | Male   | No                                            | Master’s               | No                    | No                  | N/A                             | Part time                         |
| 11     | Male   | No                                            | Bachelor’s             | Graduate student      | No                  | N/A                             | Part time                         |
| 12     | Male   | No                                            | Bachelor’s             | No                    | No                  | N/A                             | Part time                         |
| 13     | Female | No                                            | Master’s               | No                    | Yes                 | Was                             | Part time                         |
| 14     | Male   | No                                            | Bachelor’s             | No                    | No                  | Is                              | Part time                         |
| 15     | Male   | No                                            | Doctor’s               | No                    | Yes                 | N/A                             | Part time                         |
| 16     | Male   | No                                            | Bachelor’s             | No                    | No                  | N/A                             | Part time                         |
| 17     | Female | No                                            | Bachelor’s             | Graduate student      | Yes                 | N/A                             | Part time                         |
| 18     | Female | No                                            | Bachelor’s             | No                    | No                  | N/A                             | Part time                         |
| 19     | Male   | No                                            | Bachelor’s             | No                    | No                  | N/A                             | Part time                         |
| 20     | Male   | No                                            | Bachelor’s             | Graduate student      | No                  | N/A                             | Part time                         |
| 21     | Male   | No                                            | Bachelor’s             | Graduate student      | No                  | N/A                             | Part time                         |
| 22     | Male   | No                                            | Bachelor’s             | Graduate student      | Yes                 | N/A                             | Part time                         |
| 23     | Female | No                                            | Bachelor’s             | No                    | No                  | N/A                             | Part time                         |
| 24     | Female | No                                            | Bachelor’s             | Graduate student      | Yes                 | N/A                             | Part time                         |
| 25     | Female | No                                            | Master’s               | No                    | No                  | N/A                             | Part time                         |
| 26     | Male   | No                                            | Bachelor’s             | Graduate student      | Yes                 | N/A                             | Part time                         |
| 27     | Female | No                                            | Bachelor’s             | No                    | No                  | N/A                             | Part time                         |
| 28     | Female | No                                            | Bachelor’s             | No                    | No                  | N/A                             | Part time                         |
| 29     | Male   | No                                            | Bachelor’s             | No                    | No                  | N/A                             | Part time                         |
| 30     | Male   | No                                            | Bachelor’s             | No                    | No                  | N/A                             | Part time                         |
At first, I just like watching short videos of news comments on Bilibili. Then I realized that with the help of some tools and the Bilibili user guide on how to upload videos, I could create such videos on my own and become an uploader too. So I made several videos and uploaded them to Bilibili [...] When I already had a small fan base, I realized I simply couldn’t stop making new videos because I didn’t want to lose my fans.

To attract more fans and viewers, participants put a lot of effort into locating the comments they work on. Questionnaire results show that some of them prefer comments with the most likes or with the largest number of replies. In the comment box, some noted that they often selected witty and thought-provoking comments, and the ones they thought their fans would be most interested in. Besides, participants also upload their videos to other popular applications and platforms, such as Jin Ri Tou Tiao and Xi Gua Shi Pin to get more views and expand their fanbase.

**Instruments: translation tools and video-editing applications**

Translation is a challenging task for most of the participants because the majority of them have not received professional training in translation. This can be demonstrated by the fact that when asked what was the most difficult part in the whole process, 12 participants chose translation. They also valued the quality of translation and believed that good translation helped them attract more fans. One participant put in the comment box the following:

> For me, translation is the most time-consuming part. It usually takes me at least a whole day to translate the comments I collected. I find sarcasm and witty remarks the most difficult to translate. Some of them are culturally-loaded expressions, so I have to spend a lot of time searching for the background information to understand them. Sometimes, I have to add the background information to the videos, otherwise, viewers will feel confused.

Participants use online tools to improve the quality of translation and hence cut the amount of time they have to spend on translation. The most frequently mentioned tools are machine translation tools (e.g. Google Translate and Youdao Translate), while online dictionaries and online corpus (e.g. Linguee) are also included in their translation toolkit.

Besides translation, video editing is also a difficult and time-consuming part. To give viewers the best viewing experience, both the sound and image quality of the uploaded videos must be guaranteed, which usually takes up a lot of time. But with plenty of easy-to-use video-editing software, high-quality videos can be created in a more efficient way. Questionnaire results show that participants use Adobe Premiere, ArcTime, Filmora, iMovie and some Chinese software such as Wondershare, iJianJi and Jian Ying to edit videos.

**Rules: protection of IPRs and censorship on Bilibili**

Intellectual property rights (IPRs) protection remains a grey zone on Bilibili in that there are still not any regulations on whether uploaders can translate comments of videos downloaded from banned foreign websites such as YouTube, and just like early fansubbers, these participants are working on foreign media content and viewers’ comments without the permission of the original creators, which may raise an issue of IPR infringement. One participant shared his concern over IPRs with us in the follow-up interview:
I am aware of IPRs and want to see my rights protected, but when I translate viewers’ comments and create subtitles, sometimes it feels like I am violating others’ IPRs. Maybe that is why I attach source information to every video I make.

An interesting finding is that participants also had concerns over their own IPRs being violated by fellow content creators. Sixteen participants reported that their videos had been reposted by other Bilibili accounts without their consent. What is more, 29 of the 30 participants said they were aware of the importance of their own IPRs, and wished there would be strict IPR-related rules on Bilibili.

Bilibili censorship is one of the most frequently mentioned points in the collected questionnaires. For content creators, they have to make sure their videos do not contain any content or ideas that are against the core values of China’s society. Otherwise, their videos would be blocked or sent back for revision. In the interview, both participants disclosed that they must be very careful in selecting comments to be translated, especially when they were working on videos about China’s fight against Covid-19 because, according to one participant, ‘not everyone outside China understand and appreciate what we have done’. When asked to elaborate on how to select comments to be translated during the interview, one participant replied the following:

I would choose those positive comments on China’s fight against Covid-19 to make sure that my videos will not be blocked by the censorship [. . .] If the video touches on something a little sensitive, it would be sent back or blocked. To make things worse, sometimes the sensitive parts are not marked, which means I have to revise the content in the video without any guidance. I have to keep revising till it passes the censorship. It’s such a tiring task.

However, the preference for comments with a positive tone should not be simply attributed to censorship. One participant explained in the interview that, knowing lots of viewers believe people in other countries hold only negative opinions towards China, he intentionally selected comments with a positive tone to show that positive reviews on China’s fight against the pandemic did exist. In this sense, participants’ UGT bears great resemblance to ‘transframing’ – translation-mediated framing (Liu, 2019). Like the selection process in ‘transframing’, the process of selecting public comments to be translated is also determined by the ‘influencers of transframing’, that is, the embodiment of frames navigated by ideology, culture and subjectivity (Liu, 2019). Although it is beyond the scope of this study to seek any further interpretation of participants’ selection of comments, it merits scholarly inquiry in the future when we take a closer look at this UGT process.

Community: the interaction between content creators and viewers

In the AT model of the present study, the community includes content creators on Bilibili, their existing and potential fans. Viewers can interact with content creators in mainly three ways on Bilibili: First, viewers leave comments in the comment section below any video, and content creators reply to the comments to start the two-way communication; second, viewers send private messages to content creators; and third, viewers send comments through Danmaku. Danmaku interface (or Danmu弹幕, literally meaning bullet comments) allows real-time comments to be overlaid onto videos, offering viewers the participatory viewing experience. Questionnaire results suggest that it is this real-time interaction feature that attracts participants to upload self-created videos to Bilibili. One participant revealed her liking for Danmaku in one of the comment boxes:
It is because I am a Danmaku lover that I choose Bilibili as the platform where I share my videos. [...] I have access to instant reactions from the viewers in Danmaku. Since Danmaku comments are directly overlaid onto the videos immediately upon being entered, it feels like I’m watching my videos together with my fans.

Communication between content creators and viewers can improve the quality of the self-created content. To increase the views of videos, uploaders would take viewers’ comments into consideration and make some improvement in the next video. Seventeen participants said their choice of the topic of the next video was influenced by viewers’ comments either in the comment section or in Danmaku. In addition, 18 of them said they would change the background soundtrack, shorten or lengthen videos or adjust the style of the subtitles based on viewers’ suggestions. When asked whether some viewers have pointed out their translation errors, 21 said yes and 19 admitted that they once revised translation according to viewers’ suggestions. In so doing, communicating with viewers is helpful in improving the quality of translation and enlarging their fanbase, as one participant pointed out in the follow-up interview:

I enjoy reading viewers’ comments, to be honest, especially those thanking me for creating the video. All the thank-you comments make me feel encouraged to carry on. I also enjoy looking for suggestions in comments. Some suggestions help me improve the translation and some give me inspiration for what to be put in my next video. I try my best to reply to as many suggestions as possible, because my replies show how much I value their suggestions. You know, when they feel your sincerity, they become fans.

However, participants are not predisposed to interact with fellow uploaders. Although some admitted that they were inspired by videos featuring similar content to become uploaders, 22 participants said they had never communicated with other uploaders. The two participants explained in the follow-up interview that there was no need for communication with other uploaders because they were all doing the same thing, and they knew the right way to do it.

**Division of labour: individual work and cooperation**

Even though the videos created by these uploaders are shorter than 4 minutes in general, creating such videos is still a complicated and time-consuming task in that it is composed of several sub-tasks, including searching for China-related videos posted on international platforms, selecting comments, translating, editing and uploading videos. However, instead of having a team at their disposal with one or more people in charge of different sub-tasks, 25 participants said they worked on their own. This is largely due to the fact that uploading these videos to Bilibili seldom generate any income, while managing a team is especially hard if there are no monetary incentives. What is noteworthy is that five participants put in the comment box that in most cases, they worked alone, but they might seek help from others when necessary. In the interview, both participants said that when they needed help in understanding the comments, they would ask their foreign friends for help, as one participant revealed:

For most of the time, I worked alone, but sometimes I would turn to some of my foreign friends for help [...] It’s when I had trouble understanding the comments I chose, especially when I struggled with translating the slangs or culturally-loaded expressions in the comments. One needs specific cultural and historical contexts to understand such comments. The online translation tools are no help at all in translating them. I have to talk to my foreign friends who have the cultural background and the knowledge to help me fully understand the comments.
Thus, the division of labour in the activity system in the present study can be summarized as for most of the time, participants work alone and utilize all kinds of resources at hand to assist them through each part of this complicated UGT activity, and are willing to seek help from others when necessary.

**Outcome: better understanding of different perspectives**

The broader meaning of Bilibili content creators’ UGT activity, which starts from the pursuit of hobbies and fanbase growth, is providing the opportunities not only for content creators themselves but also for their viewers to learn and understand different perspectives. On one hand, to provide quality content to fans and viewers, participants in the present study keep on searching and browsing China-related videos on international video-sharing platforms, reading and translating public comments on the videos. In this process, they are exposed to a wealth of grassroots opinions, enlightening them on the importance of seeing things from different perspectives and enabling them to increase understanding of other people’s information and reasoning. On the other hand, through UGT, they are able to break down linguistic barriers to make accessible different perspectives for fans and viewers to view issues and situations both from their own viewpoints and those of others from different cultures. For the past few months, most of the uploaders’ videos were about China’s efforts in fighting Covid-19. Their videos show how China’s efforts have been perceived in other parts of the world. In the interview, one of the participants spoke about the outcome for his UGT activity:

Many people think people in other countries only hold negative opinions towards China. It’s not true. People in other countries are not that different from us. They also think highly of China’s efforts in many cases. For example, when I worked on the video ‘once upon a virus’ by New China TV on YouTube, I found a lot of positive comments on our fight against the virus. And I also found a bunch of funny ones with a sarcastic tone criticizing the sluggish response of the United States; and some talking about how their home countries are doing in the pandemic. So by doing this, I come to see all these different perspectives. I hope by translating some comments and making videos for my viewers, I can help them get an unbiased understanding of how the outside world sees us.

The same participant also admitted that negative comments did exist, but to make sure his videos would not get blocked, he must be really careful in deciding which ones can be translated and which ones should not. He told us in the interview that he worked hard on striking a balance between complying with the censorship rules and the integrity of the information he delivered:

But still, I am not giving up offering my fans and viewers different perspectives, because sometimes hearing harsh comments or knowing that others hold grudge against us will encourage us to reflect on ourselves, who we are, what our values are and etc., so that when we have a chance to respond to these comments or exchange views with these naysayers, we will be able to defend ourselves and the values we hold dear. That’s why I’m thinking about summarizing some negative comments and putting them in the comment section.

Going through comments on videos this participant uploaded, we notice that his efforts to present different perspectives are gradually accepted by viewers. Although there are still comments mocking his UGT activity as ‘粪里淘金(literally, extracting gold from faeces)’, deliberately searching for comments with a positive tone among floods of open smears and unfair judgements
from naysayers, there are a growing number of comments showing the viewers’ awareness of the strict censorship rules and their appreciation of the hard work the participant has done, such as using a chart showing the percentages of comments with a positive, negative and neutral tone that the participant found under the original video, to provide them with different perspectives while complying with the censorship rules.

**Conclusion**

Based on the questionnaire results and the findings from the follow-up interviews, we are able to create an activity model (see Figure 3), offering a glimpse into all the elements that support participants’ UGT activity. As discussed above, the ‘subject’ – a group of Bilibili content creators – is eager to share with fans and viewers what it views or reads about China from international video-sharing platforms; regarding the UGT work as a hobby rather than a profession, the ‘subject’ keeps translating, creating and uploading user-generated media content to Bilibili to achieve the ‘object’ of pursuing hobbies and expanding the fanbase; valuing the quality of the uploaded content, the ‘subject’ makes full use of the available ‘instruments’, including translation tools and multi-functional video-editing applications, to give viewers the best possible viewing experience; concerned about protecting the IPRs of both others and its own and abiding by Bilibili censorship ‘rules’ upholding the core values of China’s society, the ‘subject’ is cautious about selecting the content to be translated and works hard on striking a balance between ‘rules’ and information integrity; despite little or no communication with fellow Bilibili content creators who are taking similar actions, the ‘subject’ takes viewers’ comments and suggestions seriously and manages to form a ‘community’ featuring a dynamic and positive interaction, which has led to the creation of more quality content catering to the viewers’ needs and interests; unable to offer any material reward or monetary remuneration to attract co-workers, the ‘subject’ works alone most of the time and seeks help from others when necessary; relying on all the aforementioned elements, participants in our
study are breaking down linguistic borders through UGT not only for themselves but also for fans and viewers to learn and understand different perspectives, the ‘outcome’ that gives broader meaning to their UGT activity.

This ‘outcome’ remains pertinent to the context of working on videos about China’s fight against Covid-19. Covid-19 caught the world off guard and has caused untold miseries to the world in many aspects. Amid the rising concerns over how to live a normal life when the lurking darkness of the virus still keeps parts of the world in lockdown, we must continue international exchanges and cooperation and keep our minds open to different perspectives, so that we can enhance our understanding of one another, cultivate empathy and strengthen the desire for peaceful coexistence as citizens of the world during this trying time. Participants’ UGT is not only an enabling activity, but also encourages their fans and viewers to embrace different perspectives and remain open to cross-cultural exchanges. Due to insufficient data collected from follow-up interviews with only two participants, we were unable to place the complex model of Bilibili content creators’ UGT in the context of the ongoing pandemic. However, further discussion with them regarding their UGT activity still shows that the ‘citizen media’ practice (Baker & Blaagaard, 2016; Bélair-Gagnon & Anderson, 2015) of this kind is extremely important when political smear campaigns are on the rise. Their self-created content is made up of voices from the grassroots, a significant component of people-to-people bonds.

Leveraging the spirit of openness and sharing of OSM platforms, and harnessing digital services and tools available, participants in our study, as members of the non-professional translation community on Chinese OSM platforms, are helping their monolingual Chinese-speaking fans and viewers to increase their cross-cultural engagement. Their UGT activity not only serves as a living example of the rise of a new type of internet users known for grassroots creativity but also demonstrates the possibility of OSM platforms developing into a ‘democratic translation environment’ (Desjardins, 2017, p. 6) and ‘a world of amateurish fun’ (Pym, 2011b, p. 6), which merits further scholarly attention from both translation studies and media studies.

**Limitation and suggestions for future studies**

In the present study, given the time limit, we contacted only 90 content creators on Bilibili, collected only 30 questionnaires and were able to conduct follow-up interviews with only two participants. Therefore, whether the results of the questionnaires can represent the majority of such uploaders is still questionable. This is a pilot study providing a general picture of what these content creators are doing and offering a glimpse into each key element in their UGT activity system. Future research, on one hand, could have a closer look into any one of the seven elements of the activity model; a careful examination of the interactions, especially the ‘contradictions’ among them, is also needed to better explain changes and developments in the system. On the other hand, a more substantial study in the future is needed to cover more content creators and employ more instruments to collect data from broader sources. For example, researchers can invite Bilibili content creators who have worked on Covid-19-related videos to a focus group discussion, which can be conducted via online chatting applications such as WeChat or QQ, to have in-depth exchanges on their UGT activity.
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Notes
1. The most eye-catching feature of Bilibili is its Danmaku interface (or Danmu弹幕, literally meaning bullet comments), which allows real-time comments to be overlaid onto videos, offering viewers the participatory viewing experience.
2. There is still no consensus about an umbrella term to define this phenomenon. Inspired by the International Conference on Non-professional Interpreting and Translation, which has been held every 2 years since 2012, we use ‘the non-professional community’ here to label those who are turning translation into a flourishing activity in the age of Web 2.0.
3. In his study of audiovisual translation, Pérez-González (2014) referred to ‘democratization of technology’ and ‘technologization of democracy’ as the ‘two major contexts of cultural production shaped by the interplay between technology and democratization as theorized by Foucault’ (p. 307). According to Pérez-González (2014), in the context of audiovisual translation, democratization of technology refers to ‘the involvement of ordinary citizens in amateur audiovisual translation as a form of cultural resistance, choosing their own technological tools and mediation conventions’ (p. 307), while technologization of democracy designates ‘the phenomenon whereby ordinary citizens are provided with technological tools to carry out amateur audiovisual translation and adhere to the guidelines and restrictions imposed by the “enabling” organizations’ (p. 312).
4. For example, Netease, a Chinese internet technology company, once crowdsourced the translation of authorized videos of open classes from the world’s top universities to YYeTs, one of the largest fansubbing groups in China.
5. Sina Weibo is a popular microblogging website, where users can upload texts, pictures and videos for instant sharing.
6. See http://www.cac.gov.cn/2020-04/27/c_1589535470378587.htm.
7. In the present study, two participants claim they have received professional training in translation, one claims he is working as a professional translator and one claims she once worked as a professional translator. So when describing the participants and their translation activity, we drop the modifier ‘non-professional’, but professionals or not, participants in the present study are all users on social video-sharing platforms and users of advanced technological tools to produce UGT. They are still members of the non-professional translation community in China.
8. See https://www.globenewswire.com/news-release/2020/05/18/2035302/0/en/Bilibili-Inc-Announces-First-Quarter-2020-Financial-Results.html.
9. Youku is a video-sharing website based in Beijing, China.
10. Douyin is the Chinese version of TikTok that ByteDance runs in China’s mainland.
11. Engeström believes that activity theory (AT) has evolved through three generations of research. There are three generations of AT model: one based on Vygotsky’s classical triadic model of mediated act; one placing individual actions in a collective activity, a model that the present study is based on; and one built on the idea of multiple interacting activity systems focusing on a partially shared object, which can be used in future studies such as the ones looking into the interactions among different voluntary subtitling groups in China.
12. Bilibili content creators are nicknamed Bilibili uploaders.
13. Fans in this context refer to subscribers to an uploader’s Bilibili channel.
14. Because those who responded made it clear that their personal information should not be included in the article, their account names are not listed in Table 1.
15. Despite that the exact number of participants reporting on a specific experience (by selecting the same answer option(s) in questionnaires) has no statistical value in the present study, we have still chosen to refer to the concrete number of participants in presenting some of the results in § ‘Major findings’ to allow us to document them in a precise manner.
16. Jin Ri Tou Tiao is a Chinese news and information content platform. See https://www.toutiao.com/.
17. Xi Gua Shi Pin is a Chinese video-sharing platform. See https://www.ixigua.com/.
18. Youdao Translate is one feature of Youdao dictionary, one of the most popular dictionary applications in China.
19. Linguee is a free online translation tool that combines a dictionary with a search engine, making it possible for users to search for bilingual texts, words and expressions in different languages.
20. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q5BZ09iNdvo.

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