

Game of Translations: Virtual Community doing English Translations of Chinese Online Fiction

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ABSTRACT

Fan translations are an important part of global fan subculture activity, intensified especially through the new media platforms which connect producers and consumers all around the globe. One recent trend within this category is that of English translations of Chinese online fictions. It is a newly emerging form of activity which takes place on blogs connected through a blogroll. Through these channels, fans comprising blog moderators, translators, and readers can engage in exchanges which add value to the appreciation of literature. Thus, it can be imagined as a 'virtual settlement' (Jones, 1997) after Anderson (1983)'s 'imagined community'. Within this community, a further observation can be made about the mechanics of this practice. Like a game, the fans act as players where they negotiate rules regarding the production of translations. Given the community-centric nature of these websites, my paper outlines the formation of 'illusio', or "agreed rules of the game", a concept introduced by Bourdieu. This is operationalised using Järvinen (2007)'s framework, locating the nine elements of a 'gamified practice' within the interactions of this community, known as Shusheng Bar. The findings suggest that members of Shusheng Bar possess a shared history and connected future. The significance of this observation assists in understanding the dynamics of online subcultures.

KEYWORDS

Fan Translation; Fan Subculture; Chinese Online Literature; Virtual Settlement; Gamified Practice.

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Games', or narratives can be played out in the process of reading fiction, especially when the practice of reading becomes interactive. Mead (1962) defined the 'game stage' as an individual's ability to define behaviours and formulate group expectations (Vail, 2007). In the literary field, an author produces, an editor rearranges, the book is published, and readers consume. But what happens when the fiction is translated, not as commissioned by the official publisher, but by autonomous agents? This paper examines the mechanics of virtual settlements engaged in the unofficial translations of popular Chinese online literature, proposing it as a gamified practice that occurs within an imagined community. Gamification is defined by Deterding et al (2011) as "the use of game design elements in non-game contexts". To do so, Bourdieu's concept of *illusio* will be operationalised through the nine attributes of ludology (Järvinen, 2007).

Chinese online literature is a relatively recent publishing phenomenon which has emerged since 1997, and is as of 2016, hosted on over 500 websites in China (Tian & Adorjan, 2016). According to Tian and Adorjan (2016), these websites can be conceptualized as communities of commissioned productions, where readers are able

to affect the outcomes of writers' output. As of today, the practice of reading online fiction has become highly popular among Chinese netizens (Xiang & Montgomery, 2012), who consume them in their original Chinese language (Hockx, 2015; Feng, 2013; Yang, 2008). However, with the growing popularity of these online novels, many have been published as complete books, enjoying even greater success to the point of being adapted into film and television productions, which can be viewed worldwide through online drama platforms (Xiang & Montgomery, 2012). This in turn generates interest among a wider community, who may or may not be literate in Chinese. This is because online drama platforms also enjoy the benefits of an activity known as 'fan subs', or fan subtitles, where fans who are literate in Chinese translate the dialogue into English (Yuan, 2011). Thus, the English-literate community is able to view the dramatizations of Chinese online literature, developing an interest in reading the original novel, and is enabled to do so because of the presence of the online fiction translation communities.

According to a 2016 report by Chinese newspaper Global Times, "thanks to foreign translators, China's thriving online lit scene is heading overseas" (Yin, 2016). International interest in Chinese online literature is becoming more widespread, with foreign readers claiming they enjoy reading Chinese online literature because they have "strong, imaginative plots, and a vast range of genres", including "wuxia (martial arts), xianxia (martial arts and Taoist magic), and xuanhuan (fantasy adventures)" (Yin, 2016). Some of these translators were interviewed, stating that they did so to "show that Chinese culture has advanced" and so that "people can learn more about Chinese culture". One such translator quit his full time job to focus exclusively on maintaining his translation website, suggesting that some view this practice as a full time vocation (Yin, 2016).

The cycle of these cultural goods begins as such. Firstly, a Chinese-language author posts chapters of their novel in instalment online. If the chapters become popular with readers, the author is encouraged by fans to continue writing and to complete the novel. Eventually, the completed online novel enjoys even greater popularity, leading towards print publication and adaptations in various mediums.

For example, the novel *Bu Bu Jing Xin*, or *Startling By Each Step*, was first posted as an online series in 2005 by renowned Chinese online fiction author Tong Hua (桐华) (Jinjiang Original Network, n.d.). As the novel subsequently surged in popularity, it was published as a print novel, and later adapted into a Chinese drama series, *Scarlet Heart* (Ockoala, 2011), and a Korean version (Asian Wiki, n. d.), *Scarlet Heart Ryeo*. *Scarlet Heart* was broadcast in South Korea, New York City, Malaysia, Singapore, Canada, Japan, and Thailand (Wikipedia, n. d.). A sequel, *Scarlet Heart 2* was broadcast in 2014 (Wikipedia, n. d.). A radio drama was also made in 2011, followed by a stage play in 2012, and a movie in 2015 (Wikipedia, n. d.).

With this exposure, more fans from around the world, including non-Chinese literate audiences developed an interest in the original novel. In the absence of official English translations, they then rely on unofficial English fan translations of the online version. However, there are also bilingual fans who developed an interest in purchasing the print novel after reading the English translations online (Zhang, 2011).

This paper adds on to the study by Tian and Adorjan (2016) which chronicled the rise of Chinese online literature, by providing a perspective from a non-Chinese-literate readership. My objective is to explore the motivations of English-literate readers in accessing Chinese online literature, as well as outline the formation of "the game" between readers and the translator in understanding the narrative, through the lens of the dynamics within a 'virtual settlement'.

2 | ONLINE LITERARY COMMUNITIES

Chinese online literature was born digitally as a fan-generated phenomenon (Xiang & Montgomery, 2012). It has been around since 1997, with the establishment of the literary site Under the Banyan Tree (Yang, 2008). Since then, it has expanded into a complex network of business and community, including activities such as writing, publishing, reading and gaming - while having an international character (Yang, 2008). This transformed the landscape for emerging writers with no prior economic or social capital (Yang, 2008). Online literature in China also has two main qualities, that of being facilitated by digital technology and being

community-based (Hockx, 2015). A recent study by Tian and Adorjan (2016) explained the increasingly explosive rise of Chinese online literature, making several significant findings about its connected communities. These included discovering emotional bonds between authors and readers; readers' influence over authors in terms of finance; and readers' support of authors in terms of morale. Their study demonstrated that within Chinese online literature communities, there is a strong influence of social capital, which flows from the reader to the author.

My study differs from this however, as the community I am considering represents a muted fixed rather than organic cultural product, because of its nature of being a translation. Thus, it is not the actual original cultural product itself, but a derivative work or a cultural by-product. Readers are therefore not able to use social capital to affect the original narrative structure, though they are able to negotiate interpretations of the narrative. Translators are also not supposed to make profit from their translations, as is the case with many freelance translators. This makes it more of a 'game' and less of a transaction – a purely leisurely activity. The author similarly does not depend on the readers for feedback, as the original cultural product has already been finalized. Tian and Adorjan (2016) have also compared Chinese online literature to online fanfiction, where there are several notable similarities and differences. A simple comparison of the characteristics of communities hosting fanfiction, Chinese online literature, and fan translations of Chinese online literature can be seen in Table 1.

English translations of Chinese online literature are

essentially a derivative type of work, hinging upon the existence of the original fiction. While the nature of its community is also participatory and interactive, the content of the original fiction cannot be changed, though the interpretation of its meaning can be negotiated. The translator receives appreciation on the form of reader comments, rather than reviews. My study adds on to the notion of community-building in literary fields, extending the established knowledge of print literary communities and online literary communities, to that of independent online literary translation communities.

3 | RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Thus, drawing from the above, I would like to establish fan translations as a gamified practice, by answering the following research questions:

1. What makes readers interested in these translations?
2. How do readers and translators approach the task? How do they interact with each other?
3. Do disputes over meaning arise?

4 | CHINESE-ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS: A BRIEF BACKGROUND

The history of intercultural translations goes back a long way. It covers a range of media, including official and unofficial translations, print and online media, as well as different genres of media.

Translations between Chinese and English have always been one-sided, according to He (2007).

Table 1 | Comparison of fanfiction, Chinese online fiction, and fan translations of Chinese online fiction (adapted from Tian & Adorjan 2016, with addition).

Fanfiction	Chinese Online Literature	English Translation of Chinese Online Literature
Derivative	Original	Derivative
Participatory	Participatory	Participatory
Interactive	Interactive	Interactive
Monolithic (Fixed - content not affected by reader)	Malleable (Not fixed - content may be affected by reader)	Non-applicable (content cannot be changed; but readers can negotiate interpretations)
Reader reviews	Reader reviews	Reader appreciation

For He (2007), translation reflects and is affected by power relations between language and culture. English translations of Chinese works have often ignored the literal structure of the original composition, preferring instead to alter the structure to suit the benefit of the English language reader; while Chinese translations of English works have tended to be 'faithful' to the originals (He, 2007). This depicts a lack of congruity between the original and translated worldviews. There may be some credence for this as English is a global lingua franca, while Chinese language is considered an important but peripheral language in the world system (He, 2007).

The history of official translations, particularly with print media in the form of novels, can be traced to feudal China and pre-Industrial Europe. Fan (1999) chronicles the three main waves of literary exchange between China and the West, noting that the first wave preceded the year 1898; the second wave started after 1919; and the third wave emerged in the post-1980s era. In fact, the Chinese novel was first to be translated into English, preceding the translation of an English novel into Chinese. While the first Chinese novel can arguably be said to be 'Romance of Three Kingdoms' by Luo Guanzhong (1300s); the first Chinese novel to be translated into English is 'Breeze in the Moonlight' (Hao Qiu Zhuan), which was translated by James Wilkinson, edited by Archbishop Thomas Percy and published in London in 1761 (Fan, 1999). In the West, the first English-language novel was said to be Sir Philip Sidney's 'The Countess of Pembroke'; while the first English-language novel to be translated into Chinese was 'Gulliver's Travels' translated and published serially in a Shanghai daily, Shen Bao in 1872 (Fan, 1999). Alongside this, Chinese fiction was increasingly influenced by Western motifs, especially after China's increasing openness in the post 1980s era (Chen, 1988).

At present however, translations are not only confined to the official ones but also include unofficial translation by fans. Fan-based translation has been developing since the 1980s, evolving from unsolicited ones to the present-day, crowdsourced community translations (O'Hagan, 2011).

As new technologies became available, enabling different forms of narratives, these expand to

include more than just traditional print media – namely screen adaptations on film and television, as well as online literary works. Enabled by the growth of new media, 'fan subtitlers' or 'fansubs' have recently grown as a trend in China. Yuan (2011) explains that with the popularisation of Internet in China, fansubbing foreign movies or television programmes became a rising phenomenon in Chinese cyberspace. Tian claimed that there are 'hundreds of thousands' of Chinese netizens organised as fansub groups, who work collaboratively to 'sub' foreign mass media products, and upload them online for free downloading. Tian terms them as a 'community of interculturality', in which members' identities are constructed through language, among others, and contribute to globalisation (Yuan, 2011).

There is a precedent or compatriot to the emergence of the fansub culture, known as 'scanlation subculture' (Manovich, 2010). This subculture revolves around the scanning and translating of Japanese graphic novels, or manga. Manovich (2010) defines scanlation, a portmanteau of 'scan' and 'translation' as "the practice of scanning original Japanese editions of manga, translating the text into another language, then using image-editing software to replace the Japanese text and other textual image elements on the page with the translation text". He notes that fansub culture co-existed alongside scanlation subculture, with regards to subtitling anime, or Japanese animation videos, television programmes, and films. Some of the issues pertaining to scanlations may also affect fansub culture. Where copyright issues arise, Manovich (2010) claimed that "most scanlator sites agree to promptly remove any material at the request of the original publisher; while most publishers have until recently limited most of their requests to occasions when official translations are to be released into non-Japanese markets".

The issue of derivative works arises here in the same way as it does with fan fiction. According to Farley (2013), translators and fan fiction writers have been subject to accusations of being a 'thief' or 'traitor'. Farley (2013) raised the question of who controls the meaning – is it authors, readers, creators, or translators? Along a continuum of meaning production, Farley theorises translation as

an interpretive argument, and fan fiction as a form of translation.

For this reason, many translation communities comprising various cultural products post rules and disclaimers regarding the use of the translated goods. These rules affect the way translators and readers interact, especially in the context of a 'virtual community'.

Yet the personal view of original authors may be supportive. In 2004 itself, Harry Potter's author J. K. Rowling was reported to have approved of fan fiction, stating she "was flattered people wanted to write their own stories" (Waters, 2004).

5 | VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES

A major component of fan activity, which gives them their identity, is the creation of textual production (Fiske, 1992), which includes fan fiction, fan art, fan videos, plushies, sculptures, and other forms of multimedia. The availability of technologies facilitate new mediums of fan expression. Thus, fansub groups can be located as a subset of wider fan subculture. Henry Jenkins, a pioneering scholar of fandom subculture, defines fandom as

"virtual communities, 'imagined' and 'imagining' communities, long before the introduction of networked computers."
(Jenkins, 2002)

This definition suggests that fan communities can be considered as what Anderson (1983) terms 'imagined communities'- whose members believe in a sense of comradeship despite possibly not knowing every single one of each other. In addition, Anderson (1983) notes that the production of textual goods is responsible for the sustenance of 'imagined communities'-which in this instance is fan translation. Reiterating the subculture path, Fiske (1992) defined fandom as being typically associated with cultural forms that are rejected by the dominant value system, including pop music, comics, and romance novels, among others. Where fan fiction is concerned, Jenkins (2002) noted that among the first few established fandoms which were science fiction fandoms such as Star Trek, some fans who participated in writing fan fiction later went on to become successful writers.

This network of translators and readers may be viewed as a type of imagined community, using

Anderson's approach. With that said, the categorisation of blogs as 'virtual communities' has been a contested concept (Jones, 1997). Many sociological definitions of community do allow for the possibility of including virtual ones, such as McMillan & Chavis (1986)'s study which outlined four characteristics, which include membership, influence, integration, and fulfilment of needs. However, skeptics such as Weinreich (1997) argue that this cannot be accepted because a community must contain kinship, geographic territory, common history, and a shared value system (Jones, 1997). Thus Jones (1997) outlined several characteristics of his own, to define whether a particular cyber-place can be labelled a 'virtual settlement'. These include a minimum level of interactivity, a variety of communicators, a minimum level of sustained membership, and a virtual common public space where a significant portion of interactive group CMCs (computer-mediated communication) occur. In proposing fan translation sites as a 'gamified practice', I select a particular cyber-place of focus which is a translation repository named Shusheng Bar as my main site of observation.

6 | GAMIFICATION

Illusio is a concept developed by Bourdieu, defined as "the belief that the 'game' we collectively agree to play is worth playing, that the fiction we collectively elect to accredit constitutes reality" (Cuille, 1997). It is the process by which the individual becomes socially grounded and motivated through something that gives their life meaning (Hage, 2013). There is a demarcation between the socially accepted construction of fiction, and the socially accepted construction of reality, in which 'normal' members of society are able to agree upon the difference.

In this paper, I discuss the issue of a narrative which has first been socially constructed by the Chinese online literature platform, itself a construction negotiated between producers and consumers (Tian & Adorjan, 2016); then reframed as a translation by fan translators; and finally interpreted by English-literate readers. In this process, the meaning of the original narrative must first be interpreted by the fan translator, within the categories of language, culture, and history; then broadcast through the online platform which itself contains a specific structure; then finally

reconstituted through audience discussions. This process may be conceptualized as a process of developing 'illutio'.

It must be noted however, that Bourdieu's concept of 'illutio' suffers from a lack of operationalisation. In studying the impact of fanfiction on the new version of British television series Doctor Who, Hoge (2011) used the concept of 'ludology', or game studies, finding that producers were aware of the content of fanfiction and have sought to integrate its elements into the series. Thus drawing from this, to address the 'gamified' aspect, I apply Järvinen (2007) 's nine elements of ludology to the content of Shusheng Bar, focusing on interaction between translators and readers, examining whether the nine elements of a 'game' are present. Järvinen's model is derived from Erving Goffman's concept of 'focused gatherings', which are "social arrangements that occur when persons are in one another's immediate physical presence" involving "a single visual and cognitive focus of attention" (Järvinen, 2007) which is likely to be found as a centrepiece of an 'imagined community'. He calls this 'applied ludology'. Järvinen (2007) attests there are nine elements of a game: components, environment, ruleset, game mechanics, theme, information, interface, players, and contexts.

Of course, as a field, ludology is not without its debates. Ludology has been associated with a level of formalism where its unit of analysis is the technicality of the game rather than actual lived experience (Murray, 2005). Many scholars supporting this approach have refused to connect the study of games to that of cultural forms such as paintings, films, digital art, or storytelling (Murray, 2005). In contrast, narratology advocates a storytelling-based approach (Frasca, 2003). This paper shows that narratives can indeed be contained within a 'virtual settlement' that possesses all the formal elements of a game.

7 | METHOD

As mentioned above, my cyber-place of focus is a translation listing hosted on a blog, known as Shusheng Bar (which means 'scholar' in Mandarin).

The administrator declares Shusheng Bar as "a compilation list of translations", and links are provided to individual translator's blogs. It is thus a kind of blogroll. These translations are categorised

into genres, popular authors, popular books, and has a 'Search' function. The status of translations is also provided, such as 'Completed', 'In Progress', 'Detailed Translation', 'Machine Translation (sic) and Edited', 'Summary', and 'Hiatus'. Rules also exist in this site, regarding the protocol of requesting a translation which covers accepted interactions between translators and readers.

The links on the repository lead to individual translation blogs, for example, Koala's Playground which translates Chinese online literature, and does reviews of East Asian cultural goods including Chinese online literature, television dramas, and film. It has a large number of followers who regularly comment on all of the blog posts.

I chose Shusheng Bar because it turns up as the first hit in a Google Search for "Chinese novels translated into English", was established in 2012 (making it one of the oldest), and includes a wide variety of fiction genres. These include Xian Xia (Taoist magic), Ancient, Comedy, Wuxia (martial arts), Game, Fantasy, Mystery, Time Travel, Romance, Modern, and Rebirth. The content on Shusheng Bar is accessible for free.

Other sites which are more genre-specific also exist, such as 'Wuxiaworld' (martial arts) or 'Xianxia World' (Taoist magic). Wuxiaworld (founded 2014) was featured in the newspapers Global Times and China Daily, which announced the emergence of the fan translation phenomenon. The China Daily article mentions that translators translate free of charge, but are supported from donations by other fans and blog advertising (Mei, 2017) if they do pursue it as a full-time vocation (Yin, 2016). However, this is not observed in Shusheng Bar.

The method used is that of inobtrusive participant observation and thematic textual analysis of readers' comments, similar to that of Tian and Adorjan (2016) and Walstrom (2004), who practiced observation of online communities with non-intervention. According to Stevens, O'Donnell and Williams (2015), previous authors have concluded that where data can be accessed without site membership, such data can be considered as public domain (Attard & Coulson, 2012; Haigh & Jones, 2005; Sudweeks & Rafaeli, 1996; Whitehead, 2010). This research method falls under the category of Internet-mediated research, as content is sourced from publicly

available blogs and websites. I used the following definition from the British Psychological Society (2013) which is an authority on ethics in conducting Internet-mediated research:

“The term ‘internet-mediated research’ covers a wide range of quantitative and qualitative approaches to research involving human participants which include non-reactive approaches, where data about individuals are collected unobtrusively, e.g. analyses of ‘found text’ in blogs, discussion forums or other online spaces, analyses of hits on websites, or observation of other types of online activity such as search engine histories.” (British Psychological Society, 2013).

8 | THE ‘ILLUSIO’ OF SHUSHENG BAR

As outlined above, my research objective is to establish fan translations as a ‘gamified’ practice, by answering the following research questions:

1. What makes readers interested in these translations?
2. How do readers and translators approach the task? How do they interact with each other?
3. Do disputes over meaning arise?

8.1. WHAT MAKES READERS INTERESTED IN THESE TRANSLATIONS?

i. Linguistic Accessibility

There are several reasons as to why readers become interested in Shusheng Bar.

The first aspect, which is the most important is the issue of linguistic accessibility. Readers who have heard of a particular Chinese novel, but are unable to read Chinese, may find such translations helpful. In this first segment, I highlight readers’ discussions with the translator regarding the use of language, and how accessing this translation has helped them appreciate this literary work. For example, in the post listing down translation links, there is a commenter who mentions having heard of a classic Chinese literary novel, ‘Fortress Besieged’.

“I’m loving how we have added novels by famous authors, so I’m wondering if I could maybe make a recommendation? It’s a very

funny book called 围城 or Fortress Besieged, by 钱钟书. it’s already translated into English. It’s a famous novel by a well known scholar and author and I have to say it’s SO FUNNY! There is a Chinese Drama based on the book as well.”

Although this commenter had read the book in its official English translation, they wished to include it in the list so that others who might be interested in the book could discover it too.

“You are heaven sent for all of us who cannot read Chinese”

“At 56 years, this is the first time I can enjoy a Chinese novel”

“I can read and speak Chinese but my standard is not too great!”

Readers note that without the translations, it would be impossible for them to enjoy the products of Chinese online literature. Some had in fact only been able to access it at a much later age. There are also readers who are capable of reading both the Chinese and English versions:

“Thank you for capturing all the beautiful details in English and not get lost in translation”

“Thank you for providing the English translation. I finished reading the novel in Chinese last night after much effort and tears since I only learned Chinese for about 5 years”

Some readers who were Chinese-literate but lacked proficiency and were more experienced in reading in English also professed they found it easier to read the English translation.

“Re-reading this story in English, especially the beginning part, brought back warm memories, as though I had experienced all of this with them”

This suggested that the translator captured the essence of the original novel.

“My Chinese grades were very low in school, and I had thought I would never willingly read a chinese book in my life.

Then came 步步惊心, 大漠谣, and the rest is history."

"But then again, I don't speak chinese so don't fully understand what's going on."

These two comments suggest a need to engage with Chinese-literate readers to deepen their own understanding of literary materials.

ii. Comparison to English-Language Literature

Because the readership is primarily English-literate, many have previously grown up on a diet of English language literature. Another theme within the readership's discussion is comparison to English language works of fiction. Readers compared popular novel Yun Zhong Ge (Song in the Clouds), which has a strong romance theme, to that of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. In comparing the Austen romantic hero, Darcy, to Yun Zhong Ge's lead male character, Emperor Zhao of Han (Liu Fuling), a reader posted:

"I have obviously not been reading the right romance novels"

The novels of Enid Blyton are also mentioned. The translator writes:

*"I devoured Enid Blyton. I mean, which certified romance novelist lover hasn't been raised on a combo of Jane Austen and her *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*, as well as consuming *Georgette Hayer by the boat load*"*

The translator acknowledges that they have originally read classic English language romance novels before embarking on reading and translating Chinese language novels. A reader wishes they had discovered Chinese online literature earlier:

*"What was my mum doing letting me read Enid Blyton instead of *The Three Kingdoms*?"*

This reader expressed their appreciation of Chinese literature, enabled by the existence of English-language translations, and expressed ambition to read one of the four classics of Chinese literature, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, which also had its drama adaptation in 1994 and in 2010.

iii. Interest in an author

*"I like to read Tong Hua's books. So far, I've read *Bu Bu Jing Xin*, *Damo Yao*, *Secrets Hidden by Time*, *The Time Never Back*, and *Once Promise*."*

"I love Tong Hua's works. The way she develops the story and its character make me feel excited of what will happen next and want to know the fate of each character. However, most of her works will leave the reader a tormented feeling."

The two comments above suggest that the readers come to the site in search of popular author Tong Hua's work.

iv. Interest in a translator

"I'm currently reading Koala's translation but couldn't help and check around for spoiler ^^"

"Woohoo! It was the best news of today that Koala is translating this!"

"I stumbled on this website by accident while wanting to read more after Koala posts chapter by chapter."

The three comments above suggest that the readers have been following Koala's Playground, a translation and recap blog of fiction, television, and movies - and are satisfied with the quality of the translations.

v. Interest in the translation repository

"Thank you very much for the detailed summary & updates. I am not reading the book yet I feel attracted to the book from reading your summary."

"Hi, I recently stumble into this thread, started reading some of the translated novel and got hooked big time. thanks and much appreciation for hard works and dedication in promoting CNovel in this way."

These comments suggest that the readers stumbled upon Shusheng Bar itself, and decided they liked the quality of the translations. They then developed a loyalty for following updates in Shusheng Bar, possibly due to the sense of community within.

vi. Geographical ties

"Hi hi, I'm also Singaporean and am so glad to see so many Singaporeans at this bookbar!"

The comment above suggests a reader who is glad to meet other citizens of their nation-state in the sense of an 'imagined community'. Wuxiaworld, another popular translation site, mentions that most of its translators "[...] are a mixture of Chinese, Singaporeans, Chinese-Americans and foreigners who have been studying Chinese for years." (Yin, 2016)

"Now I can feel 'The development of transportation and communication made the whole world a global village.'"

At the same time, the sense of being connected to the rest of the world also appealed to members, such as this commenter who mentioned having learnt about the concept of a 'global village' (where people around the world are connected through time and space) as a student.

vii. Interest in history/culture

"Just realized that some of the characters in this series is based in Chinese mythology."

As many of the fictions have historical settings or are based on real historical figures and events (such as Yun Zhong Ge), an interest in these topics also attracts readers who are history buffs. This is especially so given the willingness of members to engage in historical debate and discussion as well as cultural definition.



Figure 1 – The Song in the Clouds/Yun Zhong Ge page in Shusheng Bar.

8.2. HOW DO READERS AND TRANSLATORS APPROACH THE TASK? HOW DO THEY INTERACT WITH EACH OTHER?

As a 'virtual settlement', Shusheng Bar contains its own 'gamified practice'. Readers and translators 'play the game' using the nine elements which are components, environment, ruleset, game mechanics, theme, information, interface, players, and contexts (Järvinen, 2007).

i. Components

In Shusheng Bar, translations are categorised into genres, popular authors, and popular books (see Figure 1). For example, genres include 'Wuxia' (martial arts), 'Time Travel', and 'Romance'; popular authors include Ding Mo and Tong Hua; while popular books include 'General and I' and 'Princess Wei Young'.

It also has three buttons labeled 'English Translation', 'Chinese Audiobooks', and 'Drama'. The first button leads to the complete listing of English translations of Chinese online novels (see Figure 2). At the moment, there are around 80 available novel translations. The status of translations is also provided, such as 'Completed', 'In Progress', 'Detailed Translation', 'Machine Translation (sic) and Edited', 'Summary', and 'Hiatus'. The site also has a 'Search' function where keywords can be entered to generate findings.

The full list of translations is then given, categorised into "Ancient Chinese Romance Novels" – "Completed", and "In Progress"; and links to English translation blogs by translators, Vietnamese translations, and machine translations

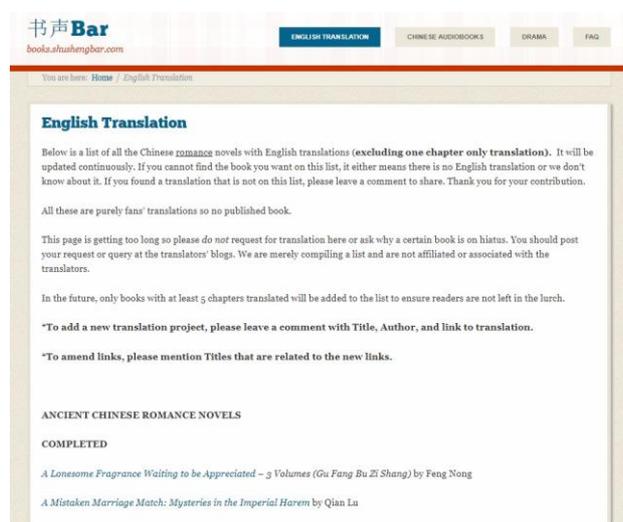


Figure 2 - List of English translations of novels.

which have been edited. A list of projects on “Hiatus” is also given. The other categories include “Short Stories” and “Modern Chinese Romance Stories”.

ii. Environment

The FAQ describes the intended environment as user-friendly:

“The bar is here to facilitate your reading experience by providing useful information to you. This is to provide a user friendly environment for all users of SSB, that allows you to glean your information without having to feel like you are wading and searching through miscellaneous information.”

In Shusheng Bar, the content is freely accessible and no payment is required. No profits are made. The repository is public domain and can be accessed by anyone who searches for “Chinese novels translated into English” on Google. Anyone can follow the site, become a silent reader (lurker) or an active reader (commenter). Anyone who wishes to become a translator could also inform the site owner to link to their blog. Comments also go through an approval process by moderators.

For example, in the post featuring the full list of translations mentioned above, the announcement is followed by 109 responses. Among these comments are links to other translation blogs, likely provided by a translator who wishes to advertise themselves, or a reader who wishes to inform – so that the repository can add them to the list. Others provide advice that if there are no links that means there is no translation, even if the novel exists. Instead, they direct the curious to a fan-made music video (MV) which summarises the whole storyline. They also advise some technological workarounds such as using Google Translate to ‘gauge’ the content of the story (since the automatic translation might not be completely accurate). Rumours on possible translations are also shared here. In response to the advice, a commenter nominated the moderator for a blog award.

Another reader replied, defining those concepts in detail for the benefit of the former. This shows a community-centric classification system based on the interpretations of the translators. A “bad ending” may indicate a story which leaves the reader

unsatisfied. Translators also share their experiences of the translation process:

“If I hadn’t translate it, I wouldn’t have reread. I missed so much too.”

This translator claims that translating the novel made them re-read it in a new light.

In addition, new members can also introduce themselves, including those who are new to the fan translation subculture:

“Hi everyone, I’m new here and I just stumbled across this site yesterday. I didn’t know there was actually an audience for english translations of Chinese novels. Just wondering how can I participate and submit my works? Thanks ☺”

In response, another reader advised them on how they could start running a translation blog and be added to the list.

iii. Ruleset

Upon accessing the site, the website header states:

“Welcome to Shu Sheng Bar (SSB). Please check the FAQ page before you post any question or request.”

On the FAQ page, the rules comprise several categories, i.e. The Bar (the general site), The Books, and The English Translations. These include info ranging from general housekeeping rules, to where one can buy the original books.

As an example, to begin a new translation, the moderator posts the following rules:

“Below is a list of all the Chinese romance novels with English translations (excluding one chapter only translation). It will be updated continuously. If you cannot find the book you want on this list, it either means there is no English translation or we don’t know about it. If you found a translation that is not on this list, please leave a comment to share. Thank you for your contribution.”

“All these are purely fans’ translations so no published book.”

“This page is getting too long so please do not request for translation here or ask why a

certain book is on hiatus. You should post your request or query at the translators' blogs. We are merely compiling a list and are not affiliated or associated with the translators."

"In the future, only books with at least 5 chapters translated will be added to the list to ensure readers are not left in the lurch."

The site is very much a repository and direct requests for translations are not to be posted here. The rules mention that requests should be directed to the individual translator blogs.

"NO, we do not take any request. It is best you request individual translators at their own blogs to translate the book you want. Please refrain from asking at SSB for a book to be translated."

Similarly, readers are reminded that they should respect the decision of translators should they wish to remove their translations.

"Please respect the translator and DO NOT request for or distribute a translation that has been taken down."

There are also consequences when the "rules of the game" are broken, however minimally. In one instance when a reader asked the translator to provide a spoiler before the translated chapter was released, others advised them against doing so. They also pre-empted that the translator would not do so, as most of readers might not want spoilers. Thus, when a comment features a possible spoiler, it is placed under 'hidden' view.

iv. Game mechanics

Shusheng Bar is updated at least once a month – sometimes weekly and sometimes almost daily. The moderator posts announcements; readers provide feedback; readers inform the moderator of problems in accessing content; the moderator responds or make changes; readers communicate with other readers in discussing/debating the plots, characters, or historical background of the narratives. Readers are also able to find a particular translator blog through the repository which acts a community directory. The process can then repeat itself. Most recently, a pop-up poll was also added.

The basic setup of the community involves the moderator announcing a new set of translations - pointing to a page with a summary of the novel, and links to the Ebook, Audiobook, Radiodrama, sources of English translations, Vietnamese translation, and the Chinese comic version. Readers then reply to the moderator's announcements by commenting on the page. The site has several moderators, a few of whom come from Singapore, a Chinese-majority society offering mainly English-medium education and Chinese-medium education as a second option (Lee, 2014).

There are procedures regarding the requesting of translations. The FAQ page states:

"For example, you can ask further questions on the plot which you don't understand after you have read them or ask further questions about the novel before deciding whether to read it, including requests for spoilers. As well, discussions of dramas adapted from the novels are welcome. The bar is here to facilitate your reading experience by providing useful information to you."

v. Theme

The FAQ page describes the site's mission as:

"a place for you to comment on and discuss books."

vi. Information

Moderators also give out additional information regarding the narrative backgrounds of the selected fiction. For example, there are discussions of historical context, cultural context, technological workarounds, additional fan activities such as fan videos, and rumours of translations or adaptations.

In one particular translator's blog, containing a translation of Yun Zhong Ge, the translator placed stock photos of preferred actors and actresses sourced from the Internet to help readers imagine the characters. This translation had started since 2012, before the novel was dramatized. Thus the choice of photos was not official and merely represented the translator's imagination. The actors and actresses are wearing costumes that resemble those of the Han Dynasty era. Perhaps due to this, conversation among readers had started over who they might wish to cast if they were the producer of

a television series. At that time, *Scarlet Heart* had recently been televised in 2011. Interestingly, readers suggested Korean actors and actresses possibly because the translation site also recaps Korean dramas. The stock photos however, are of Chinese actors and actresses. This also leads to conversations which steer out of the direct topic, such as 'favourite pairings' between actors and actresses and speculation on their real-life relationships. Thus there is a link between the content of the fictions and current events in the 'real' world.

Commenters also ask each other about the meaning of slang. For example, a reader asked:

"Hi, what does the OE/HE/BE mean on ssb?"

The reader asked what those acronyms mean in the context of 'ssb', or Shusheng Bar.

"Typically OE = Open Ending, HE = Happy Ending, and SE = Sad Ending. BE I'm guessing = Bad Ending? I don't use this myself so I'm not too sure."

Another reader replied, defining those concepts in detail for the benefit of the former. This shows a community-centric classification system based on the interpretations of the translators.

vii. Interface

Shusheng Bar is hosted on Wordpress.com, a blogging service which allows blog posts in multimedia - text, audio, video and images, as well as comments.

viii. Players

The site consists of moderators, translators, and readers who engage in conversation. There may also be lurkers – readers who do not actively comment.

The first post ever made on this site was on 2 August 2012, while the first comment was received on 26 August 2012. At the moment, there are around 400 posts in total in Shusheng Bar. The site is still active as of June 2017, which suggests it has been around for at least five years.

Occasionally, a reader declares that the process of reading translated chapters affects them in their daily life. Waiting for each installment to be posted

becomes a highlight of their day. Sometimes, a reader claims that it brightens their mood:

"I had a really rough day but between this chapter and your recap of [...], now I'm happy as a clam"

Another reader was very vocal in voicing their appreciation in the context of how it improved their quality of life, noting:

"At night I dream of it, at day I read it again and again, watch the drama on YouTube, read again"

Accessing the translations becomes a routine that is interspersed with their activities in daily life. The content becomes a goal that they aspire to, suggesting the importance of online community and the cultural product function much like offline material and social gratification.

There is also an aspirational aspect. In a post on a novel about translators, "翻译官 Les Interprètes (Interpreter)" which had also been made into a television series, a translator claims:

"I wish I can read Chinese or French so I can be a real translator like the leads in the book and not translating Chinese novel anonymously online:"

ix. Contexts

The site hosts translations of popular narratives, focusing mostly on online fiction, but also including print fiction, and screen adaptations on television. It emerged in an era when Chinese online novels became increasingly popular in China and in other countries likely due to their adaptation to screen.

8.3. DO DISPUTES OVER MEANING ARISE?

There are debates on the constitution of characters, the quality of the storyline, and the endings. Readers, translators, and moderators engaged in discussions where they both argue and provide evidence as to which conclusion is stronger, in the light of ambiguous situations. The fictions in question also tend to have open-endings, which encourages this.

For example, let us examine the post "云中歌 Song in the Clouds". *Song in the Clouds* is a popular novel, also known as *Yun Zhong Ge*,

written by the famous online novelist Tong Hua. The novel had also been adapted into a popular television series and was screened in 2015. This post made on 3 August 2012, provides a synopsis of the novel, written in literary language, as such:

“Boundless gold sea of sand, snow white Tian Shan camel, I am clothed in a green silk dress, eyes bright and with a faint smile.”

This is the narrative viewpoint of the main character. Links to the ebook, audiobook, radiodrama, two sources of English translations, a Vietnamese translation, and a Chinese comic follow. After two weeks had passed, on 14 August 2012, the first commenter appeared:

“I’m surprised the discussion here is empty! Let me start the ball rolling then 😊”

The first commenter then went on to discuss the characters that they liked and rated the author’s storytelling, but mentioned having complex feelings about the novel which made them unable to like it.

About an hour after the first commenter posted, the second commenter followed up, also discussing their favourite characters and the strengths of the author. This echoed the themes introduced by the first commenter.

Around three days after, a third commenter responded to the sentiment of the first two commenters:

“Ya I know how you felt.”

The fourth commenter then pointed out a mistake made by the third commenter (who is also a moderator), where they mixed up the names of two characters. In reply, the third commenter jokingly but gratefully said:

“Hah! I didn’t even receive my mistake until u pointed it out! All my night reading up on Han dynasty = fail!!”

In their response, the third commenter introduced the practice of reading up on the Han Dynasty of China, given that the storyline is set in that time period. They also noted that the author, Tong Hua, wrote a fictional “letter” to one of her characters, suggesting fan service (obliging fans’ interest). They then asked if the fourth commenter (which

they were responding to) could read Chinese, because they wanted to clarify a character’s ending. However, no direct response was given, though a debate later ensued over the ultimate fates of the characters, which coloured most of the rest of the forty-one comments. To support their arguments, the commenters posted links to other resources such as YouTube videos. The conversation lasted until 7 January 2017.

In the case of international readers who are accessing the book for the first time, there is the issue of having to interpret the novel from the course of history. As Yun Zhong Ge is set in China’s Han Dynasty, which is approximately two thousand years ago, many customs and traditions are foreign to international audiences. Because of this, readers sometimes engage in discussion about the characters and the plot from the viewpoint of history. Some readers ask for help in understanding traditions, metaphors, or events. There are also some excited readers who are curious to know how the novel’s plot might unfold, thus they access Wikipedia to find out what happens to the historical characters. For instance, in trying to discover what happens to one of the main characters, the Emperor Zhao of Han (Liu Fuling), they searched for information on Wikipedia. They also did so to discover the fates of his family members, who are also characters in the novel.

“What does giving an embroidered shoe symbolize?”

This question was asked regarding the cultural significance of a boy giving a girl a shoe, which is what the character Emperor Zhao (Liu Fuling) does when first meeting the female lead, Yun Ge, as a promise they will meet again.

“In real history LBY becomes an emperor after Ling Gege”

“According to the history books”

“I read in Wikipedia”

“Have no great in depth knowledge of Chinese history like some of the others”

Readers cite their sources and their findings from books and the Internet, engaging in a comparison of historical fact-finding. The translator also replied

to these comments, noting that readers need not worry:

“No worries about lack of C-history. I try to give little tidbits of background if possible”

The translator often adds on their notes as a preamble or afterword in each of their blog posts, which consist of a chapter each. In these notes, the translator also opens a discussion by highlighting some aspect of the novel such as history.

9 | DISCUSSION

Shusheng Bar is visited by fans who are interested in English translations of Chinese online literature for a variety of reasons. These are linguistic accessibility, comparison to English-language literature, interest in an author or translator, stumbling upon the website itself, interest in culture and history, as well as the sense of connectivity across the globe. The site is populated by translators, readers, and moderators, who together function as an imagined community in a virtual settlement.

As a fan translation community of original works, Shusheng Bar displays a specific form of social dynamic in the essence of Bourdieu's 'illusio'. There are specific “rules of the game” to be followed in the production of the core, which is the translation of the original work. The readers then build meaning by sharing interpretations of the text, interpretations of culture and history, personal feelings, advice, and inspirations from the plot or characters. There is also a sense of an ‘imagined community’ in the way share personal anecdotes; engage in reciprocity through cultural competency exchange and the formation of relationships (Mauss, 1929); and make known expectations through requests. This is enabled because of the presence of the ‘game’ aspects which are expressed here in Järvinen (2007)’s nine elements of ludology - components, environment, ruleset, game mechanics, theme, information, interface, players, and contexts.

From the above, it is suggested that the ‘illusio’ of Shusheng Bar can be categorized into several themes, which are the prior product, process, and future product. The prior product consists of discussion of the original fiction, including the author, the characters, and the plot. The process involves discussion of the understanding of

historical and cultural background of the fiction, language competencies of the reader, relating personal feelings, and deriving inspirations from the narrative. The future product consists of discussion about potential dramatizations and desired cast of actors, directors, or producers. Thus, there is an element of diachronicity in community building where readers look to the past, present, and future. This echoes Anderson’s concept of ‘imagined community’, where members assume a shared history and connected future.

Thus boundaries of the settlement are also continually reinforced. In comparison to findings on Chinese online literature by Tian and Adorjan (2016), who found that readers are able to exert social pressure over authors, my findings suggest that in a translation community, readers do not attempt to do so, as the product is already fixed. However, readers do express hopefulness while reading earlier chapters, that in later chapters the characters or the plot might change to accommodate their hopes. They may claim elation or frustration in sympathy with the character. Sometimes the translator also expresses similar opinions, in reply to the readers. Often, this will result in a discussion about the original author’s storytelling tendencies. However, readers also state outward recognition that according to the “rules of the game”, this is not necessarily going to be accomplished, thus separating wishful thinking from reality.

Besides this, community building is also accomplished through mentoring. Evans et al (2016) found that English language fanfiction sites facilitate community-building through a mentoring pattern that differs from traditional approaches, called ‘distributed mentoring’. Networked publics enable fanfiction site members to spontaneously mentor each other in open forums (Evans et al, 2016). Similarly, in my study, the nature of the translation site resembles that of an open forum which enables readers who are more experienced with English translated Chinese online literature, or even Chinese-literate readers who prefer to read English translations, to ‘mentor’ other less experienced readers in developing their understandings, for example in the case of discussing Han Dynasty history, as well as understanding ‘jargon’ created within the community. This is especially important where

issues of cultural or historical knowledge are concerned, as readers need to understand these to successfully interpret the narrative.

The significance of this observation assists in understanding the dynamics of online subcultures, which may diverge from working-class subcultures, as the ethos of its formation is based on shared interests rather than a response to norm rejection. In comparison to working-class subcultures such as the Western chavs, Essex Girls, bikers, and punks; and the Asian subcultures Mat Rempit, Mat Rock, and Ah Beng (Chan, 2017), the Chinese online fiction community differs in its origins. Created as a means of sharing interests which are traditionally associated with privilege, the online fiction community does not deliberately seek to differentiate itself from mainstream society nor are they socially excluded. Instead, the fact that members may be literate in more than one language, such as Chinese and English; have a comprehensive knowledge of literature, culture and history; and have access to the Internet and technological knowledge show that their cultural capital belongs to the middle or upper-classes. Thus, they bear resemblance to non-working-class subcultures such as the East Asian subcultures which include Gyarū, Lolita, Maid Café, and Cosplay which also require financial and temporal investment (Chan, 2017).

10 | CONCLUSION

This paper outlined the way blogs hosting English translations of Chinese online fiction act as 'imagined communities'. It examined the way in which translators and readers form a community, approach the task of translation, and participate in debates regarding the affirmation of meanings, leading to the genesis of a fan subculture. In the case study discussed, Bourdieu's concept of 'illusio' has been used as a theoretical framework to understand the cultural logic behind a specific 'virtual settlement' that participates in the exchange of cultural goods, envisioning it as a 'gamified practice'. This concept has been operationalised through Järvinen (2007)'s nine aspects of a game. In addition, this paper adds on to the study of derivative works of fiction such as fanfiction, and Chinese online fiction – establishing fan translations as a type of cultural product.

The significance of this observation assists in understanding the dynamics of online subcultures, which may diverge from working-class subcultures, as the ethos of its formation is based on shared interests rather than a response to norm rejection. While this study has focused on a community defined by its use of literature in a bilingual context, it is hoped that the same concept can be used to understand the cultural logic of other online communities which are founded based on cultural transactions.

Further study will be undertaken into the relations of power, with regard to gender, ethnicity, and social class, as well as formation of friendship between members of this 'imagined community'.

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