

BOOK REVIEW

Online Collaborative Translation in China and Beyond: Community, Practice, and Identity

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Practices of collaborative translation in ancient times are exemplified in projects such as the translation of the Septuagint Bible in the West and the medieval Buddhist sutras in China. In modern times, the internet and digital technologies have given rise to a new form of collaborative translation, known as online collaborative translation (OCT), which has gained significant popularity in recent years.

In this book growing out of her PhD thesis, Chuan Yu offers a novel perspective into the burgeoning but often-hidden world of OCT practices in China as an ethnographer. Through her digital ethnographic fieldwork in the Chinese online translation platforms including Yeeyan and Cenci, she explores how grassroots translators collaborate as they select, translate, edit and polish translations upon the intersection of technological development, translation practices, and social factors. Furthermore, she theorizes the phenomenon under the sociological framework of community of practice focusing on the communities, working practices and identities of these translators. In the end, the boundaries of OCT have been pushed beyond China by providing an up-to-date account of OCT in practice, training and theory. Researchers in the fields of translation studies, media studies, cultural studies and sociology will find this book stimulating.

The book is organized into eight chapters that provide an in-depth examination of the theoretical and practical dimensions of OCT. It opens with the introduction of collaborative translation, in which the author proposes a Metamap to show the differences between machine-centered and human-centered collaborative translation, and thus induces the concept of OCT. The methodological reflections, statement of the aim, and overview of chapters are also illustrated here.

In the second chapter entitled “The Chinese internet, participatory culture, and online collaborative translation”, the author introduces the rise of the Chinese internet and participatory culture as the technological and social developments that have enabled OCT practices to flourish. She attempts to situate OCT at the intersection of the Chinese internet, participatory culture and translation studies, and argues that OCT is a day-to-day online activity where the participants make meaning, express themselves and share knowledge against the background of media censorship in the post-socialist era.



The theoretical framework is identified and illustrated in the third chapter. It presents a community of practice (CoP) framework drawing from previous scholars, especially from Wenger (1998), to examine collaborative translation and online translation communities, and explores the key concepts that underpin OCT, including community, communities of practice, and identities and roles through the case study of Yeeyan community. Under the CoP framework, it is found that the Yeeyaners, a group of translators from different professional background, participate in and interact with others regularly for the shared passion and mission on the platform.

Based on digital field work spanning from April 2014 to October 2015, plenty of ethnographic cases and interview data from the participants of Cenci and Yeeyan are used and analysed in the following three chapters to depict a full picture of motivation, participation, interaction, and self-identification of the participants from these two major OCT platforms in China.

The fourth chapter titled “Narrative community in a community of practice” discusses online translation communities and OCT practices against the background of fast spread of internet in China, and portrays both of them as narrative communities and communities of practice. Through a case example around the Yeeyan translation of the article *What’s Gone Wrong with Democracy* from *The Economist* in 2014, it is argued that the OCT practices serve as citizen media practices in which the participants express themselves, manifest their identities, and negotiate the meaning, which “constitutes a narrative community within a community of practice” (p.81).

The following chapter delves deeper into the community structure of the OCT platforms and the various roles played by the participants at different stages of the process to position OCT as a social act. Based on the ethnographic data including website materials of Yeeyan, translation manuscripts and excerpts of the interactions between the participants, the chapter reveals the structured (parallel and hierarchical) participation and two different roles (local identity roles and negotiated identity roles) the participants play on Yeeyan.

The concept of situated learning from Lave and Wenger (1991) is introduced and applied in the sixth chapter to probe into the Yeeyaners’ motivation for participation in four aspects—i.e., informality, situatedness, co-participation and sustainability. Through a set of interview and archival data, it demonstrates how learning is built into each stage of textual production during the process of collaboration. In the end, the author concludes that there involves informal and formal learning in the process and “online collaborative translation has the potential to be further incorporated into translator training” (p.118)

The author then zooms in onto a heatedly debated topic in translation studies: professional vs non-professional translators/translation. The semi-structured interviews and statistical analysis of archival data show that, in the long-standing debate on translation competence, the Yeeyan translators “prioritize the delivery of a professionally executed translation based on the knowledge that users contribute and exchange” (p.13) instead of making a clear-cut choice in the dichotomy of professionals and non-professionals. It is further concluded that OCT blurs the boundary between professional and non-professional translators by providing an empowering platform for them to work together, negotiate and connect through the collaborative and dynamic process.



The final chapter summarizes the main findings from the perspective of CoP theory, and provides directions for future research in OCT and in combining CoP and other relevant theories. It places emphasis on the intersections between OCT and translation technologies, and holds that both the first-generation OCTs (human translators connected through information and communication technologies) and future-generation OCTs (in collaboration between humans and machines) will continue to expand the notion of translation.

A main strength of this book lies in its interdisciplinary approach into the popular online translation amateurism, drawing on insights from fields such as translation studies, media studies and sociology, thus contributing to the current conceptualizations of translation as social practice. With the data and experience from the ethnographic fieldwork, the author provides sufficient case studies, and engages with a range of perspectives on OCT from both academic fields and real-life practice, which demonstrates the advantage and complexity of ethnography in translation studies.

Another contribution of the book is that it highlights the trends and features of computer-assisted human translation, which is mentioned frequently in debates on the competence and necessity of human translation fuelled by the emergence of ChatGPT, an AI-based machine translation tool. As the author notes in the book, despite the overwhelming trend of technological breakthroughs in the field of translation, OCT and various forms of machine translation will continue to expand the notion of translation. From this book, the participants' passion for translation and mutual learning, the active interaction for meaning-negotiation and translation improvement, the frustration upon criticism and the sense of achievement obtained in the process, and the strong peer support among the groups unveiled from the absorbing ethnographic narrative are indicating that "future-generation OCTs are likely to become a dominant form undertaken in collaboration between humans and machines" (p.158) and that we could always stand by and trust humans.

Meanwhile, a few issues that are slightly touched upon in the book need to be further addressed, such as the challenges brought about by OCT, including the need to ensure consistency and coherence across multiple translations, the potential conflicts among translators, and the social and ethical consequences arising from collaborative translation for profit-oriented companies (Zwischenberger, 2022). Even though most of the OCT volunteers are willing to translate for free, as noted in the book, the work of the Yeeyan translators has been unethically exploited. The research by Piróth and Baker (2020) also shows, volunteer translators are closely juxtaposed with the corporate world and non-profit translation crowdsourcing can lead to long-term language assets being created by an unpaid crowd but used for corporate purposes. Given that most OCT practices occur on either commercial or profit-oriented platforms, the underlying mechanism of the platform exploitation of the grassroots translators' work could be further explored. In addition, the media's participatory culture, situated learning, and sense of community are attributed as the motivation for the Yeeyaners to participate and translate. It will be meaningful to explore the possibilities of other underlying reasons for the massive participation of OCT. Also, a lot of attention has been paid to the role, voices and subjectivities of Yeeyaners as translators. It would be interesting to hear more about how Yeeyaners view the translation process and product as pure readers in the dynamic interaction of OCT. Last, although the book mainly deals with the OCT phenomenon in China, the foreign counterparts of OCT platforms could have been mentioned



and introduced more in order to provide a more comprehensive perspective on the OCT phenomenon globally.

On the basis of collaborative translation, more concepts are worth exploring, such as the blended concept of *translaboration*, the third space where translation and collaboration interact (Alfer, 2017). Instead of being a pure fusion of translation and collaboration, translaboration refers to a wider scope of collaborations among multiple stakeholders in more extensive processes of collaborative translation. According to Fauconnier and Turner (2002), the process of this blending involves projections from two mental sources or input spaces into a third space to form a new hybrid that neither of the two mental spaces could generate on their own. The OCT phenomenon has already revealed some traces or features of translaboration due to its new form of collaboration in cyberspace. Future studies, especially transdisciplinary ones, could apply the concept of translaboration as an experimental category to verify the connections between translation and collaboration, and investigate the possibility of unifying the two concepts in theory and practice.

Overall, this book constitutes a valuable contribution to the study of OCT practices, translation studies and beyond. Offering a thorough and comprehensive account of the theoretical and practical dimensions of OCT, this work offers useful insights into the ways in which OCT practices reflect and shape social and cultural identities and communities in the era of digital media. As such, this book captivates the attention of scholars and students alike, particularly those interested in translation studies, media studies, cultural studies, and sociology.

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