

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Online Translation-as-Activism against Censorship: The Case of Translating *The Whistle Giver*

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Abstract:

This research addresses the under-explored role of translation as a form of activism in China, particularly in the context of online platforms. While online activism in China has garnered significant attention, the specific role of translation as a transformative practice has received limited scholarly focus. This study examines the translation campaign surrounding *The Whistle Giver*, a censored article pertaining to COVID-19, which involved a collaborative effort by non-professional translators who strategically rendered the original text into various unreadable forms. By employing translation as a tool of metamorphosis, these translators challenged the dominance of official discourse and asserted their individual agency in shaping public narratives. This case study demonstrates the potential of Web 2.0-enabled translation as a means of combating censorship and fostering grassroots ideological struggles. Web 2.0 platforms play a pivotal role in facilitating the collaborative nature of this translation campaign, allowing for the dissemination and sharing of the transformed texts. The interactive and participatory features of Web 2.0 platforms provide fertile ground for the emergence of a playful and ritualistic dimension to the translation process. By harnessing the power of Web 2.0-enabled translation, activists forge a collective identity, challenging any existing power structures and fostering collective memories. This form of activism transcends traditional boundaries, utilizing translation as a transformative practice to shape public discourse and effect social and political change. The study sheds light on the crucial role of non-professional translators, the transformative potential of translation as a tool for resistance, and the impact of Web 2.0 platforms in facilitating collaborative and participatory practices.

Keywords: activist, collaborative translation, metamorphosis, *The Whistle Giver*, Web 2.0

1. Introduction: The Translation and Spreading of *The Whistle Giver* on WeChat

On 10 March 2020, a Chinese government-run magazine, *Renwu* [人物], published a report called ‘*The Whistle Giver*’ [发哨子的人]. The report accounts for the discovery of the virus by Ai Fen [艾芬], the head of the Emergency Department of Wuhan Central Hospital. Ai Fen recalled her experience in the early detection of the ‘SARS virus’ and the “unprecedented criticism” [前所未有的斥训] she encountered after she tried to reveal the finding to her families, friends, and colleagues, and the information eventually was leaked to the public. In the interview, she famously said, “Should I know the situation would become what it is now, I won’t care about the criticism. I would speak [about the virus] everywhere, right?” [早知道有今天, 我管他批评不批评, 老子到处说, 对不对?] (see Gong 2020 [archived by China Digital Times]; *translation mine*). Ai Fen was a colleague of the whistle-



blower Dr. Li Wenliang, who was among the first doctors to detect the virus and warned their friends and families. After his warning became public, the Public Security Bureau in Wuhan asked him to sign a statement of confession acknowledging that he was spreading fake news. Upon his return to work, Dr. Li was tragically infected with the COVID-19 virus and, after a "performative rescue" (see the report from BBC, 2020) that lasted for three hours, he was declared dead on 7 February 2020. His death incited both anger and sorrow among the Chinese people. In Central Park, New York, a chair was purchased to commemorate Dr. Li, engraved with a sentence he once said during an interview: "A healthy society should not have just one voice" [健康的社会不应该只有一种声音]. The complex emotions stirred by these events were echoed in Ai Fen's interview and the subsequent campaigns this article aims to explore. A Weibo user commented on the report on Ai Fen – and its subsequent deletion – expressing that "the coronavirus situation saddens us. Our hearts ache for our doctors. The authorities make us angry" (cited in Yang, 2022, p. 141).

Similar to other content related to the pandemic, the report was swiftly deleted following its publication on WeChat, one of China's largest social media platforms. However, the deletion and subsequent censorship had unintended effects. People began to repost the article on their social networks, and, after numerous rounds of censoring, many started to translate the 5000-word article, initially into widely spoken languages like English, French, and Spanish, and later into Morse code (see Figure 1), hexadecimal codes, Klingon, emojis, bar codes, etc. These translated versions garnered even more attention than the original Chinese article. Despite consistent censorship, these translated articles repeatedly found their way back online. Many of the translation versions are now stored in a Google Drive¹, and there are, until the time this article is written, 61 versions of translation available.

¹See: https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/13VYDD2H75x8ahge0vw_g50grJAhkG2kX



in the text (pp. 136–137); and second, the transformative nature of the rally that resonates throughout the digital realm (pp. 141–142). Both these insightful perspectives will be referenced and built upon in subsequent sections of this article. However, it is intriguing and somewhat disheartening to note the relative invisibility of the translation process amidst these scholarly discourses. It seems that the products of this unique campaign have garnered far more academic attention than the creative and defiant process that gave birth to them. Therefore, this article does not seek to offer an alternative understanding of this event per se; rather, it aims to spotlight the crucial role translation played in this digital upheaval. By probing the intricate relationship between translation and social movements, particularly those that grapple with censorship, this article aspires to underscore how this case may illuminate the functional significance of translation. This applies to both the moulding of the "shaky memory" as discussed by Lai (2022), and to the mobilization of the online rally as examined by Yang (2022).

The scholarly discourse surrounding the relationship between translation and censorship in translation studies predominantly veers in two directions. On the one hand, a sizeable body of work, including studies by Michelle Woods (2012) and Christopher Rundle et al. (2022), explores how censorship at various levels impacts translators and their translations. While this aspect of the discussion is undoubtedly important, it does not align closely with the focus of the current discussion. On the other hand, translation is examined as a powerful tool wielded in the political struggle for information access (for example, Tymoczko, 2000; Delistathi, 2011; Baker, 2006) and therefore against censorship, a perspective that bears significant relevance to our discussion and will therefore be explored in more depth in the following sections.

For more effective management of readers' expectations, it is essential to clarify several methodological aspects before diving into the theory and analysis. The analysis conducted here concerns translated texts that have been deliberately obscured to the point of being unrecognisable or unreadable. As such, it precludes the conventional analysis as is typical in translation studies, and there will be no focus on text alterations, translation strategies, discourse analysis, or word usage. Instead, the approach to this study is theoretical and holistic. All 61 target texts are accessible through the link in the first footnote. Emphasis is placed on the ideological-driven decision-making behind the translation, regardless of the strategies employed or the forms it takes. This approach inevitably shifts the focus of the paper towards theory, making it less reliant on text as data. The crux of this study, therefore, lies not in the translation strategy itself but in the decision to undertake the translation in whatever manner it may manifest.

2. Translation as Resistance

In the face of censorship, translation emerges as a potent tool for resistance and fuels the fires of activist campaigns. This section will delve into the pivotal role that translation plays in this unique case, and it aims to foster a bilateral understanding. Namely, it probes not only how translation theories can explicate the case but also, perhaps more importantly, what this case reveals about the nature and dynamics of translation itself.



Mona Baker's multiple works on translation and activism (for instance, Baker, 2006, 2010, 2013, 2020) establish a solid theoretical foundation for examining the role of translation and narration as potent acts of political subversion. In Baker's analysis, the function of translators and interpreters transcends the traditional conception of them being situated in a "liminal" space between cultures and political divides" (Baker, 2013, p. 23). Instead, they become narrators driven by a profound 'self-transcending commitment' (Hernandi, 1980). Baker (2013) posits that translators and interpreters, when acting as activists, operate much like other activist groups under the umbrella of "autonomous movements". Yet, they retain a "strong 'professional' character" (p. 24). Their focus gravitates towards issues "of giving voices, of extending narrative space" and they also "recognise that language and translation themselves constitute a space of resistance, a means of reversing the symbolic order" (p. 25). In Baker's view, translation and interpreting as activism require a departure from "championing single issues" and instead necessitate a shift "towards globality" (p. 36). Consequently, the role of translation and interpreting, given their unique potential to globalize cultural and language-specific issues, becomes paramount, and they secure a "privileged space of political action" (p. 35).

While Baker's observations on collective action as a form of activism remain pertinent in the context of the current case (and will be revisited in subsequent sections), two notable divergences from her analysis need to be elucidated upfront. Firstly, there is a divergence in terms of the language landscape. Baker's concept of translation activism generally implies the act of translating from a minority language into a majority or globally dominant language, thereby extending the reach of the former. However, in this particular case, the original text in Chinese, a language spoken by a large population, was translated into multiple other forms, including minor languages and non-language sign systems. Secondly, the role of professional commitment in our case exhibits a stark contrast. Baker's arguments revolve around the professional character of translators and interpreters, whose activities are deeply embedded within their defined professional boundaries. However, the case we delve into here reveals a different kind of participant. These are individuals without formal training in translation, ordinary netizens armed with language skills, driven by a shared sense of purpose and an acute awareness of the urgency of their task. Despite lacking professional training, their collective efforts have created significant impacts, challenging our understanding of who are the 'translators' and what translation can achieve. Thus, while Baker's perspectives are informative, this case compels us to rethink the parameters of translation activism and the roles that 'translators' can assume. It allows us to envisage a form of translation activism that is broad-based, participatory, inclusive, and capable of challenging censorship.

The next section will explore how these new insights can be reconciled with existing theories of translation, and how they can contribute to our understanding of translation as a form of social activism. The richness of the case underscores the complexity and dynamism of translation, demonstrating how translation can be an effective tool for socio-political change in the era of Web 2.0. With its capacity to unite people, foster social interaction, stimulate collective creativity, and defy censorship, translation in this context emerges as a potent weapon in the hands of the everyday people.



2.1 Activist translation as metramorphosis

The role of translation in this case is distinctively different from what Baker engages in her works. Rather than making information more comprehensible to a broader audience, the act of translation here makes the information more unrecognizable. At first glance, the basic logic behind this approach seems straightforward: translation avoids triggering sensitive words, thereby circumventing the automated censorship mechanisms by disseminating the message in other languages. As Yang (2022, p. 139) observes: "Programmed computer codes for censoring the web do not understand the content of a text. They recognize forms. Thus, anticensorship efforts work best by inventing new forms. By substituting different symbols for the censored vocabularies or images, netizens produce new textual forms to elude censors". However, the case in question, involving at least 61 variations of translation, suggests a more profound function of translation at play than merely evading censorship keywords.

In contrast to Baker's main focus on narration when discussing translation-as-activism, the act of translation into unreadable codes in this case "[moves] away from the possibility of easy reading [and] means abandoning narration, and instead adopting the form of presentation" (Lai, 2022, p. 25). In other words, the case we are considering does not rely on translation as a means of providing an information service. Instead, translation is employed to convert readable information into an unrecognizable format. Lai (2022, p. 30) stops short in elaborating on how translation transforms readable text into unreadable text but only notes that "[p]erhaps surprisingly, the direct translation of the original report has distorted the meaning, and its rhetoric is quite different from the traditional method of producing Internet memes or political satire". However, given that translation is a process of meaning-making rather than preserving, it is not surprising that translation distorts the 'original report' only in this case, the distortion is more overt.

The above discussion leads us to consider translation as deforming rather than informing and as estranging rather than familiarizing. This might well be a more fundamental function of translation than traditionally conceived. Antoine Berman (1985[2021]) identifies at least twelve tendencies of deformation in literary translation, with most of the tendencies being 'deconstructive' forces brought about by the act of translation. Further, this deformation in translation also prompts a semiotic inquiry. For instance, as reviewed by Göran Sonesson (2014, p. 267), the Tartu School posits that "intercultural translation gives rise to deformations". Sonesson, however, dismisses such deformations as not being 'translation proper'. He asserts that "[t]he telos or goal of the act of translation is to preserve the meaning of what is translated as much as possible" (ibid., p. 262). Yet, recent trends in translation studies, which challenge the idea of 'translation proper', make claims including "there is no 'translationality proper'" (Blumczynski, 2023, p.193). This enables us to focus more on the deformational function of translation as a semiotic process, without being constrained by Sonesson's preoccupation with the goal of translation. Even when translating across cultures, without an activist agenda, often there is a necessity for "alienation from 'one's own' culture [...] in the dialectics of cultural renewal" (Papastergiadis, 2011, p. 13). In this case study, alienating from the familiarized culture is not a choice but a necessary tactic forced by censorship.

However, the importance of translation in this case study goes beyond just deforming to circumvent censorship and disseminate the information contained in the article. By translating the article into as



many forms as possible, the individuals involved expressed their dissatisfaction, if not anger, towards censorship and the government, a sentiment also identified by Yang (2022). The commitment to investigating the intelligent effort behind the translation of a 5000-word article makes the deformation more meaningful than just an ingenious circumvention strategy to bypass censorship. Instead, translation, in this case, is ‘*metramorphosis*’, borrowing from Bracha L. Ettinger (1992, italics mine) and later introduced to translation studies by Carolyn Shread (2008). Within this framework, the effort of translation transforms into what Shread (2008, p. 224) terms as “the transformations in meaning accessed by the layer of subjectivity-as-encounter.” This perspective encourages us to see translation as a process that generates new meanings rather than deteriorating, neglecting, or replacing the original message. The term ‘*metramorphosis*’ emanates from the concept of ‘*metamorphosis*’. Different from *metamorphosis*, however, the prefix ‘*metra*’ offers an array of interpretations as it resonates with ‘*meta*’, ‘*mater*’, and ‘*matrix*’ (von Flotow, 2012, p. 137). While Ettinger (1993) and Shread (2008) applied the term in feminist activism, others such as Elfving-Hwang (2011) have employed it to explore intricate relationships between self and otherness within broader non-feminist contexts. Specifically, *metramorphosis* is described as a process that infuses the concept of the ‘*matrix*’ (as indicated by the prefix ‘*metra*’) with the notion of ‘*Morpheus*’, a Greek reference to forms and their transformations. This unique focus on the matrix facilitates envisioning a relationship that transcends equivalence. Ettinger (1993, pp. 45–46) further elucidates, “Matrix gives meaning to the real which is otherwise unthinkable. [...] Matrix: dynamic and temporary assemblage created by non-rejection, without absorption, repeal, or fusion.”

Thinking in this light, we see that translational effort here becomes what Shread (2008, p. 224) describes as “the transformations in meaning accessed by the layer of subjectivity-as-encounter, and, in this sense, it promotes a view of translation as generative, rather than as deterioration, dereliction or replacement of the original”. In other words, the translation practices of rendering the censored text into unreadable forms not only entails the process of estranging the form into something undetectable by the algorithm and human censoring but creating something that is inter-subjectively related to the source text, and the resistance comes exactly from this encounter. Going back to Lai’s (2022) surprising finding that translation distorts the original, a translation studies response would be that translation is *metramorphosis*: the meaning-generation instead of meaning-replacement process, responding to the void, in Shread’s (2008, p. 235) sense, at the withdrawal of the source text, in this case in the presence of censorship. In this context, censorship that culminates in deletion engenders an absolute ‘other’: the unknowable and unthinkable reality. Translation, by deploying unrecognizable signifiers, allows for an encounter of the translator with this reality. This is not just a conduit of information but a form of activism that acknowledges and confronts the ‘other’. This process permits the re-imagination and reinterpretation of the censored text, yielding a product that, while indistinguishable from the original form, retains the essence and power of the original message. In short, the engagement with translation as *metramorphosis* underscores the creative and transformative practice, rather than viewing it as a mere activity of text deformation. It allows the act of translation to serve as an articulation of discontent and rebellion against authoritative regimes, thus illuminating the intellectual endeavours behind translations and their vital role as catalysts for social and political change. By invoking the concept of



the ‘matrix’, translation in this case can be theorised as a dynamic, temporary assemblage offering meaning to otherwise unthinkable realities.

In brief conclusion, while Baker’s concept of translation-as-activism focuses on the potential of translation to globalize local resistance by offering access to information, this case study illuminates the nature of translation as, initially, deformation, and then as metamorphosis. It breaks down the readable into the unreadable while generating new meaning when the original, readable text becomes void in the face of censorship.

2.2 Non-professional translators as *Minjian* activists

The second difference between translation-as-activism defined by Baker and the issue addressed in this article is the participation of non-professional translators. In this campaign, most, if not all, of the translators involved are hidden behind usernames, making their real identities unknown. Given the large number of participants, it is highly likely that many of them are not professional translators. It is this non-professional translation that characterizes the mass participation in the campaign. In the Chinese context, this kind of mass, non-official, and non-professional participation can be understood as a *Minjian* [民间] practice.

Minjian, which translates to “among-the-people,” is a concept that signifies opposition to the *Guan* [官], representing the government or officialdom. Sebastian Veg (2019) explores the historical and contemporary significance of *Minjian* in understanding China, referring to grassroots intellectuals. Shifting the focus from professional-translation-as-activism to *Minjian*-translation-as-activism draws attention to the everyday lives of ordinary people, where their independently acquired knowledge and self-organized activities hold greater significance (Veg, 2019, p. 12). Veg discusses the intervention of *Minjian* voices from the internet in major events, for example, the Wenchuan Earthquake, where online *Minjian* journalism enabled the pluralization of public discourse (Veg, 2019, p. 246). By adopting the concept of *Minjian*, we highlight its opposition to officialdom and the professional/elite sphere. This reframing allows for a deeper analysis of this case study, shedding light on the role of grassroots common people. Their independent engagement and self-organizing efforts become crucial in understanding the dynamics of translation-as-activism within the broader socio-political context of China.

In terms of *Minjian* as non-official, the concept becomes more complex in *The Whistle Giver* case than in a simple official-*Minjian* dichotomy. The interview with Ai Fen and the report were initially published by a state-run magazine, and many subsequent translations still attribute authorship to the original author of *The Whistle Giver*, Gong Jingqi[龚菁琦]. This complexity brings us back to the discussion of the translators’ subjectivity raised in Section 2.1, as well as forward to the classic debate on the (in)visibility of translators (see Venuti, 2012). The *Minjian* nature of the campaign only emerges through the act of translation, as the creation and censorship of the report were done by officials. To foster a plurality of *Minjian* public discourse, especially in the face of censorship, translators must assert their subjectivity. In other words, the report becomes a *Minjian* text that challenges censorship after it is translated into different forms. Through *Minjian*-translation-as-activism, the significance



attached to the text extends beyond the documentation of early COVID-19 events and seeking accountability for the virus's early spread.

Regarding non-professionalism as a characteristic of *Minjian*-ness, non-professional translation differs from professional translation in terms of “who” rather than “how” the translation is carried out (Borodo, 2022, p. 433). Specifically, non-professional translation refers to “translation done in everyday circumstances by bilinguals who have no special training for it” (Harris, 1976, p. 96). The internet further strengthens non-professional translation, as it opens up translation as an everyday online activity performed by self-declared translators (O'Hagan, 2017, p. 25). By highlighting the everyday nature of non-professional translation, such practice can be categorized as one of the *Minjian* activities. A major characteristic of these translators is captured by the alternative term for the practice: volunteer translation (Pym, 2011). Volunteer translation refers to “translation conducted by people exercising their free will to perform translation work which is not remunerated, which is formally organized and for the benefit of others” (Olohan, 2013, p.3). In the exploration of translation-as-activism, this willingness is often framed as a challenge to the established mainstream values, the promotion of alternative viewpoints, and the advocacy for societal change (Borodo, 2022, p. 439). It is also due to their non-professional status that the practice of translation in this case, and other similar instances, often falls outside the scope of academic discussions centred on translation. When their identities become visible, these *Minjian* translators-as-activists often perceive themselves as journalists, editors, or activists rather than translators (Guo, 2008).

Another significant feature of non-professional translation is its increasing reliance on the internet, which will be examined closely in the following section. However, before delving into the exploration of the internet and translation in the context of activism, a concise summary can be drawn. The preceding section highlights that the translation activity involved in transforming *The Whistle Giver* into various unreadable forms differs from Baker's theorization of translation-as-activism. Instead, this case underscores the everyday nature, or *Minjian*-ness, of translation practice. It intertwines with the official decision-making process of creating and deleting the text, with the translators' subjectivity and visibility serving as a critique of censorship. Moreover, it highlights the voluntary willingness of grassroots intellectuals to participate in the translation campaign driven by their political ambitions.

3. Web 2.0-Enabled Translation

This section aims to explore the various activities, particularly translation, enabled by Web 2.0 and the ethical issues associated with them. Web 2.0, distinguished from static and passive web pages (Web 1.0), is characterized as a “network platform on which peers contribute to the development of tools, content, and communities on the Internet” (Shang et al., 2011, p. 178). Based on its interactive features, knowledge creation is viewed as a bottom-up spiral process, starting from the individual and extending to the organizational level (ibid., p. 179). In the context of activism, research projects on Web 2.0-enabled activism primarily focus on the internet as a more convenient and cost-effective means of disseminating information, for example, Earl (2010). Meanwhile, research on Web 2.0-enabled translation predominantly examines collaborative translation approaches, such as crowdsourcing (see Jiménez-Crespo, 2021), or non-professional translation practices like fan-subbing (Lee, 2011). To



bring together the discussion on Web 2.0 and the multitude of activities it enables, this section argues that Web 2.0 provides translation-as-activism with greater networking possibilities and entertainment factors. However, on the flip side, due to internet accessibility, Web 2.0 also becomes a battleground between official and grassroots intellectuals, as exemplified by non-professional translators in this case.

3.1 The playfulness of Web 2.0-enabled translation

While not explicitly referring to Web 2.0, Guobin Yang and Min Jiang (2015) theorize Chinese online political satire as a networked social practice. They contend that “practices of online political satire at their most political moments are not only critiques of power but popular mobilizations against power” (p. 216). This satire is often expressed through explicit or implicit playfulness, which is facilitated by the availability of Web 2.0 and its “plethora of tools that allow activists to explore, experience, and experiment” (Yang, 2011). Highlighting the role of playfulness is crucial to recognizing the impact of various forms of leisure and noninstitutional activities on conditioning social interactions, as pointed out by Vincent Huang and Tingting Liu (2021, p. 30).

While Huang and Liu focus on the role of game-play in what they term “playful resistance,” it can be argued that translation also generates a sense of playfulness. According to psychologists, one of the major sources of playfulness arises from ambiguity and changes in reality (Csikszentmihalyi, 1981). Playful individuals, such as players, are often compared to “random generators” (Sutton-Smith, 1976, p. 9). In this sense, translation qualifies as a source of playfulness because translators confront the ever-changing relationship between text and its meanings. Translation scholars, like Maria Tymoczko (2007), borrow the concept of ‘game,’ particularly from Wittgenstein (1953, as cited in Tymoczko, 2007, p. 84), to conceptualize translation. Susan Bassnett (2019), in her study on translating concrete poetry, introduces playfulness as “the game” (p. 19). She even identifies translators’ admission of their inability to write as an invitation for readers to “smile at this admission of helpless foolishness” (p. 9). While Bassnett specifically discusses concrete poetry, her research object shares certain similarities with the translation of *The Whistle Giver*. Figure 2 presents another translation version of the report, relying primarily on visual representations. Playing with visual figures thus becomes a distinctive feature of this translation, akin to a concrete poem (Bollobás, 1986).



However, the case under examination deviates from the norm described by Baker. While translations are likely carried out by individuals, Web 2.0 enables the sharing, reposting, and imitation of available translations. This read-and-produce process grants translators-as-activists a dual identity. On the one hand, they are readers of an imagined community, bringing together different readerships and constructing an essentially utopian community (Venuti, 2013, pp. 11–32). By introducing a source text from a foreign culture, translation creates a phantom of understanding among target readers. These target readers believe they have equal access to the source text literature, thereby belonging to the same readership community as the source text readers. In other words, the source text encounters the target text readers, and “such individual encounters are... profoundly mediated by what is made available to read at any given time: what is translated” (Damrosch, 2003, p. 117). It is important to note that the creation of this utopian community is not limited to linguistically constructed literature. Just as translation extends beyond language, the community it creates should not be confined to language-based literature. When people are exposed to and understand pictures, movies, artefacts, and other cultural goods, they also experience a sense of belonging to an imagined community. This community is built on the utopian belief that all members share an identical understanding and interpretation of the cultural significance conveyed by these objects.

Scholars such as Damrosch (2003) and Venuti (2013) have delved into the ways in which translation creates readership communities, often centred around written works and language. However, it is important to recognize that utopian communities can also be forged through the translation of texts that rely less on words and language for meaning. The translation of *The Whistle Giver* provides a compelling example of a community formed beyond the constraints of language. Referring to this community as utopian highlights the fact that their shared belief in sameness brings them together: the censored source text of *The Whistle Giver*. While they may possess a screenshot of the report, the intention is not to faithfully convey the exact content of the source text. Moreover, readers do not anticipate fully comprehending the specific signs within the translated text. Instead, the imagined community emerges from the conviction that readers—including subsequent translators who assume the role of readers—share the intention of rendering the ‘same’ text unreadable in various ways. The act of rendering the text unreadable assumes significance as an act of resistance against censorship.

Additionally, as translators embark on their work and readers disseminate the translations, the networking capabilities afforded by Web 2.0 serve another crucial purpose: the creation of a social ritual. Social rituals, both traditional and modern, play a vital role in the fabric of social life. Psychological perspectives, as explored by Watson-Jones and Legare (2016), shed light on the benefits of social rituals for groups. Ritualized symbolic practices (RSP) can be analysed through four key factors: salience, repetitiveness, homologousness, and resources. It is worth noting that Web 2.0 imparts a unique dimension to the ritual observed in this case study due to its inherent connectivity. Maj and Derada-Nowakowski (2012) observe that the social space of Web 2.0 has fostered rituals that facilitate user adaptation to new technologies and the redefinition of human beings’ place within culture. Through Web 2.0, individuals are afforded the opportunity to participate in social games and create cultural patterns. As a result, rituals have become an integral part of Web 2.0-enabled communication, permeating our everyday lives with their significance.



Relating to the translation campaign, we can analyse it based on the factors of RSP. Firstly, during the peak period of translating and reposting different versions, the ritual nature of the campaign becomes evident not only to the participants but also to almost everyone online. As noted by Yang (2022, p. 141), even ordinary internet users who don't typically experience censorship in their daily lives may come across the relayed postings in their WeChat Moments. This visibility amplifies the ritualistic nature of the campaign. Secondly, the essence of this activism-as-ritual behaviour lies in the repetitive nature of translation and reposting. As discussed earlier, translators repeatedly deconstruct the familiar and easily readable source text, transforming it into unfamiliar and unreadable forms. The more innovative the translation, the more captivating the result appears to be. Despite the variations in the translations, it is this very divergence that lies at the core of the ritual. The repetitiveness stems from an ongoing endeavour to render the source text into new unrecognizable forms. However, the act of translation does not mark the end of the ritual. It is the subsequent reading and sharing of the translations that bring it to completion. In fact, there are more readers or viewers, since the translated text is unreadable, and as Lai (2022, p. 25) points out, the most prevalent mode of perception for the audience is viewing rather than reading. Thirdly, the factor of homologousness emerges once again in the continuous effort of creating and reposting different yet unrecognizable posts. While a similar analysis can be made as in the second factor, for brevity, I will skip it for now. Finally, the resources involved in this ritual are the text itself and the individual knowledge possessed by the translators. The former is self-explanatory, but the latter requires further elaboration. Previous discussions on this matter, primarily highlighted by Lai (2022) and Yang (2022), tend to focus solely on the unreadability of the translated text. However, I argue that there is at least one reader who understands the meaning of the text, approaching it as a reader rather than a viewer: the translator themselves. By translating the text into various signs, they become the user or even the creator of those signs, granting them the right to interpret what they have produced. Therefore, their knowledge becomes a crucial resource for the ritual to assume its distinctive form and meaning.

To sum up, Web 2.0 enables translation to approach the text playfully. The intersection of playfulness, social interaction, and a shared sense of purpose within the context of Web 2.0-enabled translation forms a vibrant 'virtual carnival' atmosphere. This festive-like ambience also becomes a vital vessel for activism against censorship, subtly altering the way how translation acts as a form of resistance. Translators operating under Web 2.0 embody a unique form of digital activism by reworking the original text into a multitude of forms, creatively evading censorship and restrictions. By reframing the act of translation into a playful challenge against censorship, this participatory form of translation activism sparks greater enthusiasm and involvement within the online community. This enthusiasm is not only a by-product of the shared playfulness but also intimately connected to the implementation of RSP within the translation process. This is to say that the participants are not merely translating but actively engaging in a symbolic practice of defiance. The coexistence of playfulness, shared purpose, and ritualistic participation in the 'virtual carnival' underscores the innovative potential of translation as an act of digital activism, as facilitated by the Web 2.0 environment.

Thus, the celebratory, game-like atmosphere of the 'virtual carnival' not only makes the translation process more amusing for translators and the reposting community but also amplifies its potential as a



form of activism. This intersection of playfulness and defiance democratizes the act of translation, making it an accessible, engaging, and potent tool for resistance against censorship.

3.2 Web 2.0-enabled translation as interventionism

In the meantime, Web 2.0 also brings the open nature of the ritual and the Web 2.0-enabled platforms and content are not just available only to a certain group of participants. The openness, on the other hand, exposes the ritual to out-groupers, here mainly referring to those who are responsible for censoring the content. Such exposure complicates the ritual activity as it not only works as a force of cohesion but also creates a divide between different groups. This implies that more research should focus on the platform where the conflict occurs, as highlighted by Julie McDonough Dolmaya and María del Mar Sánchez Ramos (2019). Web 2.0 brings democratic possibilities to users but also introduces surveillance. In other words, Web 2.0 technologies have the potential to turn the internet into a battleground between censorship and liberty. While in many instances, we observe the dominance of one ideology over the other, there are times when the two different ideologies contest each other on the same platform. The coexistence of both sides makes the platform a site for ‘Internet interventionism’: the strategic use of the internet by multiple social actors to communicate, interact, and effect social and political change (Xu, 2016, pp. 106–107).

For the activists, the openness of Web 2.0-enabled rituals means that “everyone who has access to the internet can participate in interventional practice and exercise media power.” On the other hand, for the government, it signifies “new forms of interaction between the state and non-state China” (ibid., pp. 108–109). The major battle here revolves around the creation and deletion of relevant content. While the official attitude remains unknown and can only be inferred from their repetitive deletion of relevant texts, the voices of activists are often heard as they choose to express themselves on platforms like WeChat and other social media platforms. Some of these accounts have been documented and translated by Yang (2022). For example, similar to my use of the term ‘battle’, a Weibo user used a war metaphor to describe the tension between content creation and deletion, stating that “Today’s deleting-reposting-deleting again-reposting again—this is the internet version of a people’s war” (cited in Yang, 2022, p. 140). The officials not only have equal access to the content available to online activists, but they also possess significantly greater power in deciding the existence of this content. Indeed, it is precisely this power that the translation campaign aims to challenge. To combat this power, grassroots intellectuals rely on the sheer number of participants. The complexity of Web 2.0 becomes apparent here. On the one hand, equal access to activist materials makes it easier for the government to abuse its power, but on the other hand, it is Web 2.0 that enables the campaign to mobilize a significant number of participants, ultimately giving it the capacity to become an interventionist voice challenging censorship. This aspect, however, extends beyond the focus of this article, which primarily explores the act of translation-as-activism. It warrants further research to thoroughly examine the relationship between interventionism and activism.

To sum up, the close relationship between interventionism and activism becomes apparent in the context of Web 2.0-enabled translation practices against censorship. Interventionism, as a form of internet-enabled political engagement, allows for the strategic use of the internet to effect social and political change. In the case of activism against censorship, interventionism manifests as a collective



effort to challenge the oppressive control of information and promote freedom of expression. The activists leverage the openness and connectivity of Web 2.0 platforms to create and share translated content that subverts censorship measures. This interventionist voice serves as a powerful tool to challenge the dominance of the government and engage in a battle for information freedom. Through their interventions, activists not only express their discontent but also inspire others to join the cause and contribute to the movement. The intertwined nature of interventionism and activism highlights the transformative potential of Web 2.0 technologies in reshaping power dynamics and advancing democratic principles.

4. Conclusion

Translators as global justice translators, pro-democracy activists, and refugee solidarity activists, as pointed out by Nicole Doerr (2021, p. 167), are motivated by “their motivation to enact collective, conscious, disruptive interventions that challenge domination.” Doerr emphasizes the need for further study on “social movements and civil society groups focusing on their hegemonic or counter-hegemonic third-party position as translators for social and political change” (ibid.). This article aligns with Doerr’s call by exploring the role of translation in an online activism campaign that rendered *The Whistle Giver*, a censored article about COVID-19, into at least 61 different versions, many of which were unreadable to most viewers. The article highlights two aspects of translation: non-professional-translation-as-activism and translation as a Web2.0-enabled-activity. The first aspect argues that translation functions as metamorphosis, deconstructing information into unrecognisable forms to evade censorship and revealing the subjectivity of the translator as a meaning-generator. The non-professional status of these translators positions them as grassroots (or *Minjian*) intellectuals. The second aspect focuses on how Web 2.0 enables translation to become a playful yet collective behaviour, with the Web 2.0 platforms serving as the battleground between official and *Minjian* intellectuals/translators during online activism as internet intervention.

This article has implications in exploring novel ways in which translation functions in online activist campaigns. However, there are limitations due to methodological constraints. The ongoing censorship has resulted in the deletion or unavailability of many relevant materials. Therefore, the materials related to *The Whistle Giver* used in this article are all second-hand sources, including the original article, 61 translated versions, and screenshots of the translated articles. Consequently, it is not possible to directly contact the translators, which is unfortunate as understanding their motivations, particularly in the context of volunteer translation, remains a matter of speculation or logical deduction at best. Future research projects can address these limitations by focusing on non-professional-translation-as-activism with first-hand material and examining how various motivations influence the behaviours of translators-as-activists. Furthermore, it is important to note that this article does not aim to provide a comprehensive account of the entire translation campaign. Instead, its primary objective is to investigate the role of translation. As reviewed in the introduction, several scholars have already explored various perspectives on this activist campaign, but further research is welcome to deepen our understanding.



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