

‘Refund!’ ‘The translation is wrong’: Digital Activism in *Danmu*-based user engagement with the translation of *Friends* on *Bilibili.com*

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Abstract

The coming-of-age of Web 2.0 has increasingly woven translation into ‘participatory culture’ (Jenkins 2006), catalyzing a ‘demotic turn’ (Pérez-González 2014) that foregrounds the cocreational dynamics facilitated by digital media affordances, a prime example being the interface of *danmu* (‘live’ comments superimposed onto video frames). Despite growing academic interest in the linguistic, discursive and semiotic practices it fosters, no scholarship within Translation Studies (TS) is dedicated to the activist potential of *danmu*-based subtitling. To bridge the gap, using the controversial subtitled sitcom *Friends* aired on Bilibili.com in 2022 as a case study, I conduct a combined quantitative and qualitative analysis of how *danmu* users discursively construct and engage with the official translation amid widespread online protests against its censorship of sexuality. Quantitatively, adopting a data-driven approach, I analyze a corpus of *danmu* entries crawled via Python, delving into the linguistic and discursive patterns emerging from the meta-translation discourse and alternative, bottom-up translation versions that counter official narratives. The findings reveal a pervasive and systematic critique of the official translation and collective dissent against the censoring practice. The subsequent contextual interpretation illuminates the delicate interplay between control and resistance that characterizes China’s idiosyncratic media ecology, marked by veiled dissent through linguistic camouflage and subversive humor, and communal solidarity formed through intertextual connections leading to the mobilization of collective grievances. The paper calls for reconceptualizing *danmu* as an arena for online civic engagement within China’s tightly regulated mediascape, signaling new trajectories for exploring the democratization of meaning-making in TS inquiry.

Biography

Mr. Yuan LIU is a Master’s student in a double-degree program at the Glasgow-Nankai Joint Graduate School where he is pursuing an MSc degree in Translation Studies from University of Glasgow and an MA degree in English Language and Literature from Nankai University. His research interests lie at the intersection of translation studies, digital media and corpus linguistics.