Archiving as the Foundation of Fansubbing: A Case Study on Fan-made Translation of Virtual YouTubers in China

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I. Introduction

The term 'fansubbing' constitutes a portmanteau that combines 'fan' and 'subtitling'. The term can be generalised as fans making subtitles for their favourite content, such as anime (Díaz-Cintas & Muñoz Sánchez, 2006; Leonard, 2004, 2005; Pérez-González, 2007) or TV shows (Dwyer, 2018; Duraner et al., 2017). According to audio-visual translation (AVT) scholars like Dwyer Tessa (2018) and Luis Pérez-González (2020), the amateur subtitling phenomenon firstly appeared in America where Japanese anime fans decided to subtitle their favourite cartoons, as the idiosyncratic language and cultural elements in them were previously withdrawn from the mainstream national television programme via dubbing (Dwyer, 2018). However, this spontaneous fan activity did not receive significant attention from either academics or society until the popularisation of the internet (ibid.; Pérez-González, 2020), which took place around the 2000s (ibid.) and largely increased fansub's global sharing. On the one hand, the internet has offered several efficient and free tools for fansubbing, such as BT torrents (Wang & Zhang, 2017; Pérez-González, 2020) for file sharing within hours (or even minutes, if with decent internet connections), and powerful subtitling software like Aegisubs. These tools have enabled amateurs to access and process audio-visual texts on PCs without extra spending thus lowering the threshold of fansubbing (Díaz-Cintas, 2010). On the other hand, it has contributed to building up efficient fansubbing networks with an unprecedented scale and speed (Dwyer, 2018). Amateurs from over the world can form subtitling groups and recruit others; or find and join existing ones through online forums (Díaz-Cintas & Muñoz Sánchez, 2006). Within the virtual fansubbing communities, tasks are usually divided among members with different roles, including but not limited to timers, translators and proof-readers (ibid.). This pattern is commonly adopted by several 'fansubbing machines' (Massidda, 2015) and it has broadened the latter with new media genres and language pairs to cope with (Dwyer, 2018; Pérez-González, 2020). Unlike fans in the early stage who exclusively worked upon Japanese-English anime translation in the U.S., today's fansubbers may produce subtitles for diverse cultural products, from Korean TV soap operas (Dwyer, 2012) to vlogs filmed by users around the world (Lee, 2021). Below is an international fansubbing map extracted from translation scholar Serenella Massidda (2020)'s work and it demonstrates fansubbing's popularity throughout the world. Together with fandubbing, fansubbing is widely seen as fan's essential tool to overcome language barriers in fandom consumption (Pérez-González, 2020).
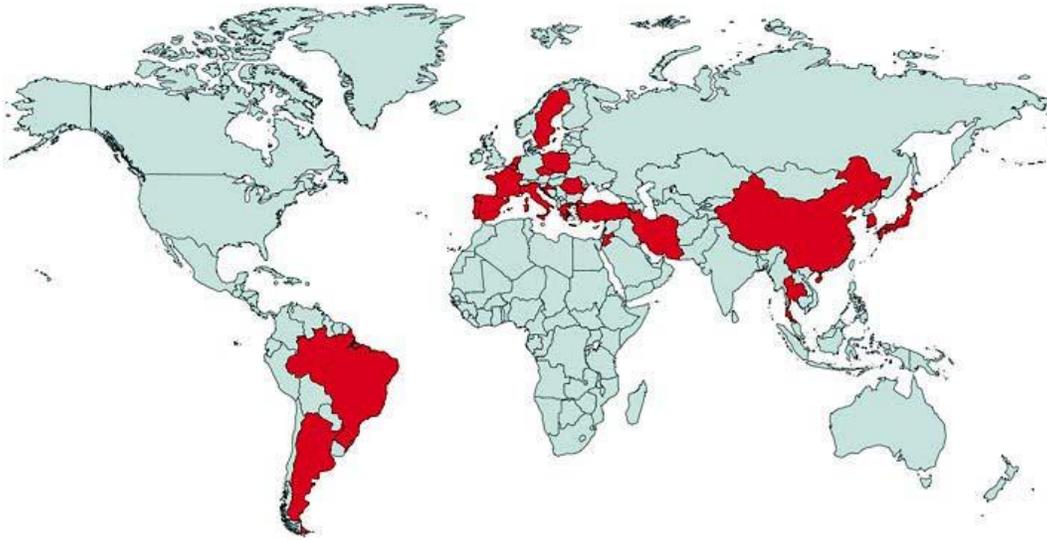
Figure 1. Geolocalisation of fansubbing (Massida, 2020, p. 194)

However, with the flourish of fansubbing, the field still has some less-researched areas and archiving studies could be one of them. Most literature in fansubbing studies over the past decades has emphasised either the textual or extra-textual aspects, such as fan's experimental subtitling strategies (Nornes, 1999) or their product's controversial copyright status (Leonard, 2004; Massidda, 2015). Fansubs could be disparate from professional ones as they often violate the conventions in film subtitling, such as using multiple colours for subtitles (Pérez-González, 2020) or adding translator's notes on the screen (Pérez-González, 2007). Whilst these inventions by the amateurs might have achieved innovative watching experiences, some have doubted their legality, i.e., accusing that these fan-made translations are essentially piracy and should be eliminated for the corporate's profit (Massidda, 2020), which is also debatable since there was evidence supporting that such 'piracy' could be 'promotion' for many media franchises (Jenkins, 2008). In addition, scholars have attempted to reveal the lives of fansubbers and demonstrate how their communities functioned as online subtitling groups, which examined the phenomena from the micro-level aspect and usually with ethnographical methods (cf. Li, 2017; Yu, 2017; Lu & Lu, 2021). Admittedly, the portrait of fansubbing around the globe has been painted from various angles, but new insights continued to emerge toward the ongoing phenomena.

The report aims to rethink fansubbing from the viewpoint of information science, to be more specific, fan archiving studies. Instead of asking the question of 'how did fans translate and subtitle the media text' or investigating fansub's significance in the fandom's ecology, I would like to take a step back and raise a

relatively more fundamental question, which is 'how did fansubbers obtain and manage the indispensable materials for subtitling', and why archiving can be regarded as the foundation of fansubbing. In other words, this article may not heavily focus on either the linguistic or cultural aspects of fansubs, but on what has been retrieved and stored during their production and dissemination. To exemplify this with one of the most significant examples, i.e., untranslated raw materials (or in the more conventional term, source texts): I believe translation can hardly happen without the existence of source texts, even in text-less scenarios like interpreting. In audio-visual translation, translators are frequently required to provide subtitles with concerns about other elements in source materials, such as built-in writings on the screen (Díaz-Cintas, 2010). Therefore, source materials are vital in subtitling and fan's archiving strategies to pin down and store these essential source texts may contribute to further understanding of fansubbing. In return, fansubbing may also offer new insights into information studies because fan archiving during fansubbing has the uniqueness for its purposes beyond mere preservation, but overcoming the language barriers for wider media consumption. In short, this study can be regarded as a re-examination of fansubbing from the fan archiving angle.

I will adopt both historical review and empirical approaches (i.e., fieldwork and online observation) to answer the aforementioned research questions. In pursuit of the research goals, it begins by explaining why archiving has been the foundation of fansubbing since the latter's very first beginning, and it will then move on to present real-life data extracted from the author's netnography research (Kozinets, 2010), whereas the researcher has joined in the fansubbing groups and conduct translation to better demonstrate how archiving has facilitated professional-like workflows for fansubbers on Bilibili.com, arguably the most popular user-generated video website in China (Alexa.com, 2022). Before entering the main sections, it is necessary to clarify what 'archiving' means as the term is expected to appear repeatedly throughout the paper. The term 'archiving', as well as its appearance within 'fan archiving', will be used in this study to describe the retrieval, storage and management of information, despite whether they were digitised or not. The reason for adopting such a definition is because archiving has been recorded as a part of fansubbing before the arrival of digitality (Dwyer, 2018; Pérez-González, 2020) and for a certain amount of time fans had been translating media content in off-line circumstances, such as burning subtitles upon VHS tapes (ibid.). Nevertheless, archiving in these electronic situations is no less significant to fan audio-visual translation than those conducted under the digital environment, hence both will be included under the umbrella term of 'archiving' in this paper, even though the two can be distinctly different from each other in operation.

II. Archiving as Source Text Preservation:
Fansubbing in the Electronic Age

Fan archiving was mostly related to obtaining and saving original Japanese anime but not necessarily their translation at the beginning of fan audio-visual translation. Although the history of fan-made anime-centric translation is largely under research (Dwyer, 2018), few works have indicated that fans had been purposely retrieving materials for translation within the local fandom community before establishing the fansubs. According to Dwyer's (ibid.) remarkable historical records on early-stage fansubbing that took place in America, fans in the 1960s would buy original and unedited Japanese anime VHS tapes from those who were based in Japan, be they friends, pen-pals, or U.S. soldiers severing overseas (ibid.). These valuable copies would usually travel to America via post before they were distributed to local fan clubs throughout the country (Patten, 2004). However, fans couldn't attach subtitles to these imported bootlegs until the late 1980s due to the lack of technological support (Dwyer, 2018). Instead, they adopted similar methods for silent film translation, namely live interpreting on-the-spot (Jenkins, 2006), or generating translation booklets and synopses beforehand (Leonard, 2004). The former includes line-to-line dialogue translation while the latter normally includes story plots in a much shorter length to help the audience focus on the screen (ibid.). Indeed, these informal audio-visual translation methods might have satisfied fans with accessibility to original media content without suffering from previous cultural appropriation brought by mainstream authority's dubbing and subtitles (Dwyer, 2018). But as oral-spoken words went with the wind and few have systematically stored the materialised translation printouts, it would be implausible to claim that early fan translations of anime were successfully archived. In addition, the quality would be questionable even if the printed translation were maintained for several decades without professional settings like humidity control etc. Hence, fan archiving under the circumstance of separated source text and translation was mainly focused on the acquisition of source materials through physical transmission, which can be time-consuming but a prerequisite to fan-made AVT.

In the late 1980s, fansubs managed to synchronise with their correspondent sources for the first time but still struggled to gain massive circulation. According to the media scholar Sean Leonard (2004), it was a technique called 'generator locking' that enabled fansubs to be added onto videos firstly in 1986. The expensive hardware allowed users to overlap different signals simultaneously so fans may attach subtitles (signal 1) to original videos (signal 2) as an initial form of fansubbing. Afterwards, the processed films would be transferred into VCR tapes and mailed to whoever ordered them via fan networks (ibid.). This seemingly easy task would take thousands of dollars for the equipment and approximately a hundred-hour to produce (ibid.), which made its later replacement by the cheaper

laserdisc not surprising in 1989 (Hawkins, 2013). However, both fansubbed VCRs and DVDs remained in electronic forms and could not be consumed without having their physical presence, which failed to boost up their dissemination in speed and scale, although it secured the fansub's stabilised preservation. To verify this conclusion, the author has searched Google to check and compare the archive status of previously mentioned translation printouts and fansubs burnt within sources. As a result, no translation booklets or synopses were found, while a few fans still hold several copies of fansubbed VHS tapes and DVDs. To name just a few: YouTube user Toy Bounty Hunters[1] (2020) has shown his bootleg VHS fansub collections in good condition (i.e., with both clean packages and tapes) and similarly, another user TokuDragon [2] (2019) has presented that his fansubbed VHS tapes are still functional after decades from when they were archived. These recent examples from fan archivers may well prove that fansubs in electronic forms have been better preserved than translation printouts, even though they have not made a huge breakthrough in circulation yet.

III. Archiving as the Foundation of Massive Cocreation: Fansubbing in the Age of the Internet

Similar to most other fandom activities (Booth, 2015; De Kosnik, 2016), digitality has significantly enhanced fansubbing's efficiency and reshaped it into a massive global phenomenon (Pérez-González, 2020). After entering the 1990s, fans have been subtitling not only with an incredibly fast speed but also greatly enlarged content diversity. A fansubbed episode of Japanese anime can be produced and spread online within hours after its origin was aired (Dwyer, 2018; Pérez-González, 2020). Meanwhile, fansub platforms like Viki (Dwyer, 2012) and YYeTs (Wang, 2017) have reached out from the anime-centric source text circles to wider genre selections from different contexts. For instance, the Korean soap opera *Playful Kiss* (Dwyer, 2012) and the American series TV show *Prison Break* (Wang, 2014) etc. Achievements likewise were based heavily upon the simplified but powerful archiving features of the internet. Firstly, it has offered upgraded archiving tools that lowered the difficulty of obtaining source materials. Compared to waiting for the tapes or discs to be mailed, or manually brought back from overseas, fansubbers in the digital era may save inestimable time by downloading sources via file-sharing tools such as BitTorrent (Pérez-González, 2007). Meanwhile, this technique also transferred media content from over the world into downloadable forms and help them spread in the universal World Wide Web after being ripped from the previous

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[1] See Toy Bounty Hunters' fansub VHS collection at
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5cFanWdC0L8
[2] See TokuDragon shows and played his fansub VHS at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VuI-pIoSeWs

carriers (ibid.). From this stage, source texts in fansubbing have begun to discard their physical constraints and may transfer almost in no time and cross geographical boundaries. As a result, it has not only decreased the subtitling's production time but enabled more content to be further consumed globally.

Under this circumstance, the new archiving method may have spawned a specific job title in modern fansubbing. Díaz-Cintas and Muñoz-Sánchez (2006) have coined the term 'raw providers' to refer to those who ripped sources from original context for translation but might not necessarily translate them. What raw providers would conduct was to download source materials and then compress them as either BT torrents or digital files like .mp4 before posting them back online for massive consumption, via either open forums or inside fansubbing groups. This can be an interesting role for archive studies because unlike conventional fan archives (e.g., AO3) that regard the information repository as its end ("AO3", 2022), many raw providers in fansubbing groups retrieve and manage content as a means for further translation and fansub dissemination in the target context. As economists like Adam Smith have demonstrated on the strength in the division of labour (2008), it is expected to witness an increased efficiency in fansub production after archiving is assigned separately to certain skilful members, especially to whoever has easier access to the sources e.g., living in the country where the source content is broadcasted. However, copyright issues have placed the position of both raw providers and their fansub groups at risk, since most of the raw materials were extracted from commercialised media content without official permissions, making it difficult to defend their free circulation against piracy accusations —several raw providers have been arrested and sentenced for their archiving behaviour (Zheng, 2021). Despite its controversial legal status, massive and rapid source text archiving across the globe has been the powerhouse for online fansubbing, especially after digisubs became the latter's mainstream output (Pérez-González, 2020).

In my fieldwork on China's current fansubbing ecology, I have discovered that some fansubbers adopt online archive systems to create collective subtitling workflows, which may further explain why archiving could be the foundation of modern fansubbing. In multiple fansubbing groups that I joined as a fansubber, archiving is serving beyond pure sources storage but as a 'check-in/out' file management system. To be more specific, members of fansubbing groups are using net disks and shared online worksheets to produce fansubs in assembly production lines. Figure 2 can be a conventional worksheet that demonstrates the labour division and procedure in fansubbing, which contains: raw material acquirement, timing, translation, proof-reading, video cover illustrating and publishing. Each job vacancy is to be filled by fan translators depending on their capabilities and willingness while fansubs are generated after all sections are finished. Meanwhile, private net disks with restricted translator-only access are set up according to the aforementioned workflow. In other words, each section has its correspondent folder

to store relative files created in progress. For instance, the folder 'sources' may contain a few unedited media files that are downloaded from elsewhere; and in the 'Timed but untranslated' folder translators may find .ass files that timers processed for later translation. It should be clear how the combination of online editable worksheets and net disks has formed a file management system for fansubbing: fans initially sign up for specific tasks and then set to work separately. They check out files from the previous step and check back the updated one to net disks after modification. The subtlety of this archiving system can be generally two-folded: it remains the basic preserving feature of archiving that stores materials for fansubbing, whilst also efficiently arranging works and tracking subtitling progress through an organised one-stop file managing structure. Although the origin of this intelligent archiving pattern remains unknown, it was proved to be a successful prototype by several fansub groups for increased productivity.

Another online archive that may affect fansubbing is the audience's digitised reactions toward fansubs. These reactions can be classified into numericised ones and textual ones. In terms of the former, it refers to the automatic records of the 'liked, saved and reposted' numbers fansubbed content holds whilst the latter is mainly the comment left by viewers. The two both reflect the fansub's circulation status and may offer insights for further translation activity. Similar to the concept of 'like economy' (Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013), if a fansubbed video received an impressive amount of 'likes' and 'reposts', then it is not only a motivation for its producers but might also promote the translation style and tone it had applied that gains success. On the contrary, a fansub with a lower response rate usually provokes the reflection on translation, and viewers may explain their dissatisfactions in the comment box, such as 'please make the font larger, I can barely see the subtitles' or 'I do not find this translation faithful enough'. These feedbacks would be discussed and might eventually improve fansub quality in further subtitling works if they were not reported and deleted by the platform. In other words, fansub's viewing statistics and comments are also historical records of fan documents (videos) that may reflect the reception of fan works. Therefore, these para-texts around fansubs can be qualified as resources for both translation and archiving studies, but they may not be studied in detail here due to the limited word count.

Figure 2: Worksheet and job titles from a Chinese group subtitling for a virtual YouTuber

IV. Conclusion

This paper has briefly demonstrated how fan archiving and its relative technologies provide vital support to fansub's production and dissemination, and why they can be more than preservation of the source text but also foundations in fansubbing from scratch. Approximately eighty years ago (Dwyer, 2018), fans started to realise that to consume overseas content with preferable translation, they must first acquire the untranslated raw materials and then establish their translation upon them. In pursuit of this goal, fansubbers have adopted a series of archive forms from easily-disposed translation printouts to expensive self-burned VHS/DVDs, and finally digital files like BT torrents that prospered in virtual communities. During the evolution of fansubbing in its efficiency and popularity, the significance of searching for and managing information has always been at the core position in amateur subtitling. Where today's fan archiving in subtitling varies from the one in the anime-centric age is in a shifting function from mere information preservation to managing massive translation and product evaluation. With the historical review on fansubbing and the presentation of the Chinese fan's new subtitling pattern, this paper was designed to determine the irreplaceable and innovative role of archiving in fan-made audio-visual translation. However, this research may benefit from a larger sample size in respect to archiving in the current fansubbing phenomenon because the author has only worked within a limited number of Chinese fansub groups, hence might not portray a larger picture that reflects archiving's significance from other fansubbing contexts. Furthermore, this paper may also be complemented by theories from library and information studies, where archiving is studied as a major subject and has fruitful theoretical models to interpret fansubber's archiving behaviours. Finally, further studies might repeat the research by including fansub groups from outside China or those subtitling for different genres, such as vlogs (Lee, 2021). In addition, voices and interpretations from archiving scholars would also be of great help in understanding fan archives in subtitling from alternative angles.

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