A Postmodern Analysis of Intralingual Subtitles in China's Web-Only Variety Shows: A Case of *Mars Intelligence Agency*

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Under the dynamic and diversified online mediascape in China, the traditional roles of intralingual subtitles have gradually shifted as they have become an integral part of entertainment and one of the main content types for consumption. This study addresses a relatively underresearched but growing practice of intralingual subtitles used on Web-only shows in China. Using examples from *Mars Intelligence Agency*, this study attempts to describe the nature and characteristics of intralingual subtitles and to explore their sociocultural significance in today's digital environment from a postmodern perspective. The results show that the changing role of intralingual subtitles, from traditional referentiality to a more emancipatory form of spectatorial consumption, challenges the power structures in traditional TV and exhibits a postmodern way of consumption. This shift lies at the heart of the dynamism of online mediascape in China and is inseparable from the formation of a Chinese postmodern consciousness.

Keywords: intralingual subtitles, postmodernism, variety shows, cyberculture, new media

Since the 1970s, intralingual subtitles have been traditionally used to facilitate minority and general audiences' understanding of certain linguistic features of the same language (O'Hagan, 2012). Today, they are largely used as an aid for the deaf and hard of hearing to ensure "greater democratic access" (Díaz Cintas & Remael, 2007, p. 14) to audiovisual products. Intralingual subtitles have also been widely used as a didactic tool for foreign language teaching and learning, and used for karaoke effect in public places (Díaz Cintas & Remael, 2007). However, with the dynamism of digital technology, the traditional roles of intralingual subtitles (e.g., verbatim transcription of an utterance from those on-screen) have gradually shifted as commentary intralingual subtitles, which are written and inserted by the producer of the program, have become an integral part of the entertainment and one of the main content types for consumption in the online mediascape in some Asian countries, such as China.

This study addresses a relatively underresearched, but growing, practice of intralingual subtitles used in Web-only variety shows in China. Compared with the practices of intralingual subtitles in traditional broadcast TV, which are more constrained by the "administrative boundaries that pertain to terrestrial

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broadcasters" (Keane & Zhao, 2015, p. 299), the practices of intralingual subtitles in Web-only shows are more innovative and diversified because the "creative personnel are less conditioned by traditional ways of imaging content" (p. 299). As we will discuss later, Web-only shows differ from traditional TV shows in terms of program form, thematic content, language style, and audiovisual elements. As an indispensable element in the multimodal ensemble of Web-only shows, intralingual subtitles are increasingly serving as one of the main motivations to watch and one of the main content types consumed by audiences. This phenomenon clearly indicates intralingual subtitles' new roles under the dynamism of China's online mediascape as they challenge the power structures in traditional TV.

Although strictly speaking, the analysis of intralingual subtitles might not fall onto the conventional audiovisual translation (AVT) norms, the way subtitles are used in emerging media practice makes it relevant to AVT. As Díaz Cintas (2018) notes, research on AVT has gradually moved away from a linguistic to a sociocultural viewpoint, especially in relation to media studies that emphasize its social significance in today's digital mediascape. This new role of intralingual subtitles that is prevalent in Web-only shows in China has scarcely been analyzed in academic literature related to both AVT and media studies. On the one hand, existing studies on intralingual subtitles focus primarily on the role they play for the deaf and hard of hearing (Aleksandrowicz, 2020; McIntyre & Lugea, 2015; Romero-Fresco, 2016), overlooking the sociocultural role it plays in the dynamism of the digital world. On the other hand, although research has been conducted on the changing role of intralingual subtitles in todays' mediascape, previous studies have been largely based in the context of Japan (O'Hagan, 2012; Sasamoto, O'Hagan, & Doherty, 2017), given that this novel practice of intralingual subtitles originated in Japanese open captions on TV. For instance, O'Hagan (2012) highlights the new role of intralingual subtitles as an effective way of eliciting humor and serving as a new form of entertainment on TV programs. Drawing on multimodal framework, Sasamoto et al. (2017) examine the use of intralingual subtitles in Japanese TV programs and suggest that subtitles are often deployed in conjunction with other semiotic resources to make the entertainment value of the show more explicit. Although these previous studies can shed light on the nature of intralingual subtitles and their effects on viewers' interpretation and reception, they tend to overlook the sociocultural role these subtitles play in the context of the online mediascape. In addition, their studies focus largely on traditional media (e.g., broadcast TV) rather than the Internet, where practices tend to be more diversified and complex.

Using examples from *Mars Intelligence Agency* (*MIA*; Yang, Li, & Hu, 2016–2020), a popular Web-only variety show in China, this study addresses the sociocultural significance of this new practice of intralingual subtitles from a postmodern perspective. It aims to describe the practices of intralingual subtitles under the dynamic and diversified online mediascape in China and to explain the way the new practices of intralingual subtitles in Web-only shows challenge the power structures in traditional broadcast TV—namely, the hierarchy between the narrative and the nonnarrative, as well as the relation between authorship and viewership. We argue that the changing role of intralingual subtitles, from traditional referentiality to a more emancipatory form of spectatorial consumption, not only demonstrates a postmodern way of consumption, but also provides new ways of thinking about the audience and the program. The results of this study can further benefit AVT studies and open up new directions, especially digital content production and creative industries in the field of media studies, that have only been partly recognized in AVT research.

Cyberculture in Postmodern China

Mapping Postmodernism in China

Theories of postmodernism have attracted an increasing number of scholars in recent years, given that the principles of the concept provide a new perspective for understanding the new forms and roles of media consumption outside the established mediascape (Xu, 2016). Postmodernism, in short, can be summed up as a widespread sociocultural trend of thought and attitude since the 1960s with the aim of criticizing and deconstructing modern cultural logic and value orientation (Lyotard, 1984). Featherstone (2007) suggests that postmodernism is the breakdown of the boundary between "art and everyday life" and the disruption of the difference between "high art and mass/popular culture" (p. 7). In addition, as Li (2018) suggests, postmodernism tends to be antitraditional because it aims to deconstruct, reconfigure, and subvert the established hegemony as well as decentralize and negate the current situation.

Since the opening-up policy in China in the 1980s and the reform of the market economy at the beginning of the 1990s, the postmodern trend originating in the West has gradually penetrated and influenced various aspects of Chinese people's practices and values. With the sweep of economic and cultural globalization and the deepening cultural exchange between China and the rest of the world, the cultural industry in China has inevitably been imprinted with postmodern features (Li, 2018). The applicability of postmodernism in the Chinese context has been a subject of debate among scholars for many years, and the center of the debate lies in the question of how to distinguish between modernity and postmodernity in contemporary China (Dirlik & Zhang, 2000; Roast, 2016). Yu (2009) suggests that it is problematic to apply postmodernity to a Chinese context because China is still in the modernity stage, so too much focus on postmodernity may not provide a holistic understanding of the cultural development in China. Based on this view, Roast (2016) indicates that one cannot consider China to have skipped the process of modernity and to be totally postmodern because China's postmodernity was informed by a globalized postmodernity during its process of modernization. Given that it is difficult to draw a boundary between the two concepts, it is more appropriate to describe China as experiencing a simultaneous coexistence of modernity and postmodernity (Roast, 2016).

Although scholars hold different views on the applicability of postmodernism to China, there is a growing consensus that China's online mediasphere does embody the principles of postmodernism, which is evident in the analysis of different forms of cyberculture in the Chinese context from a postmodern perspective (Hao & He, 2016; Li, 2018; Xu, 2016). According to Wang (2000), popular culture in China is characterized by its challenge to the state-led media structure, which is a manifestation of postmodernity in the way that it undermines the "domestic totalitarian ideology" and deconstructs the metanarrative "in the course of a fragmentary narration" (p. 23). For a long time, educational and political propaganda was one of the main aims of traditional broadcast TV in China, in which the social elites in the fields of politics and economy were the main characters. The popularity of Web-based culture in recent years has challenged the "staged spectacles of the grand socialist master narrative" (Berg, 2011, p. 145), aiming to replace the metanarrative with multiple small stories in a playful style. There has also been a shift from "what the media does to people" to "what people do with the media"; the audience is no longer being informed and guided by the "mainstream melody programs" (Yu, 2009, p. 10), but has participated in and become the host of

the program. As we will show in the next section, the increasing popularity of *danmu* and fansubbing culture in China's online mediascape reflects a superficial aspect of consumption and a focus on interactivity and participation, which is the very embodiment of the postmodern experience. Based on these features, Roast (2016) summarizes popular culture in China as "becomings" over "beings"; it has the postmodern characteristics of hybridity, nontotalization, and nonnarrativization, subverting and challenging the power structures in traditional media in a dynamic way.

The perspective of deconstructing the narrative and challenging the power structures in traditional media can be useful in explaining the practices of intralingual subtitles in Web-only shows as an element of postmodern culture in China. When focusing on the nature of intralingual subtitles, a postmodern perspective is key in understanding why this type of subtitles is particularly popular in China and to unravelling the way the subtitles challenge the power structures in traditional media, particularly broadcast TV. This, in turn, can shed light on the social implications of intralingual subtitles in today's digital environment.

Cyberculture in the Context of Postmodern China

Cyberculture exhibits certain characteristics with postmodernity, given that the formation and development of cyberculture have their roots on the Internet. The main characteristics of cyberculture in the context of postmodernism in China can be summarized as symbolization and entertainment (Li, 2018; Xu, 2016). Symbolization refers to the use of symbolic language, such as numbers, letters, punctuation, and, most recently, emoticons or emojis, to express one's utterances and feelings. For instance, the most popular Internet slang includes the use of numbers because of their similarities in pronunciation with certain Chinese characters, such as 886 (*ba ba liu*, similar to *bai bai lou*, meaning *goodbye*) and 1314 (*yi san yi si*, similar to *yi sheng yi shi*, meaning *in one's whole life*). To avoid censorship online, English capital letters are often used as the abbreviations for certain Chinese words that may be considered sensitive, such as LD (*ling dao*—leader) and ZF (*zheng fu*—government). The symbolization of one's utterances reflects netizens' pursuit of novelty and freedom, challenging the standard use of language in traditional media.

The second characteristic of cyberculture, entertainment, lies at the heart of popular culture, given that one of the main aims of popular culture is to entertain the public. Digital technology breakthroughs have enabled new forms and means of online entertainment, including the transplantation of part or all of the existing online practices into other practices (Li, 2018; Xu, 2016; Zhou, 2017). As we will show in the data analysis, this characteristic of transplanting online practices (e.g., fansubbing and danmu) into intralingual subtitles increases not only the carnivalesque aspect of the show but also the sense of interactivity and participation.

The interactivity of cyberculture in China's online mediascape can be best illustrated by danmu, which is a unique feature of video-sharing websites in some Asian countries that allows viewers to superimpose their comments onto the video frame "immediately upon being entered" (Yang, 2020, p. 254). The dynamic danmu can give viewers the illusion of real-time interaction and a coviewing experience. The layout of danmu further maximizes interactivity because it reflects the "comments first philosophy" (Yang, 2020). The popularity of danmu thus challenges the established hierarchical structure of content-over-comment, given that content and comments are increasingly being hybridized to be consumed. The

comment culture embodied by danmu, as Xu (2016) suggests, demonstrates a tendency toward postmodern aesthetics on fragmentation and superficiality.

This entertainment value of cyberculture can also be demonstrated by the increasingly innovative use of intralingual subtitles in Web shows in China. Originating in Japan, the creative use of intralingual subtitles, or what O'Hagan (2012) calls "open captions," first appeared in China in the variety show *Happy Camp* (Liu, 2012). At the time, open captions were mostly used for providing supplementary information (e.g., locations and rules of the game) for the activities happening on-screen; this information complemented the audiovisual elements in the show and helped viewers to access information in a timely and effective manner (Teng & Lu, 2015). However, as Zhang (2017) suggests, open captions that are merely explanatory no longer meet the needs of the audience. The advances in digital technology and the flourishing of Web shows in China since 2015 have led to a burst of growth in the use of creative subtitles (Nan, 2017). Since this time, open captions have become more diversified and creative: They often contain Internet slang, symbols, emoticons, and special effects to attract the audience and increase the show's entertainment value. As we will show in the data analysis, open captions are no longer limited to providing additional information; instead, they are often created by the producer for self-mockery and making fun of the speakers on-screen. As Zhang (2017) notes, these humorous and sometimes critical subtitles have become part of the psychological appeal to audiences when they are watching variety shows. Along with the show's main narrative, these fragmented nonnarrative subtitles have become a necessary element in creating comic effect and enriching the overall narrative.

Web-Only Variety Shows in China: Netizens' Carnival

Since the mid-2010s, several Web-only variety shows have been launched on the main online video platforms in China, including Youku, Tencent, and iQiyi, and they have quickly stolen traditional TV's thunder. From 2016 to 2018, the total number of new Web-only variety shows in China increased from 106 to 162, and types of programs have become more varied, to include talk shows, parent–kid reality shows, singing competition shows, travel shows, and so on (Entgroup, 2019). As Zhou (2017) suggests, compared with traditional TV shows, which are rigorously censored, programs on Web TV tend to be more heavily influenced by the postmodern trend: They are more creative in content, more decentralized in structure, and more diversified in form. The popularity of Web-only shows in China is inseparable from the innovation and diversity in program forms, thematic content, language style, and audiovisual elements, which are summarized next.

Created in and continuing to develop under the dynamism of China's online mediascape, the Web-only variety shows can be best understood as a manifestation of netizens' carnival online. The migration of the talent from traditional media to online entertainment has allowed Web-only shows in China to flourish (Entgroup, 2019). The production teams of Web-only shows were mostly born in the 1980s and 1990s—often referred to as "the indigenous people" of the Internet—which allows them to better cater to the interests of the target audience. The program forms and styles of Web-only shows are more carnivalesque because of their combination and integration of existing forms of traditional TV programs (Hao & He, 2016). For instance, *MIA* (Yang et al., 2016–2020) is a creative integration of various existing forms, including talk shows, stage performance, and conference discussion, mixing the old and the new in a playful way. In

addition, as reported by JingData (2018), the content of traditional TV shows is mainly aimed at audiences of all ages, so a relatively official, formal, and objective tone is often retained in the program; in contrast, the Web shows are more geared toward a younger audience, so the shows' language style more closely resembles young people's language habits and thus tends to be more subversive, subjective, colloquial, and humorous (Hao & He, 2016). This Net generation's pursuit of freedom, openness, and individuality is consistent with the traits of Web-only variety shows, which can be regarded as the very embodiment of postmodernity (Zhou, 2017). In *MIA* (Yang et al., 2016–2020), for example, the proposals discussed by the agents in every episode are mostly topics popular among young people, such as homosexuality, celebrity gossip, and cheating—topics that might be considered sensitive for traditional TV shows.

Furthermore, audiovisual elements in Web-only shows, such as funny pictures (e.g., emoticons and emojis), sounds, and subtitles, often interact with stage performance to create a series of amusing scenes; this challenges the relatively dignified and decent styles of traditional TV shows, in which subtitles are mostly used for referential purposes (Hao & He, 2016). The highly visualized, spatialized, and image-oriented features in Web-only shows are the very manifestation of postmodern aesthetics (Zhou, 2017). According to Entgroup's (2019) survey on viewers' reception of Web-only shows in China, it is the multimodal combination of creative subtitles and other audiovisual elements on-screen (e.g., spectacular scenes, celebrities' performance, and sound effects) that attracts audiences to the show. In other words, the image-oriented aesthetic features of Web-only shows have gradually replaced the language-oriented ones in traditional TV programs, emphasizing the multimodality of the digital age (Zhou, 2017). As we will show in the data analysis, the use of innovative subtitles in Web-only shows has freed audiences from passively receiving the information and has provided new ways of thinking about the relationship between the audience and the program.

In China, as Zhao (2019) indicates, the government plays a dual role of participant and regulator in developing online entertainment, resulting in a more dynamic and complex situation. The relatively relaxed environment on the Internet before 2016 provided the perfect conditions for the development of Web shows because of the double standards for online and offline TV administration and management (Zhou, 2017). The regulations on Web-TV programs before 2016 were still incomplete; no unified standard existed for topic selection, production, and distribution. The issue of regulation by the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television in China in 2011 limited the number of entertainment programs permitted to air on television, leading audiences to the Internet for entertainment, though the broadcast TV regulation was later implemented for Web-TV as well.

However, the flourishing of Web shows in China's online mediascape is not seen as "outside of the state's political domain" (Wang & Lobato, 2019, p. 361); instead, it has always been subject to government regulation and intervention. Given that online entertainment has "the potential to extend into politically significant conversation" (Wu, 2020, p. 642), since 2017, the National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA) of China has enacted several increasingly tight regulations to restrict the production of Web shows, gradually forming unified online and offline management. The *Notice on Further Strengthening the Management of Creation and Broadcasting of Online Audiovisual Programs* (National Radio and Television Administration [NRTA], 2017) set requirements for the use of language in Web programs. To further tighten the management on Web shows, NRTA issued the *Notice of Further Strengthening the Administration of*

Broadcast Television and Online Audiovisual Entertainment Programs (NRTA, 2018), which encourages high-quality content and innovative program formats and emphasizes the same standard for online and broadcast TV. Under the guidance of NRTA, the China Netcasting Services Association, in cooperation with online video platforms in China, including Youku, Tencent Video, and iQiyi, formulated *Details on Content Review Standards for Online Variety Shows* (China Netcasting Services Association, 2020); this document lists more detailed standards for various aspects, including the selection of creative staff, behavior of on-camera crew, layout of the stage, and usage of language.

It is within this regulatory environment that Web-only shows formed and developed in China. As an indispensable element in Web shows' spectacular scenes, intralingual subtitles are also subjected to being censored, as can be seen from the mentioned regulations. It is thus interesting to see how intralingual subtitles negotiate under such dynamism and to explore its sociocultural implications in postmodern China.

Research Data

An Introduction to MIA

As Zhao and Keane (2013) noted, 2008 was a watershed moment for online video platforms in China as the government introduced licensing to tackle the pressure of copyright issues. In the face of state regulation and soaring licensing costs, online video platforms in China were pressured to experiment with alternative content strategies and business models (Zhao, 2019). Youku, one of the biggest online video platforms in China, was no exception to this trend. To address the homogenization of content offerings and rising licensing costs caused by the government's crackdown on infringing video sites, Youku began to pay more attention to cooperating with other media companies and TV stations to produce original and innovative content—exhibiting a decentralizing feature in postmodern condition (Lin, 2020). With its emphasis on original programming and brand platform building, Youku has produced a range of popular Web shows in recent years, including *MIA* (Yang et al., 2016–2020), coproduced by Youku and Yinhekuyu Media Company. The production teams were from both Yinhekuyu and other state-owned TV stations, including Hunan TV, China Central TV, and Guangdong TV. As Zhao and Keane (2013) suggest, coproduction conducted by Youku can be an effective strategy to deal with the surging licensing costs and to enhance content diversity.

Pioneering a new mode of variety show that combines talk show, stage performance, and conference, the participants of *MIA* (Yang et al., 2016–2020) include both celebrities, who are known as directors or senior agents in the show, and ordinary people, who are called junior agents, discussing topics coming from Youku big data (Xinhuanet, 2016). *MIA* Season 1 was launched on Youku in 2016 and quickly gained great popularity with the Chinese audience. In 2016, *MIA* Season 1 was among the top 10 Web-only shows in China, and it received the Annual Excellent Web-Only Variety Show award for that year. As we will show in the analysis, the practice of transplanting user-generated content (UGC), such as quasi-danmu and fansubbing-style subtitles in the show, can be seen as part of the platform's content strategies regarding original programming and the professionalization of amateur culture to build content differentiation and enhance viewer loyalty.

Data Selection

Four seasons of *MIA* (Yang et al., 2016–2020) had been released as of the time of this research, 51 episodes in total. To explore more general patterns of the use of intralingual subtitles in the show, this study draws on examples from three episodes—3 hours, 2 minutes, 8 seconds in total—covering the episodes with the highest popularity index (Season 3 Episode 1–1046; Youku, 2019), the average popularity index (Season 1 Episode 4–702), and the lowest popularity index (Season 4 Episode 5–416). The popularity index is calculated by a number of live statistics, including the number of comments, likes, shares and active users (Youku, 2019). From these three episodes, we manually collected 944 intralingual subtitles that were not used as a direct rendering of the dialogue as it would be used traditionally, given that this study focuses on the new practices of intralingual subtitles created by the producer. We recorded and took screenshots of the image where the subtitle appears. Each intralingual subtitle instance was also annotated in terms of its classification within the topics outlined in Table 1.

Data Analysis

Drawing on the examples collected from the three episodes, this section explores the nature of intralingual subtitles deployed in the show and their sociocultural implications from a postmodern perspective. Table 1 shows the classification and frequency of the 944 intralingual subtitles:

Table 1. Classification and Frequency of Intralingual Subtitles.

Topics	Examples	Frequency
Tucao speakers	解释就是掩饰 Explanation is cover-up.	415 (44%)
	来自火星的好男人 A good man from Mars.	
Depiction of the speaker's inner thoughts	是在说我吗？Are you talking about me?	223 (24%)
	让我好好想想 Let me think it over.	
Tucao scenes/plots	根本停不下来的历史讲堂 The history class that can't stop.	145 (15%)
	捡肥皂联盟 The Soap-Picking Alliance	
Display of the theme or the topic discussed	特工提问时间 Agents question time	102 (11%)
	存在感太低已成为很多地球人的困扰 Low sense of existence has become a problem for many people on earth.	
Depiction of the producer's inner thoughts	不要拉进度条，有惊喜哦！Don't drag the progress bar, there are surprises!	59 (6%)
	散会了，下期见哦 The meeting is over, see you next time.	

Tucao Speakers and Scenes/Plots

Table 1 shows that one of the common features of intralingual subtitles in *MIA* (Yang et al., 2016–2020) is the abundance of *tucao* language (59%), which refers to joking around, or criticizing or teasing someone or something with the aim of "uncovering the truth about it" in a sarcastic, harsh, humorous, or playful manner (Hsiao, 2015). Examples 1–4 present intralingual subtitles that contain tucao language applied to the speakers or the scenes, not only adding an extra layer of narrative but also showing that the producer is aiming to establish a closer relationship with the audience.

Example 1: S1E4
与时代脱节的**老干部**
(The veteran cadre who is out of touch with the era; Wang & Wu, 2016, 00:20:34)

Example 2: S4E5
甜到发齁
(too sweet that may feel sick; Liu, 2018, 00:40:27)

Example 3: S1E4
接盘侠
(large stocks accepter; Wang & Wu, 2016, 00:33:51)

Example 4: S3E1
学渣们的期待眼球
(the expected eyes from poor students; Feng, Liu, Kang, & He, 2017, 00:25:40)

Examples 1–4 show that Internet slang terms are often used to tucao the speakers on-screen: 老干部 literally means "veteran cadre" and is used by young netizens to refer to a group of celebrities who are middle aged or older and cannot keep up with the trends of young people; 甜到发齁, originally used to describe a taste that is too sweet, refers to a couple in a very good and sweet relationship; 接盘侠 is a stock market term that literally means "the large stocks accepter," but on the Internet, it often refers to the person who takes over some awful mess; and 学渣 is a neologism coined by netizens that refers to poor students. These Internet slang terms are used in subtitles to poke fun at the speakers in the show.

The use of tucao language in subtitles not only increases the humorous effect, but also challenges the power structure between authorship and viewership in traditional TV. With traditional TV, the relationship between the producer and the audience is often distant, and the audience is put in a passive position, being told and guided rather than actively affiliated (Yu, 2009). As Hsiao (2015) indicates, through criticizing and teasing other people, the act of tucao can facilitate in-group rapport, because the ideas expressed by tucao are shared by most viewers and resonates with them. In the case of *MIA* (Yang et al., 2016–2020), through teasing the speakers on-screen, the producer tries to create a sense of in-group identity with the audience so as to cater to the language habits of the young netizens. The ability to decode tucao language and

Internet slang represents group solidarity among netizens, which is a group into which the producer clearly inserts himself/herself. In addition, because tucao is "intrinsically interactive" (Hsiao, 2015), it can also trigger responses from the audience. As NetEase (2020) reports, from viewers' perspective, tucao speakers in front of the screen with the producer have already become part of the audience's desire to watch these shows. The sense of interactivity is thus achieved through the resonance created by the tucao language, which brings viewers closer to the program.

Examples 5 and 6 show that taboo content, including swear words and sexual references, is also found in tucao language to achieve satiric and humorous effects:

Example 5: S1E4
懵 **X**
(getting confused; Wang & Wu, 2016, 00:21:41)

Example 6: S1E4
捡肥皂联盟
(Soap-Picking Alliance; Wang & Wu, 2016, 00:20:28)

To evade official censorship, English letter *X* (Example 5) is employed to replace the Chinese taboo word 屄 (*bi*), which means female genitals. In addition to English letters, other semiotic resources, including punctuation and Pinyin (the romanization of the Chinese characters based on their pronunciation), are also found in the show to replace the taboo word 屄, such as 装bi (to show off) and 逗 * (funny idiot). In Example 6, an Internet slang term 捡肥皂, which literally means "picking up the soap" and is often used to imply homosexual sex on the Internet, is employed to tease the behavior of several male speakers in the show. The innovative use of various semiotic resources and Internet slang makes visible what has been invisible to the censors. This practice indicates the intention of the producer to bypass the censors and present the content that may be considered sensitive by using "hidden transcripts"; this exhibits a sense of power resistance and "direct expression of dissent" (Yang, 2009, p. 60). In addition, this practice of using tucao language to tease others shows a new element for consumption in Web-only shows, which decentralizes the main narrative by adding a new layer of fragmented nonnarrative content.

To tucao the plot in the show, Figure 1 shows that intralingual subtitles and the image transplanted from disparate sources work together to create a "hilarious mixture by means of incongruous juxtaposition" (Gong & Yang, 2010, p. 12). This grassroots culture, often called online spoofs or *egao* in Chinese, has become increasingly popular among online communities, aiming to subvert and challenge the so-called normal in a comic way. It is a phenomenon resulting from individual playfulness with the characteristics of "humor, revelry, subversion, grassroot spontaneity, defiance of authority, mass participation, and multimedia high-tech" (Gong & Yang, 2010, p. 4), which are the very embodiment of postmodernity.

Translation: (In the Name of *MIA*)
(Fight every corrupt phenomenon)
(Arrest every corrupt official)

Figure 1. S3E1 (Feng et al., 2017, 00:10:56).

Figure 2. Original poster for In the Name of People *(Li & Gao, 2017).*

In this scene, Xue Zhiqian is promoted from senior agent to deputy director of the agency, and other agents are gossiping about the reasons for his promotion. After one agent says, "How much money did you give to the director?" (Feng et al, 2017, 00:09: 10), an image resembling the poster of a famous Chinese TV drama about anticorruption at that time—*In the Name of People* (Li & Gao, 2017) produced by the Supreme People's Procuratorate Film and TV Center of China—is displayed on-screen (Figure 2). The subtitles in the show, which are in the same color, font, and position as in the poster, say, "In the Name of *MIA*" (Feng et al., 2017, 00:10:56). The incongruous effect is thus achieved through the recontextualization of a serious story against the backdrop of state-led anticorruption campaign into a playful and hilarious scene in an entertaining Web-only show.

The effect of egao achieved through the synergy of intralingual subtitles and image in this example demonstrates a sense of postmodernity in several ways. First, according to an online survey conducted by Yates and Hasmath (2017), it is not solely the content of egao, but its networked function that makes

viewers more engaged in the show. The multimodal ensemble achieved through creative subtitles and image is more in line with netizens' needs; they can directly screenshot it as a meme to spread across the Internet, further triggering a carnival in the new digital era. Second, the egao effect created through spoofing the state-led ideologies and discourse involves a sense of subversiveness and maximizes the playfulness and subjectivity of the program. The pursuit of focusing on one's sensual and subjective heart over the "traditional objective and rational mindset of values or worldview" (Lim, 2013, para. 13) is the very embodiment of postmodern features. Furthermore, given that egao is essentially a superficial and depthless cultural consumption (Xu, 2016), its employment in the show exhibits a postmodern surface consumption rather than the deep consumption that occurs with traditional media. The consumption of superficial intralingual subtitles together with the image challenges the totalization of the narrative in traditional media and leans toward a new and fragmentary narrative mechanism.

This practice of egao and tucao language, a part of UGC or grassroots culture, in intralingual subtitles in the show also demonstrates the inclusion of amateur creativity in content production, which is a crucial part of the content strategy adopted by Youku. As Zhao (2016) notes, this strategy on facilitating original content production contributes not only to the diversity of content offerings but also to the establishment of community culture. This professionalization of amateur culture is also evidenced in the transplantation of fansubbing and danmu practice in subtitles, shown in the next section.

Depiction of the Speakers' and Producer's Inner Thoughts

Advances in digital technology have made intralingual subtitles and image interact in a more creative way. In *MIA* (Yang et al., 2016–2020), various forms of intralingual subtitles are created by imitating all or parts of the comics and danmu practices in a playful way, exhibiting a postmodern characteristic of transplantation, pastiche, and hybridity (Gong & Yang, 2010). Figures 3 and 4 show that the speakers' inner thoughts are presented in a comic strip format.

(extremely excited)

Figure 3. S4E5 (Liu, 2018, 00:12:18).

(I think)
(I am aggrieved)

Figure 4. S1E4 (Wang & Wu, 2016, 00:09:53).

The subtitles in special effects (e.g., comic-style font in different colors), a practice often adopted by fansub groups (Lu & Lu, 2021), together with the speech bubbles and the comic-style frame, highlight the inner thoughts of the speakers as they complement the main narrative by depicting the speakers' unspoken psychological states. This practice of intralingual subtitles positioned in the middle of the frame increases not only the fragmentation of the main narrative but also the entertainment atmosphere of the show. In addition to transplanting comic practices, another feature of video-sharing websites, danmu has also been transplanted in the show to depict the inner thoughts of the producer (see Figure 5).
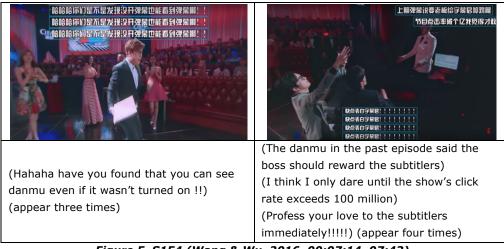

(Hahaha have you found that you can see danmu even if it wasn't turned on !!)
(appear three times)

(The danmu in the past episode said the boss should reward the subtitlers)
(I think I only dare until the show's click rate exceeds 100 million)
(Profess your love to the subtitlers immediately!!!!!) (appear four times)

Figure 5. S1E4 (Wang & Wu, 2016, 00:07:14–07:43).

Unlike danmu, which is created by the viewer, these intralingual subtitles scrolling from right to left on the screen are created by the producer; we call these the quasi-danmu intralingual subtitles, given that they imitate the interface of real danmu in video-sharing platforms. Similar to the previous examples, the dynamic intralingual subtitles positioned at both the top and the bottom not only draw audiences' attention to this nonnarrative content, but also challenge the relatively distant relation between the

viewership and the authorship that exists with traditional TV. The quasi-danmu intralingual subtitles address the viewer directly in a playful and informal way, which increases the mutual recognition between the viewer and the producer and increases the liveliness and the sense of interactivity of the program. A survey taken by Chen, Gao, and Rau (2017) shows that viewers do not consider the density of subtitles on the video, which nearly blocks the original content, to be a disturbance; instead, the creative subtitles are their main motive to watch these videos because they give viewers a sense of interacting with the producer and reduce the "loneliness of watching alone" (p. 733).

In addition, the feature of directly addressing the audience and the dynamicity of intralingual subtitles also place the producer in a highly visible position, reflecting their desire to express themselves in a public manner. This sense of postmodern subjectivity challenges the intralingual subtitles in traditional TV, which are often positioned at the bottom of the screen and go unnoticed by the viewer. Furthermore, similar to tucao language, this practice also represents a new form of consumption, given that each subtitle produces its own meaning without "being fixed to a singular narrative" (Xu, 2016, p. 449). In this way, "the surface layers of interaction" (intralingual subtitles) are increasingly consumed by the audience, together with "the inner layers of meaning" (content; Xu, 2016, p. 449); this reflects a type of consumption that focuses on the superficial aspect in the context of postmodern cyberculture.

Similar to the use of tucao and egao practice, the borrowing from grassroots culture (i.e., fansub and danmu in this section) into intralingual subtitles demonstrates that UGC is "no longer associated only with amateurish practices," but is considered "a dynamic concept with the potential to move towards the professional end of the spectrum" (Zhao, 2019, p. 78). UGC's value of "self-expression and a sense of community" (Zhao & Keane, 2013, p. 735) has become a competitive advantage for online platforms to facilitate viewer loyalty and engagement. This is evidenced in the use of quasi-danmu subtitles in the show, which enhances viewer engagement and community building: The subtitles designed by the producer can trigger viewers to share their own comments on-screen by using the real danmu function on the platform.

Display of the Theme or the Topic Discussed

When displaying the theme or the title of the topic discussed in the program, intralingual subtitles are often presented in an innovative style that is consistent with the theme discussed. Figure 6 presents an example.

(The director of *MIA* received the Martian residents with kindness)
(*MIA* held a meeting and enthusiastically answered questions from Martian residents)

Figure 6. S3E1 (Feng et al., 2017, 00:50:27).

Figure 6 shows that the frame (at the bottom of the screen), font (standard font), and color (white) of the intralingual subtitles mock a news broadcast style, which is in line with the section where the director answers questions at the end of the program. This creative style of subtitles exhibits not only a postmodern characteristic of transplantation and hybridity but also a carnivalesque way of consumption.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study set out to explore the relatively underresearched aspect of the innovative use of intralingual subtitles in Web-only variety shows in China. The main aim is to describe the nature and characteristics of intralingual subtitles used in Web-only shows and to shed light on their sociocultural significance. The development of digital technology and the increasing demand for online entertainment have given rise to a new form of intralingual subtitles that distinguishes itself from the traditional usage in various aspects. Compared with those used in traditional TV, with its "one size fits all solution" (van Tonder, 2015, p. 1), we find that subtitles in Web-only shows tend to be more diversified and creative in styles and forms: They often appear in different positions, colors, and fonts, reflecting a postmodern culture that is highly spatialized, visualized, and image based. Unlike intralingual subtitles in traditional TV, which are mainly used for referential purposes, the technology-enabled intralingual subtitles in Web-only shows clearly indicate their new role as a means of entertainment.

The transplantation of amateur or grassroots practices (e.g., tucao, egao, danmu, and fansub) into intralingual subtitles as shown in this study exhibits the dynamics between the amateur and the professional—namely, the professionalization of amateur content in China's rapidly evolving online video platforms (Zhao, 2019). As can be seen from the case of *MIA* (Yang et al., 2016–2020), the way the producer borrows from UGC for intralingual subtitles can be seen as part of Youku's content strategies of original programming and formalizing amateur media in the face of state regulation and rising licensing costs. This dynamic between the amateur and the professional demonstrates the importance of going beyond the dichotomy between the two and the significance of focusing on their coevolution (Zhao, 2016). This study shows that the transplantation of amateur creativity into intralingual subtitles in Web-only shows has

propelled experiment and innovation among online video platforms in China, given that it provides not only new materials for production but also new ways of consumption, as well as new ways of thinking about the relation between the audience and the program, which are summarized next.

The use of creative intralingual subtitles in the show challenges the power structures in traditional media. Unlike traditional TV shows, in which the narrative is often a unitary whole, the narrative in Web-only programs is fragmented by the employment of creative intralingual subtitles; these "operate within the coextensive plane of time and space" (Xu, 2016, p. 448) where the main narrative or content is produced. The popularity of these fragmentary and commentary subtitles fosters a new layer of meaning through the authorial voice that bypasses the diegetic characters to engage with the audience directly. This divergence away from consuming solely the narrative (the main content) to both the narrative and the multiple small nonnarrative (intralingual subtitles) undermines the totalization of the program and emphasizes the shift toward a postmodern aesthetics on fragmentation and superficiality. In other words, the boundaries between the narrative and the nonnarrative are increasingly blurred as they are being hybridized to be consumed by the audience. As Xu (2016) suggests, the breakdown of the power structure between the narrative and the nonnarrative represents a new way of consumption on the superficial layer of meaning, which is the very embodiment of postmodern consumption.

In addition, through commentary and subjective subtitles, the interaction between the producer and the viewer has gained in visibility and dynamicity, breaking the invisibility of the producer in traditional TV shows, where the producer or the subtitler is often not allowed to "voice their individuality" and tends to "remain anonymous" (Díaz Cintas, 2018, p. 140). As this study shows, however, in Web-only shows, the producer explores new forms of interplay between subtitles and the audience to encourage and maximize the sense of interactivity and participation of the audience. From viewers' perspective, this type of subtitle also frees them from passive viewing as they actively participate in the acts of tucao and egao, and send out real danmu together with the producer. This form of intralingual subtitle, which creates entertainment through community building, challenges the power structure in traditional media, in which the viewer is often secondary and passive, and reflects the increasingly important role that the viewer plays in the rapidly growing postmodern cyberculture.

However, although this postmodern practice has driven the innovation among online video platforms in China, it would be overly optimistic to overemphasize its empowering or liberative potential. A lot of uncertainties and ambiguity still exist in this postmodern practice as it negotiates creativity, diversity, and the state regulation. As we have shown, the abundance of abusive subtitles, a term used by Cai (2015) to refer to the innovative subtitling practices that challenge the practices of official subtitling (e.g., using punctuation, Pinyin, and Internet slang to replace sensitive words and the transplantation of fansub and danmu practices), challenges the power structures in traditional media, but it still involves the need to negotiate "the political and economic boundaries in the creative content production" (Zhao, 2016, p. 5453). Nevertheless, this creative usage of subtitles also poses challenges to the state governance, which is evidenced in the increasingly tightened and detailed regulation issued by NRTA. Therefore, given the state's dual role as participant and regulator in developing online entertainment, this postmodern practice cannot be seen as entire resistance or whole submission to the state governance, but a balance between the two, demonstrating what Yang (2009) calls the ambivalence and complexity of the Chinese Internet.

To conclude, by drawing an interesting triad between digital communication, intralingual subtitling, and postmodern China, this study is a timely investigation into the complementary fields of AVT studies and media studies. The study of the creative use of intralingual subtitles makes a great contribution to AVT research, given that it answers Díaz Cintas's (2018) call for situating the close analysis of subtitles within the wider sociocultural context surrounding it to better understand the significant role that AVT plays in the digital era. The results of this study not only shed light on the implications of this emerging media practice in the dynamics and diversity of China's online mediascape but also point out broader possible areas—especially digital content production and online screen ecology in the field of media studies—that have only been partly recognized in AVT research.

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