

## “Love is love” and “Love is equal”, Fansubbing and Queer Feminism in China

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How did you first find out about feminism? Through academic texts, journal articles or the internet? Or a bit of both, for example, by articles or blogs published online. While information technologies have transformed many aspects of our social lives, our knowledge of feminism and feminist practice have been extended and shaped by the internet. It is not surprising that digital feminist activism has been an emerging area in feminist studies, with a focus on how digital technologies, especially social media, have been used to mobilize and engage the public in the new media environments (e.g. Martin and Valenti 2012; Anderson and Grace 2015; Gleeson and Turner 2019). For example, the #MeToo campaign on Twitter, which encourages women to share their own stories of sexual harassment, has attracted a lot of attention from many researchers because of its feminist nature and the global attention it has garnered. The personal history of sexual harassment that #MeToo participants recounted is seen as "a powerful wellspring for political mobilization" (Loss 2011, 288), given its role in raising the public's awareness of sexual harassment and its potential of building "a larger networked feminist public" (Rentschler and Thrift 2015, 341). While recognizing its positive function of solidarity-building and awareness-raising, problems associated with the #MeToo movement have also been exposed, such as its potentially unethical naming and shaming of perpetrators in public (Haire, Mewman and Fileborn 2019) and its potential simplification and elimination of the complexities and ambiguities of sexual violence (Alcoff 2018; Darnell 2019). There is also the issue of the movement's potential exclusion of marginalised groups who might not have access to social media or have the confidence to speak up for themselves publicly (Fileborn and Loney-Howes 2019, 9). Many of these problems also have nuanced expressions in the MiTu (米兔, rice bunny, a phonetical translation of MeToo into Chinese) campaign in China. As Jing Zeng (2019, 75) observes, the development of the MiTu movement in China has been affected by the authorities' control and censorship that "prevent it from spreading out of control" and "threatening the government's legitimacy". Facing this censorship and the lack of formal legislation protecting individuals who participate in social movements, Chinese activists had to adopt creative strategies such as the alternative hashtag #MiTuInChina (Rice Bunny in China), emojis (of rice bowls and bunny heads) and local dialects to sustain the movement (Ibid, 76). These alternative strategies of mobilizing and organising the public on digital platforms that Chinese feminist activists have adopted in the MiTu movement reveal the diffusion of feminist practices across the world and the significance of local adaptation and translation in global feminist movement.

In fact, in the past years the Chinese feminist movement has experienced an important paradigm shift from 'non-governmental organizing' to the organization staying outside of the official system (体制外,

*tizhi wai*) (Wang 2018, 263). In this shift, Chinese grassroots feminists have emerged and placed themselves at the frontier of the movement, although because of the government's tightened control over social organization, they have to "tone down their focus on organization-based modes of action and develop guerrilla-like tactics and 'a form of network-based civil society' instead" (Yuen 2015, 56 quoted in Wang 2018, 264). Similar trends have also been identified in the recent practice of Chinese queer activists, who have adopted less confrontational strategies that "manipulate conventional modes of organising and the meaning of public presence and the aims of activism *tout court*" (original emphasis; Engebretsen 2017, 2). This new focus has been exemplified in the formation of grassroots lesbian organization and the growth of online feminist-minded groups including online lesbian feminist communities. These online communities might or might not have direct connections to the 'action-oriented' feminist activism in China, but their discussion of gender issues and involvement in online feminist critique have "fashioned a vocal feminist environment in cyberspace" (Wang 2018, 271). Through examining a case of Jihua, a Chinese online lesbian community, this chapter explores how Chinese lesbian translators circumvent censorship to reach and mobilize a wider audience through their subtitling of queer- and/or feminist-related foreign media contents. It argues that their translation practice exemplifies a non-confrontational model for Chinese queer feminists to participate and intervene in the queer feminist discourse in China. Not only does their translation enhance the Chinese public's understanding of queer feminism, but also their collaborative translation model provides individuals with chances to connect with queer communities and form their own cultural identities, which in turn nurture and sustain the development of queer feminism in China.<sup>1</sup> All this further demonstrates the role of translation in transforming global queer feminist movement and empowering local LGBT individuals and communities.

### **1. Challenges for the development of queer feminism in China**

In China, as well as in many places in the world, the representation of lesbians in mainstream media is often marginalized and their welfare is little addressed. Since the late 1990s lesbians and lesbian culture have become more visible in Chinese society (He 2001), but at the same time problems related to the inequality and discriminations that they receive within and outside of the LGBT community have also been increasingly exposed. Discussions of lesbians' rights have also been brought to the front of feminist critique in China. While there is very little research on this area, discussions on the urgency for Chinese lesbians to ally with Chinese feminist activists to resist the recent resurgent gender inequality in Chinese society have begun to emerge in cyberspace. These discussions were epitomized in a debate that took place online in December 2011 between a group of anonymous queer women activists and gay male activists. Starting with a manifesto published on a Sina Weibo (the Chinese version of Twitter) account ("Pretty Lesbian Fighter" (美少女战士拉拉), questioning the male hegemony in the current Chinese LGBT movement and calls for "an anti-identitarian and all-

inclusive queer politics” (Bao 2018, 86), the debate attracted much attention within Chinese LGBT communities and stimulated a wide discussion online. Centering on the issue of the exclusion of queer women in Chinese gender politics, the debate openly challenged the "sexism and the conservative biological essentialist views on sexuality" and called for an "alliance with the existing feminist activism" (Liu et al 2015, 16), signalling the rise of queer feminism in China. It is important to note that the feminism that Chinese queer feminists associate themselves with is different from the women-can-hold-half-the-sky form of feminism during the Mao years before the 1980s, which attributes inequality between men and women to private ownership and the inequality between classes and, emphasizing women’s equal participation in production under public ownership (Wang and Zhang 2010, 41-42). Nor is it close to the type of feminism advocated by the state-backed All-China Women's Federation, which was for long the only national organization representing women’s causes in China until the 1990s, but has been struggling to address new forms of gender discrimination in China’s social and economic transition since the 1980s, and at the same time keep in line with the Party’s ideology emphasizing women’s traditional role in the families as a contribution to the nation’s construction of socialism (Zhou 2019, 18). In fact, the Federation's recent emphasis on women's reproductive role in current official discourse, for example, its degrading labelling and criticism of Chinese women who are over 27 and still unmarried as 'left-overs',<sup>2</sup> pushed Chinese lesbians further away. This by no means suggests that the emerging queer feminism is a temporary strategy or a provisional coalition between Chinese feminists and lesbian activists. Rather the participation of Chinese queer activists in feminist critique, especially online, is shaping the current feminist movement in China (Wang 2017, 178), and their open challenge of the heterosexual normativity in Chinese society is at the same time leading Chinese feminism to new directions.

Queer feminism is, however, not an easy topic in China. Although feminist ideals such as equal rights for women and men in employment and education are accepted and espoused in principle by the Chinese public, the feminist label, especially its rights-focused Chinese translation '女权主义者' (People who advocate women's rights), is often considered a dangerous term. This is not just because, as elsewhere in the world, the image of feminists is often stereotyped as 'man-haters' or 'masculine-looking women', which many Chinese women want to avoid. It is also due to its explicit association with the women's rights movement that the current Chinese government is eager to crack down on in the name of maintaining the nation's social stability. The detention of the Chinese ‘Feminist Five’ (seen as representatives of Chinese queer feminism by Hongwei Bao (2018, 87)) by Chinese police on the eve of International Women's Day in 2015<sup>3</sup> revealed the danger of participating in any form of gender activism in public. At the same time, the online space for discussing the rights of women and LGBT people in China has been also shrinking due to the government's increasing emphasis on the control and censorship of online content. The state's previous "no encouraging, no discouraging, and

no promoting" approach to LGBT communities (Zhao, Yang and Lavin 2017) has changed, especially after the release of "General Rules of Internet Audiovisual Program Content Censorship" by the China Netcasting Services Association in June 2017. In this document, homosexual relationships, along with sexual deviation and incest, are classified as abnormal sexual relationships and openly banned in all online and offline media content in China. Although this document is currently only an industry regulation rather than legislation, it is clear that the once relatively open online environment is being closely monitored by the state and is becoming more hostile to both feminist and lesbian communities. For example, in March 2018, Feminist Voices, one of China's most influential feminist social media accounts on Weibo, with over 180,000 followers, was forced to shut down. In April 2019, an online community with a hashtag #les# on Wechat and a lesbian group named "Les Sky" on Douban.com (another influential Chinese social media platform for sharing information on lifestyle and cultural experiences) were also shut down. Facing these structural constraints, how to develop and sustain movements and encourage social change are urgent questions for Chinese queer feminists. As I shall demonstrate in the following sections, the successful practice of Chinese online lesbian fan translation communities suggests an effective way to reach a wider public and develop feminist consciousness and solidarity in China.

## **2. Queer media activism and lesbian fansubbing**

The increase of lesbian images and storylines in global mainstream media has been nourishing online lesbian fan communities around the world, and the advent of digital technologies such as web 2.0 has furthered "the increasingly diffuse proliferation of online fan activities" (Ng and Russo 2017, 6). There is a substantial body of research focusing on fan communities' practices around popular lesbian media, especially those that have been aired in North America such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Isaksson 2009, 2010), *Xena, Warrior Princess* (Hanmer 2014; Jones 2002) and *The L Word* (Moore 2007). While examining queer fan reception of these texts, this work suggests the potential of fans' capacities to enhance the visibility of queer culture and negotiate with the industry through their fan productions (in the form of slash fiction, film criticism and recaps). For example, through examining the identity-based practices of a web-based US queer women's cinephile community, AfterEllen (<https://www.afterellen.com/>), and its transition from independence to corporate ownership in 2014, Maria San Filippo (2015) discusses how online queer film criticism has transformed in the age of media conglomeration and homonormativity. Fan productions, such as "community-minded recaps, fan/tasy speculations, and transformative rereadings", which often go together with "critical treatment of works emphasising content over style", as pointed out by San Filippo (2015, 121), are key venues for contemporary online queer cultural criticism. This burgeoning queer and/or feminist fan culture is an expression of the overall changing trends of cultural consumption, but also demonstrates third-wave feminism's increased use of popular culture to communicate feminist ideas and their new consciousness-raising approach "adapted to the changing cultural climate [that seeks] to address

larger and more public audience” (Sowards and Renegar 2004, 547). In the Chinese context, fansubbing (fan subtitling) is a particularly important part of queer cultural criticism and has specific significance, given its role of providing access and recontextualizing media texts for local fans' consumption. For example, without directly addressing the translation practices of Chinese queer fansubbing, Jing Jamie Zhao (2017) noted the indispensable role of an online queer subtitling group, The Garden of Eden Subtitling group, in translating and distributing *The L Word* online among Chinese audiences and facilitating Chinese fans' engagement with this media text through the online group's discussion forum.

At present, fansubbing has been widely discussed in general in the field of translation studies, but there is very limited research focusing on subtitling practice by specific social groups such as sexual minorities. As noted by Minako O'Hagan (2012), driven by the unavailability of, or the delay in, or the distorted information in official channels, fansubbers often form networks to produce and share translated media content. As a form of user-led cultural production, fansubbing empowers grassroots users, who collaborate to interpret cultural forms and reproduce media content (Hartley 2004). This is considered as an example of the democratisation of technology (Burgess 2006) as well as a potential way to disrupt and intervene in the subtitling industry (Pérez-González and Susam-Saraeva 2012; Dwyer 2018). The collaboration model widely adopted by fansub groups is considered to be a "co-creative practice" (Banks and Deuze 2009, 149) that contributes to collective identity formation (Li 2015) and nurtures trust and support within the fansub communities (Wongseree et al 2019). This strand of research echoes the discourse on online participatory culture, which specifically addresses the collaboration and production of cultural products by fans regardless of time and space. As Henry Jenkins (2006a) pointed out, increasing internet-based media consumption has led to a change in the public's viewing behaviour, the emerging fansubbing culture around the world is clearly an expression of such changes. Despite the dubious legal status of the practice (Lee 2009; Evans 2019), fansubbers' engagement with media texts is a manifestation of their emotional commitment to their favourite media texts (Jenkins 2006b, 5) as well as an example of the social and cultural transformation of these texts by local grassroots audiences (Fiske 1992; Dang 2019; Evans 2019; Guo and Evans forthcoming).

Existing research on fansubbing in China has touched upon the social and cultural significance of fan translation of foreign media content. Fansubbing in China in general is seen as a resistance to the state's dominance and control of cyberspace because it provides information usually censored by the government (Wang and Zhang 2017); consequently, it is examined as a potential site for civic engagement (Zhang and Mao 2013). As an important component of Chinese queer culture, fansubbing contributes to Chinese queer cinematic culture and community-building, and fansubbed foreign lesbian media content also help create a 'strange, or foreign queer world', that enables the imagination

of "being queer in a Chinese context and connect[ing] with others in that queer world" (Guo and Evans 2020). The political side of Chinese feminist fansubbing is also argued by scholars such as Guobin Yang, who examined how Chinese viewers on bilibili.com responded to a video "When You Are a Girl Questioning Your Sexuality" translated by the JoinFeministSubtitleGroup. Yang (2017, 64) argued that the feminist subtitle translation constitutes "a way of creating an interactive online space for openly discussing sexual orientations and identity anxieties." However, while endorsing the political significance of the translation action itself, Yang did not talk about the actual linguistic translation or the translator—that is, the translated video and the feminist subtitling group in this case—but considered that the information conveyed through translation is 'secondary' given the unpredictable reception of the translated text. This gap is precisely what this chapter would like to address, as questions of how feminist-related ideas are translated by Chinese lesbian subtitling groups and how the translation process creates the networked feminist public and shapes the queer feminist community are crucial for our understanding of the development of queer feminism in China.

### **3. Translating for exchange and solidarity, A case study of Jihua subtitling group**

The emergence of queer subtitling groups in China is not accidental. The Chinese government's ban of queer-themed content in Chinese mainstream media and the low number of domestic productions are no doubt a main reason, but the surging fan subtitling culture in China since 2000 is also an important factor to take into account. It is estimated that by 2017 there were more than 80 subtitling groups active online in China, some of which had millions of registered users (Davis and Yeh 2017, 2). The development of fansubbing culture in China nurtures Chinese queer fansubbing in many respects, from the technology and the collaboration model to volunteer recruitment. Although the term lesbian fansubbing is used as an umbrella term in this chapter that refers to Chinese lesbian fans' subtitling practices, it does not mean that all Chinese lesbian fansubbers mark themselves as lesbian translators in their translation activities. In fact, it is very common to see that some Chinese lesbian fan translators are affiliated with non-identity based online translation communities, even though they are mainly interested in projects involving queer-themed films and TV drama. For example, the Garden of Eden subtitling group, which translated *The L Word* into Chinese along with a wide range of other popular North American and British TV productions, does not label itself as queer. What makes queer fansubbers different is their exclusively queer focus in selecting media texts to translate and their deep engagement with these texts beyond the process of translation.

This queer focus is thus more prominently exhibited by those who set up communities with explicitly queer marking. A good example of this identity-based route is Jihua. Founded in 2010, Jihua (梨花, "fall for the flower," a metaphor for desiring women) was initially a lesbian social and media-sharing site, with its subtitling group founded in 2013 (Guo and Evans 2020). Apart from producing Chinese

subtitles for lesbian-themed media content in foreign languages, Jihua has also built up close connections with other online queer and feminist communities, usually through 1) Jihua's service to these communities by providing translation (e.g. translation for short lesbian films in Shanghai Pride Film Festival) and collaborating with other Chinese feminist groups and individuals (e.g. The Feminist Voice) in the broad promotion of feminist ideas; and 2) its members' multi-positioning in various queer and feminist groups. For example, some of its members are also actively involved in creating and disseminating digital queer feminist-minded contents on other digital platforms (e.g. Lespedia 围姬百科, a Chinese podcast on lesbian culture hosted by lesbians). To reach audiences beyond LGBT communities, Jihua also disseminates its translations on popular online streaming sites in China such as Bilibili.com and youkou.com apart from its own website and account in major Chinese social media platforms such as Wechat and Weibo.

To demonstrate how Jihua enables feminist discussions among the public through its translation, I turn to an example of how Chinese viewers engaged with Jihua's translation of a short clip-"Hope for our daughters" (also called Suffragettes Viral Clip). This clip is part of a campaign launched by Focus Features, the distributor of the film *Suffragettes* (2015), which promised to donate \$1 to a feminist NGO, Equality Now, for every post by the public on Instagram with the hashtag #HopeForOurDaughters. The clip features an exercise carried out among a group of girls between the ages of seven and 14, who are asked to match some gender inequality statistics (e.g. opportunity of education for girls, female child labour, death rate of teenage pregnancy) with their relevant year (1915 or 2015). The campaign was launched in early November 2015, and Jihua's translation of this clip was released on Bilibili.com a month later in early December. In this two-minute video, there are 15 Chinese comments by the viewers in the form of bullet subtitles (danmaku) at the top of the screen. Some of these comments echo viewers' shock and sadness after finding out about the continuing prevalence of injustice against women, or lament the inability of the Chinese public to support the campaign due to the censoring of Instagram in China. Other comments, however, directly address feminist topics beyond the content of the video, including a brief debate over whether feminism can be over-emphasized.

Starting at around 20 second in, one viewer comments that despite the fact that feminism is less emphasized in some countries, where the patriarchal tradition is still very strong, feminism is "over-emphasized" in others. Other viewers immediately challenged the first commentator by asking him/her to name those countries with "over-emphasized feminism", questioning the possibility of over-emphasizing a feminism that only advocates equality. One viewer even pointed out that those who attack feminism do so often simply because gender equality might jeopardize their self-interest, hinting at the questionable positioning of the first commentator. Apart from the discussions around the

topic of feminism in general, there are also more direct engagements from the viewers with Jihua's translation and the Chinese context.

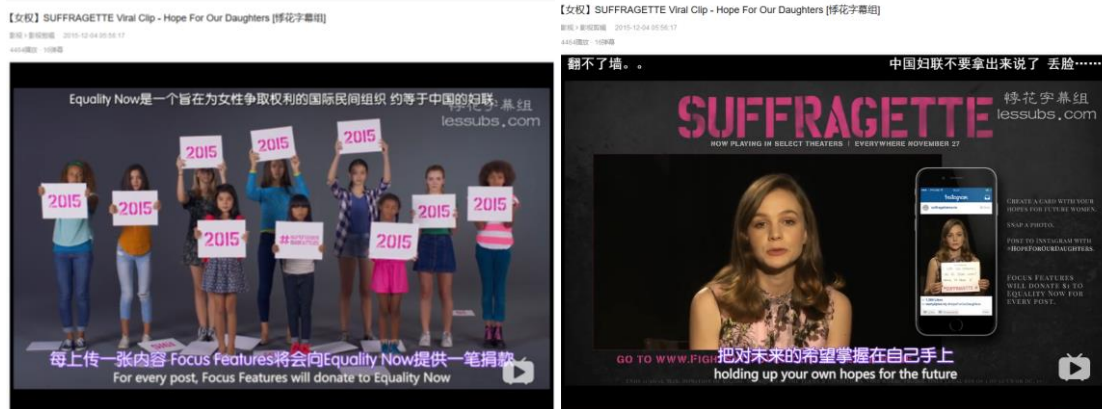


Figure 1 Jihua translator's note on Equality Now (left) and Chinese Viewers' discussion around the China's All-women Federation in the form of bullet subtitles (right)

As seen in figure 1 (left), at almost the end of the video, at the top of the screen appeared a translator's note explaining the organization of Equality Now mentioned by Carey Mulligan (who played Maud Watts in *Suffragette*). In the note, China's All-women Federation was used as an example to explain the nature of Equality Now. Two viewers quickly responded by showing their contempt towards the Federation and disagreement with this comparison (Figure 1 (right)). The debate, discussion and challenges enabled by the translation demonstrate that Jihua not only disseminates the gender inequality information delivered by the video but also stimulates its viewers to express their feelings, discuss and critically review the meaning of the video, and apply it to their local context. Since all the bullet comments are retained and will be replayed together with the video each time it is played, the translation, along with the discussions generated therein, can potentially have a long-lasting impact on its viewers.

Given that Instagram is blocked in China, it is unlikely that Jihua translated this clip to call for the Chinese public's participation in the HopeForOurDaughters campaign. However, this does not mean that this campaign is then irrelevant and there is no need for the Chinese public to be aware of it. As mentioned earlier, apart from providing a translation of the gender injustice information in the clip, Jihua translators tried to provide background information on the organization involved in the campaign. The comparison of Equality Now to the Chinese Women's Federation might be problematic, as mentioned before, but Jihua translators' efforts in contextualizing the campaign for a Chinese audience should be recognized. Through translation, they informed the Chinese public of ongoing feminist campaigns around the world and created a space for feminist-related discussion. All these actions potentially promoted the feminist film *Suffragette* to the Chinese audience<sup>4</sup> and



highlighted its relevance to the present world, including China. Given the tightened control on feminist contents after the well-known Feminist Five incident happened earlier that year, Jihua's decision to translate this clip and upload it to a general public-facing website such as Bilibili.com are no doubt strategic, as the translation uploaded there has more chance to be seen by a wide range of people. Subtitling a short foreign video clip is also less notable and thus unlikely to attract censorship. While watching the clip, one will frequently encounter the logo of Jihua production and reminders of ways to join Jihua. This further reveals the intention of Jihua to reach and interact with the public. To achieve this goal, instead of positioning themselves as the "counterpublic", in Michael Warner's (2002) term, Jihua translators adopt an inclusive position and call attention to the development of the feminist movement around the world and its relevance to the Chinese context. This indirect approach of using 'feminist others' to approach and articulate 'the feminist self' might not be as efficient and controlled in terms of the outcomes, but it has the advantage of minimizing intervention of censorship and winning an audience who might not be necessarily interested in feminist discussions. The comments and interactions that Jihua's translation generated among Chinese audiences, especially their reflections on the Chinese context, also demonstrate how translation enables 'the self's' recognition and response to 'the others', and reinvention at the same time. In the following section, through examining Jihua's translation of a documentary *Political Animals* (2016), I will explore how the audience is encouraged to look at feminist issues from an international scope and how translation helps the formulation of "the self" and contributes to the local queer feminist movement.

#### **4. Translating *Political Animals* (2016) into Chinese**

Directed by Jonah Markowitz and Tracy Wares, the documentary *Political Animals* (2016) uncovers a history of how four California out lesbian politicians (Jackie Goldberg, Christine Kehoe, Sheila Kuehl, and Carole Migden) fought for gay people's civil rights (e.g. the first domestic partnership legal registry and the first anti-bullying bill protecting gay students) in their local communities since the 90s, which eventually set the stage for the advance of legislation throughout the entire country. While basically following the conventional talking head format, this documentary includes footage from the Assembly debates in which these lesbian legislators' proposals encountered open hostility and resistance from the opposition, who were often their colleagues. The negative references to homosexual people are an obviously difficult issue for translators. However, a more challenging issue is to make this documentary appealing not just to Chinese LGBT people, but to the general public. Despite it winning over ten awards in various international LGBT film festivals, this documentary was almost unknown in China, and there was no publicity for or introduction to this documentary in Chinese in cyberspace before Jihua's translation. In fact, as of the time of writing, almost all identifiable traces of this documentary in Chinese in cyberspace are attributable to Jihua's translation of this documentary.<sup>5</sup> The sparse information in Chinese on this documentary is not unexpected, given the fact that the documentary didn't target the Chinese market in the first place, and documentary is

also not the most popular genre in China. One may then wonder why Jihua chose to translate it? A simple answer can be found in Jihua's Sina blog,<sup>6</sup> that it was mainly due to a recommendation by Madyke, a Jihua member in the United States. However, a more decisive factor might be the unique perspective that the documentary offers on the female forerunners of political equality for gay people in the course of LGBT history. This perspective seems to be very appealing to Jihua itself, given the fact that 24 of its members-- almost one-quarter of the group at that time--volunteered in the translation of this 87-minute documentary.<sup>7</sup>

This joint translation project thus constitutes an interesting example of Chinese queer fansubbers' engagement with foreign queer media texts. This engagement can be found in the translators' endorsement of the political equality of LGBT people. For example, the documentary begins with President Obama's well-known statement, "Love is love", in his 2015 speech in the White House Rose Garden to celebrate the US Supreme Court's pro-marriage equality decision.<sup>8</sup> The widely circulated Chinese version of this statement is a rather literal translation, "爱就是爱" (Love is love).<sup>9</sup> Rather than adopting this established translation, Jihua translators produced a slightly different version, "爱皆平等" (love [is] all equal), in which the second "love" in the English text was translated into "平等" (equal) and the verb 'is' was replaced by an adverb "皆" (all), which functions as the predicate of the sentence (*is all equal*), stressing the variety of "love" and the inclusiveness of equality. These changes seem to be minor and might be easily dismissed as the translators' idiosyncratic style. After all, the translation does not deviate much from the intention of the source text and explicates the legislation guaranteeing equality stressed by Obama in his speech; that is, "all people should be treated equally, regardless of who they are or who they love" (2015). Nevertheless, this kind of explicit translation, as defined by Vinay and Darbelnet as "the process of introducing information into the target language which is present only implicitly in the source language, but which can be derived from the context or the situation" (1995, 8), does reveal the translators' intention of foregrounding the idea of equality by providing their viewers with "more communicative clues" (Pym 2005, 33). For those who haven't seen the complete version of Obama's speech, it is hard to grasp its central argument with the few seconds included in the documentary. Foreseeing that this could be a problem for Chinese viewers who might not be that familiar with the history and context of the American gay rights movement, Jihua translators produced a version highlighting the relevance of Obama's speech to the topic of this documentary and drawing viewers' attention to the existence of different sexual orientations and relationships. Similar practices can also be found in Jihua's translation of Assemblywoman Sheila Kuehl's speech in the floor debate in 1997 over AB101, a bill to resist discrimination in schools based on "sexual orientation" and broaden sexual minority groups' rights. To refute the opposition's accusation of the hidden agenda of the bill, Kuehl stressed at the end of her speech that "It (the bill)'s just about love. That's all it's about". These two sentences were translated by Jihua as "这仅仅和爱有

关，爱就是爱，毫无差别。” (This is just about love; love is love, there is no difference). While keeping the structure of the first sentence, Jihua's translation splits the second sentence into two clauses and shifts its focus from the bill to the topic of 'love' by fronting and explicating the reference of 'that' as the subject of the first clause and elaborating on the undifferentiated love in the second clause. This kind of "pronounced explicitation", in Anthony Pym's words (2005, 34), constitutes a good example of Jihua's recontextualisation of the source text for a Chinese audience. Its significance is not limited to the promotion of specific queer interests but lies in its reach to a wider public and potential of producing a direct impact on Chinese society, which is by no means an easy task given that the documentary is about a foreign culture and history.

As P, the Jihua coordinator of the translation of *Political Animals*, revealed, the translation took around a month and a half to complete, a much longer period than most subtitling groups would invest in translating a foreign film under 2 hours.<sup>10</sup> The complex history of the American LGBT rights movement and US legislative procedures that the documentary covers no doubt slowed down the translation process. However, what seemed to trouble Jihua translators most is not just the accuracy of the translation, but how to make this foreign history accessible and relevant to the Chinese public and maximize its social impact.<sup>11</sup> "We have a stratified audience," P stressed, "and it is important to make our translation as inclusive as possible".<sup>12</sup> By "stratified", P refers to the diverse backgrounds and varied self-identifications of Jihua audiences, including those who are not gays or lesbians and those who know very little about LGBT culture but happen to be watching a film translated by Jihua. For example, when one speaker used two terms, 'butch' and 'femme' in her statement, a translator's note appeared at the top of the screen explaining that "butch/femme 意指在女女关系中扮演男性/女性的那一方" (butch/femme refers to the party who plays the role of male/female in a lesbian relationship). This plain explanation clearly targets the general public rather than the Chinese LGBT people, as for the latter, the expression "T/P"<sup>13</sup> would be more familiar and appropriate. This inclination of enhancing the accessibility of this documentary can be also found in Jihua's translation of signs and words in visual images such as pictures and newspapers in the documentary. Examples include the offensive "Faggots stay out" sign hung behind the bar of Barney's Beanery restaurant in California and the headlines of US newspaper reports on the public's discussion around homosexual discrimination in school such as "Harassment shouldn't be part of School Life" and "Santa Monica prepared to introduce gay student rights legislation". As a standard practice, on-screen text is usually included in the translated subtitles, whereas text in visual images is considered as part of the image and not necessarily translated. This is because the translation of this additional information may obstruct the image or overwhelm audiences who are also digesting the subtitles for speech at the same time. This is less of a concern for Chinese audiences who have some knowledge of the English language, because they can temporarily prioritize reading the visual message and still more or less get

the gist of what the speaker said by listening. However, this non-translation of text in images disadvantages those who do not have sufficient English language skills to either read the English texts in the image or comprehend the audio message in English, thus widening the gap between elite audiences and ordinary audiences. For a documentary such as *Political Animals*, these text-inclusive images play an important role, providing historical context as well as evidence for the testimony of the speakers. And the additional emphasis added by the director to many of these texts through highlighting and underlining also reveals that these texts, as a visual element, constitute part of the documentary's narration and contribute to the nuances and connotations of the spoken text.

For instance, there are a few scenes in the documentary that review the American public's opposition to the Gay Rights Movement, which provides background information for the opposition within the California Assembly to the proposal of a California domestic partnership bill in 1999.<sup>14</sup> In these scenes, the statement by Sheila Kuehl, one of the four lesbian Assemblywomen featured in this documentary, became the background audio and the photographs of the street protesters, including those from various religious organisations, became the focus of the screen. In these photographs, the anti-gay slogans and exclamations on placards and boards form a visual focus demanding attention from the viewers.



Figure 2 Jihua's translation of the two placards appeared in *Political Animals* (2016)

Figure 2 shows a close-up shot of a photo with two placards reading "Smile if you have AIDS" and "Smash Gay Rights Now". Those who are familiar with the US AIDS crisis in the 80s will recognize that this photograph portrays the protest of Jewish and Christian religious groups during a Gay Pride Parade in New York City in June 1985. It elucidates the historical background of American religious groups' opposition to the bill and the enormous social pressure that these pioneer lesbian legislators had to battle in their legalisation of gay rights in California. However, for Chinese audiences who are not familiar with this background and are unable to read the English texts on the placards, this photo does not say very much other than that depicting a protest scene. By using techniques such as ASS

Tags and ASS Draw 3, Jihua translators placed Chinese translations in similar fonts right below the English source texts in the blank space of the two placards in the photograph, including the information noting the name of the protesting organisation (Jewish Moral Committee) on the placard "Smash Gay Rights Now" (Jihua translation: 立刻打倒同性权益). These translations not only effectively clarify what Kuehl referred to as "the traditional religious community" (传统宗教团体 in Jihua's translation), but enhance the photograph's visual impact on Chinese audiences by explicating the connection between the written subtitle and visual elements. The translation of the placard "Smile if you have AIDS", 有艾滋请微笑, further exposed the nuanced historical connections between the battle for a domestic partnership bill in the 90s and the US AIDS crisis in the 80s. Admittedly, this kind of practice of blending translation in the visuals is not unusual in fansubbing and has been seen as an experimentation to "create immersive spectatorial experience" and "foster new kinds of interplay between the linguistic and visual modes" (Pérez-González 2014, 259). It "demonstrates well the performativity of amateur subtitles", which in turn enhance "the affinity between amateur prosumers and their audience" (Pérez-González 2014, 261). This "immersive spectatorial experience" that Jihua translators intend to create and make accessible to the wider public, however, enables a space to perform lesbian identities which is all the more meaningful in the current Chinese context, given the censorship of both LGBT content and social movement-related information in Chinese mainstream media.

As mentioned earlier, the documentary inevitably involves some pejorative references to gays and lesbians. Instead of simply replacing all of them with equivalent derogatory expressions in Chinese, Jihua translators translate them as neutrally as possible when the context allows. For instance, while the frequently mentioned phrase "lesbian and gay" in this documentary was translated as 女同性恋、男同性恋 (female homosexual and male homosexual), both are formal umbrella terms found in Chinese official discourse and academic contexts. In one sentence from a witness statement in the debate over the AB1001 Bill, "I am not a dyke, I am not a heathen", the word "dyke" was rendered as "拉拉", a non-derogatory Chinese slang word phonetically adapted from the English word lesbian. Strictly speaking, this rendering is problematic because by erasing the pejorative connotation of the source text, it reads as if the witness denied that she was a lesbian, which contradicted with what she claimed at the beginning of her testimony "I am a lesbian high school student" (translated by Jihua as "我是一个女同性恋高中生。"). A similar strategy was also applied to Jihua's translation of the word "faggot" in the "Faggots stay out" sign and the sentence "... has faggot scratched into his chest...", which were translated respectively into the more neutral term "同性恋" (homosexual) and "娘娘腔" (literal meaning: with a woman's voice), a slang word referring to effeminate men, sometimes with the implication of being homosexual. This kind of neutralizing or weakening negative references to gays and lesbians suggests Jihua translators' intention to reduce the potential discriminative

appellations of the LGBT people in media. This manipulative approach might be questionable by some professional translation standards but is understandable, given Jihua's identity-based positioning as well as the fact that the translated documentary addresses the general Chinese public, including the Chinese LGBT communities, who might be offended by these derogatory terms.

Jihua's goal to enlarge social impact and stimulate changes is also demonstrated in its translation of legal concepts and terms related to LGBT rights such as "domestic partnership registry" (Jihua's translation, 同居伴侣登记), "estate planning" (遗产规划), "right to inherit without will" (无遗嘱继承权) and "taken (*sic*) unemployment if your partner moves because of job" (若伴侣因为工作搬迁则享有失业救济金的权利). Translating these concepts and terms can be challenging because many of these concepts and terms are unknown by the Chinese public and there are no established equivalent concepts or terms in China's legal system. Practically it is also difficult to provide detailed explanation through subtitles, given time and space limitations. In this case, Jihua's translation is particularly timely and meaningful in that it provides Chinese audiences with information on US's legislative protection of LGBT rights, which is still an unaddressed area in Chinese legal system. Admittedly, Jihua's translation of some terms and concepts could be more concise and formal as legal terms usually are, especially given the confined space of subtitling and the legal context involved. However, as stressed by P from Jihua, their priority consideration is whether their audience can understand the meaning of the concepts rather than finding or creating equivalent terms in Chinese. This emphasis on comprehensibility reveals Jihua's focus on engaging with Chinese general public in their translation practice. Translating these concepts into Chinese would not lead to changes overnight and not all of the concepts are applicable to the Chinese context, but the translation serves an important role of educating the public about legal equality for LGBT people, which paves the way for the creation of Chinese LGBT rights-related legislation.

Although not directly addressing issues specific to the Chinese context, Jihua provide space and opportunities for the presentation of international LGBT rights movements in a mode accessible to Chinese audiences. The necessity and significance of such presentation in the digital age is self-explanatory, and this is where McKenzie Wark (2017) takes issue with Butler's theory of performativity (1993). Wark emphasizes that in a modern polity the primary space is the media and the "technical, mediated double of the bodies come and gather before a body is formed" (Wark 2017, 197). Given the ban of queer-related content in Chinese mainstream media and the government's censorship and monitoring of the cyberspace, it is difficult to realize the performativity of gender through "taking media space" and "occupying media time", as Wark (2017, 197) suggests. While domestic queer media sources are rare in Chinese cyberspace, Jihua's translation of foreign LGBT-related media enriches the digital representation of international LGBT history and culture and fosters

an informed public who are likely to be more inclusive and friendly to LGBT people. The circulation of these translated LGBT media in Chinese online streaming sites and social media platforms also draw the Chinese public's attention to the existence and activities of Chinese LGBT communities such as Jihua. Therefore, Jihua's translation practice constitutes an important manifestation of the performativity of Chinese lesbian fansubbers on cyberspace. This performativity has an important significance for Chinese online LGBT communities, including Jihua itself. As Judith Butler argues, "recognizing a gender depends fundamentally on whether there is a mode of presentation for that gender, a condition for its appearance; we can call this its media or its mode of presentation" (2015, 38-39). Given that Jihua itself is an identity-based online queer community, such translation projects provide individuals with opportunities for working and communicating with others with similar gender orientations and interests. From the close reading of the source text, proofreading others' work, and discussion of potentially controversial translations, group productions of a translation of such a documentary open up discussions of issues that are unlikely to happen in other places, online or offline, and may further contribute to individuals' 'self-making' process, in Lisa Rofel's term (2007).

In many ways, Jihua's translation practice is not much different from other fansubbing groups. What makes it distinctive is its explicit advocacy for lesbian rights and gender equality. As proclaimed in its mission statement, "不仅输出字幕，我们还输出思想。" (We export not only subtitles but also ideas), Jihua does not see its subtitling work merely as a linguistic transfer but an approach to disseminate knowledge and facilitate social changes. And it is precisely this active political positioning and clearly defined community identity that appeal to those who would volunteer their time and effort to join in and contribute to the translation. The fact that Jihua is active and thriving despite the forced closure of many subtitling websites in China is evidence enough of its continued significance and effective strategies. This significance is not simply an example of the marked influence of user-generated content, but the expression of new ways to organize and articulate the interest of marginalized social groups, including queer feminists, in the Chinese context. And the sustained self-interest Jihua exhibited in involving itself with the issue of gender equality in China also demonstrates the great potential of queer feminism in China.

Coda, While this chapter was drafted, Jihua launched an open call for participation in a public opinion poll on the revised *Marriage and Family Law of China's Civil Code*. In this call, many recommendations proposed by Jihua are similar to the strategies adopted by the four California lesbian legislature makers portrayed in the documentary *Political Animals*. For example, phrasing such as "夫妻关系" (the husband and wife relationship) in the Code is suggested to change into "two parties' relationship" (双方关系), "男女双方" (male and female two parties) into "双方" (two parties)

to extend the protection and rights to LGBT people.<sup>15</sup> This by no means suggests that Jihua simply copied the western queer model, but demonstrates the successful transfer of experience and knowledge through translation and the potential of local grassroots queer groups to create and facilitate social changes. It exemplifies how the ascent of digital media has inflected and energized transnational feminist practices and ideas and how queer fansubbing contributes to the formation of local feminist knowledge and culture.

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\* This chapter is forthcoming in the book *Translating Feminism-Interdisciplinary Approaches to Text, Place and Agency* (2021) edited by Maude Anne Bracke, Julia C. Bullock, Penelope Morris and Kristina Schulz. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

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<sup>1</sup> In this chapter, I use the term “queer feminism” to refer to the opposition to patriarchy and any forms of binary and hierarchical categories of gender, sex and sexuality, including but also beyond the LGBT and other gender/sexuality minorities.

<sup>2</sup> More information regarding the Federation's categorization of "leftover" women can be found in "China's 'Leftover' Women," by LetaHong Fincher, Ms Blog Magazine, November 22, 2011, accessed 30th August 2019, <http://msmagazine.com/blog/2011/11/22/chinas-leftover-women/>.

<sup>3</sup> On the eve of the International Women's Day in 2015, Chinese police detained five Chinese feminists (two of whom are lesbians and one of whom is bi-sexual) who planned to distribute anti-sexual harassment materials in public.

<sup>4</sup> This documentary's Chinese subtitles first appeared online in early Jan 2016. There are currently a few Chinese versions, and all of them were translated by fansubbing groups (i.e. Bingbing zimuzu 冰冰字幕组) or individual fansubbers (i.e. Xianggang Xiaoya 香港小鸭).

<sup>5</sup> For example, there is a brief introduction to the documentary on Youku.com and Douban.com, but these introductions are in fact a direct copy of the introduction posted by Jihua on its Sina blog. Youku.com is one of the main online streaming websites, and Douban.com is an influential social media site in China for sharing information on music, film and literature works.

<sup>6</sup> “【悸花译制】 Political Animals 政坛骁将”, accessed December 2<sup>nd</sup> 2019, <https://www.weibo.com/1238123087/H6MNIxaY5?type=repost>.

<sup>7</sup> Among these 24, seven worked on the transcription/translation; eight did the proofreading, and six contributed to timecoding.

<sup>8</sup> “Remarks by the President on the Supreme Court Decision on Marriage Equality” Accessed November 23rd, 2019, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/06/26/remarks-president-supreme-court-decision-marriage-equality>>

<sup>9</sup> Chinese translation of this statement by Obama can be found in several mainstream media such as ifeng.com (凤凰网, [http://news.ifeng.com/a/20150628/44057495\\_0.shtml](http://news.ifeng.com/a/20150628/44057495_0.shtml)) and *China Daily* ([http://cn.chinadaily.com.cn/2015-06/27/content\\_21121114.htm](http://cn.chinadaily.com.cn/2015-06/27/content_21121114.htm)), both accessed on November 11 2019.

<sup>10</sup> Interview of P, Jihua coordinator of the translation of *Political Animals* (2016), November 15th, 2019. All quotations of P's statement in English are my translation unless stated otherwise.

<sup>11</sup> Interview of P, Jihua coordinator of the translation of *Political Animals* (2016),

<sup>12</sup> Interview of P, Jihua coordinator of the translation of *Political Animals* (2016),

<sup>13</sup> ‘T’ is phonetically adopted from ‘tomboy’, and ‘P’ is from ‘prettygirl’. There is also H, referring to ‘half’ (either T or P). These terms are used to refer to the different roles and relationship rather than identities among lesbians and bisexual women in China. More information regarding these terms can be found in *Queer Women in Urban China: An Ethnography* (2013) by Elisabeth L. Engebretsen. London: Routledge.

<sup>14</sup> The bill recognized the civil rights of all same-sex couples over the age of 18 same as married couples. It initially mainly covered hospital-visitation rights and the right to be claimed as a next of kin of the estate of a deceased partner, but later expanded to include all of the rights and responsibilities common to marriage.

<sup>15</sup> “如果你不站出来，凭什么让别人为你的权利呐喊：民法典婚姻家庭编（草案三次审议稿）征求意见稿需要你！” (If you don't stand up, why you think others should support you for your rights?: Your feedback is needed on the draft of the revised *Marriage and Family Law of China's Civil Code*), accessed December 2nd, 2019, <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/3I2IWTCL6BTsk8HSMtyOw>.