




Source text readers as censors in the digital age: a paratextual examination of the English translation of *Wuhan Diary*

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ABSTRACT

The coming-of-age of digital media has transformed the translation landscape, (con)fusing to a certain extent the Source and the Target. Not only has there been a shift in the way the agents of a translation interact with the text, but source text readers have also been brought into the picture as potentially important players in the (co)production of the target text. Using the controversial *Wuhan Diary* about the Covid-19 crisis in China as a case study, this paper examines the role of source text readers as censors of the paratexts of the *Diary's* English translation. The active participation of source text readers created much tension with the source text author, and also gave rise to conflicts with other agents such as the translator and publisher. The resolution of what were often ideological conflicts was reflected in the fluidity of the paratexts of the target text, a fluidity facilitated and enabled by digital media.

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1. Introduction

The coming-of-age of digital media has transformed the translation landscape. As Mona Baker (2014, p. 23) claims, ‘the impact of new media cultures’ on translation is ‘among the most promising new lines of research’. Karin Littau (2011) even suggests a ‘medial turn’ in translation studies, emphasising the importance of ‘understanding the changing role of human communication’ in the digital age. Indeed, the ubiquity of the internet has redefined the role of the translator and how they translate. An increasing number of translation jobs are now carried out by non-professional translators. Online collaboration on various social media platforms, for example, enables consumers of popular cultural products to participate in translation in diverse forms such as fansubbing, scanlation and fandubbing (Vazquez-Calvo et al., 2019). Self-evidently, digital media defy temporal or sequential limitations and geographical borders. As a result, a group of translators can simultaneously ‘work on the same document or content from diverse locations’ (Gambier, 2016, p. 894). This speaks to the non-linearity of translation activities in the digital age. In fact, not only can translators work on the translation

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product in a non-linear manner, but the ST author and translator might also be able to work together to generate the ST and TT almost simultaneously.

Apart from volunteer translation, there are other means by which consumers can actively engage with popular cultural products in today's digital mediasphere, such as user commentary (Shim et al., 2020). User commentaries as a form of audience reception are not new to digital media; what is revolutionary in translation practice in the digital space is how texts interact with their audiences. Traditionally, the production of the TT excludes interaction with the reader, rendering them mere passive recipients. In the digital age, however, audience reception can start before the translation is finalised and thus exerts its influence on the final translation product. In other words, the translation process can be laid bare to its audience in the digital space, allowing readers to comment on the translation-in-progress and thus participate in the co-production of meaning.

Furthermore, as we are now living in a 'global village sustained by digital computing and communication technologies' (Kressel & Lento, 2007, p. 332), the line between the previously clearly defined source context and target context is blurred, and the concept of target readers or target audience is similarly called into question. Texts intended to be consumed in the target context could also be disseminated concurrently in the virtual space of the source context. Reception studies of TTs might therefore have to take into account reader responses from both the source culture and the target culture. This places the translation, translator and ST author in a very vulnerable position, as they are left open to scrutiny, criticism and challenge from readers not only within the intended target context, but also, simultaneously, within the source culture.

By examining the case of Fang Fang's controversial *Wuhan Diary* describing the Covid-19 outbreak in China, this article attempts to illustrate the changing landscape of translation, particularly the participation of ST readers, as enabled by digital media. I will reveal the role of ST readers¹ as censors in online discussions around the English translation of *Wuhan Diary*. Due to its focus on the impact of digital media on translation, this article sources its data from various media outlets and social media platforms in China and the Anglophone world.²

2. *Wuhan Diary* and its initial reception in China

The source text of *Wuhan Diary* is popularly known in China as *The Diary of Fang Fang*. Wuhan went into lockdown on 23 January 2020 due to the outbreak of the novel coronavirus, later dubbed Covid-19 by the World Health Organisation. *Wuhan Diary* is a record of daily life in this central Chinese city from the perspective of the well-established Chinese writer Wang Fang, whose pseudonym is Fang Fang. The *Diary*, published online daily (with a few exceptions), was read and shared on the mega social media platform WeChat by millions of Chinese readers from around the world.

In her diary, Fang Fang provided even-handed depictions of Wuhan in lockdown. In addition to her vivid description of the helplessness and suffering of ordinary citizens and the inadequate response of local officials, Fang Fang also recorded the gradual improvement of the Chinese medical system in dealing with the pandemic and the ongoing support for Wuhan provided by the rest of China. Though the *Diary* was not free from misinformation, for many it remained a welcoming, on-the-ground source of

information about life in quarantine. This was particularly true in the early days of lockdown, when the local official news outlets proved to be unreliable, releasing only highly-censored reports in praise of the government's response to the outbreak. Fang Fang related highly personalised stories of local people's lives and paid special attention to the voices of those without access to political privileges or personal wealth. The *Diary* also catered to the interest and desire of readers by consistently advocating for public accountability, a stance which contributed to her growing reputation as a fighter for the people.

Fang Fang's first diary entry appeared on 25 January, the day of the 2020 Chinese New Year. Her diary was initially circulated online on her Weibo account (a microblogging platform, the Chinese equivalent of Twitter) without any political interference and its popularity was immediate: readings soared to hundreds of thousands within hours of release of each update. Censorship stepped in several days later when a post from her Weibo account was blocked, as recorded in Fang Fang's diary on 29 January (Fang, 2020a). She therefore had to explore alternative platforms such as WeChat and post on the accounts of third parties who volunteered their assistance. Filtering and deletion of her posts continued from time to time and Fang Fang even addressed the cyber censors directly in her diary by including sections beginning with 'Dear censors' (Fang, 2020a). Notwithstanding, the censorship seemed neither stringent nor consistent, as all entries of her diary kept being read, shared and reposted on various online platforms in China.

Fang Fang's diary acquired over 400 million followers; in the meantime, however, unfavourable reader comments were also accumulating, especially after the Chinese central government dismissed key local officials to appease popular critique and improve response to the pandemic. On 24 February 2020, a month into lockdown, Fang Fang was interviewed by China News Service, the second largest news agency in China. She dismissed allegations that her diary had an anti-government bent by insisting on her 'absolute consistency' with the government's position³ (Fang & Xia, 2020).

The last entry of Fang Fang's diary was released on 24 March, when the Wuhan authorities announced that the lockdown would be lifted on 8 April. At the time, there was no news of print publication of her diary. On 30 March, Fang Fang posted on her Weibo account in response to an unauthorised announcement of the forthcoming release of her diary: 'Please note that I have so far not published any book related to the outbreak, nor have I published my diary' (Fang, 2020c).

On 8 April when Wuhan reopened, however, some angry Chinese readers started to attack Fang Fang on multiple online platforms, as they discovered that on the very day of Wuhan's reopening, pre-sale of the English and German versions of her diary was officially announced on Amazon and respective publishers' websites (Jinri, 2020). News of the *Diary's* forthcoming publication in English and German could not have come at a more politically inconvenient time. It amplified the already polarising opinions around Fang Fang's diary in China. One popular reasoning of Fang Fang's critics was that the *Diary* would be exploited to give documentary support to the West's emerging narrative, which blamed China for either generating the virus or being negligent in its early handling of it – a view particularly prevalent in the United States.

3. Contextualising the translation of the *Diary*: a target text phenomenon

After the end of February 2020, the coronavirus spread to many other countries. On 19 March, the number of deaths from the virus outbreak in Italy surpassed that in China (Lyman & Hjelmgaard, 2020). On 26 March, the number of confirmed cases of the virus in the United States soared past that of either China or Italy (McNeil Jr, 2020), making it the new epicentre of the pandemic. In such a context, allegations of China's lack of transparency and its early cover-up of the outbreak in Wuhan also became increasingly popular among politicians across the world. From 22 January to the end of March, the then US President Donald Trump praised China 37 times for its 'transparency' and effective management of the pandemic (Hansler et al., 2020). However, with confirmed cases later spiking in the US, the President and his administration began constructing their anti-China narrative to shift the blame for their insufficient response onto China. From March onwards, China became the target of criticism and blame whenever the subject of Covid-19 was brought up in US public life, resulting in a typically polarised narrative of China versus the rest of the world.

Media reports containing content favourable to China were also singled out for criticism. The Voice of America, a US government funded news agency, was accused of using American taxpayers' money to pay for China's 'very own propaganda' by posting on its Twitter account a video of Wuhan's reopening and comparing China's coronavirus death toll to that of America (Herman, 2020). In like manner, CNN and NBC News were labelled as 'Chinese puppets' and 'Enemies of the People' by President Trump on Twitter for saying 'GREAT things about China' (Trump, 2020). In such a political climate, Fang Fang's diary, which had fuelled fierce debate among its domestic readers in China due to its exposé of the country's cover-up and corruption, swiftly attracted attention and gained popularity in the West. The BBC (2020) heralded the *Diary* as 'a reliable source of information' at a time 'when news was being heavily filtered and independent news outlets were scarce'. When HarperCollins Publishers announced pre-sale of the English translation of the *Diary* on 8 April, it highlighted the aspects of the diary commensurate with the West's anti-China narrative.

In the first version of the blurb for the English translation entitled *Wuhan Diary: Dispatches from the Original Epicenter*, China was emphatically referred to as 'an authoritarian nation' in which 'authorities use technology to closely monitor citizens and tightly control the media' (Kunlunge, 2020). The author Fang Fang was depicted as a 'dissident' who 'courageously speaks out against social injustice, corruption, abuse and the systemic political problems which impeded the response to the epidemic', and it was noted that her blog had been temporarily shut down and many of her posts deleted by the authorities (Dymocks, 2020). Although Fang Fang herself reasserted in an interview, as mentioned earlier, her cooperative attitude towards the government's positioning and in fact recorded many of the positive aspects of China's handling of the coronavirus crisis (Fang & Xia, 2020), the blurb marketed her diary as a predominantly anti-government exercise. Against a backdrop whereby people in Wuhan were said to be 'quarantined without reliable information', Fang Fang's diary opened a window into the 'fears, frustration, anger and hope of millions of ordinary Chinese' (Dymocks, 2020).

The publisher's blurb selectively recapitulated some key features of Fang Fang's diary, with those conforming to the West's anti-China narrative foregrounded and features

countering that narrative largely ignored. Such paratexts⁴ as the publisher's prospectus are important documents to prepare the ground for retail outlets and future translations. As thresholds of interpretation (Genette, 1997), the paratextual apparatus of a book 'primes, explains, contextualises, justifies and through beautification, tempts' (Pellatt, 2013, p. 3). The publisher, by presenting Fang Fang as an 'eyewitness' to the coronavirus crisis in Wuhan and describing her diary as 'documenting' the quarantine life in the Chinese city, unmistakably directed readers' attention to the informative function of the translated text.

However, in the source context of Fang Fang's diary, these posts were consumed by many Chinese readers not merely or even primarily, as informative texts, but as expressive texts which readers devoured for emotional resonance and for the power of the written words. Information wise, most of the tragic events recorded in the *Diary* could also have been accessed from the proliferation of We Media during the coronavirus crisis, which could sometimes be as critical as Fang Fang about the government's management of the pandemic. However, as a multiple award-winning full-time writer, Fang Fang's reputation, or in Bourdieusian terms, her accumulated cultural and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986) earned her diary more readability, depth, and therefore empathic charisma.

The reception of the *Diary* in its source context, nevertheless, does not necessarily exert any influence on how it is going to be interpreted, translated, marketed, consumed and received in the target culture. It is the target context that will condition, if not determine, the way a translation is devised to cater to the tastes, expectations and needs of its target readers. Michael Cronin (2013, p. 89) views the ST as an *objectile*, which 'answers to the particular mixture of constraint and liberty that informs the task of the translator', and maybe also the task of the publisher. The language used by the publisher to promote the English translation of Fang Fang's diary would seem reasonable to its intended target audience. It conformed to and reinforced the anti-China sentiments popular in the US (and the West in general); it resonated with the popular ideological perception of the Chinese government, and it chimed with some target readers' stereotypical impression about the life of ordinary citizens in an authoritarian country. The publisher's paratextual manipulation would work in finding a niche for the English translation of the *Diary* in the Anglophone market, but the predominantly negative image of China it projected was to land the ST author in trouble in the source context.⁵

4. Reader censorship of the ST of the *Diary*

As a marketing strategy, the publisher's paratextual manipulation was not uncommon. What was unusual in the case of *Wuhan Diary* was the participation of ST readers in attempting to influence the translation, a move induced by the online circulation of the publisher's blurb. The ST elements were introduced back into the translation landscape thanks to the unprecedented way people read and interacted in the digital environment.

As soon as news of the English translation of Fang Fang's diary was released on Amazon on 8 April, the paratexts used to market the book were promptly circulated in the digital space in China (the Chinese version auto-generated by Google Translate was used on many platforms). Soon hundreds of thousands of Chinese netizens

bombarded the *Diary's* author with all sorts of criticisms, calling her 'a traitor for supporting the enemy's narrative' (Yuan, 2020). Among Fang Fang's critics was a well-known journalist named Hu Xijin, who is the editor-in-chief of *Global Times*, an offshoot of China's official newspaper *People's Daily*. Hu (2020a) previously called for tolerance of different voices such as those recorded in Fang Fang's diary. However, the translation of the *Diary* into English prompted a backflip in his attitude. On 8 April he commented that the publication of Fang Fang's diary overseas was 'not really in good taste', particularly at a time when the US elites were trying to blame China for the US outbreak of the pandemic (Hu, 2020b). Hu added that the *Diary* would be exploited by the political forces abroad, and 'the Chinese people, including those who have supported Fang Fang, will pay for her fame in the West'. Hu's comments soon drew more than 190,000 likes⁶ (Ehret, 2020). Hu's change of attitude due to the overseas publication of the *Diary* was emblematic of shifts among a number of previous supporters of Fang Fang (Zhi, 2020).

In reality, there was never a shortage of critical readers of the *Diary*. The author even chose to respond to some of these criticisms in several diary entries, where the critics were often dismissed as far-left by launching their attacks in a Cultural-Revolution style (Fang, 2020a). HarperCollins' announcement of the publication of the English translation of the *Diary* caused a peak in the 'torrent of criticism' of Fang Fang (Xia, 2020), among which there were even death threats (Rudolph, 2020).

In addition to accusing Fang Fang's diary of 'handing over a knife' to anti-China forces in the West (Davidson, 2020) and 'giving Western countries ammunition to target China' (Xia, 2020), the escalating online contestation over the *Diary* also focused on several other aspects, such as the author's identity and credibility, and her diary's legitimacy and objectivity. The seeming purpose of such criticisms was to discredit the author and thereby limit the circulation of the *Diary* or minimise its influence on the reading public. But essentially, by attempting to stipulate what, whether and how a writer can write, and by influencing the readers' decision on what and how to read, the critics were effectively turning themselves into censors. Censorship is defined as 'the changing or the suppression or prohibition of speech or writing that is deemed subversive of the common good' in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Anastaplo, 2020). The concept of 'common good' is of course highly relative. It can be informed and structured by idiosyncratic perception, and is thus open to interpretation, based on the interpreter's political stance, social status, cultural background and geographical context. As such, both Fang Fang and her critics often subconsciously assume the role of censors, despite the author's protestations to the contrary. In what follows, I will refer to Chinese critics of Fang Fang's diary as reader-censors.

Controversy over the author's identity resulted in part from the ST readers' (mis)expectation. Fang Fang was Chair of the Communist Party-sponsored Writers' Association of Hubei Province (of which Wuhan is the capital) before retirement. At the time of writing her diary, many readers believed that she was still receiving stipends from the government, and thus there was widely shared expectation that she should work for the mainstream ideology of China. Fang Fang's criticism of the local government's response to the coronavirus crisis was therefore interpreted as betrayal of her identity as a former holder of local office. In this instance, by foregrounding the identity of the

author, the critical readers were censoring how Fang Fang should write about the lockdown of Wuhan.

On that same basis, the credibility of her diary was often questioned. As the readers observed, Fang Fang wrote in her apartment during the lockdown and relied on second-hand stories. They consequently classified Fang Fang's diary as hearsay and full of unsubstantiated details, citing the *Diary's* high frequency of phrases such as 'I heard ...', 'I was told ...', '... said'. The most criticised example in the *Diary* was a description of a photo Fang Fang claimed to have received from her 'doctor friend'. The photo showed 'cellphones piled up on the floor of a funeral home; the owners of those phones had already been reduced to ash' (Fang & Berry, 2020, 152). Many readers and medical workers disputed the credibility of the description, labelling this 'a rumour'. They requested that the author substantiate her story by showing the photo, which Fang Fang never did. Her response was that she needed to protect her doctor friend and she did not have the obligation to prove her credibility to the readers.

Amid the online debate about the authenticity and credibility of Fang Fang's diary, some readers from Wuhan voiced their opposition to Fang Fang entitling her diary 'Wuhan Diary' in the English version. They claimed that she could not legitimately represent Wuhan, because what she wrote did not accord with their own experience during lockdown. In this instance, both the ST readers' insistence on verification of misinformation in Fang Fang's diary, and their objection to use of the word 'Wuhan' in the title, were essentially forms of reader censorship. More importantly, their decision to criticise or censor the text resulted from their perception of the *Diary* as a 'documentary text'. As discussed earlier, those who read the *Diary* as a literary piece would not usually obsess over the credibility of certain details. However, when readers started to consume the *Diary* as a journalistic document, they switched into a non-fiction mindset that requires all details to be authentic and verifiable, accurate and precise.

Another form of reader censorship concerned the work's objectivity. Fang Fang's diary was said to be a partial collage of 'tragic stories', which conveyed mainly anxiety and anger, misery and death, and corruption and negligence. Fang Fang, however, refuted that characterisation. Pressured by the online storm of criticism after the announcement on 8 April of her diary's imminent publication in English, she agreed to a couple of interviews to defend herself – one of these was removed from the Chinese social media by cyber censors shortly after it was posted. In that interview on 11 April, Fang Fang responded to a question about her selective presentation of the tragic and dark sides of the lockdown as follows:

My book will only do good to the country, as I wrote in great detail the various measures taken after the reshuffle of the Hubei government. [...] Reading my diary would reveal clearly how China succeeded in its battle against the coronavirus. My diary is by no means a record of negative comments and tragic stories about China, as the far-lefts have misinterpreted. [...] Isn't the overseas publication of this book a good way of promoting the China experience? (Fang et al., 2020)

The response, however, was in diametrical opposition to the HarperCollins blurb, which, for its own target markets, highlighted only the negative aspects of China's handling of the pandemic. The only statement which might remotely relate to what Fang Fang called 'the China experience', came barbed with an unflattering criticism:

As Fang Fang documents the beginning of the global health crisis in real time, she illuminates how many of the countries dealing with the novel coronavirus pandemic have repeated similar patterns and mistakes. (Dymocks, 2020)

Despite her insistence that she recorded both the bright side of China's management of the crisis and the tragedies of ordinary citizens, Fang Fang virtually lost control of her own text, both in the way the ST was interpreted by her Chinese readers and in the way the TT was marketed by her publishers. Translation for the target market can render the intention of the ST author or her own interpretation of the text irrelevant, resulting in the virtual 'death of the author', as articulated by Roland Barthes (1977) in a different context. However, the dynamic interaction in the digital space between agents, which transcends the limits of physical borders, means that the traditional, jurisdiction-bound process of translating and publishing can be upended. The ST readers can participate in the production of the TT and shape the final translation product, and real-time revisions, particularly of paratexts, are possible.

5. ST readers as censors and co-producers of the TT

In the first version of the US cover of *Wuhan Diary* as advertised by HarperCollins, a subtitle 'Dispatches from the Original Epicentre' was used. This caused reaction in Chinese social media. Many argued that the subtitle, which was asserting that the coronavirus originated from Wuhan while the WHO scientists were yet to reach any conclusion, would only lend support to the West's anti-China narrative. In the interview on 11 April, Fang Fang (Fang et al., 2020) held her translators accountable for the offence caused, explaining that she was not literate in English and had not expected her original title to be changed. As a response to the readers' critical interpretation of the subtitle, Fang Fang (Fang et al., 2020) said that her US-based translator Michael Berry had apologised and sent the publisher an immediate request for the author's original title to be reflected in the promotion of the English translation.

The subtitle was subsequently changed to 'Dispatches from a Quarantined City' (Fang & Berry, 2020). The ST readers, through their debates on Chinese social media, were able to indirectly participate in the packaging of the TT. Traditionally, ST readers would not be a major consideration of the agents of the target context during the translation process. Indeed, before the digital era, even in the target culture, reception studies were usually conducted well after the texts were published. The digital space has enabled readers to feed their reception back into the translation process and to actively shape the translation product.

For the criticisms on the presentation of the blurb, the author shifted the blame onto 'booksellers', who in their marketing of the book, may have used misleading language. 'I am not literate in foreign languages, but these could all be rectified' (Fang et al., 2020). Usually, the publishers are responsible for marketing, and the retailers sell the book. In this case, Fang Fang's ambiguous reference to 'booksellers' might have been a deliberate and strategic choice with two goals: first, to address the reader-censors' criticism, and second, to sidestep the conflicts with her publishers. In the interview, Fang Fang explained that the parties involved had agreed that, in future, such paratexts would need to be first examined by the translator before being sent to her for additional

confirmation (Fang et al., 2020). The questioning of the blurb by the ST readers apparently caused significant tension between the ST author, the translator, and the publisher.

According to social game theory, social actions are made up of different games, and all players enter into the games with their own agendas (Goffman, 1969, pp. 86–89). Therefore, human interactions feature conflicts, negotiation, and compromise on the road to collaboration. Fang Fang's attribution of blame for the English title of her diary to the translator would create, at least superficially, tension and conflict with her translator, a prominent US scholar of Chinese Studies at the University of California. However, as the ultimate purpose of interaction in the book industries was collaboration rather than confrontation, Fang Fang, as a verbal compensation to repair the relationship that may be damaged by her blame-shifting remarks, added that her English translator Berry was very friendly to China (Fang et al., 2020). In a similar vein, instead of provoking her publisher, she tried to tone down her critique by referring to the publisher in the disguise of the 'bookseller' (as mentioned above). With all parties involved in this internal conflict making concessions, they were able to keep moving their interaction and collaboration forward.

Nonetheless, the conflicts between them, which resulted from the ST reader censorship, did have some immediate and lasting textual consequences for the translation. The subtitle, for example, was revised, and the blurb was radically changed to reflect the re-negotiated relationship between the parties. Very notably, the direct reference to the Chinese government's monitoring of its citizens and censorship over Fang Fang's diary posts disappeared from the promotional text. Other politically inflammatory language was also revised or removed from the blurb. In the first version of the blurb, the concluding sentence was 'Blending the eerie and dystopian, the profound and the quotidian, *Wuhan Diary* is a remarkable record of our times and a unique look at life in confinement in an authoritarian nation' (Dymocks, 2020). It has since been updated and shortened to the politically anodyne: 'Blending the intimate and the epic, the profound and the quotidian, *Wuhan Diary* is a remarkable record of an extraordinary time' (Fang & Berry, 2020).

Furthermore, in the revised blurb, Fang Fang was no longer described as a dissident against 'social injustice, corruption, abuse, and the systemic political problems which impeded the response to the epidemic' (Dymocks, 2020). Instead, her identity as a conscientious writer was foregrounded, and the 'systemic political problems' of China were present to a lesser degree: 'by claiming the writer's duty to record she also speaks out against social injustice, abuse of power, and other problems which impeded the response to the epidemic' (Fang & Berry, 2020). Fang Fang even employed the paratextual space as a platform to highlight her victimisation by some Chinese netizens, saying that she was 'embroiled in online controversies' because of her critical remarks about the ill management of the crisis by Chinese officials (Fang et al., 2020).

Prior to the digital age, paratextual spaces such as the blurb, preface and translator's introduction to a volume could be taken advantage of by the author, publisher and translator to their own ends. Moreover, the main channel for a selective group of readers to voice their opinion on the book in question would be commissioned book reviews published in newspapers, magazines and journals. This hierarchy of voices, however, has been totally transformed by digital media. On Amazon, for example, customers can

post their reviews online for other interested readers to view. The peritexts of the book and its epitexts therefore interestingly concur in the same digital space.

Readers' reviews, like the polarised reception in the ST context, can be deeply divisive. As of 4 June 2020, there were 89 customer reviews on the US Amazon site, with 46% 5-star ratings and 52% 1-star ratings, which made the overall rating of the book 2.9 stars. The top review, with the title 'totally bias [sic] information' and a rating of 1-star, won the approval of 191 people. Next to it was a top 5-star rating entitled 'an inside and human look at a global pandemic', which was found to be helpful by 110 people. The digital age enables any reader to share their review of a book publicly almost in real-time, and sometimes even prior to a book's publication. Book reviews are no longer the privilege of a selective few. Peer reviews from fellow netizens are increasingly used when a consumer is making a decision about what to read and for this reason are scrutinised by publishers and authors. In practical terms, this development turned ordinary readers into key players in the shaping of the reception or even success of *Wuhan Diary*.

As the internet defies geographical borders, many of the TT readers who are bilingual are at the same time ST readers. This further complicates the reading and reviewing landscape. If one reads carefully the customer reviews on the Amazon website, it is not difficult to notice that some reviews were purely based on their critical reading of the ST.⁷ This double identity of the bilingual readers makes them capable of transferring their reception of the ST into the TT context, which would in turn potentially dilute the accuracy and credibility of the reception of the TT in its target culture.

Fang Fang would probably find the ST readers' uncompromising criticism annoying and frustrating, as she, together with her publisher, has made great concessions to address those readers' concerns. The previous absence of positive comments about China in the blurb was now replaced with praise for the 'courage', 'resilience and perseverance' of the Chinese people:

Fang Fang finds solace in small domestic comforts and is inspired by the courage of friends, health professionals and volunteers, as well as the resilience and perseverance of Wuhan's nine million residents. (Fang & Berry, 2020)

The cyber-bullied author, who had alleged that she was victimised by 'organised cyber abuse' on Chinese social media, chose to project a different personal image in the digital space. In the updated blurb, Fang Fang was now not only 'inspired' by the Chinese people's reaction to the crisis, but she also occupied a moral vantage point to call for global unity in the face of the spread of the virus that was raging out of control in many other countries:

She reminds us that, in the face of the new virus, the plight of the citizens of Wuhan is also that of citizens everywhere. As Fang Fang writes: 'The virus is the common enemy of humankind; that is a lesson for all humanity. The only way we can conquer this virus and free ourselves from its grip is for all members of humankind to work together'. (Fang & Berry, 2020)

This was apparently the author's conciliatory response to some ST readers' accusation that her diary would be weaponised by the West, and as such could be used to scapegoat China. By explicitly declaring the virus the 'common enemy of humankind', Fang Fang was attempting to deflect criticism. With these radical changes to the paratexts for the

English version of her diary, which were almost an item-by-item correction based on the ST reader-censors' criticism, the publisher seemed to be discursively aligning itself with the 'China experience' against the coronavirus, as Fang Fang had claimed.

Nonetheless, neither the Western media nor the Chinese ST readers acknowledged these paratextual updates. Just like the Western media's exclusive emphasis on unfavourable descriptions of China in Fang Fang's diary, the Chinese ST readers continued to attack the author based on these same negative descriptions. Binary views are so ingrained and ubiquitous in the mindset of China versus the West that people now habitually approach an international phenomenon by choosing one of the two polar positions. The West tends to consider China its polar opposite, therefore nothing from there could be unambiguously good. A negative angle could somehow be contrived based on the list of stereotypical perceptions of China, thanks to the decades-old history of opposition between the two ideologically different camps. In a similar vein, the Chinese readers would selectively approach the author and her work with a pre-determined bias: if you are writing what the Western 'enemy' wants to read, how can you be claiming you are still one of us? In this sense, both the West's selection of *Wuhan Diary* for publication and the ST readers' appeal for the author to withdraw it from overseas publication feature the same human traits: the dichotomy between self and other, between us and them. In practice, the intolerance of otherness is often the origin of censorship.

The contestation between the ST readers, the author, the translator, the publisher, and the TT context including the media coverage of the *Diary* eventually vitiated the *Diary's* publication in book format in China but, ironically, accelerated the publication of its English translation. With the initial popularity of her diary on Chinese social media, over ten publishers in China contacted Fang Fang competing for the right to publish her diary as a book (Fang, 2020b). However, as a result of the rising controversy about the *Diary* and the ensuing conflict between the author and her critics, all the Chinese publishers withdrew their bids (Fang, 2020b). The ST reader censorship, magnified by the prowess of digital media, suffocated the publishing of the *Diary* in China before any government censors needed to step in.

In contrast, the English translation of the *Diary* enjoyed a whirlwind publication. Its release was scheduled on 18 August 2020 when the publisher first announced its pre-sale on Amazon on 8 April. At this time, the full Chinese ST had not yet been sent to the translator. Fang Fang submitted the final draft of the ST to the publisher on 14 April, and disclosed the day after that the translation had already been completed (Fang, 2020b). It would be unusually rapid for a translated book to be published within four months of ST submission. However, only a few days later, on 18 April, the date of publication of the English translation was brought forward to 30 June by the publisher. Notwithstanding the paratextual revisions the ST reader censorship had engendered, the barbed criticism of the ST readers seemed to have backfired, further expediting the release of the English translation.

This could be interpreted from at least two perspectives. First, the conflicts the English translation instigated between the ST context and the TT context generated stronger interest in the book and more steadfast support among TT readers, and hence hastened the book's publication. Second, compromise and compensation always shadowed each other in the resolution of a conflict: when the author and publisher gave way in redrafting

the blurb to address the backlash in the ST context, they somehow compensated their seeming defeat or loss in the paratextual space.

Without doubt, the news of the expedited publication of the *Diary* provoked another round of online critique among Fang Fang's Chinese reader-censors of her 'treacherous' writing. As the highly-charged debate continued to unfold, the publisher brought the publication further forward. *Wuhan Diary* was eventually released on 15 May, one month after Fang Fang submitted her ST. Interestingly, the official release of the translation, which stabilised, fossilised and consecrated the TT, also gradually reduced and silenced the debate over the *Diary* in the ST context. The ST reader censorship, in this case, appeared more interested in influencing or participating in the formation of the TT than in the dissemination and reception of the final translation product among TT readers, over which it had no means of exerting meaningful influence. Online customer reviews, on Amazon for example, might serve as the major platform for some bilingual ST readers to post their criticism of the *Diary*, but the impact was very doubtful, as the ideological bias was often axiomatic and transparent in their reviews.

The digital space enables the accessibility of paratexts well before the text proper is available in order to forecast and publicise, but it also makes the paratexts more susceptible to readers' – including the ST readers' – review, evaluation, criticism, and in extreme situations, censorship. Under such circumstances, uncertainty and fluidity of the paratexts increase exponentially in comparison with the traditional publishing chain of the pre-internet era.

6. Conclusion

Digital media's coming-of-age has transformed the landscape of translation, (con)fusing to a large extent what is the Source and what is the Target. By examining the case of *Wuhan Diary*, it is clear that even though the TT is produced and intended for consumption in the target context, it is nevertheless not exempt from the influence of the source context. The real-time participation of ST readers in censoring and co-producing the paratextual elements of the English translation is indicative of the scale of entanglement of the Source and the Target in the digital age. Translation may no longer be considered independent of the source context, as texts are shared and consumed globally by bilinguals and multilinguals, and thus to a certain extent, meaning is brokered free of linguistic, cultural, or geographical borders.

There is a general consensus that a ST could have multiple TTs in another language, and that the function of the TT could often differ from that of the ST. This legitimises the manipulation of the ST in translation, especially when it comes to a ST addressing current affairs from an ideologically very different perspective. Nevertheless, the digital space renders such manipulation of ST transparent by bringing it under scrutiny of bilinguals and multilinguals, including the ST readers, and even those relying on auto-generated translations, flawed as they may be. The interaction between various agents within the book world has also been greatly complicated by the rise of digital media. The translation and publication process has become increasingly non-linear and multi-dimensional, and the agents of the TT are also able to experiment with the paratextual elements to test, guide, direct and even manipulate the reception of the TT while it is still in the making. The case of *Wuhan Diary* suggests that translation in the digital

age is no longer business-as-usual, and the advancement of translation theory will have to take account of the impacts of digital media.

Notes

1. *Wuhan Diary* has both its supporters and critics in the source context. The reason why ST readers, instead of ST critics, are used in this paper is that the term ‘ST readers’ captures the dynamic nature of the readership of *Wuhan Diary*. For example, some readers who initially supported the ST author later became opponents when controversy arose over the translation of the *Diary* into English.
2. My key considerations in data collection are accessibility, credibility and balance. Quotations are mainly made from mainstream media outlets that are credible sources of information (e.g., BBC, CNN, *New York Times*, *The Guardian*, iFeng News), which will remain accessible to readers (in contrast, social media posts may be subject to cyber censorship and thus become inaccessible). In order to strike a balance between competing views, prominent media outlets in both China and the Anglophone world are consulted.
3. Fang Fang’s statement here should not be taken at face value. It was not possible to conclude whether the statement represented her genuine intention or whether she was only trying to protect herself against reader criticisms.
4. Paratext is a concept proposed by the French literary theorist Gérard Genette. Genette (1997, n.p.) defines paratexts as ‘liminal devices and conventions’ within the book (i.e., ‘peritexts,’ such as titles, forewords and epigraphs) and outside the book (i.e., ‘epitexts,’ such as reviews and interviews).
5. Within the digital mediasphere, this type of feedback loop is likely to become more and more commonplace to translated texts.
6. Hu’s change of attitude towards Fang Fang’s diary was in itself controversial and much-debated among the Chinese netizens. And this type of withdrawal of support for someone who was ‘assessed to have said or done something unacceptable or highly problematic’ was popularly referred to as ‘cancel culture’ in digital media studies (Ng, 2020, p. 623).
7. Such fake reviews on Amazon have attracted much academic attention and are referred to as ‘Amazon sock-puppetry scandals’ (Murray, 2018, p. 133).

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