Are Fansubs More Trustworthy than Subtitles in China?

—With a Focus on the Movie, The Avengers—

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[Abstract]

The development of the Internet, the Chinese open-door policy, the popularization of English, and the process of globalization in China make it possible for Chinese people to have access to foreign cultures, freely participating in international trendy activities under the socialist system. Chinese fansubbing is one of those activities which college students and young white-collar workers, with ‘economic strength’ and ‘language power,’ participate in. In China most audiences believe that fansubs are more loyal and authentic to the original works than the official subtitles, due to strict media censorship with intentional plot changes, eliminations, editions and mistranslations. Under these circumstances in today’s China, this paper aims to study deep into two questions. 1. What are the differences between official subtitles and fansubs in China? 2. Is it fine to believe that the fansubs are more loyal to the original work than official subtitles, as often believed by Chinese general audience? To answer these three questions, both the
subtitle and fansub of an American movie, *The Avengers*, are comparatively analyzed in various ways.

[Key Words] fansub, subtitle, fansubber, censorship, Chinese copyright law

### 1. Introduction

Subtitling is a main mode of audiovisual translation and fansubbing\(^1\) is a similar but characterful version of subtitling. Nowadays, the subtitling industry mainly works on the markets for DVDs, cable TVs, movies, and games all over the world. Unlike the century-old subtitling, the history of fansubbing can be traced back to the late 1980s with the use of VHS tapes which imposed cumbersome and expensive processes of private subtitling (O’Hagan, 2009: 100). Main difference between subtitles and fansubs is simple — who translated the work, the official translators or fans.

Fans\(^2\) began to produce amateur subtitled copies so that they could share them with their fellow fans. Over the past few decades, these fans empowered by the Internet have been ranked as co-creators with official creators among the general fans. China is no exception. The phenomena of fansub in China like in other countries began under the influence of manga\(^3\) and the Korean wave. In China, however, fansubbers used to translate the media products that would not be officially imported. Sometimes censorship, mistranslation, reediting, and even plot changing in any officially imported

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1) A fansub (short for fan-subtitled) is a version of a foreign film or foreign television program which has been translated by fans (as opposed to an officially licensed translation done by professionals) and subtitled into a language other than that of original (From Wikipedia).

2) Henry Jenkins distinguished between ‘viewers’ and ‘fans’, suggesting that while viewers follow an isolated model of media consumption, far from simply consuming a product, fans participate in discussions and reflections on their experience, and are involved in a varied range of interactive activities: writing letters to producers, conversing with other fans on forums, and attending fan events for example (Massidda, 2012: 44).