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The discursive construction of the moral and legal statuses of fansubbers in the Chinese press 2006-2018

Abstract: Fansubbers (short for “fan subtitlers”) are confronted with a moral-legal dilemma in China. On the one hand, they are highly appreciated by the general public because they work without pay and altruistically provide free access to subtitled audiovisual contents that are otherwise unavailable. On the other hand, they distribute unlicensed contents and violate the copyright law in China. Their practices cause damages to copyright holders and thus call for legal actions. Given the conflicting moral and legal statuses, it is necessary to understand how the Chinese press frame and represent fansubbers, as the media play a crucial role in shaping people’s opinions. Drawing on a one-million-word corpus of news reports between 2006 and 2018, this study examines the media frames, discourse topics, and representations about fansubbers in China. Based on keyword, collocation, and concordance analyses, four discourse topics were identified: *sharing*, *volunteerism*, *copyright*, and *commercialization*. The former two pointed to a moral frame, while the latter two fed into a legal frame. The diachronic analysis demonstrated that the topic of *sharing* was most prominent in eight of 13 years, while the topic of *copyright* spiked about every five years. The corpus findings also unravel the complexities of discursive strategies in two aspects: (a) representational strategies work in combination to selectively frame fansubbers and (b) the same discursive strategies can simultaneously moralize and delegitimize fansubbers. This study sheds light on the multifaceted, dynamic, and complex nature of media representations about fansubbers with a conflicting social position.

Keywords: corpus-assisted discourse analysis, fansubbers, Chinese press, moral, legal

1. Introduction

Fansubbing (short for “fan subtitling”) originated in the 1980s, when fans translated and distributed Japanese anime and manga inaccessible in the American market (Díaz Cintas and Muñoz Sánchez, 2006). Over the past decades, enabled by technological advancement, fansubbing has expanded to other genres, languages, and locales (Barra, 2009; Wu, 2017). For instance, in China, fansubbed products run the gamut from TV series to reality shows, from films to documentaries, and from public speeches to open courses. Fansubbed products are highly sought after because they provide a wealth of entertainment and education resources, as opposed to the state-controlled quantity of overseas audiovisual contents in the local market. Even if audiovisual programs are officially imported, they will probably undergo a lengthy delay and/or have their contents sanitized to fit the local sociocultural norms (Zhong, 2008). In response to these issues, fansubbers come together and pool their efforts to provide the general public with speedy access of overseas audiovisual contents in the original flavors.

Despite fansubbers’ well-meant intentions, their practices are illegal in that they translate and distribute unauthorized copyrighted contents (He, 2017). In China, it is popular to encode subtitles into audiovisual products, which are called “hard subs,” vis-à-vis “soft subs” with subtitles separated from audiovisual contents (Barra, 2009; Wu,

2017). Thus, when fansubbers distribute unlicensed hard subs, they violate the copyright law and potentially do damages to market sales. In 2009, the Chinese state regulator shut down over 530 peer-to-peer file-sharing websites, which had functioned as fansubbers' distribution channels. In 2014, the watchdog once again took actions and shut down SHOOTER (a decade-old platform for sharing subtitles) and YYeTs (the largest fansub group in China) because of their subtitle-derivative commercial activities. Aware of their shaky legal grounds, Chinese fansubbers moralize¹ and rationalize their practices by highlighting their ethos as volunteers and cultural brokers. They construct their moralities through their dedication to not-for-profit work that allows the general public to access otherwise inaccessible contents (Hsiao, 2014). They also distance themselves from the piracy business and follow a "gentleman agreement": they cease to distribute subtitled products that are commercially available in the local market (Díaz Cintas and Muñoz Sánchez, 2006). In this sense, fansubbing practices arguably act in favor of the copyright holders because they can test the potential market demand and create a fan/consumer base (He, 2017; Ito, 2017; Wu, 2017).

Chinese fansubbers' dual roles as cultural brokers and copyright infringers and the paradoxical consequences of helping and hurting copyright-holders' businesses warrant an examination of how they are represented in the Chinese press. As established in media research and critical discourse analysis (CDA) research, media play a significant role in shaping public perceptions and opinions of social groups (Bednarek and Caple, 2014; Entman, 1993; McEnery, McGlashan, and Love, 2015). Existing CDA studies have largely focused on social groups positioned at the extremes of a status hierarchy: either privileged groups (e.g. political leaders, judges, and doctors) or disadvantaged groups (e.g. ethnic minorities, refugees, and asylum seekers). Fansubbers present an interesting case because they occupy a conflicting social position. On the one hand, they have gained public support because free subtitled products enrich people's entertainment and education. On the other hand, they are copyright infringers, whose unlawful practices have been frowned upon or even curbed by the law enforcement agencies. The paradoxical nature of fansubbers (moralized versus delegitimized) offers an interesting case to elucidate how media construct realities and statuses of a particular social group through selective frames and discursive strategies. More importantly, this study seeks to demonstrate that media representations of fansubbers (and by extension other similar groups with a conflicting social position) are multifaceted, dynamic, and complex, rather than monolithic, static, or simplistic.

2. Media framing and discursive strategies in representing social groups

Framing highlights some aspects of reality and hides others. In Entman's (1993) words, "to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text" (p. 52). For instance, van Gorp's (2005) study shows that the Belgian press framed asylum seekers as either victims in need of humanitarian help or intruders threatening the society. The victim-frame highlights the unfortunate

¹ In this article, "moralize" means "to make moral" and "to give a moral quality to" (www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/122096). A similar usage can be found in van Leeuwen (2008, p. 111)

factors causing asylum seekers to leave their countries, while the intruder-frame foregrounds their potential illicit actions in the new country. In a recent study, Paltridge, Mayson and Schapper (2014) report that the Australian newspapers frame international students as either “an economic commodity” or “exploiters of the immigration system” (p. 109). The commodity-frame justifies the presence of international students in Australia but reduces their contribution to a narrow, economic sense. By contrast, the immigration-frame construes international students as an out-group and problematizes their presence. These two studies and the body of research they represent show that media (un)wittingly use frames to guide readers’ attention to and interpretation of fractions of realities relative to social groups. In the case of Chinese fansubbers, the self-representation discourse and the legal discourse frame fansubbers rather differently. In the self-representation discourse, fansubbers deploy a moral frame (Hsiao, 2014) aligned with traditional Chinese thinking. In ancient China, people “considered creativity and innovation as a collective benefit to their community and posterity” (Yu, 2015, p. 250). They believed that knowledge created and accumulated by individuals should be shared with the public. As such, people in the community can “use any property that is the result of cumulative knowledge and will be of benefit to the public” (Hsiao, 2014, p. 237). Such beliefs moralize fansubbers’ practices to share their subtitled products as entertainment and education resources with the public. By contrast, in the legal discourse, their practices are judged with reference to a legal frame and characterized as acts of copyright infringement (He, 2017). Given the discrepancy between the self-representation discourse and the legal discourse, it would be interesting to understand how the Chinese press frame fansubbers in news reports. Do the press evoke a moral frame, a legal frame, or both? This study seeks to find out whether and how these two competing frames are adopted by the Chinese press to fashion people’s opinions and attitudes about fansubbers.

Media frames are usually primed by semantic macrostructures (van Dijk, 1988) and micro-level linguistic features. At a macro level, features of social groups are variously topicalized. The presence and absence of discourse topics determine *what* is being reported or not, thereby strategically manipulating the amount and scope of exposure. For instance, refugees and immigrants are predominantly associated with negative topics, such as violence and crime (van Dijk, 1991). As a second example, Baker, Gabrielatos and McEnery (2013) found that the representation of Muslims in the British press was dominated by a “conflict” topic. These studies and the body of research they represent tend to identify negative discourse topics, probably because the social groups in question are relatively disadvantaged, or construed as “others” in the society. In this study, given the conflicting social position occupied by fansubbers, it would be interesting to know what discourse topics are evoked as instantiations of underlying and potentially competing media frames in news reports.

At a micro level, linguistic choices made in news texts shape the representation of actors and their actions. CDA provides well-established toolkits to tease out the linguistic realization of agency dynamics in societies. For instance, transitivity analysis is a proven analytical technique to examine process types and participant roles attributed to social groups (Fairclough, 2003). Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) distinguish six process types: material, mental, relational, verbal, behavioral, and existential. Thompson (2008, 2013) further maps participants’ transitivity roles in these processes onto a cline

of agency (i.e. from making an impact on other actors to being impacted). For instance, participants described as Initiators and Actors in a material process are given higher agency than those described as Behavers in a behavioral process, Sayers in a verbal process, and Sensors in a mental process. Participants represented as Goals in a material process have the lowest degree of agency, as they are impacted by other people's actions. In addition to transitivity analysis, social actor analysis is another useful tool to reveal the social position implicated by linguistic choices to nominate and represent social actors (van Leeuwen, 2008). Persons with a high social position tend to be represented by formal or semiformal names in news reports, while those with a low social position are usually named informally. Applied in this study, transitivity analysis and social actor analysis can reveal *how* media adopt particular linguistic choices (to the exclusion of others) to ascribe agency to fansubbers and construct their social position.

Informed by the theoretical concepts explained above, this study seeks to address the following questions: 1) Do the Chinese press adopt a moral frame, a legal frame, or both in their representations of fansubbers? What discourse topics feed into the media frame(s)? 2) How do the discourse topics about fansubbers develop over time? 3) How do the Chinese press deploy transitivity and nomination strategies to represent fansubbers and construct their social position?

3. Research methodology

3.1 The fansubber corpus

This study adopts a methodological framework of corpus-assisted discourse studies (CADS) that incorporate corpus techniques into discourse analysis and combine quantitative and qualitative analyses (Baker et al., 2008; Partington, Duguid, and Taylor, 2013). To build a corpus about media's representations of fansubbers, we gathered news articles from two online databases, WiseNews and China National Knowledge Infrastructure, using the search term *zimuzu* (literally "subtitling group," a popular term in China to denote fansubbers). Duplicate results within and between the databases were removed. Irrelevant results were also removed based on the following criteria: a) News articles were about intra-lingual subtitles (e.g. adding Chinese subtitles in Chinese entertainment shows for comical effects); b) Fansub groups were mentioned in passing (e.g. a one-sentence announcement of a certain fansub group commissioned for a TV show). After eliminating the duplicate and irrelevant results, we were left with 1,163 texts published between 2006 (the earliest news reports found in the databases) and 2018. It should be noted that Chinese newspapers can be broadly categorized as party-sponsored and market-oriented ones. Some previous studies have found that news stories about critical issues (e.g. public health) were framed differently between party-sponsored and market-oriented newspapers (see Duan and Miller, 2019 for details). However, after examining two widely circulated newspapers, *Guangzhou Daily* (party-sponsored) and *Southern Metropolis Daily* (market-oriented), our pilot study did not flag significant differences in media frames, discourse topics, or discursive strategies when fansubbers were reported. As such, we did not differentiate party-sponsored newspapers from market-oriented ones in the corpus.

As the Chinese language contains monosyllable characters and does not use spaces to separate words in writing, spaces were inserted into the Chinese corpus texts, using a Chinese word segmentation system called NLPIR (Natural Language Processing and Information Retrieval). Table 1 reports the resultant corpus size by year and in aggregate. All the news excerpts cited in this paper were translated into English by the author.

Table 1
Corpus information

Year	Number of news articles	Number of Chinese words (after segmentation)
2006	11	6,022
2007	49	53,521
2008	19	18,626
2009	86	93,952
2010	167	179,970
2011	128	143,938
2012	140	144,182
2013	140	153,916
2014	189	177,899
2015	108	109,069
2016	39	50,637
2017	46	50,522
2018	41	44,896
Total	1,163	1,227,150

3.2 Analytical procedures

Following the procedures in CDA and CADS (Baker et al., 2008), the analysis was carried out in three stages (see also Table 2) aided by the corpus tool AntConc 3.5.8w (Anthony, 2019). To answer the first set of research questions, keyword analysis, concordance analysis, and collocation analysis were combined to reveal the media frames and discourse topics about fansubbers. Keyword analysis was conducted as an entry point to understand the potential topics that contributed to media frames (Baker et al., 2013). The fansubber corpus was compared against the news portion of the Lancaster Corpus of Mandarin Chinese (LCMC, McEnery and Xiao, 2004). The top 100 content keywords were further examined by the researcher and a research assistant. We independently grouped these keywords into semantic categories and then discussed discrepancies until agreement was reached. The resultant categories provided a general impression of potential discourse topics in the news reports. Then, we inspected the concordance lines of the top 100 content keywords and examined the significant collocates within a span of five words to the left or right of *zimuzu*. A word was regarded as a significant collocate if it met the following criteria: (1) minimum frequency of five in the entire corpus; (2) MI (mutual information) score greater than three; and (3) log-likelihood score greater than 15.13 ($p < 0.0001$) (see Baker et al., 2013; Rayson et al., 2004). Triangulating the keyword analysis, concordance analysis

and collocation analysis, we independently noted down the topicalized features about fansubbers. We then discussed our notes and settled on four discourse topics: *sharing*, *volunteerism*, *copyright* and *commercialization*. The former two feed into a moral frame, while the latter two a legal frame.

Table 2
Analytical procedures

Research questions	Procedures	Outcomes
1. Media frames and discourse topics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) The fansubber corpus was compared against the news portion of LCMC. b) Top 100 content keywords were grouped into semantic categories. c) The concordance lines of the top 100 content keywords were examined. d) Significant collocates of <i>zimuzu</i> were identified and examined. 	Two media frames and four discourse topics were identified: a moral frame with the topics of <i>sharing</i> and <i>volunteerism</i> and a legal frame with the topics of <i>copyright</i> and <i>commercialization</i>
2. Diachronic development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Extended concordance lines of <i>zimuzu</i> were drawn from each annual sub-corpus. b) 1,215 extended concordance lines were coded as instantiations of one or more than one discourse topic. 	The percentages of the four discourse topics over a 13-year span
3. Transitivity and nomination strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) 1,215 extended concordance lines were coded in terms of process types and participant roles. b) Social actors in the verbal processes were coded in terms of nomination strategies. 	<p>The percentages of process types and participant roles across the four discourse topics.</p> <p>The percentages of nomination strategies of social actors.</p>

To answer the second research question, extended concordance analysis (co-text of 300 words) was conducted to reveal the diachronic development of discourse topics. Random samples of 100 concordance lines of *zimuzu* were drawn from each annual sub-corpus, except for the 2006, 2016, and 2018 sub-corpora, in which all the concordance lines were included because fewer than 100 results were returned. This step left us with 1,215 concordance lines of *zimuzu*, which were treated as concordance-corpora (see Partington, 2015 for details about concordance-corpora). Next, the researcher and the aforementioned research assistant coded each of the 1,215 concordance lines as instantiation of one or more than one discourse topic (*sharing*, *volunteerism*, *copyright* and *commercialization*). Inter-coder differences were resolved through discussion. After that, we plotted the distribution of discourse topics over the span of 13 years. This step allows us to inspect the diachronic changes in media frames and discourse topics and perspectivize them in relation to law enforcement actions against fansubbers in China (Wu, 2017).

To answer the third research question, transitivity analysis and social actor analysis were conducted to examine the representational strategies adopted by the Chinese press. For the purpose of transitivity analysis, the researcher and the aforementioned research assistant coded each of the 1,215 concordance lines in terms of process types and participant roles (Thompson, 2013; see also Table 3 for coding examples). During the coding process, we noticed a salient pattern of representing fansubbers in verbal processes. Unlike the representations of other social groups whose voices were suppressed in media (Paltridge et al., 2014; Torkington and Ribeiro, 2019), the fansubbers' voices were frequently represented in our corpus. However, we noticed that fansubbers and other social actors were nominated differently when the media presented their quotes. Therefore, as a next step, we focused on the verbal processes in the concordance-corpora and coded the nomination strategies of fansubbers and other social actors (e.g. law professors and practicing lawyers).² Following van Leeuwen's (2008) model, we coded the nomination strategies in terms of the degree of formality (formal, semiformal, and informal). Inter-coder differences were resolved through discussion.

Table 3
Transitivity analysis examples

Process types	Participant roles	Example sentences from the corpus
Material	Initiator	Fansubbers made audience fall in love with American TV series.
	Actor + Goal	Fansubbers shared subtitled TV dramas online.
	Actor – Goal or + Scope Goal	Fansubbers volunteered to work. Law enforcement agencies investigated fansubbers about their infringing acts.
Behavioral	Behaver	Fansubbers cheered.
Mental	Senser	Fansubbers regretted that their products were appropriated by piracy businesses.
	Attribute	Viewers are familiar with fansubbers.
Verbal	Sayer	Some fansubber said that they were aware of the potential legal risks.
	Target	He sharply criticized fansubbers.
Relational	Carrier	Fansubbers are interest-driven.
	Token	Fansubbers are one of the top eight hardworking social groups online.
Existential	Existent	There are many active fansubbers online.

4. Results

4.1 Media frames and discourse topics about fansubbers

² In the corpus, lawyers, scholars, and company representatives are predominantly represented in the verbal processes. Therefore, only verbal processes are included in the analysis of the nomination strategies to ensure comparability.

As an entry point to CADS, keyword analysis offered a general picture of the salient features about fansubbers. The top 100 content keywords (see Table 4) suggest three interesting points. First, the social groups frequently reported by the Chinese press tend to be ordinary people (e.g. *people*, *netizens*, *viewers*, and *fans*) who benefit from fansubbers’ free subtitled contents. Second, it appears that fansubbed TV series and open courses are in great demand, especially TV programs made in the United States, Korea, and Thailand, and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) offered by famous schools (see the keywords in the “audiovisual contents” category in Table 4). Third, keywords in certain categories are indicative of congruent, yet conflicting discourse positions. For instance, “legality” and “market” keywords appear to be in contrast with “sharing” keywords. These keywords provide useful references to identify discourse topics about fansubbers.

Table 4
Top 100 content keywords

Categories	Keywords
Actors	fansubbers, people, netizens, viewers, fans, reporters, YYeTs, media, cast, members, users, students
Audiovisual contents	American-dramas*, videos, films, drama, courses, series, university, audiovisual, culture, open-course*, content, programs, Prison-Break*, episodes, Korean-dramas*, movies, famous-school*, cartoons, TV, stories, entertainment, serials, Thai-dramas*, music, literature
Countries	China, America, domestic, foreign, Korea, overseas
Languages	Chinese, English, language
Legality	copyright, piracy, infringement, close, actions
Market	import, advertisement
Share	download, disseminate, broadcast, resources, provide, free, share, follow, release
Online spaces	internet, website, network, BT, online, forum, platform, Micro-blog
Work	translate, subtitle, product, work, produce, start, dub, translation
Evaluation	big, many, most, high, professional, love, like, heated, new, good
Others	watch, time, use, become, times, appear, method, life, plot, say, express, learn

*A hyphenated word indicates that a Chinese two-character-unit is parsed as one word in NLPiR but does not have one-word English equivalence. For instance, *meiju* is segmented as one Chinese word, with *mei* meaning *American* and *ju* meaning *dramas*.

As explained in Section 3.2, we inspected the concordance lines of the top 100 content keywords (Table 4) and the significant collocates of *zimuzu* (Table 5). These analytical procedures revealed four salient discourse topics about fansubbers: *sharing*, *volunteerism*, *copyright* and *commercialization*. The former two point to a moral frame, while the latter two feed into a legal frame. In the following paragraphs, the four discourse topics are exemplified by significant collocates (italicized in the main text and also presented in Table 5) and representative news texts from the corpus. The numbers in brackets at the end of extracts indicate the year and the record number of a particular news report.

Table 5
Significant collocates indicative of discourse topics

Discourse topics	Collocates
Sharing	work, translate, compete, vie, produce, release, publish, share, provide, disseminate, speed, products, fora, free, introduce, break, respected, appreciated, thanked
Volunteerism	volunteer, contribute, dedicate, gather, establish, join, self-initiated, unpaid, voluntary, non-professional, amateurs, grassroots, organization, team, leaders, recruit, assign, tasks, collaborate
Copyright	brinkmanship, grey, distribute, infringe, violate, rights, illegal, keep, mysterious, revealed, exposed, investigated, shut, closed, abolish, disbanded, stop, terminate, disappear, bid
Commercialization	change, transform, operation, business, profits, earn, money, opening, commercialized, merged, licensed, partnership, survival

In the discourse topic of *sharing*, fansubbers are described as sharers who *work* diligently and *translate* subtitles. They *compete* against each other and *vie* to *produce*, *release*, *publish*, *share*, *provide*, and *disseminate* subtitles with remarkable *speed*. Viewers can access these subtitled *products* in online *fora* for *free*. Fansubbers *introduce* overseas audiovisual contents to the Chinese audience and *break* cultural barriers. As a result, they are *respected*, *appreciated*, and *thanked* by the Chinese audience. In this sense, fansubbers are portrayed as the makers and disseminators of subtitled contents that are favored by Internet users:

Fansubbers encode subtitles into the audiovisual contents and share them with viewers free of charge. (2015-108)

Thanks to fansubbers, viewers can watch subtitled programs the next day or even several hours after the programs are aired. (2007-28)

In the discourse topic of *volunteerism*, fansubbers *volunteer* to work, *contribute* selflessly, and *dedicate* themselves to translation. They *gather* to *establish* or *join self-initiated* groups. Although they are *unpaid*, *voluntary*, *non-professional amateurs* from the *grassroots*, they work as a smooth *organization*. *Team leaders recruit* members and *assign* translation *tasks*, on which fansubbers *collaborate*. As such, fansubbers are represented as volunteer members working as well-organized groups. Their work is not financially rewarded but largely driven by their interests in overseas cultures and specific audiovisual genres:

Fansubbers work in not-for-profit organizations. They are unpaid volunteers, highly interested in overseas audiovisual programs. (2012-108)

Fansubbers join subtitle groups because they have similar interests and are willing to work part-time and without pay. (2014-19)

In the discourse topic of *copyright*, fansubbers are described as (potential) law offenders who work in legal *brinkmanship* and *grey* areas. They *distribute* audiovisual contents, *infringe* copyrights, and *violate* the *rights* of copyright holders. Because of the *illegal* status, they (have to) *keep* a *mysterious* profile, but they are *revealed* and *exposed* by media. Fansub groups are *investigated*, *shut/closed* down, *abolished*, and *disbanded* by law enforcement agencies, so they *stop* updating contents, *terminate* their websites, *disappear* from the Internet, and *bid* farewell to audience. Clearly, the topic of *copyright* highlights the actions of enforcement agencies and the fansubbers' (forced) actions:

File-sharing websites are plunged into apocalyptic fears. One of the chain effects is that fansubbers disband their fansub groups. (2009-58)

Fansubbers' groups were shut down. This had something to do with our country's increasingly resolute law enforcement for copyright protection. (2014-171)

In the discourse topic of *commercialization*, fansubbers *change/transform* their *operation* and *business* models. Some fansubbers make *profits* and *earn money* by placing advertisements on the *opening* scenes of the subtitled contents. Some fansub groups are *commercialized* and *merged* by media platforms. As these platforms acquire *licensed* contents, the *partnership* is considered good for fansubbers' *survival*. Fundamentally, the discourse topic of *commercialization* discusses the possibilities of fansubbers working in sustainable business models without legal risks. Some fansubbers have taken up these solutions, while some others are reluctant to commercialize their practices:

Recently, with the mounting pressure of copyright protection, fansubbers who used to work in grey areas are ... cooperating with video-streaming websites that have purchased copyrighted contents. (2014-185)

Fansubbers have ambivalent feelings about cooperating with media platforms, because fansubbers work for the sake of their interests in TV programmes, not profits. (2011-122)

4.2 Diachronic development of discourse topics

As explained in Section 3.2, to understand the diachronic change of the discourse topics between 2006 and 2018, each of the 1,215 extended concordance lines (co-text of 300 words) was coded as instantiation of one or more than one discourse topic (*sharing*, *volunteerism*, *copyright* and *commercialization*). The percentages of the topics were then calculated in each annual concordance corpus. For example, in the 2010 corpus, the occurrences of the four topics were 55, 32, 14, and 15, adding up to 116. The percentages were 47%, 28%, 12%, and 13%, respectively. Figure 1 presents the

diachronic development over the 13-year span. As can be seen, the topic of *volunteerism* was dominant in 2006 and 2007, but substantially declined from 62% in 2006 to 21% in 2018. The topic of *commercialization* generally remained underrepresented in the corpus, although occasional upward spikes were noticeable in 2010 and 2017. The topic of *sharing* fluctuated over the 13-year span, but the general trend has been upward. Additionally, in eight of the 13 years, the topic of *sharing* took the lead in the news reports, suggesting that it was the most prominent topic about fansubbers in the Chinese press. As regards the topic of *copyright*, its percentage spiked approximately every five years, with noticeable peaks in 2009, 2014, and 2018. These sudden increases can be attributed to law enforcement agencies taking actions against fansubbers. Since 2005, the authorities have annually organized a taskforce to tackle Internet-based copyright infringement issues. In 2009, 530 file-sharing websites were shut down, with fansubbers losing their dissemination channels. In 2014, two highly popular fansub platforms (i.e. YYeTs and SHOOTER) were closed because they profited from selling unauthorized contents. In 2018, fansubbers were identified as one major source of pirated anime products and their practices were cracked down by enforcement agencies. This seems to show that the topic of *copyright* was largely event-driven.

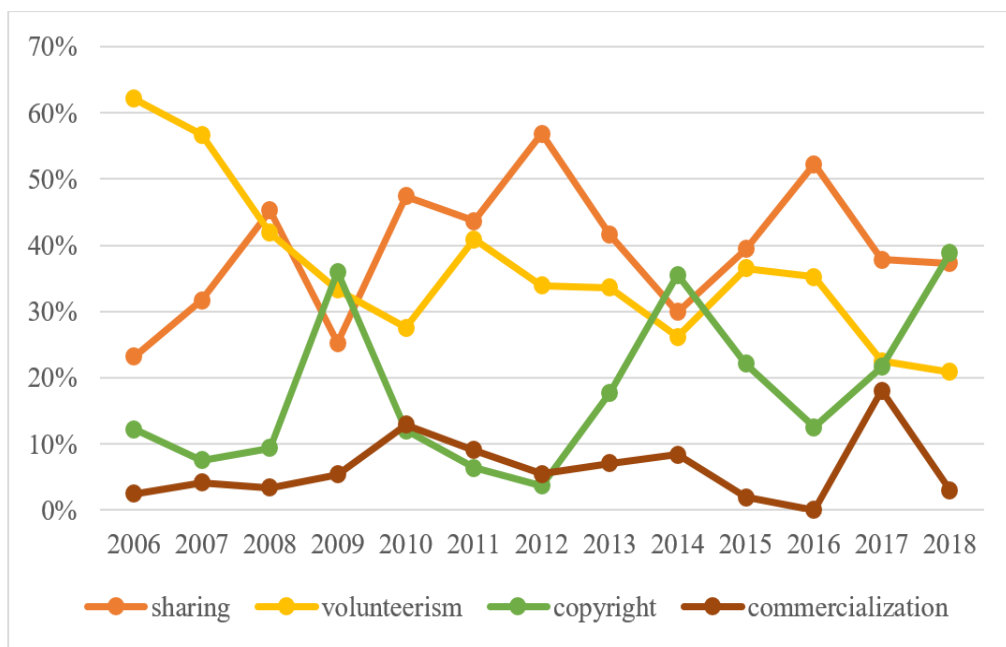


Figure 1. Diachronic development of the four discourse topics

4.3 Representational strategies

To understand how representational strategies are employed to discursively construct fansubbers' realities, we examine the transitivity patterns in the news reports. As evident in Table 6, there appears to be a predominant focus on what fansubbers do or what is done to them in the media representations, because the dominant process type is material, particularly in the topic of *copyright*. The percentages of relational processes are higher in the topics of *sharing* and *volunteerism*, because fansubbers are more likely to be ascribed attributes (e.g. *voluntary*, *unpaid*, and *non-professional*) or values (e.g. *the*

largest, one of the two popular, and the most famous). The percentages of verbal processes are similar across the four discourse topics, suggesting that fansubbers' voices are not strategically excluded from a particular topic. The percentage of mental processes is higher in the topic of *commercialization* because fansubbers' *thoughts, willingness* and *intention* to cooperate with media platforms are more often reported. The percentages of existential processes are relatively small across the board. As existential processes indicate the "[renunciation of] the opportunity to represent the participant (the Existent) as involved in any 'goings-on'" (Thompson, 2013, p. 110), the small amount of instances in the corpus indicates that the media do not represent fansubbers as mere existence of entities, but rather choose to attribute "traits, characteristics, qualities, and features" to them (Reisigl and Wodak, 2009, p. 94). Finally, the proportion of behavioral processes is minimal, suggesting that the media do not focus on the physiological processes of fansubbers.

Table 6
Process types across four discourse topics

Process types	Moral frame		Legal frame	
	Sharing (n=536)	Volunteerism (n=493)	Copyright (n=237)	Commercialization (n=89)
Material	360 (67.2%)	256 (51.9%)	179 (75.5%)	59 (66.3%)
Relational: attributive	71 (13.2%)	128 (26%)	18 (7.6%)	9 (10.1%)
Relational: identifying	38 (7.1%)	45 (9.1%)	4 (1.7%)	5 (5.6%)
Verbal	23 (4.3%)	34 (6.9%)	16 (6.8%)	5 (5.6%)
Mental	24 (4.5%)	20 (4.1%)	15 (6.3%)	10 (11.2%)
Existential	18 (3.4%)	8 (1.6%)	4 (1.7%)	1 (1.1%)
Behavioral	2 (0.4%)	2 (0.4%)	1 (0.4%)	0

To understand how agency is variously ascribed to fansubbers, we examined the participant roles across the two media frames and four discourse topics. Table 7 groups the participant roles into "six bands" (Thompson, 2008, p. 26) and presents them in the order of declining agency (Thompson, 2008, 2013).³ Scrutiny of Table 7 shows that the percentages of Goals in the legal frame are twice of those in the moral frame. This tendency to attribute a lower degree of agency to fansubbers in the legal frame suggests that fansubbers are relatively passive (vs. proactive) in legal actions against them and in choosing their business partners. Interestingly, when higher agency roles are examined, the percentages of Initiators are minimal across the four discourse topics. The percentage of Actors with Goals is the highest in the topic of *sharing*, but the lowest in *volunteerism*. The disparity is understandable because, as the previous paragraph shows, the topic of *volunteerism* focuses more on fansubbers' attributes (hence a higher proportion of Carriers). The four discourse topics do not show marked differences in the remaining participant roles. Based on these results, it can be concluded that the agency discursively ascribed to fansubbers declines in the following order: sharing > volunteerism > commercialization > copyright.

³ Table 7 does not include 31 instances of fansubbers expressed as Existents and 20 instances of fansubbers expressed in Circumstances.

Table 7
Participant roles in four discourse topics

Band	Role	Moral frame		Legal frame	
		Sharing (n=508)	Volunteerism (n=476)	Copyright (n=232)	Commercialization (n=88)
1	Initiator	10 (2%)	3 (0.6%)	2 (0.9%)	0 (0%)
2	Actor + Goal	164 (32.3%)	75 (15.8%)	47 (20.3%)	23 (26.1%)
3	Actor – Goal or + Scope	94 (18.5%)	124 (26.1%)	51 (22%)	15 (17%)
	Sayer	20 (3.9%)	31 (6.5%)	14 (6%)	5 (5.7%)
	Behaver	17 (3.3%)	16 (3.4%)	13 (5.6%)	10 (11.4%)
	Senser	2 (0.4%)	2 (0.4%)	1 (0.4%)	0 (0%)
4	Carrier	71 (14%)	128 (26.9%)	18 (7.8%)	9 (10.2%)
	Token	38 (7.5%)	45 (9.5%)	4 (1.7%)	5 (5.7%)
5	Attribute	7 (1.4%)	4 (0.8%)	2 (0.9%)	0 (0%)
	Target	3 (0.6%)	3 (0.6%)	2 (0.9%)	0 (0%)
6	Goal	82 (16.1%)	45 (9.5%)	78 (33.6%)	21 (23.9%)

4.3 Nomination strategies in the verbal processes

The final step of the analysis examines how social actors are nominated in the verbal processes in the concordance-corpora. As evident in Table 8, fansubbers and Internet users are frequently represented by informal names (i.e. screen names, pseudonyms, and given names), while lawyers, scholars, and company representatives are represented by semiformal names (given names + surnames) or formal names (titles + surnames). This discrepancy seems to imply that fansubbers enjoy a lower social status than lawyers, scholars, and company representatives. It is also important to note that of the 81 instances of using semiformal names to represent fansubbers, 42 (or 51.9%) are about the same person: Liang Liang (one of the team leaders in YYeTs). He was the most outspoken fansubber, taking various interviews from 2007 to 2012. If his overrepresentation is disregarded, the percentages of formal and semiformal nomination of fansubbers are very low. This might be caused by two reasons. First, the press strategically use informal names to represent fansubbers as ordinary people who treat subtitling practices more as a hobby than a job. As the following extract shows, the media construct an amateur, mundane identity of fansubbers vis-à-vis a professional identity:

Xiu'ai, 19 years old, ... was crazy for Korean dramas. Xiu'ai "gradually fell in love with the Korean language" and started to work as a fansubber by chance. (2006-7)

Second, due to potential legal implications, fansubbers either masked their real names by taking online interviews or they asked reporters not to disclose any information that would reveal their identities:

The reporter interviewed three fansubbers online. Due to various reasons, they declined to disclose their identities or the fansub groups they are in. (2009-53)

Xiao Wugu [screen name] accrues many translation experiences working as a fansubber. She now expands to professional translation business, having published her translation of an English novel. She urged the reporter “not to expose the name of the book. Otherwise, my real name will be known!” (2011-73)

Table 8

Nomination strategies of social actors

Nomination	Fansubbers	Internet users	Lawyers	Scholars	Company representatives
Formal	8 (3.3%)	2 (5.6%)	3 (17.6%)	0	1 (3.8%)
Semiformal	81 (33.6%)	10 (27.8%)	14 (82.4%)	24 (100%)	25 (96.2%)
Informal	152 (63.1%)	24 (66.7%)	0	0	0

5. Discussion

The corpus findings show that the media discourse about fansubbers is multifaceted and dynamic, rather than monolithic or static. The discourse is multifaceted in that it evokes potentially conflicting frames to characterize fansubbers. The discourse topics of *sharing* and *volunteerism* frame fansubbers as altruistic translators committed to creation and dissemination of intellectual resources for the public. By contrast, the topics of *copyright* and *commercialization* frame fansubbers as infringers who should abandon their illegal practices and cooperate with media platforms with a sound legal status. The diachronic development of these discourse topics indicates that no one single topic dominates the media reports over the 13-year span. The topic of *volunteerism* was most salient in 2006 and 2007. The topic of *copyright* took the lead in 2009, 2014 and 2018, while the topic of *sharing* was most prominent in eight of the 13 years. The fluctuating percentages of the four topics attest to the dynamic and mixed media stances about fansubbers. Interestingly, the topic of *copyright* spiked whenever the authorities took legal actions against fansubbers as part of China’s annual campaign to tackle Internet-based copyright infringement. The hypes might be caused by the newsworthiness of the events, as media attentions are usually drawn to negative, recent happenings (Bednarek and Caple, 2014). However, when the annual campaign did not include fansubbers as targets of their legal actions, the topics of *sharing* and *volunteerism* were more prominent in media representations to moralize fansubbers. Judged from the diachronic preponderance of the topic of *sharing*, the Chinese press appear to have the interests of the general public in mind, reflecting a recent media trend of “[demonstrating] their affinity to the people” in China (Ge and Wang, 2018, p. 61). This observation is

corroborated by the “actors” keywords (see Table 4), the majority of which are ordinary people in the reportage. Of final note is the topic of *commercialization*, which can be regarded as an instantiation of the “solutions journalism” approach (McIntyre, 2019) to the moral-legal dilemma experienced by fansubbers. By definition, solutions journalism focuses on what is being (or has been) done to solve a specific issue, rather than what the issue is. The topic of *commercialization* explores the (dis)advantages of fansubbers cooperating with video-streaming platforms that have acquired licensed contents. Given the paucity of the *commercialization* topic, it could be argued that the Chinese press do not foreground the solutions that might reconcile fansubbers’ conflicting moral and legal statuses.

The corpus-assisted analysis also unravels the complexities of discursive strategies in at least two aspects. First, discursive strategies work in combination to construct selective realities about fansubbers. For instance, the assignment of higher and lower agency roles jointly reinforce positive and negative representations (Thompson, 2008) of fansubbers. On the one hand, fansubbers are moralized as social actors who *disseminate* resources, *share* knowledge, and *break* cultural barriers. (Italicized words in this paragraph are all significant collocates, see Table 5). They are portrayed as willing and capable cultural brokers who enable the public to enjoy otherwise inaccessible video contents. As such, when fansubbers are represented as Goals, they are usually *thanked*, *appreciated*, and *respected* by the general public. On the other hand, in the legal frame, fansubbers are expressed as Actors in negative processes, who *infringe* products, *distribute* unlicensed videos, and *violate* copyrights. These high-agency actions increase the sense of financial threat and harm to copyright holders, thereby justifying legal actions against fansubbers. This explains why fansubbers are represented as Goals in the processes of being *investigated*, *disbanded*, and *merged*. Collectively, these examples show that discursive strategies (e.g. high-agency and low-agency role assignments) work together and feed into competing media frames (moral vs. legal).

Second, media representations are complex in that the same discursive strategies simultaneously fulfil moralizing and delegitimizing functions. As reported in Section 4.3, fansubbers and Internet users are much more frequently identified by obscure, informal names than lawyers, scholars, and company representatives, who are always identified by their real, (semi)formal names. Informal and (semi-)formal names are linguistic instantiations of nomination strategies, which are deployed to signify social status (van Leeuwen, 2008). At a glance, informal names can be treated as a delegitimizing strategy in our news corpus. Fansubbers are considered as non-professional translators (Antonini and Bucaria, 2015; Pérez-González and Susam-Saraeva, 2012; Wu, 2017), while lawyers, scholars, and company representatives are professionals. As such, informal names reinforce their amateur images and diminish their legitimacy. Furthermore, the media use obscure names (i.e. screen names and pseudonyms) to represent fansubbers because they decline to reveal their real names or they request the reporters not to disclose their identities. If real names are used, they may invite troubles to the fansubbers being reported and the fansub group they are working in (Wu, 2017). Thus, anonymity leaves readers an impression of fansubbers evading legal actions and consequences. While these delegitimizing effects seem natural and reasonable, a more nuanced, complex interpretation is that informal names (inadvertently) moralize fansubbers as “Robin Hood” (Luczaj and Holy-Luczaj, 2017, p.

165) in the Chinese press. In this sense, fansubbers are ordinary Internet users with a good intention to share subtitled contents that are otherwise unavailable or subject to delayed scheduling. Fansubbers' identities remain unknown because they do not seek fame or adulation. They quietly act for the public good and they are "one of us" — coming *from* the Internet community and working *for* the community. On this note, the same linguistic choice (i.e. informal names) can simultaneously delegitimize and moralize fansubbers, creating incompatible statuses and an indeterminate social position.

6. Conclusion

This study adopts a CADS design and examines how the Chinese press discursively construct the moral and legal statuses of fansubbers between 2006 and 2018. The findings reveal the multifaceted, dynamic, and complex nature of media representations. The ambivalent social position of fansubbers is shaped by conflicting moral/legal frames, shifting dominant discourse topics, and complex discursive strategies. The contribution of this study can be summarized in two points. First, as CDA is committed to "the understanding and tackling of social problems" (Lin, 2014, p. 214), this study provides insight into the (counter)productive roles that media discourse plays in solving fansubbers' moral-legal dilemma. The Chinese press, to a large extent, perpetuate the moral-legal predicament, without foregrounding the solutions. Over a span of 13 years, the media discourse has functioned like a pendulum, oscillating between moralization and delegitimization of fansubbers. The topic of *commercialization* (which is potentially solution-oriented), albeit present, is underrepresented in the corpus. Therefore, more practices of solutions journalism are needed to reconcile the moral and legal statuses of fansubbers. Second, unlike previous scholarship that focuses on social groups positioned at either end of the status cline (privileged vs. disadvantaged), this study illustrates the epistemic and explanatory power of the CADS approach to unpacking complex discursive strategies in representing a group with a conflicting social position. Discursive strategies work together to selectively frame realities and even the same discursive strategy can simultaneously delegitimize and moralize fansubbers, thereby activating contradictory media frames and reinforcing the conflicting social position of fansubbers. These findings shed important light on the nuanced and complicated connections between media frames, stances, and linguistic choices in representing social groups with an ambiguous status.

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