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Presenting America Through the Translation Gate: A Case Study of *Reference News* on the WeChat Public Account Platform

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ABSTRACT

Translation has rarely been the analytical focus in communication and journalism studies, which might be ascribed to an outdated understanding of the term "translation." This study highlighted the crucial role of the translation gate in curating news narratives. It adopts an extended conceptualization of journalistic translation, which considers translation in news production as a two-level gatekeeping practice. Specifically, this study aimed to investigate translation's gatekeeping function at the macro level. To this end, popular translated news reports covering the United States posted in 2020 on the WeChat account of an official Chinese media outlet, *Reference News* (RN), were collected. By employing content analysis, this study scrutinized the sources used, topics covered, and story tones of the collected reports. The findings indicate that RN exhibited a preference for established and pro-China media sources in covering the United States. The topics in the examined reports were mostly hard news with a few instances of soft news. While the majority of news reports were negative, positive stories were also identified, demonstrating RN's efforts to disseminate constructive journalism.

Introduction

In a highly globalized information era, translation has become an integral part of news production. Nevertheless, the role of translation is mostly examined by scholars of translation studies (TS) but largely overlooked by journalism scholars, with only a handful of relevant studies published in the field. One frequently mentioned example is the second issue of the twelfth volume of *Journalism* published in 2011, which focused on examining various translation phenomena observed within the BBC World Service from myriad aspects. The findings gave prominence to the traces of translation in newsrooms, underlining that "the implications of 'translation' for the study of journalism are far wider and

deeper" (Baumann, Gillespie, and Sreberny 2011, 238). However, the conceptualization of translation demonstrated in such studies was mostly confined to an equivalence-based and language-centered sense. For instance, Zou (2021) directly addressed the detrimental impact of translation on spreading misinformation and false news stories, drawing on the seminal work on news translation by Bielsa and Bassnett (2009). Based on an expanded conceptualization of translation, Williamson Sinalo (2022) carried out a comparative analysis across five news outlets, investigating how the 2015 crisis in Burundi was presented differently by the examined organizations. These attempts by non-TS scholars have showcased the interface shared by journalism and TS, which has yet to be "translated into a close cooperation" between the two disciplines (Valdeón 2022b, 1407).

Papers published in journals of journalism studies bear witness to the active participation of translation scholars in boosting dialogue between translation and journalism studies. Translation scholar Valdeón (2018, 2020, 2022a) has been a leading figure in bridging the gap between translation and journalism studies. His work has appeared in *Journalism* and *Journalism Studies*, two prestigious journals in the field of journalism. In one contribution, he examined how the notion of translation is employed in journalism studies (Valdeón 2018). His 2020 paper on *Journalism Studies* further highlighted the presence of translation since the birth of journalism in Europe and mentions possible future research avenues interconnecting journalism and TS (Valdeón 2020). Drawing on gatekeeping, a classic concept from communication studies, Valdeón (2022a) examined translation's function as a first-level gatekeeping mechanism, which determines what articles could be selected for rendition. As guest editor, Valdeón also edited a special issue dedicated to journalistic translation, which brought together translation and journalism scholars to explore news translation practices from various perspectives (Valdeón 2022b). Compared with the large volume of existing journalistic translation research (JTR) undertaken by translation scholars, investigations concerning the impact of translation on news have been rarely undertaken by journalism scholars, which may be partly attributed to an outdated understanding of the concept of translation as "a purely interlingual equivalence practice" (van Doorslaer 2022, 171). This lack of engagement in journalism studies can be remedied by keeping journalistic academia informed "about the developing views on the concept of translation" (van Doorslaer 2018, 223).

This study first introduces the interdisciplinary and broadened conceptualization proposed by Valdeón (2021; 2022a), which regards translation as a dual-level gatekeeping practice in news production. This expanded definition is expected to encourage cooperation between translation and journalism studies. A case study examining translation as a first-level gatekeeping mechanism in the production of translated news is then presented.

Gatekeeping and Journalistic Translation

In TS, the conceptualization of translation is an enduring topic within the field as it "inevitably links to the related discussion about the object and scope of translation studies (TS)" (van Doorslaer 2021, 7). Although a consensus on conceptualizing translation within the TS world remains elusive (Bielsa 2021), it is certain that "a narrow linguistic view" of understanding translation has become obsolete (Schäffner 2012, 880). In his contribution on the use of the term "translation" in current journalism literature, Valdeón (2018) found that translation

was often understood in a narrow linguistic sense in the research articles under question, also revealing a general lack of awareness of the recent developments of JTR in TS. Therefore, a crucial step for bridging journalism and TS and encouraging interdisciplinary collaboration is to "harmonize conceptualizations of translation" (Valdeón 2023, 257).

In the existing JTR literature, many alternative labels have been employed to refer to the complex practices involved in producing translated news, such as trans-editing (Qin and Zhang 2020; Stetting 1989; Zhang 2013), localization (Orengo 2005), and transformation (Kuo and Nakamura 2005). While these terms may highlight the complexity of journalistic translation as a practice replete with various mediations and adaptations, they also risk impeding the development of TS by perpetuating the notion of translation as "a purely word-for-word transfer process" (Schäffner 2012, 881). Instead of devising new terms as alternatives to translation, a step forward for JTR is to broaden the concept of translation itself (Davier 2015; Li 2024; Schäffner 2012; Valdeón 2023), which could facilitate interdisciplinary interactions with journalism studies and extend its research scope.

The conceptualization of translation proposed by Valdeón (2020, 2021, 2022a) is particularly relevant to this study. According to Valdeón (2020, 2021, 2022a), translation serves a two-level gatekeeping function in news production, determining the selection of texts to be translated first and then the transformations undergone by the chosen texts. In news production, gatekeeping is understood as the process of shaping and molding a plethora of information before it is transformed into media messages for a target readership, which involves various transformations and (de)selection decisions (Shoemaker and Vos 2009). However, translation remains overlooked in the gatekeeping framework, despite its supposed status as "one of the gates in the news media channel" (Kalantari 2022, 1416). Fujii (1988) was likely the first translation scholar to link the concept of gatekeeping to news translation, drawing on the concept of exploring news translation practices in the Japanese context. Fujii (1988) identified four gatekeeping functions of translation: "controlling, transforming, supplementing, and reorganizing messages" (37). The idea of interconnecting gatekeeping and translation was further developed by Vuorinen (1997), who revisited Fuji's 1988 article and other pertinent literature on gatekeeping to propose an understanding of news translation that diverged from that of Fujii. While Fujii (1988) posited that the actual gatekeeping functions in news translation were beyond mere translation, suggesting translation as a matter of faithful, word-for-word transfer, Vuorinen (1997) contended that the various "gatekeeping operations" observed in news translation should be regarded as an inextricable part of translation, a conceptualization that liberates translation from "a narrow definition" (170).

Building on these early interdisciplinary endeavors, JTR literature has frequently brought up the notion of gatekeeping, examining the transformations taking place at the translation gate. For instance, Song (2017) bridged gatekeeping and translation by investigating the selection of English news articles for translation by a Korean official news agency and private news agencies, indicating that power relations play a significant role in determining the materials chosen for producing translated news, thus affecting the gatekeeping operations conducted by media outlets. Valdeón (2022a) argued that material selection represents another macro-level gatekeeping process pertinent to translation and warrants consideration in the study of translated news. His study borrowed the concept of "ideological affinity" to examine how translation as a first-level gatekeeping mechanism influences the content covered by the English

edition of a Spanish newspaper. Kalantari (2022) drew on the five-level gatekeeping framework developed by Shoemaker and Vos (2009) to examine the role of translation across each gatekeeping level, emphasizing that the translation gate should not be absent in investigating the gatekeeping process and will elicit a more comprehensive description of the complex journalistic field. While much research has focused on "the actual interlinguistic transformations applied to the texts made available to non-domestic audiences" (Valdeón 2022a, 120–121), the role of translation in selecting information to be translated on the macro level in producing journalistic content remains an overlooked aspect in JTR. Thus, this research undertakes a case study to investigate how translation operates as a primary gatekeeping mechanism, specifically by examining popular translated news stories about the United States published on the WeChat account of a renowned Chinese media outlet.

Reference News in China's Ever-Changing Media Environment

Reference News (RN) is an official news organization sponsored by the *Xinhua News Agency*. RN has long held the position of the newspaper with the largest circulation in China, managing to maintain its popularity despite rapid changes in China's journalistic landscape since the 1970s. As one of China's oldest newspapers (established in 1931), RN stands out from other opposite numbers by holding exclusive rights to publish translated news stories from sources outside the Chinese mainland, which partially explains RN's popularity among Chinese readers (Rudolph 1984; Zhou, Sun, and Deng 2021). Before 1978, all news organizations in China were state-funded; however, since the reform and opening-up, the government stopped subsidizing these media outlets, encouraging them to finance themselves through advertising and subscriptions, which resulted in the marketization of China's media environment (Zhang 2015). In other words, even for official news organizations such as RN, it is essential to embrace transformations to survive in a more competitive media environment that allows the existence of "market-driven and readership-oriented" news outlets on top of party-oriented ones (Li 1998, 308). Moreover, the emergence of the Internet and mobile phones has resulted in the digitalization of journalism in China. According to the *52nd Statistical Report on China's Internet Development*, approximately 781 million people consume online news, accounting for over 70 percent of all Internet users (CNNIC 2023). Confronted with the challenges posed by digitalization, the Chinese government has proposed the concept of media convergence to encourage traditional news media to embrace digital transformation. Regardless of the various changes experienced by the press, it should be noted that media outlets in China are subject to government supervision and are mandated to prioritize the Party's interests (Wang 2023).

RN has seized the opportunity to become trendsetters, adapting to the changes brought about by marketization and digitalization (Chase 2018). Established in 2011, RN's Weibo account has garnered more than 24 million followers. Its official website (www.cankaoxiaoxi.com) was launched in January 2012 and garnered over 15 million daily page views during its peak (Zhou, Sun, and Deng 2021, 25). RN's WeChat subscription account, the research focus of this study, was created in 2012 and now boasts a readership of over 6 million (Cankaoxiaoxi 2022). According to *The 2019 Communication Index Report of Chinese Newspaper Convergence* (People.cn, 2020), RN's WeChat account ranked fourth in terms of communication influence. Another notable transformation is the debut

of RN's digital newspaper in 2021, which requires a subscription and is accessed via RN's WeChat account. The digital newspaper aims to engage new audiences, particularly young Chinese students and overseas Chinese, while creatively advancing RN's media convergence efforts (Zhou, Yun, and Meng 2022).

As a unique news organization that produces many translated journalistic texts, RN has attracted considerable attention from translation scholars (Pan 2014, 2015; Pan and Liao 2021; Ping 2022; Wu 2018; Xia 2019). Nevertheless, except for the contributions by Zeng and Li (2023a, 2023b), existing literature examining RN's journalistic translation practices has mostly focused on news texts published in RN's printed newspapers and websites, overlooking the journalistic content produced by RN's accounts on platforms such as Weibo and WeChat, despite their having attracted a large number of readers. Given that social media has become a major channel for accessing information, we deemed it necessary to investigate translated news discourse published on these novel and emerging platforms. Therefore, this study analyzes translated news reports published on RN's popular WeChat subscription account.

Methodology

Data Collection

This study focused on popular translated news articles about the United States published by RN on WeChat in 2020. Using a software named *WeChat Article Assistant* (https://www.juyimv.cn/), 12,354 articles published by RN's WeChat account in 2020 were collected, along with metadata such as publication time, click-through rate, and content creators. The following criteria were established to select WeChat articles for analysis: published in 2020; translated news stories covering the United States; and captured more than 100,000 clicks (a key traffic indicator for the popularity of a WeChat article). Additionally, reposts from other news organizations, unsourced compilations, and non-news content (opinions, editorials, videos, interviews, and book reviews) were excluded. Ultimately, 515 WeChat articles were included in the analysis. A main RN-translated news story is often supplemented with additional materials to provide readers with further information and context regarding the reported stories (Zhang and Zeng 2023). To maintain the research focus, supplemental content was not considered in the analysis. Based on the refined dataset, this study seeks to address the following research questions:

(1) What media outlets have been selected for covering the United States and have gained popularity on RN's WeChat account?
(2) What are the topics and story tones of the collected translated news reports?
(3) What are the possible forces that might have influenced RN's selection patterns at the translation gate?

Analytical Procedure

To respond to the research questions, this study primarily employs content analysis, a methodological approach that enables researchers to systematically "describe, categorize, and/or make inferences about communication messages" (Croucher and Cronn-Mills 2018, 176).

The first dimension analyzed was the sources RN employed to report issues related to the United States. The identification of sources was based on a meticulous and comprehensive reading of the texts to detect traces of the source RN used for translation. A three-column Microsoft Excel spreadsheet was used for analysis. The first column, entitled target text (TT) headlines, contains the titles of the 515 WeChat articles. The second column includes URLs for the sampled texts published on RN's WeChat accounts, whereas the third column was reserved for the manual coding of news sources. We accessed the full texts individually through URLs in the second column, identified the media sources explicitly mentioned in the WeChat articles, and documented these sources in their corresponding entries in the third column. The third column presents all the media sources that RN opted for to cover the United States in the collected data. We then tallied the frequency of each news organization and analyzed the geographical distribution of these media sources.

The categorization of news topics opted for an open coding process, meaning that topic codes were developed iteratively during the coding process and subsequently grouped into distinct categories. The identification of news topics was based on the actors and events featured in news reports. Following the initial round of categorization, 11 general topics were identified. This 11-item topic list served as the basis for topic coding. We added a "Topic" column to the Excel spreadsheet previously used for media source identification. A dropdown list containing 11 topics was created for this column. We accessed and carefully read the full texts published on RN's WeChat accounts, assigning each article a topic code from the drop-down list. The frequency of each topic was calculated using Excel's data filtering function.

Three node categories were predefined to code the story tones exhibited by the collected news stories: positive, negative, and neutral. Definitions of the story tones are provided in Table 1. The story tones conveyed in the collected news reports were examined in an Excel spreadsheet created previously with a new column entitled "Story Tone." A dropdown list consisting of positive, negative, and neutral responses was created and

Table 1. Definitions of the story tones.

Story tone	Definition	Examples
Negative	A news report is assigned a negative code if the content or the headline of the story implies a negative tone toward the United States or America-related events/figures/organizations delineated (e.g., the pandemic situation in the US, Donald Trump, Mike Pompeo, CDC, the US military, and the US government).	致美国12万人死亡的流感已蔓延至欧洲 [The flu that has killed 120,000 people in the United States has spread to Europe]
Neutral	A news report is categorized under the neutral heading if no prominent attitude toward the covered US-related events, figures, and organizations can be discerned in the headline or the content of the story.	特朗普称自己很可能很快接受新冠病毒检测 [Trump says he is likely to be tested for the coronavirus soon]
Positive	A news report is assigned a positive code if the content or the headline of the story implies a positive tone toward the United States or America-related events/figures/organizations delineated (e.g., American doctors who collaborated with Chinese doctors and Bill Gates, the Tennessee State).	情况紧急中美联合伸出援手 [In an emergency, China and the United States jointly extend a helping hand]

used to categorize the collected data after reviewing the full news stories via the entries in the URL column of the spreadsheet.

Manual analysis involves inherent subjectivity. Following Bednarek (2015), this study prioritizes coding consistency, transparency, and persuasiveness, rather than pursuing inter-coder reliability through multiple coders. Intra-coder reliability was assessed by having the first author recode a randomly selected 10% subset of the data after a time gap of over three months, measuring the stability of coding decisions over time. For the identification of story tones, Cohen's kappa was 0.7615, indicating substantial agreement (Landis and Koch 1977), and Krippendorff's Alpha was 0.7612, demonstrating tentative reliability (Krippendorff 2018). For topic classification, Cohen's kappa was 0.8828, reflecting almost perfect agreement (Landis and Koch 1977), and Krippendorff's Alpha was 0.8837, indicating high reliability (Krippendorff 2018).

Results

News Sources Selected for Translation

Figure 1 shows the geographical distribution of news sources that RN chose to cover the United States, ranging from the most to the least. The top 20 news organizations are shown in Figure 2. The top 10 countries and regions supplying media resources for RN's translations are the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Russia, Hong Kong SAR, Germany, Japan, Singapore, Spain, and Chinese Taiwan, which account for over 97 percent of the sources identified. Additionally, less prominent media sources from countries such as North Korea, Cuba, Iran, Colombia, Argentina, and the Philippines were also observed, albeit in smaller numbers. RN's translations were not limited to
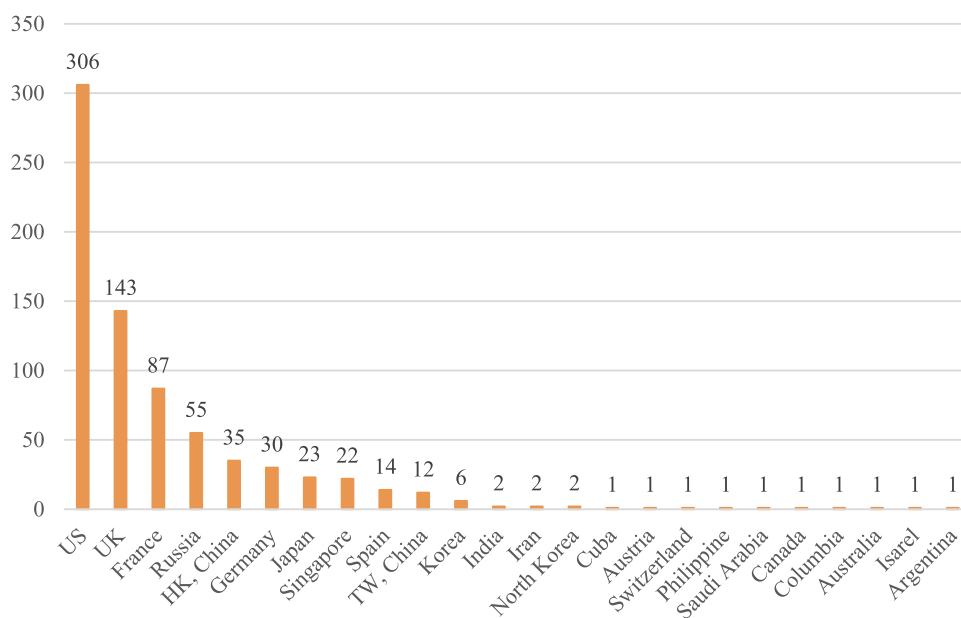

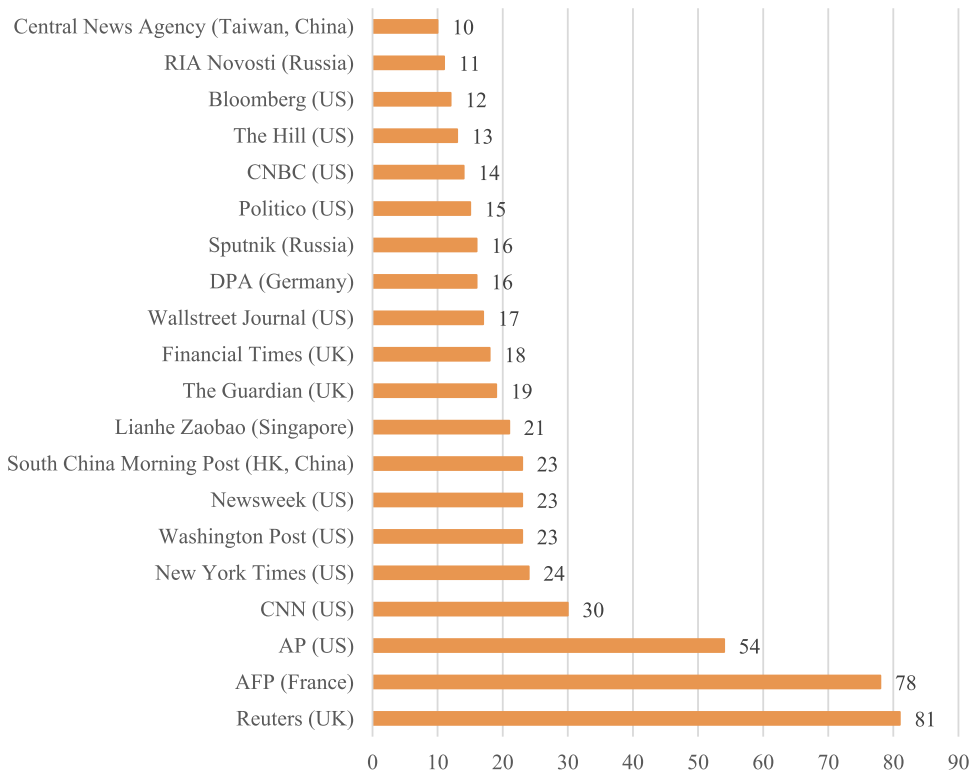**Figure 1.** Geographical distribution of the news sources selected.

Figure 2. Top 20 media sources.

English-language sources; the outlet also translated news texts from languages such as Japanese, German, Korean, Spanish, and Chinese.

The substantial percentage of the American, British, and French press is unsurprising, considering that the "Big Four" news agencies, including *Reuters*, *Associated Press* (AP), *United Press International* (UPI), and *Agence France Presse* (AFP) originate from these three nations (Bell 1991, 48). Although UPI experienced a decline in influence, leading to its bankruptcy and eventual sale in 2000 (Palmer 2019), the remaining three agencies continue to be pivotal players in the global news landscape. This is further corroborated by Figure 2, which illustrates that the three news agencies that RN frequently relied upon were Reuters, AP, and AFP. Since the 1990s, Western media have maintained a dominant position in the international journalistic arena, with the "Big Four" playing crucial roles in supplying information to media organizations worldwide, particularly those in "Asia, Africa, and Latin America" (Meng 2021, 57–58).

Russian media stands out as another frequently employed source covering America in the data, especially *Sputnik* and *RIA Novosti*. Both *Sputnik* and *RIA Novosti* are part of *Rossiya Segodnya*, Russia's most influential media conglomerate. *Sputnik* operates as an international brand under *Rossiya Segodnya*, offering news in multiple languages to present untold stories and "different voices" to its target audience (Rossiyasegodnya). *RIA Novosti* serves as a platform for Russian and global news, with a mission statement on the website of *Rossiya Segodnya* that emphasizes its commitment to providing "an

accurate picture of the day as it unfolds" (Rossiyasegodnya). A report detailing RN's translation resources and team suggests that Russian mainstream media are often given priority in RN's news selection process due to their perceived "objective and rational" approach to reporting on China and international affairs involving China (Cankaoxiaoxi.com 2021).

Traces of media outlets from Hong Kong SAR were notably present, with the *South China Morning Post* (SCMP) ranking as one of the top 10 sources translated by RN to cover the United States. According to statistics released by the Centre for Communication and Public Opinion Survey (2022) of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, *SCMP* continues to be the most credible paid newspaper in Hong Kong, voted upon by citizens. The significant presence of news content produced by *SCMP* in RN's "successful" output on WeChat might be attributed to its reputable journalistic practices. Other selected Hong Kong media sources include English-language newspapers, such as *Asia Times,* and Chinese-language newspapers, such as *DuoWei News*, *Ming Pao*, *Sing Tao Daily*, and *Hong Kong Economic Journal*.

Following Hong Kong media resources are German ones, among which the *German Press Agency* (DPA) is the most frequent German news organization and one of the top 20 sources from which RN drew materials for translation. The prevalence of DPA among German media sources is expected, given that DPA is the largest newsroom in Europe and one of the major news agencies globally (Iglhaut, 7 April 2020). Other German sources include prominent media outlets such as *Der Spiegel*, the news magazine with the largest circulation in Germany, and Germany's state-owned media, *Deutsche Welle*.

Notably, Japanese media sources ranked seventh among the sources identified in the collected data. Japan has a dynamic media landscape, with newspapers achieving substantial circulation and a readership eager for diverse information (McNeill 2019, 59). In discussing Japan's newspaper industry, the big five Japanese national dailies must be mentioned, including "*Yomiuri Shimbun*, *Asahi Shimbun*, *Mainichi Shimbun*, *Sankei Shimbun*, and *Nikkei Shimbun*" (Guo, Li, and Chen 2020, 100). These five prominent newspapers represent approximately 74 percent of the Japanese media sources identified in the data, demonstrating RN's tendency to rely on mainstream media in foreign countries to present international affairs via translation. Traces of *Kyodo News* and *Nikkei Asia* were also noted. *Kyodo News* accounted for over 20 percent of the Japanese sources rendered by RN. The frequent selection of *Kyodo News* is understandable, given that it is one of Japan's two major wire services and "the most reliable news agency" in Japan (Kyodonews; Matsushita 2019).

Singaporean media emerged as another frequently used media source. Two Singaporean newspapers were identified: the Chinese-language newspaper *Lianhe Zaobao* (Zaobao) and the English-language newspaper *The Straits Times*. The subsequent analysis primarily focuses on the use of Zaobao in RN's journalistic output, as Zaobao ranks among the top 10 media sources selected by RN, and *The Strait Times* features less prominently. As one of the most influential Chinese-language newspapers in Singapore, Zaobao boasts a readership of 40,000 people and enjoys a substantial following from other countries and regions, including China (Lianhezaobao). The online version of Zaobao has captivated a significant number of loyal readers in China, accounting for approximately 85−90 percent of the website's daily traffic (Chyi, Lee, and Tennant 2019). Furthermore,

Zaobao consistently exhibits a friendly and positive stance toward China and its development, a characteristic that is prominently highlighted on its introduction page (Lianhezaobao). The newspaper's popularity among Chinese readers and its cordial relationship with China make Zaobao a good choice for translation on RN's WeChat account.

Four Spanish media sources—*El País*, *La Vanguardia*, *EFE News Agency*, and *Rebelión*—were identified in the collected texts. Except for *Rebelión*, an independent and nonprofit news website with only one occurrence in the data, the remaining three outlets can be classified as mainstream Spanish media outlets. Both *El País* and *La Vanguardia* are categorized as "main Spanish news outlets" in the *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2023* (Newman et al. 2023, 98). *Agencia EFE*, the most influential Spanish news agency, and the world's fourth-largest wire service (Reuters, 4 November 2019), was also noted as a key Spanish media source translated by RN.

News organizations from Chinese Taiwan selected by RN for translation included *Central News Agency* (CNA), *China Times,* and *UDN News*. CNA accounted for over 80 percent of the identified media sources from Chinese Taiwan, whereas the other two agencies were mentioned only once in the collected texts. Established in 1924 in Guangzhou by the Chinese Kuomintang Party and later relocated to Chinese Taiwan in 1949, it has become the most influential and authoritative news agency in the Taiwan region (www.taiwan.cn, 2006). The prevalence of CNA can be attributed to its extensive impact as an official news agency in Chinese Taiwan. Furthermore, the importance of the Taiwan question in China–US relations could be another critical factor contributing to the high percentage of media sources from Chinese Taiwan (Xiying Zuo 2021a, 2021b).

RN resorted to media sources from various regions and in multiple languages to cover matters concerning the US. Traditional elite news agencies with global reputations, such as *Reuters*, *AP,* and *AFP*, constitute the majority of media sources translated into Chinese by RN. Two criteria were identified in RN's source selection: the media source should be highly influential in its respective location, or the chosen publication should offer news coverage that is more favorable to China.

Topics and Tones of the Translated News Stories

Topics Covered in the Translated News Reports

Figure 3 shows the distribution of the news topics. The top five topics discerned included COVID-19, China–US relations, the US presidential election, international affairs, and US politics, accounting for over 80 percent of the data. The prominence of COVID-19 is understandable given its significant impact on and lasting changes in the global landscape in 2020. Therefore, the substantial coverage of COVID-19 in RN reports in the United States, marked by high traffic numbers, appears to be justified. Given that RN is a Chinese news organization, news coverage regarding China–US relations would surely capture Chinese readers' attention. When assessing China–US relations, issues related to Chinese Taiwan, Hong Kong SAR, and the South China Sea are often broached (Tao 2017). Relevant news was also relatively conspicuous in the translated news reports under the heading of China–US relations. In addition, news reports regarding Huawei and TikTok, both accused by Trump of jeopardizing American national security and facing numerous restrictions in the US (Cohen 2020; Miao, Huang, and Huang 2023), were identified. The US presidential election, along with America's international affairs involving countries
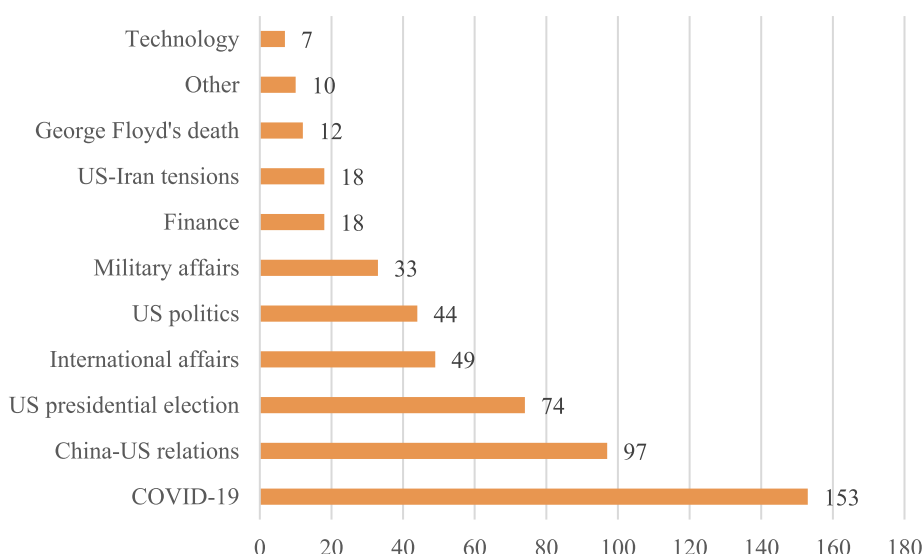
Figure 3. Distribution of news topics.

such as Germany and Russia, and US politics, also garnered attention from RN's audiences. Other topics less frequently covered in news stories include military affairs, US-Iran relations, finance, the murder of George Floyd, and technology.

The topics highlighted in the 2020 popular US-related translated reports on RN's WeChat account encompassed many high-profile news events that dominated international headlines. The two predominant news topics concerning America in 2020 were probably the pandemic and the US presidential election, both of which were quite salient in the analyzed data. For instance, in January 2020, Trump authorized the assassination of the high-ranking Iranian General, Qasem Soleimani, in Iraq; in retaliation, Iran launched missile attacks on a US military base in Iraq. News stories related to this event constituted a significant portion of the content under the theme of US-Iran tensions. The death of George Floyd, a tragedy that underscored the deeply entrenched issue of racism within the US police force and sparked nationwide protests, also garnered attention from RN's WeChat account and its audiences. Most of the topics mentioned above fall into the category of hard news, which Patterson (2000) defines as the coverage of breaking events concerning "top leaders, major issues, or significant disruptions in the routines of daily life" (3).

In addition to hard news topics, traces of soft news were noted, although they were scarce. Soft news is characterized by sensationalism, a focus on human interests, and less dependence on timeliness (Patterson 2000). Within the category labelled as "other," two news pieces could be classified as soft news. Examples 1 and 2 are headlines from stories concerning Trump's hair color, a topic seemingly peripheral to politically oriented issues. The only attractive element of these new reports was likely the mention of Trump, whose identity as the American president made him newsworthy. The eliteness and prominence of the top US leader have made even the most trivial aspects of the president's life subjects of media coverage (Parks 2020)—in RN's case, Trump's hair. To summarize, RN's WeChat followers were mainly interested in the most

up-to-date journalistic content on China's "frenemy"; occasionally, soft news relevant to elite figures might also capture readers' attention.

Example 1

特朗普头发颜色咋变了？[Why has the color of Trump's hair changed?] (RN, 16 July 2020e)

Example 2

特朗普"愁"白了头？[Trump is so "worried" that his hair has turned grey?] (RN, 14 November 2020d)

Story Tones of the Translated News Reports

Figure 4 shows the distribution of story tone in the news stories under question. Over 70 percent of the data emphasized the negative aspects of the United States, such as portraying Trump as an incapable president, accentuating the deteriorating pandemic situation, the bleak outlook of the US economy, and criticizing America's various actions perceived as deliberate provocations targeting China. Examples 3, 4, and 5 are typical examples of negative news stories about America posted by RN on WeChat.

Example 3

美国医院拉响警报：年轻患者越来越多　医生向黑市求购防护装备　[American hospitals sound the alarm: young patients are increasing; doctors turn to the black market for PPE] (RN, 30 March 2020i)

Example 4

美国国家战略储备中的个人防护装备几乎耗尽 拜登："国家耻辱" [PPE in US strategic stockpile nearly depleted; Biden: "A national disgrace"] (RN, 10 April 2020a)

Example 5

美国确诊病例超50万，纽约死亡病例快速上升 [America has more than 500,000 confirmed cases; death toll in New York surges] (RN, 11 April 2020b)

While negative news coverage predominated the dataset, positive stories that commended both ordinary and elite Americans were also identified. Eight news reports
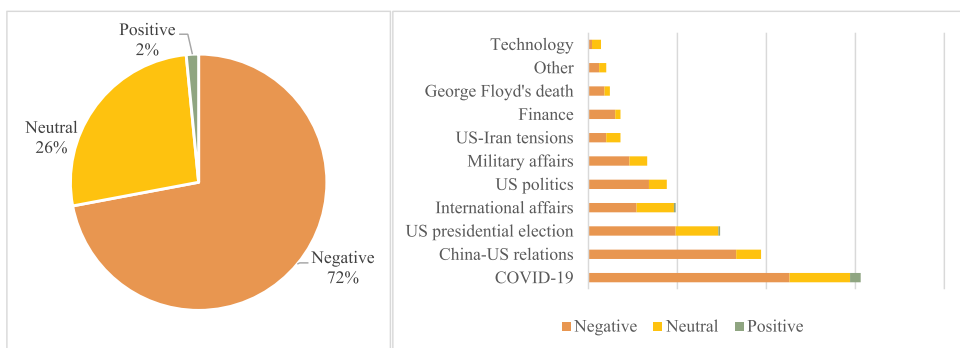

Figure 4. Distribution of story tones.

were categorized as positive: topics covered Bill Gates' donation to the WHO, New York's gradual recovery from the pandemic, Biden's appreciative response to China's congratulatory message on his election victory, a US farmer's mask donation to New York State, and various collaborations between China and the United States. Notably, half of the positive news stories focused on China–US cooperation among doctors and researchers from the nations rather than state-level interactions. Examples 6 and 7 are headlines from two news stories that portray cooperation between Chinese and American doctors and researchers in a positive light, praising their joint efforts to combat the virus and investigate the origins of COVID-19. In contrast to reports highlighting the negative aspects of the US, these stories underscore the significance of unity during the global health crisis. While casting American medical professionals and scientists in a favorable light, these pieces also emphasize China's commitment to participating in international efforts to control the pandemic (CD, 16 April 2020). Examples 8 and 9 were drawn from two news stories: one that focused on the commendable actions of Bill and Melinda Gates, and another that focused on an American farmer. The former describes the elite couple's generous donation to the WHO, while the latter recounts the heartfelt gesture of a mask donation by an ordinary American farmer to New York State. These reports highlight the vital role of individual contributions in the fight against COVID-19. Rather than emphasizing the news value of negativity, these stories embrace positivity. Compared to the substantial volume of popular negative news about America on RN's WeChat account, these positive narratives stand out, reflecting RN's efforts to practice constructive journalism, even when covering a country with which China has complex relations.

Example 6

美媒：中美医生一直在"悄然"联手抗疫 [US media: Chinese and American doctors have been "quitely" collaborating to fight against the virus] (RN, 14 April 2020c)

Example 7

"病毒猎手"与中国科学家联手追查新冠起源 ["Hunter of virus" cooperates with Chinese scientists to figure out the origin of COVID-19] (RN, 28 April 2020h)

Example 8

追捐1.5亿美元！比尔·盖茨夫妇用实际行动反对特朗普"断供"WHO [Another donation of 150 million dollars! Bill & Melinda Gates have taken actions to oppose Trump's "termination" of WHO funding] (RN, 17 April 2020f)

Example 9

七旬老农的一个举动，令纽约州长落泪 [A 70-year-old farmer's move brought the governor of New York State to tears] (RN, 26 April 2020g)

Discussion

Forces refer to the various factors that "influence the movement of news items through media channels" (Shoemaker et al. 2001, 234). This section discusses some possible forces that may have resulted in RN's selection patterns at the translation gate of covering

the United States. First, RN appears to favor well-established media outlets and news organizations that exhibit pro-China stances in its coverage of the United States. While Western media constituted the majority of news sources identified, traces of less influential news outlets, such as those from Argentina and Cuba, were also tracked. When selecting news texts for translation, RN has access to a vast pool of news publications in many languages, including hundreds of English-language media sources. Talented in-house translators with expertise in not only major languages but also minority ones, such as Lao, Burmese, and Flemish, further prove the exceptional resources at RN's disposal (Cankaoxiaoxi.com, 2021). As an official media outlet that primarily offers translated news to Chinese readers, RN's unique position in the Chinese journalistic landscape can be regarded as a major force enabling the movement of various media sources through the translation gate.

RN's identity as a state-owned media outlet is another driving force in determining the news texts that could pass RN's translation gate. The majority of topics covered in the dataset pertain to hard news, with a limited presence of soft news, suggesting that RN's followers prefer hard news topics and current reporting when seeking information about the US. Additionally, stories underlining the negative aspects of the US dominated the data. The overwhelming presence of negative news reports may be partially attributed to deteriorating China–US relations. In response to this decline, China has advanced a narrative that a rising and stronger China will not tolerate bullying behaviors from the West (Jaworsky and Qiaoan 2021). The RN's translated news stories under investigation were all published in 2020, a period when China–US relations were arguably at their lowest due to frequent disputes between the two countries. RN, as a crucial and unique part of official Chinese media, foregrounded the negative portrayals of America. Additionally, one of RN's editorial objectives is to underscore the strength of China's political system and improve China's confidence by exposing negative aspects and deeply rooted social issues in the Western world (Tao 2018; Wang 2021). The ultimate aim of the negative coverage of America by Chinese media is to depict the image of a declining country, thereby accentuating the ascent of a more powerful, responsible, and prosperous China, which might even enhance the sense of patriotism and nationalism among Chinese readers (Zeng and Sparks 2020).

Moreover, the impact of the target readership as an external force on RN's journalistic content should not be neglected. Despite being a prestigious outlet backed by the *Xinhua News Agency*, RN is not exempt from competition for clicks or traffic on social media. While RN's affiliation with the government might have prompted the othering of the U.S. in the examined translated news, the worsening perception of the U.S. among Chinese readers could also shape RN's editorial choices in reporting on America. It is worth mentioning that the followers of RN's WeChat accounts largely do not overlap with the subscribers of RN's printed newspapers (Guo 2015). A WeChat article posted by RN in 2019 outlined the demographics of its WeChat audience, revealing that young readers aged 18−25 years make up the largest segment (RN, 21 October 2019). In other words, to maintain their influential status on the WeChat platform, RN's content must appeal to the preferences of younger tech-savvy audiences. Perception of the United States has shifted in China, where it is no longer associated solely with wealth, prosperity, and technological innovation. Many Chinese people have revised their views of the U.S., which they see as frequently antagonistic toward China (Xiying Zuo 2021a, 2021b). The young generation, in particular, is less enamored with American-made products and holds critical views of the U.S. political

system; they are proud of China's progress and "value being patriotic" (He, 20 March 2021). From the standpoint of RN's young WeChat readers, their negative attitudes toward the United States could be another factor justifying the prevalence of negative coverage. While state-driven nationalism may influence RN's gatekeepers, bottom-up nationalism shaped by audience sentiments deserves more attention, especially in contexts where catering to target readers is paramount. Nevertheless, the forces discussed in this section should be considered possible rather than definitive answers to the third research question, which requires more in-depth investigation in future research, such as an ethnographic study of RN's journalistic practices and a reception study of its Chinese readership.

Conclusion

Using a dataset of popular translated news stories about the United States published on RN's WeChat account in 2020, this study investigated the media sources, topics, and story tones selected by RN at the translation gate. Nevertheless, this study examined a relatively small dataset, which limits its ability to draw general conclusions regarding RN's news translation practices on WeChat. Future research could analyze a larger dataset; for instance, all translated news stories about America published by RN during a specific period. Moreover, this study's reliance on manual coding to identify sources, topics, and story tones introduces inherent subjectivity. Future research could employ more advanced computer-assisted techniques such as automatic content analysis and topic modelling to investigate larger datasets of translated news texts and reduce the subjectivity inherent in manual analysis.

The existing body of literature on JTR has mostly focused on examining translation "as a secondary or second-level mechanism" (Valdeón 2022a, 130), highlighting the manipulative power of translation in mediating texts from one language into another. It is argued that translation's gatekeeping function at the macro level deserves more scholarly attention and might tell a more complete story of the complex role translation plays in news production. As van Doorslaer (2009) has indicated, "languages and (the absence of) translation seem to be important framing and agenda-setting factors" (90). Yet, such a view is only circulated in the TS world and has not gained much traction in journalism studies, largely due to a rigid understanding of translation as a "secondary" activity (Valdeón 2018, 265). Thus, this research also emphasizes the need "to harmonize conceptualizations of translation" across translation and journalism studies to foster interdisciplinary collaboration (Valdeón 2023, 257). It is hoped that this study could attract more scholarly attention from journalism studies to explore how the translation gate cooperates with other gates in news production.

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Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are openly available on OSF at https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/EC87K.

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