



**University of  
Nottingham**  
UK | CHINA | MALAYSIA

**Online Distribution of English-Language TV  
in Mainland China**

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**Thesis submitted to the University of Nottingham for the degree of Doctor  
of Philosophy**

**September 2021**

## Declaration

I, Xiaoran Zhang, confirm that the information presented in this thesis is the result of my own work, except where due to reference is made. This thesis has not been previously accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted for any other degree at another university.

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**Date:** September 2021

## **Abstract**

In the age of multiple screens, online video streaming has in the 2010s and present become the most significant way of consuming television content in mainland China. Among all the available content provided by Chinese streaming services, English-language television series stands out as an imported audio-visual product that is mainly distributed and circulated on the internet rather than television channels due to relevant media industry regulations and policies. Prior to landing on online streaming services as its legal distribution platform, English-language television series initially engendered its local audience base via informal distribution means, such as pirated DVDs and file-sharing and downloading websites; yet some of these informal services still exist in a grey area, since the content library formal streaming services possess is largely restricted in terms of size. From the perspective of media industry studies, this thesis deals with both formal and informal distribution platforms with a focus on formal distribution practices and the mechanisms behind them, which involve cultural, political and economic factors.

This thesis first examines the streaming services themselves, studying distribution practices for American and British television series to understand the logic behind the localization of the business practices surrounding transnational television and to illustrate the features streaming services adopt to cater to online audiences based on local streaming consumption habits. The thesis then investigates how the current distribution pattern has been constructed by state

supervision through cultural policies and censorship and by the historically dynamic relationship between formal distribution and informal distribution. I argue that the localized online distribution of English-language television series in mainland China is the result of the interplay among distributors' business practices, Chinese authorities' regulatory practices and Chinese viewers' consumption habits and viewer practices. Putting the thesis in a global context, I contend that the development of online streaming technologies has created distinctive forms of media consumption in mainland China. Within the specific local political environment, the localized distribution pattern of transnational television content represents part of China's response to the global television trade.



## Acknowledgements

It has been a bumpy road, a really really bumpy one. Yet, it has also been a marvellous journey, through which I obtained courage, friendship and love. It might only have my name associated with this thesis, but I know for sure there are many people that have contributed to this thesis as well as the thesis of my life.

I am particularly grateful to my two supervisors, Prof Roberta Pearson and Dr Mark Gallagher, who have guided me through the jungle and helped me find the path to the next chapter of my life. Looking back at these past five years, I believe we three have made a great team. The help and support I have received from them and the things I have learned from them last longer than anything.

I am extremely grateful to my friends and colleagues, Liao Zhang, Laurie Dempsey, Danielle Strouther, Giulia Manica, Joaquin Montalva, Piotr Paszynski, Sungil Ko, Zhun Gu, Ning Zhang, Karolina Jesien, and Jiyoung Kim, especially Hehsen Xie who helped me finalize this thesis. Special thanks to Prof Catherine Johnson, who welcomed me to Nottingham and provided her enlightening works for this thesis. I would like to thank Dr Franziska Meyer for her help through the last couple years of my PhD life.

Finally, my family. I don't think words can express how grateful I am for having such a strong, brave, caring, kind, supportive and patient mother. She is the rock of my life and the reason I can finish this thesis. Also, my father has provided his full support and understanding,

for which I am very grateful. This year, I forever lost a family member, but I am sure he is smiling at me from above and wishing me all the best.

A revised version of Chapter 2 has been published as ‘From Western TV Sets to Chinese Online Streaming Services: English-Language TV Series in Mainland China’, *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies*, 16(2): 220-42.

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## Introduction

As China's television market rapidly extends to China's online space, a series of local online distribution of television patterns emerge. Among different kinds of online television content, overseas/foreign television series requires a specifically designed distribution pattern distinct from those for local/domestic television content. This distribution pattern includes not only indigenous distribution features but also borrowed, altered and localized ones, which leads to the topic of this thesis, transnational distribution of television content in the context of mainland China. Focusing on the online distribution of English-language television series<sup>1</sup>,

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<sup>1</sup> This thesis focuses on foreign television series that circulate from the United States and United Kingdom to mainland China. For the sake of concision and coherence, both American and British television series are called by a joint name as English-language television series throughout the thesis. In mainland China, in a broad sense, the word 美剧 (meiju) is understood as the name for all the television programmes produced in the English language and broadcast or released on television channels and networks as well as online services in the United States, including dramas, situation comedies and reality shows. In a narrower sense, for Chinese local viewers and fans, the word mostly refers to dramas and situation comedies. The word 美剧 consists of two Chinese characters: 美 (mei) stands for the United States; 剧 (ju) means television series. The same linguistic logic is used for every foreign television content, such as 英剧 (yingju) referring to British television series and 日剧 (riju) referring to Japanese television series. However, in the early 2000s, when American television series started engendering broad viewership in mainland China, most viewers could not distinguish British TV from American TV, due the cultural proximity shared by the two countries and the viewers' lack of knowledge in terms of the origin country of the content itself. As of the early 2020s, to some of the local Chinese viewers, the term 美剧 (meiju) can still refer to all the foreign television series that are in the English language. Hence, this thesis uses the term English-language television series for both American and British television series. Another

this thesis asks multiple questions. First, how has English-language television content achieved local distribution in China? Surrounding the distribution of this content, then, how have streaming services, state authorities and the audiences been the agents for the current system of English-language television circulation? Before going further into this research, I offer a brief analysis of China's online distribution of the British television drama *Sherlock* (2010 – 2017), which exemplifies the topics the thesis explores.

In China's internet world, British actor Benedict Cumberbatch is well known by his Chinese nickname, 卷福 (juanfu), which is translated as 'the curly haired Holmes'. The nickname is derived from Cumberbatch's most famous television character, Sherlock Holmes, in the BBC's crime television series *Sherlock*. As a localized Chinese nickname, 卷福 (juanfu) consists of two Chinese characters, which is the most common way Chinese given names are formed: 卷 (juan) refers to curly hair in the Chinese language; 福 (fu) is the first character of the Chinese translation of the name Holmes. Even though Sherlock Holmes is a fictional character, Cumberbatch's screen appearance is quite different from the audiences' typical perception of how the character should look. Apart from the fact that *Sherlock* is set in modernday London, to Chinese fans, the most notable feature of the actor is his frizzy curly

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thing needs to be clarified is that this thesis does not include the study of foreign television series that are produced in other English-speaking countries, such as Canada and Australia, simply because very few titles from these countries circulate on formal and informal platforms in mainland China.

hair. Hence, the name Juanfu was created to illustrate that this Sherlock Holmes has curly hair. Benedict Cumberbatch is not the only foreign actor who has a unique and localized Chinese nickname that is based on his famous television character. For example, the character played by another British actor, Emilia Clarke, in *Game of Thrones* (2011 – 2019) was nicknamed as 龙妈 (longma), translated as ‘the mother of dragon’. The nickname was then further used to refer to Emilia Clarke herself among Chinese fans and viewers.

As Sherlock Holmes’s archenemy, Professor James Moriarty, played by British actor Andrew Scott in *Sherlock*, also has a nickname, 莫娘 (moniang), translated as Lady Moriarty. The nickname interprets the character as a female figure who has a complicated and romantic relationship with Sherlock Holmes. Besides nicknaming characters, this is another common fan activity: character coupling. On China’s biggest fan sharing video website Bilibili, numerous fan-made videos themed around the coupling of Juanfu and Moniang can be found, and these videos are usually immediately circulated on other social media, such as Weibo and WeChat. In fact, fan-made nicknames and fan-made/uploaded videos are widely appreciated in the fan community, whilst cyber cultures derived from fan communities sometimes also attract the attention from a larger audience because of the influence of social media. In this case, the Sherlock culture unintentionally completed the online campaign for the series on China’s internet, which indirectly resulted in the official importation of the series by a major Chinese streaming service, Youku.

However, before Youku stepped in formally to import the series, *Sherlock* initially entered China through informal circulation means. In July 2010, the British series' pilot was aired on the BBC in the United Kingdom and PBS in the United States. Similar to other American and British television series, it was soon circulated and distributed by file-sharing websites and subtitled by Chinese fan-subtitling groups on the internet in mainland China. Back then, as an informal distribution means, P2P file-sharing websites were the major platform to distribute foreign television programmes. Having scored a 9.4 rating on China's IMDb equivalent, Douban, for its first season, the series shortly received widely positive reviews from Chinese fans of American and British television and generated an array of discussions regarding its storylines and characters, which soon became a trendy topic on Chinese social media platforms, such as Weibo. The fan community of the series rapidly developed and naturally led to a series of fan activities, including the nicknaming and the character coupling mentioned above. However, until 2013, the only way for Chinese *Sherlock* fans to access the series was via informal file-sharing websites, such as YYeTs, one of China's most famous and longest running P2P file-sharing forums. Due to Chinese authorities'<sup>2</sup> strict control of illegal file-sharing websites, more and more P2P services had to be shut down to avoid being investigated, which resulted in the decline of informal online distribution activities (Jing 2014). Fans found it no longer convenient to download *Sherlock* from these websites they used to access. In the meanwhile, legal online streaming services started

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<sup>2</sup> For the mid-2010s activity noted here, China's media was regulated by the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (later restructured into the National Radio and Television Administration).

purchasing the distribution rights of more and more foreign television programmes that were initially only available on P2P services.

In September 2013, one of China's five major video streaming services, Youku made the first two seasons of *Sherlock* available to stream on its service. In the following months, Youku announced that it had obtained the exclusive broadcast right of the third season of *Sherlock* in mainland China (Pu 2014). On 2 January 2014, the first episode of the series' third season became available on Youku, which was at the same time when the episode was aired in the United Kingdom. This simultaneous distribution marked the first time that a Chinese streaming service formally streamed a British television series with no time delay (Geng 2014). The episode was released with Chinese subtitles, which were produced by Youku with the use of the official English subtitles provided by the BBC (Pu 2014). At 9 am on 2 January, four hours after the simultaneous broadcast, the episode had already received 190,000 views, with the number increasing to 3,750,000 twelve hours later. In fact, this simultaneous broadcast was mostly uncommon, considering China's regulations on importing foreign television programmes. In March 2014, the '先审后播' (censored, licensed, then aired) policy was launched by the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television, requiring all streaming services to submit the whole season of a foreign television series to be reviewed and censored before release them on their services (Zhao and Song 2014). As a result, simultaneous broadcast became very difficult to achieve for foreign television series, since most foreign television series are usually released in episodes.

Still, Youku managed to work with the BBC and successfully had the whole season licensed and aired. In 2016, Youku announced once again that it would release the series' fourth season simultaneously with the BBC. This time, Youku carried out an even bigger campaign for *Sherlock*. The series' official trailers and actors' interviews with translated subtitles embedded were provided by Youku whilst the viewers of these trailers were enabled to express their anticipation through the function of the bullet screen. These trailers sought to thrill and excite the viewers before the start of the release. Youku provided count-down advertisement videos each day in the six days before *Sherlock's* new season's broadcasting. Because of the popularity of *Sherlock*, its poster image was often arranged as one of the headline pictures on Youku's home page. Fans of *Sherlock* could upload their own videos about this series onto the website by 'participating in this topic', which helped to foster a fan community. More importantly, the promotion of *Sherlock* was aligned with Youku's promotion of its VIP subscription plan. Youku's VIP subscribers could access new episodes of *Sherlock* one week earlier than ordinary viewers. The release of *Sherlock's* fourth season on Youku began on 2 January 2017. The campaign for it started from April 2016 on Youku's official Weibo account with a news report on the start of series' production. Through its Weibo account, Youku provided news of the series' broadcast starting date, the production status and links to trailers for the series on Youku's website. Youku relied largely on social media for its promotional campaign. In one of its Weibo posts, Youku invited fans to re-post it and tell their favourite British series to win a present.

Youku's online campaign for *Sherlock* involves a series of marketing activities that focus rigorously on viewer interactions. For instance, Youku displays viewer-related information on its presentation page and play page, including viewer ratings, likes, view amounts and the bullet screen function whilst the BBC's iPlayer only provides information on the series itself. While rare on Western platforms, the use of fan-made content is a common practice for Chinese streaming services. Addressing the characters with fan-made nicknames on social media is also a uniquely Chinese feature. This series of campaign for *Sherlock* is specifically designed for the local Chinese fans and viewers. The campaign took over the already existing paratexts around the series created by the fans and even texts of the series interpreted by the fans to form its own campaign discourse. Moreover, whilst the informal distribution networks being controlled and combatted by the state, Youku aimed to harness the audience that had already been nurtured by the previous informal circulation and media hype generated by the fans. As a formal distributor, Youku also managed to provide viewers with interactive facilities to enhance their viewing experience without violating state regulations. This is not just a routine distribution activity of a transnational television series, if we consider the cultural, social, and political factors that contributed to this distribution.

The distribution activities of *Sherlock* are also widely conducted by other Chinese streaming services for other English-language television series, showing a clear distribution pattern that applies almost only to English-language television series. This distribution pattern enables local audiences to better experience English-language television series, by combining



an indigenous online streaming culture and a foreign and appealing television culture. On the one hand, the consumption pattern of English-language television series has then been formed by the current distribution pattern employed by Chinese streaming services and the wider online streaming environment. On the other hand, the cultural, economic, and political factors together resulted in this distribution. The case of *Sherlock* echoes the above argument and fully illustrates that the current online distribution of English-language television in China requires the distributor's attempt to make the best use of its service's interface and other social media platforms, employs promotional texts that are gathered from both the series itself and the fan community, and responds to the local regulation and supervision whilst combatting informal circulations of the series.

Based on the above discussion, this thesis first examines the streaming services themselves by taking a close look at their distribution practices for American and British television series in order to understand the logic behind the localization of their websites' business practices surrounding transnational television and to illustrate the features streaming services use to cater to online audiences based on the local streaming consumption habits. Then the thesis investigates what part of the current distribution pattern has been constructed by the state supervision through cultural policies and censorship and by the historically dynamic relationship between formal distribution and informal distribution networks. As Shujen Wang argues that distribution is where 'different networks intersect and interact with significant cultural, economic and political implications and consequences' (2003, 2). Hence,

I argue that the localized online distribution of English-language television series in mainland China is the result of the interplay among the distributors' business practices and Chinese viewers' consumption habits. Putting the thesis in the global context, I contend that the development of online streaming technologies has created distinctive forms of media consumption in mainland China. Within the specific local political environment, the localized distribution pattern of transnational television content is China's response to the globalization of television. The rest of this introduction first explains the key agents within the distribution network: the formal distributors, the regulators, the audiences, and the informal distributors, and then provides the conceptual frameworks this thesis concerns.

### **China's Online Video Streaming Industry**

As a data aggregator, Statista projects the revenue in China's online video streaming segment is to reach \$11,927 million in 2021 with a total of 301.6 million active paying users (Thomala 2021). Currently, three major online video streaming services dominate the market: iQiyi, Tencent Video and Youku by providing users with different kinds of streaming content, such as films, television series, and reality shows. The rest of the market is shared by Bilibili, Mango TV, Sohu Video and LeTV. These streaming services are considered the formal online distribution platforms of television content, since they are under direct state supervision and largely visible to viewers, advertisers, and copyright holders. In order to be able to import foreign television content, these formal streaming services are required to obtain permissions from associated authorities such as the China's National Radio and Television Administration.

They then legally obtain the right to distribute foreign television content by being authorized and recognized by the copyright holders of the content. Before the content is made available to the users, formal streaming services are also responsible for the censoring of the content.

In the meanwhile, there are also informal online distribution of foreign audio-visual products, involving those sites that lie outside the legitimate and regulated film and television industry, such as uncopyrighted streaming services, P2P video-sharing websites and Bit-torrent. Some of these informal distribution platforms might be under state supervision as well, but they are mostly not authorized by overseas copyright holders. Hence, the distribution of foreign television series relies on two distribution networks: the formal one and the informal one. As Chinese video streaming service users sometimes move among formal and informal platforms, China's streaming industry is constantly constructed and reconstructed by the two distribution networks.

## **Regulators and Censorship**

To understand China's video streaming market, we need to be aware of the surrounding regulatory environment. In mainland China, the importation of foreign audio-visual products involves the interplay between qualified importation companies and local authority, which currently is under the name the National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA), formerly the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT, 1998–2013) and the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT, 2013–2018). The NRTA is a ministry-level executive agency directly under the State Council of the

People's Republic of China. It directly controls state-owned enterprises at the national level such as China Central Television, China National Radio, China Radio International, as well as other business and non-business film and television studios and organizations. Most relevant to this thesis, the NRTA supervises and reviews the content and quality of radio, television, and online audio-visual programmes, and is responsible for censoring both domestic and imported online films and television programmes. For imported foreign television content specifically, the NRTA requires each distributor to follow its censorship system that is ambiguous but strictly implemented. The censorship system not only decides what content can be imported but also where and how it can be distributed.

As part of transnational cultural flows, numerous English-language television series arrived in mainland China and attracted substantial active local viewership in the early 2010s, which also drew the attention from the local state regulators. Many countries have mechanisms to avoid severe foreign cultural penetration, in order to protect their own domestic production sectors and national culture, among which China has a low degree tolerance towards foreign cultural products. China employs a quota system for imported foreign films. Meanwhile, foreign television programmes are widely restricted from being broadcast on television channels but allowed to be streamed on online streaming services, with the number of available titles limited to no more than 30% of all the content the services provide (Zhao and Song 2014). As a result, online video streaming services have in the 2010s

become the most significant way of consuming formally imported foreign television programmes for viewers in mainland China.

Having landed on online streaming platforms as the distribution venue, foreign television content still finds itself in a constantly changing political atmosphere, which could determine whether it can still obtain local viewership. South Korean television series, for instance, have been strictly regulated and supervised by the Chinese authorities in order to continue gaining local popularity through formal circulation after almost all the available Korean television series were taken down from Chinese online streaming services in 2016, when the political relationship between China and South Korea became intensified (Park, Lee and Seo 2019). A similar incident occurred with regard to English-language television series in 2014, when users found that several popular American television dramas, such as *The Good Wife* (2009 – 2016) and *NCIS: Naval Criminal Investigative Service* (2003 – ) were removed from online streaming services with a brief notice on their usual display pages saying ‘this content is unavailable due to relevant government policies’ (Zhao and Song 2014). The exact reason for this incident was never disclosed by either the streaming services or the authorities, suggesting that the political hurdles that English-language television series face are always difficult to identify specifically.

### **Chinese Audiences and Cultural Proximity**

Apart from the political hurdles caused by the local regulation and supervision, the cultural hurdles that hinder foreign television content from generating viewership vary depending on

the cultural background of the content. Joseph D. Straubhaar proposes the idea of cultural proximity, which asserts that ‘audiences will tend to prefer programming that is closest or most proximate to their own culture’ (2003, 80). Even though English-language television series are not as appealing to a larger audience as those from East Asia (such as Korean television dramas) due to its lack of cultural proximity to the local Chinese audiences, foreign, English-language television content has still managed to attract a robust niche demographic.

Straubhaar also argues that ‘cultural proximity is more of a factor within certain social classes than within others’ (2003, 78), meaning that audiences in certain social classes might have the tendency of choosing media products from cultures that are not very similar to their own, due to on their higher cultural capital. From the perspective of audience studies, Chinese researcher Wenhua Wei argues that the ‘appreciation’ of foreign television programmes, especially non-East Asian ones, usually requires the audience to have a higher degree of cultural capital (2017, 87). In this manner, cultural capital refers to the audience’s knowledge of the foreign culture and foreign language skills. Wei’s research also indicates that most of the English-language television viewers in mainland China are in the age groups of 20s to 30s and have received higher education (2017, 88). Hence, along with higher cultural capital and social class, age and education together formed this specific social group, who intended to seek more culturally different audio-visual products from the national ones.

## The Globalization of Television

This thesis focuses on the study of the distribution involving particular transnational television flows, constituting part of the globalization of television. Television's globalization has been a key topic for media industry studies since the 1960s. As Michele Hilmes, Matt Hills and Roberta Pearson noted, imported American television's impact on national cultures around the world was the first and main emphasis researchers proposed (2019, 9). Scholars such as Herbert Schiller (1976) and Jeremy Tunstall (1977) observed that media markets in many countries strived to overcome the domination of American television and to develop their own television industries. Later, in the 1980s and the 1990s, scholars started to pay attention to viewers' response to global television as different countries' technological and political development rapidly shifting the television industry globally (Collins 1986; Blumler 1991; Sinclair, Jacka and Cunningham 1996). In the late 1990s and the early 2000s, scholars tried to understand the international television trade, from the perspectives of the social organization and institutional arrangements that underlie the logic of global television marketplace (Bielby and Harrington 2008). Timothy Havens (2006), in particular, examined the distribution, acquisition and scheduling of transnational television content by talking with the television executives who make all the decisions. Furthermore, Jeanette Steemers's *Selling Television British Television in the Global Marketplace* (2004)—which includes considerations of key global television trade markets such as the United States, Europe, Australia, New Zealand and East Asia, to which Britain's television industry exports and

distributes content—is also based on the interviews with television executives, in order to find out the logic behind the transnational television trade.

More recently, in the 2010s, several Western scholars have published works that are specifically concerned about the transatlantic television flow between the United Kingdom and the United States, such as Michele Hilmes (2012) and Elke Weissmann (2012). In 2019, in *Transatlantic Television Drama: Industries, Programmes, and Fans*, Hills, Hilmes and Pearson further explored the US-UK relationship in terms of how British serial dramas captivate American audiences. The book uses multiple cases to study some key television dramas from the angles of transatlantic television industry, programmes, and audiences, which enlightens this thesis about the many factors that could affect the practices of transnational television content. By the late 2010s, when researching transnational television, one cannot ignore the discussion of the digital platforms. In the Introduction of their edited book, Hilmes, Pearson and Hills also observe that

the international expansion of mostly US-based digital subscription services such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, and HBO, as well as more regional “subscription video on demand” (SVOD) platforms has radically rearranged relationships between audiences and ways of viewing television, and between traditional terrestrial and cable broadcasters and the way that programmes are made, distributed, and promoted (2019, 11).

Indeed, in the digital era, audiences are accessing television content through not only television sets but also other technological devices that are internet-based, which leads to the concept of online television.



## Online Television

In a new media landscape, the relationship between online streaming and television has been analysed by scholars through lens of technological development and cultural forms. JP Kelly argues that ‘online TV is an amalgamation of both old and new media logics, extending established practices of broadcast flow while capitalizing upon the new promotional, economic and textual possibilities inherent in digital media’ (2011, 123). More specifically, Ramon Lobato defines streaming as a ‘hybrid phenomenon’ that brings together two historically distinct but now interrelated technological systems:

streaming uses the infrastructure of telecommunications and the Internet, yet from the audience perspective, streaming is very much an extension of the television experience, and in terms of its commercial operations it relies upon the existing networks and relationships of TV production and distribution (2017, 178).

Thus, both Kelly and Lobato argue that online streaming is highly intertwined with traditional television, a dynamic also evident in the context of China.

In present-day mainland China, as many audiences are moving from television sets to online streaming services to access television content, the streaming industry has taken a large share of the country’s television market. In fact, traditional Chinese television channels are willing to distribute their content on both television and online streaming services, sometimes even only on streaming services. On the one hand, it is because traditional television media executives believe that Chinese audiences have nurtured a new habit of accessing television content on a platform that is not television. On the other hand, certain genres of television

content are not allowed to be broadcast on television, such as imported foreign television series. The practice of watching a television series is no longer limited to the living room via a television set but can occur virtually anywhere with a breadth of digital devices. In this sense, online streaming television can be further defined as ‘services that facilitate the viewing of editorially selected audio-visual content through internet-connected devices and infrastructure’ (Johnson 2019, 30).

Catherine Johnson’s definition of online television can be understood as services that are ‘oriented towards the creation of viewing experiences and provide access to editorially selected content’ whilst the services are ‘delivered through internet-connected devices and infrastructure’ (2019, 34). However, Johnson argues online television services are ‘closed’, which means they ‘limit the contributions of users and are designed primarily to facilitate viewing’ unlike social networks such as YouTube and Facebook (2019, 38). This characteristic does not totally apply to Chinese streaming services. As video content providers, both formal and informal Chinese streaming services enable their viewers to engage with streaming content through various affordances. On the display page of a series, viewers can add comments in the designated comment section, similar to what YouTube provides on its video display page; viewers can use the bullet screen function to interact with each other on the display screen; there are also an array of user-uploaded videos on these services. This feature exemplifies one of the differences between Western-based streaming services and Chinese streaming services, which is one of the significant topics this thesis covers. By focusing on

these differences, this thesis aims to provide a Chinese streaming service model that functions accordingly in the context of mainland China.

## **Methodological Approaches and Thesis Structure**

This dissertation builds its argument with contextual material and case studies developed across five chapters. Chapter 1 provides the background of the Chinese audience's consumption of English-language television series, by looking at publications and news reports in both English language and Chinese language that concern several relevant topics, such as China's television sector, China's importation of foreign audio-visual products and China's online streaming history orderly. Chapter 1 first examines the economic, political, legal as well as historical actors that have interplayed in the context of China's fast-developing television industry. As a result of China's strict policies surrounding foreign television content as well as the emergence of online video streaming industry, the traditional television industry no longer broadcasts foreign television programmes, being replaced by online streaming platforms. Young Chinese urban residents are the major audience for English-language television. As the chapter reveals, young, urban Chinese consumers consider English-language TV as high-quality televisual content, in which they can discover various cultural and social elements that are rarely found in domestic productions. By providing this significant background of China's consumption of English-language television series, the thesis then investigates the distribution practices of English-language television by focusing on the platforms.

Based on existent scholarly work on online TV and online TV interfaces, Chapter 2 examines online streaming services' distribution activities for English-language television series in order to understand their services' business practices surrounding transnational TV and to illustrate the features streaming services use to cater to online audiences based on local streaming consumption habits. Looking at China's five major formal video streaming services that provide formally distributed television series—iQiyi, Sohu Video, LeTV, Tencent Video and Youku—this chapter illuminates online distribution practices for English-language television series in mainland China, by examining the design of the services' interfaces, scheduling of programmes, and accessibility for different tiers of viewers, streaming services' branding strategies as well as promotional materials. I argue that the localized online distribution of English-language television series in mainland China is the result of the distributors' business practices exploiting the various possibilities offered by digital media and local Chinese viewers' consumption habits, which helps the dissertation recognize formal Chinese streaming services as the first and foremost agent in the transnational distribution of English-language television content.

Chapter 3 investigates the viewer practices surrounding the online distribution of English-language television and the participatory culture Chinese streaming services offer. As a unique interactive affordance, the bullet screen works as participatory tool for viewers to participate in group viewing and discussion with each other during the streaming. Chapter 3 observes the viewer practices within the bullet screen comments of four English-language

television series and one Chinese television series. This chapter then conducts content analysis of different themes of bullet screen comments and uses five television series as case studies, including four English-language ones and one domestic production for comparative reasons. I argue, Chinese viewers of English-language television series tend to form a noticeable viewer community within the bullet screen, which presents the cultural identities of the overall online viewership of English-language television content. Meanwhile, the viewer practices with the use of the bullet screen also underlines how cultural proximity affects transnational television's local viewership.

Chapter 4 explores the censorship system that affects China's importation of English-language television. As a country with no motion picture content rating system, China also does not have a formal content rating system for televisual content. Hence, from the perspective of state supervision, both traditional television channels and online video streaming services can only operate under the state's strict censorship. For imported television series, content standards are determined by local distributors, based on relevant censorship documents issued by the state, which creates an inconsistent self-censorship system. The self-censorship system does enable the streaming services with semi-autonomy about what to censor and how to censor it. In this chapter, I examine the state documents regarding the process of importing overseas audio-visual products, which includes provisions on censorship and self-censorship. I give a full picture of the censorship system for overseas television programmes and an understanding of the factors contributing to streaming services' self-

copyright mechanism. Then, the chapter examines cases of censored English-language television series. I argue that the ambiguous censorship policies and self-censorship practices can encourage both cautious and boundary-pushing activities from streaming platforms that use English-language television content to enrich their library and to further drive subscriptions from English-language television viewers. I also argue the self-censorship can still generate negative feedback from Chinese viewers due to viewers' active viewing practices enabled by interactive affordances and their own cultural identities, which can result in some viewers accessing informal distribution platforms.

Chapter 5 returns to the core research subject of this thesis, online distribution of English-language television series, by shedding light on the alternative to major streaming services, informal distribution network. By revisiting current scholarly work on informal distribution and news records of China's fan-subtitling industry, this chapter discusses the development of the informal distribution economy that has led to the popularization of English-language television and thoroughly analyses YYeTs and Renren Shipin, two significant Chinese informal streaming and file-sharing websites, in terms of how the degree of the informality of these platforms constantly changes and how the line between the formal economy and the informal economy blurs. My argument is: on the one hand, the informal distribution network poses a challenge for the formal streaming services, because of the copyright infringement issues and market erosion; on the other hand, informal distribution platform provides viewers with opportunities to consume content in an uncensored form at comparatively little or no cost.

Formal and informal streaming services are intertwined as they indirectly borrow each other's business features and compete for different viewers and advertisers. Finally, the dissertation concludes with brief observations about the state of English-language television content in mainland China in the late 2020s and suggests directions for future scholarship. Together, these five chapters, and the thesis overall, demonstrate how these different active agents have interplayed with each other and resulted in the current online distribution of English-language television series. We now first turn to Chapter 1 to contextualize the bigger picture of the Chinese television industry.

## **Chapter One China's TV Sector, Online Streaming Industry, and Imported TV**

English-language television series first entered China in the late 1970s, being imported and aired by both national and regional television stations, such as China Central Television (CCTV) and Beijing Television (BTV). More than four decades later, due to the technological development of new media and the constantly changing cultural regulation and media policy, instead of television stations, formal online streaming services have become the major platform to distribute English-language television series. However, before landing on formal streaming services, English-language television content had already engendered a large audience base through informal distribution networks via pirated DVDs and online downloading and filesharing platforms.

In order to provide a full picture of the dissertation's background, this chapter explores the transformation of English-language television series' distribution platform in mainland China from traditional media to newly emergent digital media and the mechanism behind it.

As Graeme Turner argues,

it is abundantly clear that the precise configuration of any nation's or region's experience of television is going to be the product of the complex interplay among a number of specific conjunctural factors – and only one of these will be technological (2011, 36).

To understand this transformation then requires the consideration of the historical, economic, political as well as cultural factors that have all influenced China's television and online



streaming industry. The chapter's first section examines China's television sector since it emerged in the 1950s and the history of China's imported television through different media platforms. The second section then investigates the emergence and development of China's online video streaming industry and how it has become the major platform for circulating English-language television series. The third section focuses on English-language television viewership in mainland China and the relationship between the content and its viewers. The final and fourth section explains the dynamic between online streaming services as a distribution platform and English-language television series as a cultural product with the use of Roberta Pearson's (2019) cultural proximity index and temporal proximity index.

This chapter demonstrates that China's TV sector has been reconfigured in the digital age; this reconfiguration has had consequences for circulation of overseas screen content; circulation of this content, including English-language television series, evidences the formalization of online streaming distribution in China. I argue that English-language television nurtured its first large Chinese viewership via informal distribution networks and then formal online streaming services that inherited this viewership further employed this content to enhance their business models and branding strategies. The chapter also argues that the interplay among the consumers, the distributors (both formal and informal) and China's regulators has led to the country's unique online video streaming industry that differentiates itself from its Western counterpart.

## **China's TV Sector and Imported TV**

China's television sector was formed in the late 1950s, when the first Chinese television station, Beijing Television, went on the air experimentally on May 1, 1958 (Sun 1988). The station had only one channel that broadcast twice a week for two to three hours per session. The former Soviet Union provided technical assistance and supplied most of the equipment (Hong 2007, 25). Two years after the establishment of Beijing Television, the government started to set up regular and experimental stations in China's major cities such as Shanghai and Guangzhou as well as in a dozen provinces (Lee 1994). The television industry then experienced its two setbacks due to China's break up with the former Soviet Union in 1960 and the Cultural Revolution that lasted for ten years from 1966 to 1976 (Hong 2007, 25). The development of China's television industry came to a halt when many television stations were forced to shut down.

Entering the 1970s, the former Beijing Television was renamed as China Central Television (CCTV), which became China's official national television network, linking all the provincial stations to thousands of relay, transmitting, and channel-switching stations (Hong 2007, 26). These stations were launched under the 'four-tier policy', which stipulated four levels of television station development: national, provincial, prefectural and county in the age of the economic reform starting from the late 1970s. Michael Keane contends that the government implemented this policy to decentralize China's cultural administration in order for the television market to attract private investment (2015, 37). Although the

decentralization of administration enabled local stations a certain degree of autonomy, in terms of receiving private funding for equipment, personnel training and programme production, the television industry remained state-owned. In fact, by definition, China's local television stations are state-owned institutions, which means they have an obligation to broadcast what the central government decrees is edifying content, including a required amount of propaganda mainly via news programmes (Keane 2007, 192). Meanwhile, the state-driven television industry was gradually involving economic activities, such as receiving funds from advertisement sales.

The decentralization of administration resulted in the partial commercialization of the television industry, which naturally led to local stations' longing for private advertising. Mainland regions that benefited from the economic reforms, such as Shanghai, showed that their television stations could obtain impressive revenues from advertising and private investment, which made them realize that it was vital to their business to retain the audience (Keane 2015, 38). However, considering the limited capacity of regional stations to originate programmes, the demand for content had to be filled by imported foreign programmes (Keane 2015, 38).

In the reform years since 1978, positive changes in the television industry enabled the regional television stations to import foreign television programmes. Previously, only central level television stations were allowed to purchase and air foreign television programmes, the right of which was then extended to regional level stations as well. By the 1990s, most big

provincial television stations had achieved the broadcast of foreign television programmes. As the second largest television station in China, Shanghai Television even imported more foreign programmes than CCTV, which made it more competitive nationwide (Hong 2007, 33).

As for the import criterion, China did not have any clearly defined policy. What was the appropriate television content to import could only be determined by the stations based on the two criteria, 'acceptability' and 'affordability' (Hong 2007, 34). 'Acceptability' refers to programme content, which means the content should meet certain basic principles, such as not being against communism or the Party and the Chinese government; 'affordability' means television stations aimed to minimize the cost of importing foreign programmes (Hong 2007, 34). Junhao Hong argues that 'in theory, the "acceptability" criterion should have priority over the "affordability" criterion; yet, in practice, the latter often became the decisive factor in the process of decision-making for import' (2007, 34), which indicates that while importing foreign television programmes to generate revenues, regional television stations were in practice mainly looking for cheap television series. As a result, a large amount of foreign television series could be seen on Chinese television. For instance, in 1990, 39% of Shanghai TV's television programmes were imported television series from the United States (Keane 2015, 38). This undoubtedly concerned the government since the ultimate purpose of importing media and cultural products should be to serve the Party's political and ideological needs. In 1995, the Ministry of Radio, Film and Television stipulated that imported foreign

television series should be limited to 25% of each station's overall broadcast time and should not take up more than 15% of prime time (Keane 2015, 38).

After joining the WTO in 2001, with the internationalization of television in China, the programme importation practices were correspondingly influenced, in terms of regulation and policy effect. For foreign media investors, direct participation in the Chinese television market was subject to restrictions, as a result of the political regulations stating that mass media must remain under state control. What the government did not want was the communist ideology being challenged by foreign investors. In July 2005, the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (hereafter SARFT) made it clear that 'any foreign participation in the leasing of television and radio channels, the incorporation of foreign invested broadcast companies or the foundation of foreign-invested broadcast companies as a joint venture with the business scope of "Broadcasting TV and radio programmes" is prohibited' (Faber and Fu 2007, 238). This means that no foreign media entities are allowed to broadcast any content via television in mainland China. However, there was an exception for broadcast entities based in Hong Kong. As the first Chinese language television station that serves the mainland China yet not state-owned, Phoenix TV was founded by Changle Liu, a Chinese businessman who had a well-connected relationship with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Chairman and CEO of News Corporation, Rupert Murdoch held 45% of shares in the Hong-Kong based satellite channel and expected it to be a pathfinder into the mainland market (Keane 2015, 18). Thanks to Liu's affiliation with the CCP, even though Phoenix TV was still restricted from providing

content that could potentially challenge the Party's ideology, it became the most successful non-mainland satellite channel (Keane 2015, 18). Also owned by the News Corporation and based in Hong Kong, Starry Skies Satellite station was only given broadcasting rights in the Guangdong Province. The SARFT made these decisions in order to lead Western media to offer more balanced reporting on China's reform (Keane 2015, 75).

Whilst these non-mainland television stations mainly focus on providing Chinese audience with news programmes, Chinese companies are allowed to import television series from foreign countries as long as they can obtain an approval by the SARFT. Foreign television content providers could be indirectly involved in Chinese television market activities. As the President and Chief Executive of ZDF Enterprises, a German public-service television broadcaster, Alexander Coridass states that with long-term experiences of working with their Chinese partners, they had built up efficient partnerships since 1989 (2007, 313). The German broadcaster's experience pointed out that dealing with various bureaucratic obstacles was one of the biggest risks when doing business with China. He specifically mentioned that 'each programme is initially put under censorship that works by rules which are not previously known and not further explained (even after the decision)' (Coridass 2007, 314).

By the late 2000s, China's importation of foreign television content was altered. On the one hand, the relevant regulations and policies restricted foreign television investors as well as programmes from entering the market; on the other hand, with the rapid development of

television production capacity, China's television industry's demand for foreign television content was no longer as strong as it was in the 1990s. In 2006, the total airtime of domestically produced television programmes reached 2.61 million hours (Lu, Yang and Hu 2008). The most popular genre, television series started to form its own industry. By 2015, 394 Chinese television series were licensed and aired, with 16,540 episodes in total (Xu 2016). In fact, this number has never been lower than 12,000 since 2004. As I suggest later in this chapter, the overflow of domestic productions did not completely eliminate foreign television content, for which there was always an audience.

However, apart from the restriction from the state and the competition with domestic programmes, there was another factor that affected the foreign television companies. Peter Hille (2007) observes the biggest obstacle for the distribution of foreign programmes in China is China's rampant piracy. China's piracy industry has a long history and has received much attention from scholars, such as Shujen Wang (2003) and Joe Karaganis (2011). Through the 2000s, it was common to find pirated DVD (formerly in the format of VCD<sup>3</sup>) vendors and shops in cities all over China, where foreign television shows could be purchased for less than 10 Chinese yuan (\$1.5). As Peter-Tobias Stoll and Inga Kayser noted, 'According to the International Intellectual Property Alliance's Report 2004, the level of piracy products among optical disks across all lines of copyrightable business in China averages out at 90-96% and

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<sup>3</sup> VCD is a unique and widely adopted home video format in East Asia in the 1990s.

was still increasing' (2007, 294). In this context, Chinese audiences had not actually developed a sense of copyrightable cultural products, specifically films and television programmes, which made it very unlikely for foreign studios and companies to generate considerable profits from China's formal DVD market.

By the late 2000s, China's pirated DVD market had diminished whilst the number of China's internet users started rapidly growing. The internet became an even more convenient and economically accessible means to consume uncopyrighted film and television content. More and more file-sharing forums and Bit-torrent websites started to emerge on China's internet and formed the informal online distribution network when the government's regulation of the internet was not yet comprehensive. As a result, it was also the time when Chinese viewers were getting accustomed to an unlimited amount of uncensored foreign films and television dramas since these file-sharing forums and Bit-torrent websites did not go through the process of legally importing foreign audio-visual products as legally qualified distributors. Entering the 2010s, the way to watch a foreign film or a television programme on a computer or portable device became even easier with the development of online video streaming services and the device used could even be something more than a computer or a laptop since the number of smartphone and tablet users in mainland China started to grow on a national level.

According to China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC), China's internet user base is the largest in the world by far with a total of 854 million in 2019 and the internet



penetration rate is 61.2%; meanwhile, the number of smartphone users has reached 847 million with a penetration rate reaching 99.1% from 98.6% in 2019 (2020). The utilization ratio of internet applications by Chinese internet users in 2019 shows that 639 million internet users use online video streaming services, taking up 74.7% of general internet users (CNNIC 2019). In other words, Chinese viewers have been increasingly accessing online streaming platforms for films, television programmes on their laptops, smartphones, and tablets in the past decade. In the age of multiple screens, online streaming technology is rearranging the experience of television viewing. According to *2019 China TV Rating Yearbook*, the average daily linear television viewing time of one viewer has been decreasing since 2012, reaching the point of 156 minutes (Ding 2020, 42). This is what Bin Li argues as the upgrading of China's television industry, 'the digital transformation is a new business and a huge market. It will change traditional Chinese television completely' (2007, 305). In the meanwhile, the practice of importing foreign television content has also located online streaming platform as a new venue.

### **China's Online Streaming Industry**

As China's online steaming industry emerged after 2004, the market has been growing rapidly. In early 2020, a Chinese information consulting company BigData-Research published its annual report on China's online video streaming industry. According to the report, the industry has, in 2019, developed to a market that is worth 170 billion Chinese yuan (\$26.3 billion) (the number was 24.88 billion in 2014) (2020). Currently, the business model of China's online

video streaming services is based on two revenue sources, advertising sales and paid subscriptions. As of 2019, two of China's largest streaming services, iQiyi and Tencent Video have proven that the proportion of paid subscriptions in overall revenue has been steadily increasing, with paid subscriptions continuing to grow. iQiyi had more than 105 million paid subscriptions which takes up more than 50% of its overall revenue, whilst Tencent Video had a total of more than 100 million subscribers (BigData-Research 2020). However, in the early age of China's streaming industry, online streaming services only had one way to generate profits which was advertising sales. The current hybrid business model is a result of the constant rearranging and innovation within the whole internet industry.

The development of China's online distribution industry has presented some similarities with its US counterpart. Anita McGahan, Nicholas Argyres and Joel A.C Baum (2004) proposed a classic four-stage industry lifecycle theory: Pioneering (fragmentation) – Shakeout – Maturity – Decline. The theory was then applied to the online distribution industry of film and television in the context of the United States by Stuart Cunningham and Jon Silver (2013) in *Screen Distribution and The New King Kong of The Online World*. Cunningham and Silver identify three waves of market leaders in American online distribution industry:

The first pioneering stage (1997-2001) was dominated by firms that were small, undercapitalized and ahead of their time. An initial shakeout stage (2001-2006) occurred when the Hollywood Majors moved into the online distribution space. However, they failed to establish profitable business models. A second shakeout stage (2006-) coincided

with Apple entering the movie distribution business, and the launch of YouTube. By 2012, the third wave leaders consolidating their market positions in the online distribution space for film and television were YouTube, Apple, Amazon, Netflix, Yahoo!, Facebook and Hulu (2013, 13).

These three ways indicate that the constant industrial reorganization within the United States resulted in the country's current online distribution industry. Similarly, the development of China's online distribution industry has been through phases that mostly echo what happened in the US industry, with these phases dominated by different market players at particular time periods. Researchers suggest that 2004, the year when LeTV launched its website as the first specific online streaming service for film and television content, can be seen as the beginning of the development of China's online streaming industry (Zhang and Jia 2015, 11), following which, more and more players have joined the market and the industry then started to develop rapidly.

### **The Pioneering Stage: 2004 – 2007**

Back in the early 2000s, as China's most influential web portal, Tencent was already providing its users with some online videos embedded in its news outlet pages. However, in 2004, LeTV was the first website that actually introduced online film and television streaming as its primary service to users. A year later, other online video websites, such as PPTV and 56, emerged in China's internet world. Unlike LeTV, all of these websites mainly focused on providing users with a platform to upload self-made videos including illegally circulated film

and television content. By contrast, LeTV started to establish its content library by purchasing the legal streaming rights of numerous films and television series. As the industry pioneer, with nearly 10,000 hours of legal content in its library, LeTV quickly became the largest copyrighted film and television streaming service in China. In December 2006, the Chinese imitator of YouTube, Youku launched its website, aiming to meet Chinese internet users' need for an interactive video sharing platform. Youku shortly became the most popular and biggest user-generated content platform whilst other small-scaled video websites' market share was gradually absorbed by Youku and another large competitor Tudou.

### **The Shakeout Stage: 2008 – 2010**

Entering 2008, whilst rapidly developing the online video industry underwent two significant reconstructions, which has had a considerable impact on the changes in the industry structure (Zhang and Jia 2015, 12). The first reconstruction originated from the introduction of 2007's *Administrative Provisions on Internet Audio-Visual Programme Services* jointly issued by the SARFT and the Ministry of Information Industry, which established a license system for online video website operations and shut down a number of online video websites that were either unlicensed or offering uncopyrighted content. The second reconstruction was a result of the financial crisis, and financing appeared to be an issue for more than 400 online video websites (Zhang and Jia 2015, 12).

After the rearranging within the industry, more and more players were stepping into the market competition. In the end of 2009, CCTV launched China Network Television (CNTV)

as its own internet-based television broadcaster, offering a host of news and feature programmes from CCTV's foreign channels. Even with its innate advantages, such as its state owning identity and huge library of content, CNTV did not achieve fast development, due to its lack of an innovative consumer-driven service model. Comparatively, mainstream commercial video streaming websites were holding most market share. In 2010, major Chinese internet companies started to get involved in the streaming industry. Baidu, as one of China's biggest internet technology companies, founded the streaming service Qiyi, which was renamed as iQiyi in the following year. Along with LeTV, Youku, Tudou and Sohu Video (started offering television content streaming service in 2009) iQiyi then formed China's online video streaming industry in the late 2010s. Meanwhile, Western streaming services were also starting to expand on a global level. Netflix and Amazon Prime Video covered most parts of the world, except for a few countries and regions, including mainland China. This is due to the country's decision to block international sites by constructing the Great Firewall, 'a powerful internet censorship apparatus' (Zhao 2018, 108), which directly led to a domestic market for Chinese streaming services to grow without having to compete with these global market leaders.

### **The Mature Development Stage: 2011 – Present**

The final and most competitive Chinese streaming service appeared on the stage in early 2011. China's largest internet company Tencent extended its business into the online video streaming industry by rebranding its former live television service as Tencent Video, a video

streaming platform that focuses on film and television content. As mentioned earlier, by the end of 2019, Tencent Video and iQiyi have become China's most influential online film and television content providers, equal to their counterpart Netflix in the Western world. In 2012, Youku and Tudou announced plans to merge. After the merger, the two websites both remained separate with Tudou being totally transformed to a video-sharing platform whilst Youku adjusted itself to a mainly streaming-driven service. Furthermore, in 2015, the company was acquired by Alibaba, another Chinese internet company. Hereto, China's online streaming industry has been mostly manipulated by the country's biggest internet companies, Baidu, Tencent and Alibaba. With these companies' resource integration capability, the streaming services have started to evolve into more stable and profitable states.

### **Chinese Online Streaming Services' Business Model**

After more than ten years of development and improvement, the whole online streaming industry has been gradually readjusting its business model. Here, I use the term 'business model' to refer to Chinese online streaming services' revenue generation and overall business practices. As of the late 2010s, the current business model of most Chinese online video streaming services is based on both advertising sales and subscriptions. However, prior to the early 2010s, most of these services did not adopt a subscription model but were only funded by advertisers. As the number of Chinese netizens surged and the penetration of smartphone use increased, online streaming services started to accommodate more and more users, which led to the market size growing from 24.88 billion Chinese yuan (\$3.8 billion) in 2014 to 170

billion yuan (\$26.3 billion) in 2019 (BigData-Research 2020). With major Chinese internet companies stepping in, the fierce competition between different services then resulted in each service's aggressive investing in original and exclusive premium content. This requires the services to cover their expensive operational cost with funds from other divisions of the conglomerate (Curtin and Li 2018, 346). Consequently, besides benefiting from advertising revenue Chinese streaming services gradually adopted a unique subscription model that incorporates Chinese economic and cultural codes.

In order to cater to Chinese subscribers' consuming habits, Chinese streaming services have designed a flexible price plan. Unlike Western streaming services' subscription model that is usually monthly rolling (Netflix) or yearly rolling (Amazon Prime Video), Chinese streaming services' subscription model is based on different periods of validity. For example, Tencent Video offers six different subscription plans: one month, three months, one year, recurring monthly, recurring every three months, and recurring yearly. The prices for recurring plans are usually lower than for non-recurring ones, which subtly encourages users to subscribe to recurring ones. As a subsidiary of Alibaba Group, Youku offers a discounted price plan for Alipay users. Alipay is a mobile and online payment platform also owned by Alibaba Group. By making purchases via Alipay or on Taobao, users earn member points, which can be redeemed for a monthly Youku subscription. This integrated business strategy exploited by Alibaba in a way resembles Amazon Prime Video's business model. As a technology company specializing in e-commerce similar to Alibaba, Amazon's Prime subscription provides its

users with not only video and music streaming services, but also one or two-day delivery of goods and many other online services. Karen Petruska (2018, 358) argues, ‘Amazon’s television content inspires Prime subscriptions and subsequent purchases meant to take advantage of that membership’. In this sense, users of either service are encouraged to build a relationship with all the other services within Alibaba’s business sectors.

Chinese streaming services’ subscription model not only allows viewers with the access to exclusive content but also provides multiple user privileges. Unlike Netflix’s different price plans, which are determined by the number of screens users can watch on at the same time, all Tencent Video price plans enable users to access the service via unlimited devices at the same time, including smartphones, tablets, and laptops, with all the streaming-content-related features they can enjoy, such as 1080p resolution screens, Dolby Vision and downloading programmes for offline viewing. The mostly appreciated privilege is that subscribers can choose to skip the spot ads appearing at the beginning of the programme, since the ads can usually last up to 90 seconds. More user-led and less relevant to streaming content, subscribers are given the privilege to customize their user profile page with many different background settings, and they are also rewarded with a badge affixed to their user avatar that shows their VIP identity. These personalized and customized features can virtually distinguish subscribers from non-subscribers, which creates a user hierarchy that motivates users to subscribe.

Comparing to Western streaming services’ subscription model, Chinese streaming services’ subscription model is much more sophisticated and user-engaging, which implies



that Chinese users expect more privileges when they choose to pay for streaming content. However, these are just added values, the streaming programmes are the actual consumer products provided by streaming services. As indicated in industrial reports, to expand the content library with premium content is each service's foremost focus (BigData-Research 2020).

### **Expanding Content Library with Imported TV**

Chinese streaming services' content libraries bear similarities to Western services, in expanding content libraries. Netflix was reported to spend \$17.3 billion on content in 2020, which was up from \$15.3 billion in 2019 (Spangler 2020). Amazon Studios planned to spend \$7 billion on content while the newest major streaming service to enter the scene, HBO Max, planned to spend between \$1.2 billion and \$1.5 billion on content in 2020 (Klebnikov 2020). The large investment in content costs was also observed in Chinese streaming industry. By the end of 2019, Tencent Video was reported to have spent 72.2 billion yuan (\$11.2 billion) on content and iQiyi had spent 22.2 billion yuan (\$3.4 billion) (Sina 2020). As these cases indicate, expanding their content libraries is a mutual business focus shared by both Western and Chinese streaming services, which was a result of the severe competition among streaming services in both the Western industry and the Chinese industry.

With the concentration on expanding content libraries, Chinese streaming services have also started to seek branding opportunities. Rather than being a mere platform to distribute licensed streaming content, streaming services realized the significance of extending their

business to content-production, which was enlightened by a globally branding logic for streaming services rooted from Netflix's practice. Chinese online video streaming services usually divide their content into six first tier categories: films, TV series, reality shows, sports, and news. The content offered under the categories TV series and reality shows could be either the ones acquired from Chinese regional television stations and production companies or the ones self-produced by the service itself. The self-produced original content is specifically marked as 'Exclusive' or 'Self-produced', which is very similar to Netflix's 'Netflix Original'.

The original content library includes an array of different self-produced and also exclusively licensed television programmes. Thanks to its large investment on content, Tencent Video was able to acquire the exclusive online streaming right of costume drama *Ruyi's Royal Love in the Palace* (2018) and produced re-made version of the South Korean reality show *Produce 101* (2018- ). The two programmes respectively became the service's most viewed television series and reality show in 2018 and have helped strengthen its leading position in the Chinese market (Tencent Video 2018). Meanwhile, iQiyi's original drama *Yanxi Palace* (2018) created 15.96 billion views, which was the highest views a streaming service self-produced series received that year (Zu 2018). By providing plenty of exclusive branded streaming content, major steaming services, such as Tencent Video and iQiyi managed to draw more and more paid-subscriptions and upgrade their business model from purely advertising-based to subscription-driven. Meanwhile, streaming services with less capacity of content investment, such as Youku and Sohu Video also realized that imported foreign television series

was another type of content that were cheaper and could attract the already existent viewer group that was nurtured in the pirated DVD and P2P file-sharing age.

As aforementioned, foreign television series obtained a large viewership in mainland China through informal distribution networks, specifically pirated DVDs in the early 2000s and file-sharing forums and Bit-torrent websites in the late 2000s. In 2014, the United States' Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) released its annual list of worldwide online and physical markets that offered a significant volume of infringing film and television content, in which Beijing's Hailong Electronics Shopping Mall, Beijing Haidian District and San Li Tun District were outlined as where China's largest pirated DVD markets were. Several Chinese file-sharing forums and Bit-torrents websites were also listed as major illegal online distribution platforms. Prior to the release of this list, the Chinese government had already started taking actions towards combating physical pirated audio-visual products, which was not very effective. The crucial factor that determined the downfall of the pirated DVD market was actually the penetration of high-speed broadband which helped users gain access to informal online distribution platforms. However, in responding to the global attention paid to China's online piracy market, the Chinese authority forced these file-sharing forums and Bit-torrent websites to shut down. Even though some of them remerged on China's internet later, they had to remain largely invisible.

Meanwhile, national and regional television stations have been gradually reducing the amount of foreign television series they imported. One reason is the tremendous changes in

television audience demographics in the digital age. Television viewing on a television set was no longer the first choice for younger audiences when they wanted to watch television series. Viewers in the age group of 55 and above formed the major television audience (Xu 2016, 21). Younger viewers are foreign television series' target audience. Hence, foreign television series no longer appealed to the current television audience. Another reason is China's regulation pressure towards importing foreign television series. As Yik-chan Chin states, 'in terms of public broadcasting regulation in contemporary China, there is no broadcasting act or law. The Party-State regulates the country's television sector through administrative legislation, normative documents, and political leaders' speeches' (2007, 222). Hence, the regulations on imported television were not stated in relevant laws. Even though, it was never forbidden for a television station to import foreign television series, the SARFT (2004) specifically pointed out in its *Provisions on the Administration of Import and Broadcasting of Overseas TV Programmes* that the daily broadcast of overseas film and television series by each television channel shall not exceed 25% of the total broadcast time of the channel for that day and no overseas films and television dramas shall be broadcast during prime time (19:00 – 22:00). These restrictions along with the complicated examination and approval system had then resulted in the decrease of imported foreign television series by Chinese television stations.

As formal online distribution platforms, online streaming services then filled in the market gap. In 2014, major streaming services started purchasing an array of popular foreign

television series in order to attract those viewers who still wanted to consume foreign television content but had lost access to informal platforms. In other words, the informal distribution in China nurtured an audience and then passively abandoned them. Indirectly, these informal distribution activities have actually resulted in the implementation of the online distribution of foreign television series.

Among all the imported television series, the most popular ones appeared to be from South Korea and the United States. The logic behind which country or region streaming services choose to import television content from reflects their perception of their viewers' preferences. The Korean Wave has had a marked impact on China, resulting in the popularity of Korean films, music, fashion and food (Keane 2015, 64). As an essential element of the Korean Wave, South Korean television dramas had obtained a large viewership in the Chinese market, which drew attention from the streaming services.

In the meanwhile, American television series benefited the most from China's informal distribution networks, having garnered a great deal of Chinese viewers since the late 1990s (Wei 2017). Along with the Chinese word 韩剧 (hanju), meaning Korean television series, the Chinese word 美剧 (meiju), was soon created and spread all over China's internet world. Even though the word 美剧 (meiju) contains the character of 美 (mei), which means the United States, it can always be used by Chinese viewers to refer to all the foreign television series that are in English language. The Chinese word 英剧 (yingju) was not even widely used on the internet

until the arrival of *Sherlock*. Hence, from the perspective of the streaming services, American and British television series share almost the same audience.

As of the late 2010s, China's five major video streaming services all provide legally imported English-language television series: Tencent Video, iQiyi, Youku, Sohu Video and LeTV. This indicates that English-language television has become a content that is an essential category to include for a service that aims to expand its library. In the next section, I examine the viewership of English-language television series in mainland China.

### **Viewership of English-Language TV**

The first English-language television series ever broadcast on Chinese television was *Anna Karenina* (1977), imported from the United Kingdom (Hong 2007, 20). The ten-part series was produced by the British Broadcasting Corporation and introduced to the Chinese audience by Beijing TV in January 1978. Two years later in 1980, the National Broadcasting Company's *Man from Atlantis* (1977 – 1978) was broadcast on CCTV, which made it the first American television series ever to be broadcast formally in the country (Bai 2007, 80). In the following years, more and more American television series, including *Garrison's Gorillas* (1967 – 1968) and *Hunter* (1984 – 1991) were imported and caught Chinese audience's attention. American television production companies were gradually starting to make deals with Chinese regional television stations. In 1986, the American production company that produced *Hunter*, Lorimar Productions signed a five-year contract with Shanghai TV, providing a total of 7,500 hours of shows (Hong 2007, 23). The American company initially

attempted to make the deal with CCTV. But the series it provided was considered as ‘inappropriate’ for a national television station, such as *Hunter*. However, the series’ broadcast on Shanghai TV was a success with other regional and local stations approaching Shanghai TV for rebroadcast right of it (Hong 2007, 23). In 2010, in an online article written by Joseph Christian, ‘China’s favourite American TV shows’ were traced back to the 1980s. Christian (2010) noted the success of *Man from Atlantis* and *Garrison’s Gorillas* even influenced Chinese audience’ lifestyles: Chinese people started wearing sunglasses and playing Frisbee to imitate the characters from the show and even the crime rate nationwide went down significantly because people stayed at home to watch the show.

The rationale for the success of American television series could be explained as, for the first time the Chinese people in the reform years were given the chance to get to know the capitalist Western world via television, where they found novel and appealing television elements that Chinese television lacked. Moreover, the imported American television series were all dubbed in Mandarin Chinese, which helped reduce the negative effect caused by language barrier on audience’s reception since very few people were capable of understanding English and most Chinese people were illiterate (Yu 2015). The tradition of lip-sync dubbing was retained by CCTV but replaced by subtitling in the pirated DVD industry.

Entering the 1990s, the emergence of optical discs (initially VCDs and DVDs later) provided a new and affordable format of watching American television series, when there was a lack of formal time-sensitive distribution channels for the content in mainland China. In

2005, one of China's most influential information and entertainment web portals, Sina.com, conducted a survey regarding the popularity of American TV in China. The result showed that at the time, Chinese viewers' top five favourite American television series were *Friends* (1994 – 2004), *Desperate Housewives* (2004 – 2012), *Sex and the City* (1998 – 2004), *24* (2001 – 2010) and *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (2000 – 2015). Considering the fact that pirate DVDs was the major way to consume American television content in 2005, this list in practice revealed what television shows were selling well in the pirated DVD market.

China's pirate DVD market expanded tremendously in the 2000s, with some pirated DVD manufacturers even establishing their own brands that had loyal followings. These pirate operations took video sources obtained from North America and matched them with the most accurate Chinese subtitles from Taiwan and Hong Kong discs (Levin and Horn 2011). Lip-sync dubbing was not a likely option for these manufacturers and subtitling partially led to the formation of a specific consumer group. From cultural aspects, Haikuo Yu argues that subtitled versions of foreign films are particularly likely to be successful and popular among those who are under the age of 50, better educated as well as students and other intellectual minorities (2015, 497). This theory also applied to foreign television series, and it is proved by the analyses of Chinese American TV consumption. Researcher such as See Kam Tan (2011) and Wei (2017) state, the most enthusiastic viewers of American TV in China are the young, well-educated Chinese who live in urban areas, such as university students.



As the so-called ‘Compact Generation’ (Davis 2003), young people who started consuming audio-visual products via optical discs became the major consumers of pirated VCDs and DVDs. China’s young people in the pirated DVD age were the first generation of only children under the one-child policy, which took effect in 1979. By the time of the early 2000s, these only children had reached their early twenties, most of which were getting higher education or just graduated from universities. This post-1980s generation can be seen as the first large audience in China for English-language television content via pirated DVDs.

With the post-1990s generation following the post-1980s generation, Chinese youth were widely exposed to modern Western culture through films and television shows that were spread all over mainland China firstly via optical discs then the internet. Entering the 21<sup>st</sup> century, China has also witnessed the rapid growth of home broadband penetration in the country. Urban young Chinese were the earliest to discover online platforms that circulated and distributed popular American films and television shows. P2P file-sharing forums and Bit-torrent websites soon became convenient online spaces where films and television series were offered for free. As for many media markets, the Chinese market, and likely others, suggests consumers are interested in the most convenient and inexpensive mode of accessing audio-visual products. The pirated DVD industry had then gradually shrunk. The major distribution medium for English-language television content finally transformed from optical discs to online platforms where the legality still remained absent.

Chinese youth consume English-language television content for several reasons. First and foremost, this generation benefited from the reform and opening-up period and did not experience the Maoist socialism. Fengshu Liu observes,

their identity construction is being played out in a dramatically different socio-cultural context compared with the previous generations of Chinese youth. ... Chinese urban children and youth today are known to enjoy material prosperity and well-being that would have been unimaginable for previous generations. They have never experienced the hardships of civil war, the turmoil of the Great Leap Forward or the Cultural Revolution and the famines and the shortages that their parents and grandparents lived through (2010, 57-58).

With their parents concentrating all of the possible resources they could obtain on these only children, urban Chinese youth were enabled to develop a consumerist lifestyle. On the one hand they enjoyed international brands, such as Nike and McDonald's, the consumption of which became the symbol of material modernity that was rooted from Western modern culture (Yan 2005). On the other hand, whilst they were growing up urban, Chinese youth started to pursue new recreational activities and cultural expressions including playing video games and watching Hollywood blockbuster films, which were not available when their parents were young. As for television consumption, many of them sought for alternative viewing options from what was showing on China's television. Yang Gao argues, 'even with its general deregulation in the reform era, the Party-state keeps a tight rein on TV content that provokes public debate, sparks critical thinking, or challenges authority' (2016, 7). More and more

young people found it unbearable to passively receive television content that is either propagandist or of poor quality (Gao 2016, 7). Hence, they turned to the internet (previously the pirated DVD shops located all over Chinese cities) and discovered an array of foreign television content, among which American television series (later extended to British ones) displayed the modernity and cultural expressions for which they longed.

The second factor that led to the popularity of English-language television series in mainland China was triggered by China's overall English-language education and the national English-learning fever since Beijing's winning bid to hold the 2008 Olympics. Along with the one-child policy, the Chinese government also pointed out the significance of obtaining higher education for Chinese citizens (Fong 2004). Besides enjoying unprecedented caregiving and fulfilling material comfort from their family, most of the only children were expected to achieve satisfactory exam results and then a successful career prospect. As a compulsory subject, English has become an important part of China's education system. The vast majority of the National College Entrance Examinations candidates choose English as a foreign language test and millions of non-English major college students attend the College English Test in order to gain diplomas. Moreover, more and more Chinese people choose to go to foreign countries, especially English-speaking ones for educational purposes, for which they have to take international English language tests, such as the TOEFL and the IELTS. In this context, watching English-language television series was recommended by many college teachers and English tutors as an entertaining and useful way to improve one's English

listening and speaking skills. For instance, *Friends* is known as the best material for college students to use to enhance their English-language ability in mainland China (Tan 2011). Although whether it is actually effective to learn English by watching English-language television was never fully proved, many viewers were motivated to consume American and British television for its language-learning possibilities.

Due to both historical and cultural factors, the specific demographic for English-language television content was formed after more than a decade's development. Urban Chinese youth, who have been well educated and equipped with unique perceptions and values of the outside world, keep seeking for high-quality viewing products. As of the late 2010s, the major distribution platform of English-language television series has finally obtained legality after the rapid development of China's online video streaming industry. Meanwhile, the first 21st-century generation of urban Chinese youth are now in their twenties or thirties and have become the major consuming force of online commercial activities.

Statistics regarding the current age range of China's online streaming users as of 2019 shows that the majority (83.9%) of these users are in the age group between 20 and 35 (BigData-Research 2020). These users were born after 1980, which means they are among the one-child generation. Most of them hold a university degree and are self-employed or college students. 70% of the users earn 2000-3000 yuan (\$300-\$460) per month and reside in China's first or second-tier cities (BigData-Research 2020). The data shows that English-language

television series viewers and online streaming users might very much overlap. How streaming services cater to this user group is discussed in the next section.

### **The Cultural Proximity Index and English-Language TV**

As of the late 2010s, China's five major online streaming services, Tencent Video, iQiyi, Youku, Sohu Video and LeTV all include English-language television series in their content libraries, such as Tencent Video's *Game of Thrones*, Youku's *Sherlock*, iQiyi's *Elementary* (2012 – 2019), Sohu Video's *The Big Bang Theory* (2007 – 2019) and LeTV's *Criminal Minds* (2005 – 2020). Some of these series have generated local fandoms and media hype, such as *Game of Thrones* and *Sherlock* whilst others like *Elementary* and *Criminal Minds* remain popular among the viewers but have not engendered much discussion on China's internet. Roberta Pearson (2019) observes that transnational television consists of two types of series: high-end and routine, which echoes the above observation. High-end television series are often co-produced with large budgets, high production values and complex narratives and can engender large global fandoms whilst routine television series have low budgets and production values and are usually unable to generate a large fan base (Hills, Hilmes and Pearson 2019, 81). Pearson (2019, 85) then argues that these two types of transnational television content both can generate profits for local distributors, yet they serve distinct functions in terms of cultural and temporal proximity to the local market. Cultural proximity is the first factor to discuss.

Straubhaar (1991) conceives of transnational cultural trade in terms of the 'proximity' between different cultures, which includes such factors as shared histories, similar values, and congruence of dominant narrative forms. He then further explains the concept of cultural proximity in the context of global television, 'cultural capital, identity, and language tend to favor an audience desire for cultural proximity, which leads audiences to prefer local and national productions over those that are globalized and/or American' (Straubhaar 2003, 78). This is essentially true to the Chinese market since as mentioned earlier, the demographic of English-language television series consists mostly urban Chinese youth who are better educated and more perceptive of the outside world than other Chinese audience groups. As an imported audio-visual product that is produced in the English world, English-language television series shares very few similarities with China's domestic ones in terms of language, social ideology, and traditional culture, which can be called cultural discount. As Stuart McFadyen, Colin Hoskins and Adam Finn explained the concept of cultural discount,

A particular television programmes, film or video rooted in one culture, and thus attractive in the home market where viewers share a common knowledge and way of life, will have a diminished appeal elsewhere, as viewers find it difficult to identify with the style, values, beliefs history, myths, institutions, physical environment, and behavioral patterns (2003, 50).

Even though the effect of cultural discount reduces the appeal of English-language television series towards a larger or more general audience, the fact that there are still viewers who are willing to consume this content. To explain this, I apply 'the cultural proximity index'

proposed by Pearson (2019) to the consumption of English-language television content in the Chinese market. As she unpacks, ‘cultural proximity index is a spectrum ranging from the negative to the positive—cultural discount to cultural accessibility to cultural premium’ (Pearson 2019, 92). Cultural discount generally hinders foreign television content from obtaining a vast audience base in mainland China but television content of different cultural backgrounds each has a degree of cultural accessibility to its specific viewers. For instance, as a result of popularization of the Korean Wave, millions of fans of Korean culture emerged on China’s internet. They have been getting accustomed to consuming different kinds of Korean cultural products, such as K-pop music and Korean films, thus Korean television series are more culturally accessible to them than to other audience groups. Sharing relatively accessible cultural elements with Chinese domestic productions, Japanese television dramas also reached to markets in mainland China through pirated VCDs in the late 1990s (Iwabuchi 2004, 233). Similarly, English-language television series has its own audience base that has been nurtured by the previous pirated DVD market and informal online distribution networks. As Pearson argues,

[T]he US industry's century-long dominance of the global screen trade has rendered audiences familiar with Hollywood's textual codes, such as genres and narrative structures... US television dramas thus have a degree of cultural accessibility around the globe, although this may vary in correlation with the extent to which the text presumes specific knowledge of the national context (2019, 92).

In the context of mainland China, the distribution of English-language television series has a long history as already discussed in this chapter. Chinese viewers who have consumed this content via multiple informal means have developed the ability to better comprehend the content. In other words, English-language television series are culturally accessible to these viewers. Moreover, the cultural accessibility can even be understood as cultural premium. Many Chinese scholars have conducted studies regarding the assumption that English-language television content has a series of cultural values that only some local viewers appreciate. For instance, Gao (2016) interviewed 29 university students in Beijing who regularly watch American television series. The research found that these Chinese viewers consider US TV characters as role models who are ‘truthful about their feelings and opinions’, who ‘disregard constraining expectations and obligations’, and who ‘spare no effort to pursue their own dreams and desires’ (Gao 2016, 23). Qiaolei Jiang and Louis Leung even argue that ‘watching foreign TV dramas has become a way for Chinese viewers to enhance their ability to modernize their lifestyles’ (2012, 174). Also, Chinese viewers who are interested in television genre of fantasy and sci-fi are more likely and willingly to consume English-language television series simply due to the absence of this genre in domestic productions (Li 2016).

However, Gao also points out the limitation of the reception of English-language television content in mainland China,



watching US TV requires an English language ability and global media literacy that in China only a small educated elite with cosmopolitan orientation and transnational cultural capital possess; their taste for American programming is unlikely to reflect the rest of Chinese viewers (2016, 1206).

Hence, cultural discounts are significant to common Chinese viewers of local television content whilst cultural accessibility of English-language television series helped locate its Chinese viewers. In fact, Chinese viewers of English-language television series possess generally higher cultural capital and even the action of watching English-language television has become a way for these viewers to gain as well as deploy their cultural capital<sup>4</sup>. To online streaming services as distributors, the content's degree of cultural proximity is also important. As Timothy Havens argues, the site of distribution is 'a significant moment between production and consumption where economic value is created from the televisual commodity' (2002, 379). Based on this cultural economy perspective, Juan Piñon states that during the trade of international television, 'distribution sellers and buyers negotiate based on the imagined cultural value of certain genres, a programme's nation of origin, and the visibility of assumed racial and class markers' (2011, 69). By taking culture accessibility and cultural premium into account, online streaming services make decisions on what English-language television series they should import to meet the target viewers' demand. In the meanwhile,

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<sup>4</sup> Chapter 3 will further discuss Chinese viewers' deployment of their cultural capital in consuming English-language television content.

they also tend to avoid series that are too culturally specific or have a low degree of cultural accessibility even to viewers who constantly consume English-language television. For instance, Emmy-winning shows *30 Rock* (2006 – 2013) and *Parks and Recreation* (2009 – 2015) have never been imported into China by any streaming platforms and they have very small fan communities in China. Situation comedies such as these two are less likely to be imported since ‘national tastes in humor differ, and language subtitles tend to be lost in translation’ (McFadyen, Hoskins and Finn 2003, 51). Moreover, these two comedies deal with, respectively, an American fictional live sketch comedy and the Parks Department in a fictional American town, milieus that may have a lower degree of cultural accessibility to viewers who lack the knowledge of the US television industry practice or small-town government. In other words, situation comedies that do not have a broader, more universal subject matter are likely to be snubbed by Chinese streaming services.

Cultural premium at the same time is also taken into account by Chinese distributors: series that have cultural premium are even employed for other purposes rather than only to meet the viewer’s demand for English-language television. Pearson (2019) discusses America’s PBS network’s use of *Sherlock*’s cultural premium to rebrand its *Masterpiece Theatre*. She observes,

*Sherlock*, together with *Downton [Abbey]*, played a significant role in the *Masterpiece* rebrand that brought an influx of younger viewers and higher ratings... The cultural premium of Britishness evolves over time, as producers reconfigure the heritage genre in

response to changing social and cultural conditions, textual signifiers, and audience expectations' (Pearson 2019, 95-96).

This case study echoes what I have discussed about Youku's campaign in the Introduction. The specific Britishness of *Sherlock* and the texts generated from its already formed fan base became Youku's promotional materials and helped Youku garner impressive viewership and more paid subscriptions. The promotion of subscription is usually embedded in each service's campaign for its major original or exclusive content through most social media platforms. Youku's campaign for Season 4 of *Sherlock* emphasized on its transnational simultaneous broadcast and weekly update, both for subscribers only. The running of the season lasted three weeks, which means if the viewers wanted to watch the newest episode as soon as it was updated, they needed to retain their subscription for at least a month. Even though after the first run, Youku still kept the whole series available for only subscribers. Hence, the British series was treated as a significant lure for the fans of English-language television series to subscribe to Youku's service.

Chinese streaming services have been exploiting high-end English-language television series to brand their services. As one of China's top two streaming services, Tencent Video signed a deal with HBO to obtain the exclusive right to stream its hit shows, such as *Game of Thrones*, *Westworld* (2016 – ) and *Big Little Lies* (2017–2019). Similar to Youku's distribution practice of *Sherlock*, Tencent Video managed to persuade HBO to provide all the episodes of Season 6 of *Game of Thrones* before its premiere in the United States so that Tencent could

get the show reviewed by China's regulators and then released it on its site with subtitles only two weeks later than the original airdate in the United States. As a high-end television drama, *Game of Thrones* also enabled Tencent to achieve its branding strategies through the series' cultural premium. The case will be further discussed in the next chapter.

Another significant example is that Sohu Video specifically branded itself as the 'No.1 US TV Provider' by importing an array of American television shows of different genres, from high-end television dramas, such as *House of Cards* (2013 – 2018) and *Homeland* (2011 – 2020) to routine situation comedies, such as *2 Broke Girls* (2011 – 2017) and *The Big Bang Theory* (Sohu, 2017). The service even imported daytime talks shows such as *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* (2003 – ) and variety shows such as *Saturday Night Live* (1975 – ), neither genres of which are included in any other Chinese streaming services' libraries. With highly culturally specific scripts, these two television programmes feature an array of social topics in the context of the present United States, which makes them not as culturally accessible to local Chinese viewers as other English-language drama or comedy series and television programmes of these genres are not included in any of the other four major streaming services. Yet, Sohu Video still imports these programmes and presents them as subscriber-only content. There are two main reasons behind this distribution practice. First, Sohu Video targets a niche demographic, well-educated urban young audiences, as indicated on its website. English-language television content is more likely to appeal to this demographic, as argued earlier, and talk shows and variety shows that require even higher cultural capital are considered by

Chinese viewers as cultural premium content. This suggests Sohu Video's endeavour to attract savvy English-language television fans rather than only casual viewers with programmes of not only drama or comedy series but also talk shows or variety shows. Second, without enough capacity to produce original content, Sohu Video had to back off from the severe competition with the top streaming services since original content has become each service's major attraction to a large audience. Also, for Chinese buyers it is cheaper to purchase US programming than to self-produce (Havens 2002, 384). Hence, to fill its content library with various high-end and routine American television series as well as talk shows or variety shows is an essential part of Sohu's business practices and branding agenda.

Furthermore, online streaming services have been trying to nurture subscribers who seek better services and high-quality content with exclusive programming. For example, some American television series are only updated weekly for normal viewers. But paying subscribers can binge-watch the whole season and have the opportunity to gain prizes. The weekly updated content library cultivates audiences' loyalty to the service and the privilege of accessibility further help generate more subscriptions. However, the ample content library of English-language television content was restricted by the Chinese authority.

In late 2014, the SAPPRFT released a new policy in order to formally regulate and supervise online imported streaming content, which requires the streaming services to take down any streaming content that has not been approved and licensed by the SAPPRFT and the total number of foreign television programmes streaming services provide should not

exceed 30% of the service's content library (Sina 2014). This new policy resulted in the decrease of the number of English-language television series in most services' content library, which directly reduced Sohu Video's competitiveness. Meanwhile, Tencent Video and Youku adjusted their content library and only kept some high-end series and those routine series that have a large fan base in China, which brings out another factor that affects streaming services' importing plan: temporal proximity.

### **The Temporal Proximity Index and English-Language TV**

The 2014 policy also outlined that streaming services must obtain all the episodes of a foreign television programme and have them reviewed, approved and licensed by the SAPPRFT before releasing the programme to stream online. Considering many of the American television series might still be in production even after the air of its pilot in the United States, it was not always possible to import and distribute these series without a significant time delay. The implementation of this policy then restricted streaming services from providing the most recent English-language television series. Timothy Havens also argues, 'programmes typically encounter a "temporal discount" in windows far removed from their original production date' (2006, 15). The temporal discount could result in subscribers' withdrawal from the streaming services and the relapse of accessing informal platforms since these platforms usually do not obey the SAPPRFT's instruction.

Similar to the notion of the cultural proximity index, there is also a temporal proximity index that can be used to understand the temporal discount issue. Pearson states the temporal

discount requires nuancing and proposed a temporal proximity index that contains ‘temporal discount’, ‘temporal neutrality’ and ‘temporal premium’ (2019, 123). She then argues that ‘distributors and foreign broadcasters have incentives to circulate high-end television as rapidly as possible in order to discourage piracy and synchronize transmedia storytelling and promotional materials’ (Pearson 2019, 123). The premiere of *Sherlock* Season 4 took place on 1 Jan 2017 in the United Kingdom. Youku managed to achieve simultaneous broadcast, which itself was part of Youku’s major promotional materials. Chinese viewers were given the privilege to join the local and global discussion of the premiere, during which different kinds of texts were generated and soon adopted by Youku to enhance its engagement with the viewers. To the contrary, major streaming services no longer tend to import routine television series as rapidly as they used to. For instance, in mid 2016, when CBS had finished the first run broadcast of Season 5 of *2 Broke Girls* in the United States, what was available to iQiyi subscribers was only the whole Season 4 of the show.

Even though routine television series’ lack of temporal premium could discourage streaming services from rapidly circulating such content, its temporal discount might still encourage viewers to access informal platforms. However, when the streaming services are only allowed to import a very limited number of series, they choose the ones that can benefit from temporal premium the most and suffer from temporal discount the least.

## Conclusion

This chapter has provided a detailed discussion of the background of the Chinese streaming industry in the 21st century. China's television sector has a 40-year-long history of formal imports of foreign television content since the late 1980s. However, China's major audience base for English-language television series grew largely through informal distribution networks in the form of pirated DVDs and online downloading and file-sharing. From the perspective of the audience, urban young Chinese viewers consider English-language television series as high-quality television content, in which they discover various cultural and social elements that are rarely found in domestic productions. From the perspective of the regulators, the Chinese authorities kept tightening the country's media market in terms of imported television content, by putting restrictions firstly on television then online streaming. From the perspective of the distributors, online streaming services noticed the demographic's constant demand for English-language television content, which resulted in the content's formal landing on the internet platform. Meanwhile, restricted by China's media regulation and policy, streaming services figured out solutions to overcome various hurdles during the distribution process of English-language television series to benefit their business model and branding strategy.

Following on the basic knowledge of the historical, political and cultural factors that have caused the current online distribution of English-language television in mainland China, the next chapter examines streaming services' overall distribution practices for English-



language television series to better understand Chinese streaming services as the first and foremost agent in the distribution of transnational television flow in mainland China.

## Chapter Two Online Distribution Practices of English-Language TV

As one of HBO's most successful high-end series, *Game of Thrones* has earned a worldwide reputation that includes the fandom of Chinese viewers. Tencent Video, one of China's major video streaming services and HBO's only official distribution partner in mainland China, has been fully exploiting the series as a fundamental part of its promotional strategy as well as branding strategy. On July 31, 2017, Tencent Video released the first three episodes of Season 7 of *Game of Thrones* two weeks after the season's premiere in the United States; thereafter, the service started to update one new episode every week simultaneously with its original US airdate. However, the series was initially only available for VIP subscribers and then became free to stream for all viewers after its first round of releasing. On China's best-known question-and-answer website, Zhihu, the discussion regarding this simultaneous transnational broadcast involved almost 500,000 users. Tencent Video's official Zhihu account also participated in this discussion and explained the company's intention and determination to discourage piracy, which can be seen as part of Tencent Video's campaign for its branding agenda. The simultaneous transnational release is one example of the current distribution activities regarding imported television content in mainland China, content that helps the streaming service create promotional material.

As the second largest TV market in the world and, more specifically, as a market with a total of 609 million video streaming service users (BigData-Research 2019), China has

entered an era where interaction between users and operators is vital to online media. After introducing China's online streaming industry in Chapter 1, in this chapter, I examine online streaming services' distribution practices for English-language and ask the following questions: in the current online streaming industry, how do Chinese streaming services design their interface and display page to better cater to local English-language television viewers and what is the mechanism behind it? What kinds of viewer-generated texts are exploited by the streaming services and what is the relationship between the services and their viewers?

To answer these questions, I develop case studies of *Game of Thrones* and others to illustrate and analyse streamers' business practices surrounding transnational TV and to demonstrate the features streaming services use to cater to online audiences based on the local streaming consumption habits. Drawing on scholarly research on online TV, this chapter analyses the design of the services' interfaces, the scheduling of programmes, and the accessibility for different tiers of viewers, as well as promotional strategies and branding agenda, to grasp how the online distribution of English-language television series operates in mainland China. By doing so, I argue that the localized online distribution of English-language television series in mainland China is the result of the distributors' business practices exploiting the various possibilities offered by digital media and local Chinese viewers' consumption habits, which helps the dissertation recognize formal Chinese streaming services as the first and foremost agent in the transnational distribution of English-language television content.

## Online TV and Online Distribution

At the end of the 2010s, when a Chinese viewer claims they are going to watch a television programme called *Keep Running* (2014 – ) produced by Zhejiang TV (one of China's most influential regional television stations), it is very likely that they are not referring to watching a scheduled episode of the programme on Zhejiang TV on an actual television set. Even if they do watch the programme on an actual television set, the programme on the screen is probably being transmitted via internet-based streaming application installed within the television, such as Tencent Video, which means the viewers can pause, fast forward and rewind the programme and even continue watching it on their smartphones at the same time. More and more Chinese viewers are moving to online platforms for television content, which has resulted in the decline of linear television viewing. According to *2019 China TV Rating Yearbook*, the average daily television viewing time of each viewer has been decreasing since 2012, reaching the point of 129 minutes in 2018 (Ding 2019, 35). This responds to what Jeanette Steemers observes, 'linear TV viewing is likely to disappear in the face of multiple multimedia platforms, and that apps will replace channels' (2014, 47). Since the early 2010s, China's online streaming industry started to have an impact on the country's national television consuming habits, which caused an unprecedented transformation of the distribution of television content.

Chinese viewers have been used to receiving television content as 'flow' through linear television viewing. As Derek Kompare explains, flow refers to the overall experience of

watching broadcast television, which is ‘a time bound (i.e., we are asked to attend to the set at particular times), yet seemingly endless, stream of signs engaging us not so much as individual viewers but as an *audience*, a collective entity participating in the same signs at the same time’ (2002, 3, original emphasis). However, this model does not fully work in the digital age when traditional linear television viewing is gradually being replaced by fragmented and individual viewing patterns. Kompare then proposed the opposite model of flow: the ‘file’, media content arriving in our perceptions in ‘discrete, malleable packages, rather than a constant stream’ is ‘informative’, ‘accessible’ and ‘mobile’ (2002, 1-2). When we receive television content in the form of file, we can choose where, when, and how to consume it. Accessing television content in the form of file via the internet has become the new habit of Chinese viewers. In fact, Chinese television stations now choose to distribute their television programmes such as *Keep Running*, in both forms on both television channels and online streaming services. This is how they react to the fact that these programmes target young Chinese viewers who overwhelmingly prefer online TV viewing over traditional linear TV viewing. These viewers still watch television, but ‘television’ here refers to the content, not the technology that delivers the content.

With the popularization of online streaming platforms, the delivery of television content has extended to the online space. The definition of online TV has been discussed by scholars in several different contexts. For example, Amanda D. Lotz (2017, 9) identifies US-based streaming services, such as Netflix and Hulu, to argue that internet-connected television

services are ‘portals’ that distribute television content on the internet in a nonlinear manner. She contends that these services’ business models are mostly based on subscription, which is similar to how American cable television services operate (Lotz 2017). However, as Chapter 1 has explained, Chinese online TV providers are funded by both advertising and subscription and also work along with Chinese television stations to distribute television content simultaneously. Hence, Lotz’s model does not fully apply to the Chinese streaming industry.

Seeking to distinguish online television from websites that also provide online videos, such as YouTube, Catherine Johnson defines the former as ‘services that facilitate the viewing of editorially selected audio-visual content through internet-connected devices and infrastructure’ (2019, 48). Without the emphasis on whether the service provides linear content and the discussion of its funding mechanism, this model is flexible enough to describe Chinese online streaming services. Johnson also divided online TV services into three categories according to business origins:

1. TV natives, that have extended an existing TV service into the internet ecosystem (e.g., BBC, Disney, Sky);
2. Online natives, that have originated online services for the internet ecosystem (e.g., Netflix, Amazon, Apple);
3. Content natives, that have extended a content-based business in another field into an online TV service (e.g. Globe Player, Arsenal Player) (2019, 80).

In the context of mainland China, there is only one major TV native, Hunan TV’s streaming service Mango TV. All the other major online streaming services iQiyi, Tencent

Video, Youku, Sohu Video and LeTV, are online natives. Tencent and Sohu first appeared in China's cyber market in the form of two main information web portals that provide online videos. In order to meet users' demand for online streaming content, these two companies launched their own online streaming pages and then transformed them to full-scale services. Youku was initially a user-shared video platform and has changed its main business to online streaming content provider. iQiyi and LeTV have been providing online streaming content ever since they emerged in the 2000s.

Chapter 1 has introduced that these streaming services' business models are all based on both advertising and subscription, whilst their paid subscriptions have been continuing to grow in recent years. As of 2019, the top two services iQiyi and Tencent Video have both exceeded 100 million paid subscriptions which takes up more than 50% of their overall revenue (BigData-Research 2020). Again, providing exclusive original content (whether through self-production or licensing) is the key battlefield in the current Chinese online streaming industry. In spite of being an imported content by licensing, English-language television content is always treated as a streaming service's 'original' or more accurately 'exclusive' content. This is due to the scarcity of this content and the fact that online streaming services are the mainly formal platform to distribute imported television series in mainland China. Major streaming services such as Youku, tend to exploit English-language television series, especially high-end ones to generate subscriptions (as discussed in the Introduction).

On the one hand, the online streaming infrastructure gives streaming services more possibilities to design online distribution strategies that are better adapted to the characteristics of the overall internet ecosystem. On the other hand, English-language television content provides the streaming services with ample texts that can be used as marketing material. Hence, these distribution practices as will be analysed later, are essential for understanding China's online streaming industry.

### **Content Library of English-Language TV**

Lobato argues, 'as television studies moves further into the Internet age, it must develop a robust understanding of how catalogs work if it wishes to understand wider dynamics of access, choice, and diversity in digital distribution' (2018, 242). His argument emphasizes the significance of the study of online streaming services' content library. To do so, I first measure the available programmes each service possesses. Scholarly work has also pointed out the importance of the volume of a video service's library. As Elissa Nelson argues in *Windows into the Digital World*, 'one challenge a digital viewing service could face is that if enough titles aren't available, consumers can always access content elsewhere' (2014, 69), especially if this elsewhere is an informal platform where numerous television series can be found and viewed for free. In previous decades, the lack of enforcement of intellectual-property rights in China allowed the proliferation of informal means of accessing foreign audio-visual content, such as pirated VCDs in the 1990s, pirated DVDs in the 2000s, and unlicensed video streaming websites and illegal file-sharing websites in the 2000s and the early 2010s. In



present-day China, pirated DVDs and illegal file-sharing websites are still available to viewers who are unwilling to pay licensed streaming services for legally imported foreign audio-visual content.

In fact, competing with formal streaming services, informal file-sharing platforms still provide viewers with ‘unlimited’ content. Especially in 2014, after the policy on limiting the number of available foreign television series on formal streaming services to thirty percent of its total programmes was implemented, formal streaming services have faced the challenging task of preventing their viewers from leaving for informal platforms that possess a much larger yet non-authorized content library of English-language television series (Entertainment China 2017). Only when formal online streaming services are able to satisfy viewers’ needs will this kind of informal platform falter in stealing audiences from them. By purchasing rights to more popular series and maintaining an ample library, formal streaming services can more effectively combat illegal downloading. Since nowadays it is somewhat easier for viewers to go on formal streaming services than to locate and download content by unapproved means, formal distribution platforms still hold the advantage of attracting more audiences.

Yet, in the ecology of online video streaming, there is also competition among formal services. The actual size of the content library one service holds can be vital for its competitiveness, while also indicating how much it foregrounds this type of content. Hence, we need a full view of each of China’s five major streaming services – Tencent Video, Youku, LeTV, iQiyi and Sohu Video – in terms of their content libraries of English-language

television series. Difficulties in collecting statistics for streaming platforms are notorious, including the exact number of the programmes offered by the platform. For instance, one can find it almost impossible to count the number of series that Netflix possesses by scrolling down on its home page. However, with their limits on foreign television programmes, Chinese streaming services have only a relatively small number of English-language television series, so it is feasible to obtain the statistics manually. This is especially true because each service can show search results by the region of the content, meaning one can filter findings for English-language television content and count the number of English-language television series each service has. Table 2.1 produces the results of this method. Here, the number of American and British television series varies substantially on the five services.

	<b>Total</b>	<b>US</b>	<b>UK</b>	<b>Trailer (US/UK)</b>
<b>Tencent Video</b>	232	187	45	486
<b>Sohu Video</b>	58	54	4	51
<b>LeTV</b>	96	79	17	234
<b>iQiyi</b>	21	16	5	308
<b>Youku</b>	17	16	1	283

**Table 2.1** *The quantity of US/UK TV series and trailers each service possesses on Tencent Video, Sohu Video, LeTV, iQiyi and Youku, as of November 2018.*

As of November 2018, Tencent Video had a total of 232 English-language television series available for viewing, including 187 American series and forty-five British series, making it the only service with more than 100 US/UK television series available among the five. LeTV was second with a collection of seventy-nine American series and seventeen British series, ninety-six in total. Sohu Video had the third largest library in terms of English-

language television series, with fifty-four American series and four British series. The other two services, Youku and iQiyi, possessed the same number of American TV series – sixteen. As for British series, Youku had five and iQiyi only had one. The above has shown that as leading services in the industry, Tencent Video has both the capacity and the intention to enrich its content library with a large number of English-language television series comparing to others, whilst Youku and iQiyi do not consider this television content as their foremost focus in terms of expanding library. Sohu Video, in the meanwhile, specifically concentrates on including as many English-language television series as its capacity allows to achieve its branding agenda as the ‘No 1 US TV Provider’. Despite the fact that LeTV was undergoing a process of reorganization, it still held a substantial amount of series. As the service was the first copyright-compliant online video streaming platform in mainland China, it has been devoted to serving viewers with an enormous collection of various viewing options.

Acquisition preferences for content are apparent as well. In terms of the type of television series, LeTV provided mostly routine ones, such as *Criminal Minds* and *Body of Proof* (2011 – 2013). These crime series do not have large fan base in China, but their cultural accessibility makes them casual viewing for those who are not too selective about the content they watch as long as it is in English. As the service once branded itself as the ‘No. 1 US TV Provider’ (Sohu 2017), Sohu Video concentrated on offering critically acclaimed series, such as *The Big Bang Theory* and *Breaking Bad* (2008 – 2013). These widely known series could attract viewers that are more selective about American TV.

Meanwhile, iQiyi's content library included very few English-language television series, which does not indicate much about the service's acquisition preferences. Tencent Video has been licensed as HBO's exclusive partner in mainland China. Hence, almost half the number of its available English-language television series were produced by HBO, including *Game of Thrones* and *Westworld*. Similarly, Youku was the BBC's Chinese business partner, which gave Youku the exclusive online distribution rights for *Sherlock*. These two services exploit the exclusively obtained high-end series to drive subscriptions and enhance their branding practices.

Another finding during the process of data collecting is that all these five services provided their viewers with substantial quantities of trailers and clips of series they did not actually stream on their platforms. It was stated in the promotional slogan, some of these series might be available for viewers to watch in the foreseeable future. However, most of them were not indicated about whether they will be imported or not. Since all these services keep records of the viewing times of all the videos they have, the companies have comprehensive data at hand for use in planning importation of new English-language television series.

The screenshot shows the Youku homepage layout. At the top, there's a navigation bar with 'YOUKU' logo and various category links. Below that, a '即时热点' (Hot Topics) section displays several video thumbnails with titles and view counts. A '优酷懂你' (Youku Understands You) section follows, featuring a grid of video thumbnails. A red-bordered section titled 'US/UK TV Shows Section' is highlighted, containing a grid of English-language TV show thumbnails. The thumbnails include titles like '福斯特医生 第二季', '神探夏洛克 第四季', '黑金风暴 第四季', '火枪手 第三季', '穹顶之下 第一季', '星际之旅 第一季', '黑名单 第二季', '她在其中', '福斯特医生 第二季', '在黑暗中', '火枪手 第三季', '穹顶之下 第一季', '黑名单 第二季', and '她在其中'.

Figure 2. 1 Youku's first tier home page, with one small section dedicated for English-language TV, translation in red by me, as of November 2018.



way English-language television series are displayed on the interfaces<sup>5</sup> of these services' first tier home page (see Figures 2.1 & 2.2) and second tier display page (see Figures 2.3, 2.4 & 2.5) in some cases. Lobato addresses the interfaces of streaming services, emphasizing their unique organization as they use 'various kinds of motifs and elements designed as navigational aids and these design features invite particular kinds of movement around the site and particular modes of searching, discovery and access' (2017, 184). Johnson also argues that 'Unlike the programmes they provide access to, VoD interfaces are not routinely archived or valued as important forms of media content in their own right, despite their central role in organizing the viewing experience of TV' (2017, 123). The study of the interfaces of these streaming services then become essential to understanding the viewing experience they tend to offer.

Lotz investigates how effectively on-demand services work in the US market, arguing that 'the poor and cumbersome interface of the service could deter viewers from attempting to use them' (2007, 149). A well-designed and organized web space motivates viewers to explore the service and then stream content that might interest them. From the perspective of engineering, Maria Amelia Eliseo, Bárbara Soares Casac, and Gustavo Rorato Gentil point out that 'content categorization can increase user satisfaction while trying to find videos to watch' (2017, 6). Hence, the exhibition of specific type of content can very much influence user experience. Taking a close look at these Chinese streaming services' exhibition space can

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<sup>5</sup> This research focuses on the interfaces shown on PC websites of these services, as they showcase the fullest picture of their designs.

help us understand what kind of strategies they have invested in exhibiting English-language television series and how vigorously they encourage viewers to watch this content. Lobato argues that ‘the resulting “platform spaces” require analysis because they have agency of their own. No media-space is neutral. It is therefore important to consider how today’s streaming platforms are spatially structured and to what effect’ (2017, 185).



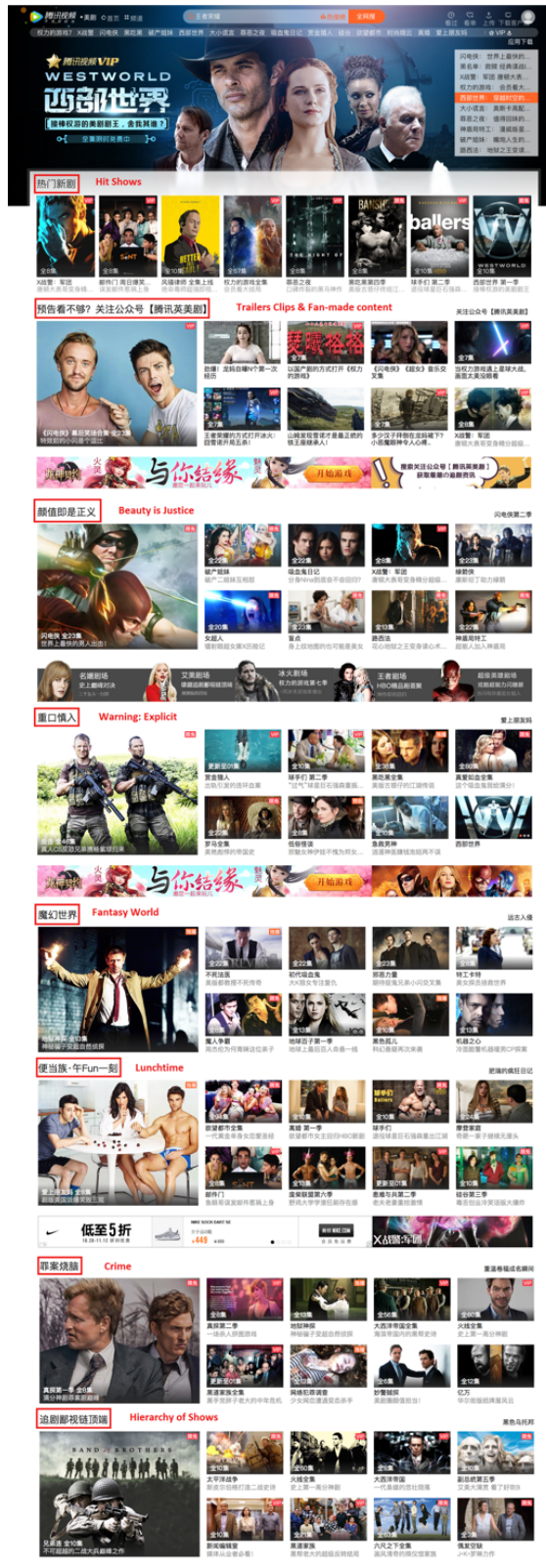


Figure 2.3 Tencent Video's second tier display page for English-language TV, categorizing content by key features, such as 颜值即是正义 (Beauty is Justice) for shows starring avowedly good-looking actors, translation in red by me, as of November 2018.



The screenshot displays the iQiyi website's second-tier display page for English-language TV content, categorized by genre. The page features a navigation bar at the top with options like '爱奇艺·美剧专区' and '搜索'. Below the navigation bar is a large banner for the 'X-Men' series. The main content area is organized into several sections:

- 一周追剧表 (Scheduling):** A grid of TV shows categorized by update frequency: 周一更新, 周二更新, 周三更新, 周四更新, 今日更新, 周六更新, and 周日更新. Shows include '黑名单 第三季', '无人永生: 第3集', '疯狂之旅 第一季', '超能力 第二季', '喜当爹: 第22集', '少数派报告 第一季', and '亿万-财富之战'.
- 美剧最爆点 (Hit Shows):** A section featuring 'Grandfathered 喜当爹' and other popular shows.
- 最新预告 (Latest Trailer):** A section with trailers for '闪电侠 第二季', '吸血鬼日记', '绿箭侠 第四季', 'DC超级英雄救世系列', '邪恶力量 第三季', '初代吸血鬼', and '风中的女王'.
- 科幻·魔幻 (Sci-fi Fantasy):** A section with shows like 'STITCHERS 编织记忆', '窥探重生 第一季', '超能力 第二季', '少数派报告 第一季', '沉睡谷 第二季', '裂魂 第一季', '裂魂 第二季', and '裂魂 第三季'.
- 悬疑·罪案 (Mystery Crime):** A section with shows like '无人永生', '国土安全 第四季', '国土安全 第三季', '黑名单 第三季', '罪恶之家 第一季', '疑犯追踪 第五季', '错配搭档 第一季', '裂魂 第四季', and '裂魂 第五季'.
- 喜剧·剧情 (Comedy Drama):** A section with shows like '镜花水月 第二季', '如果还有明天 第二季', '如果还有明天 第四季', '喜当爹', '镜花水月 第一季', '辣手藏家 第一季', '废柴联盟 第六季', '废柴联盟 第五季', '如果还有明天 第一季', '国务卿夫人 第一季', '美女上错身', and '屌丝女士 第三季'.

Red boxes highlight specific sections: '一周追剧表', '美剧最爆点', '最新预告', '科幻·魔幻', '悬疑·罪案', and '喜剧·剧情'. The text 'translation in red by me, as of November 2018' is overlaid on the image.

Figure 2.5 iQiyi's second tier display page for English-language TV, categorizing content by genre, as of

November 2018, translation in red by me, as of November 2018.

Lobato's characterization most closely supports my study of streaming services' exhibition space: how a service presents its content library to its users through design is significant because it reveals the degree to which the service encourages its users to consume this content. It is also a kind of media power, discoverability, which is 'constituted by content discovery platforms that coordinate users, content creators, and software to make content more or less engaging' (McKelvey and Hunt 2019,1). The discoverability is then analysed here in the form of exhibition of content. Exhibition first requires a web space, where viewers practice online viewing by clicking different options. Steven Schneider and Kirsten Foot argue that 'when conceptualizing a "web sphere," we consider it as not simply a collection of services, but as a hyperlinked set of "dynamically-defined digital resources" that span multiple services and are deemed relevant, or related, to a central theme or "object"' (2014, 114). In the context of this section, the theme is 'a platform to stream English-language TV.' By looking at these exhibition spaces, I scrutinize their visible surfaces understand how they are designed to structure and organize English-language television series in ways that might offer viewers certain affordances and experiences.

The way how Chinese streaming services' interfaces are designed slightly is slightly different from their Western counterparts. Johnson observes, 'The visual design of the online TV interface invites the viewer to browse, as if flicking through an electronic catalogue or perusing the shelves of a library' (2019, 114). This is how most Western streaming platforms design their homepage interfaces. As mentioned earlier, it is almost impossible to assess the



extent and nature of Netflix content, since its interface lacks ‘a visible filing system, making the limits (and organizing hierarchies) of the catalogue hard to determine’ (Johnson 2019,114). Chinese streaming services’ home page are designed according to the same logic. The distinctiveness of Chinese streaming interfaces lies in their enabling of content searches with filters, such as the region of origin of the content. Some of the services even have a designated second-tier display page for English-language television series.

The location of the hyperlink to English-language television series on the first-tier home page of each of the five services shows that Tencent Video, Sohu Video and iQiyi showcase these series in a more expansive way. Each of the three services includes a specific second-tier display page for English-language television series, which is designed to present a panoramic view of the library’s content (see Figure. 2.3, 2.4 & 2.5). Users can easily click on the hyperlink and be guided to the designated second-tier display page. On the display page, rolling banners of TV series’ posters are shown on the top. The information that a viewer can learn from these banners includes the Chinese name of the series, the scheduling, the promotional slogan and sometimes the award-winning history. The rest of the page is usually divided into different sections, which each service manages differently.

Tencent Video typically displays current hit series’ direct links below rolling banners and changes these selections frequently. The section that follows displays trailers, clips and fan-made content. Viewers can then scroll down to browse all the site’s available series. As for categorizing these series, Tencent Video labels them by describing their features in a short

catchy phrase, such as ‘颜值即是正义’ (beauty is justice) for series starring avowedly good-looking actors and ‘重口慎入’ (beware: hardcore) for series with explicit content by Chinese standard. As one means of localizing these television series for local viewers, instead of using traditional genres, this kind of labelling is assumed to be more legible to viewers, because these terms are either trendy cyber slang or borrowed cultural elements from contemporary Chinese pop culture. Considering the major target viewers are young Chinese who might be attracted to these elements, this is a market-savvy way to categorize the series. Similarly, Sohu Video classifies series with key words, such as ‘青春’ (youth) for coming-of-age series and ‘烧脑’ (brain burning) for thriller and mystery series. However, iQiyi only presents its content library by genre, which makes its second-tier display page look much more concise than the other two and less comprehensive. We might speculate that, compared to other services, since iQiyi has a relatively smaller library of English-language television series, it thus does not rely much on this region’s fare in terms of attracting viewers, resulting in less effort to fully develop this second-tier display page.

In contrast to these three services’ dedication to the exhibition of English-language television series, Youku and LeTV’s interfaces show less investment in promoting this content. Neither of them have a designated display page for English-language television series. Only a small web space on their first-tier home page is used to recommend this content with posters of series and brief one-sentence plot summaries. The limited space for the exhibition of this

content, in turn, limits viewers' ability to locate or identify English-language television content. To analogically put this case in a television context, if an online streaming service can be seen as a TV set, a second-tier display page is equal to a TV channel. Casual viewers (as opposed to English-language television fans) are hardly inclined to search for this specific content when they do not have a strong intention of accessing it. If the service puts more effort into exhibiting English-language television, the viewers who have not decided what to watch, are more likely to click to play the programme. Hence, considering the comparatively poor concentration on the exhibition of English-language television series, one might assume that Youku and LeTV are less competitive than Tencent Video or Sohu Video in terms of attracting viewers, especially casual ones, for this content.

Moreover, the above results show that the number of one service's available series does not always accord with the effort it contributes to its presentation and exhibition of them. LeTV has the second biggest collection of English-language television series, but its lack of a designated second-tier display page makes it hard for viewers to actually locate this content. By contrast, Sohu Video tries to better use its library's limited content to achieve its goal of becoming the so-called 'No. 1 US TV Provider', which is part of its branding strategy. Hence, on the one hand, for services that aim to expand their content library with all different types of content, such as LeTV and Tencent Video, to include a large amount of English-language television series is considered to be essential in the service's overall content structure, since this content caters to a specific niche demographic. On the other hand, services such as Sohu

Video, which do not have the capacity of including abundant English-language television series, are more selective about genres and quality of the content and even take the advantage of this content to brand itself.

### **Different Tiers of Accessibility**

Before on-demand services and other portable video formats had emerged, the traditional TV set was the only means of watching television programmes, which is linear television viewing. Linear TV requires audiences to wait in front of their TV sets at scheduled air times and the broadcast time of a certain programme is limited. The popularization of VHS and DVD (initially VCD in East Asia) followed, which has gradually nurtured a new habit of consuming serialized content for audiences, often called ‘binge-watching.’ Scholarly works indicate that the concept of binge-watching is linked to a rise in DVD sales of serialized content (Lotz 2007, 149). In the late 2010s, as on-demand service and streaming and file-sharing platforms started to develop rapidly and DVD markets gradually shrank, viewers find it even easier and cheaper to binge-watch online, where they are able to choose almost whatever content they want to watch, wherever and whenever. This is what Mareike Jenner calls ‘autonomous scheduling’, which enables viewers to set aside time for the ‘focused and planned’ watching of their favourite content (2017, 305). She also argues that ‘the VoD industry takes advantage of the autonomy and agency implied in binge-watching by using publication models and interfaces that encourage bingeing, attempts to predict and manipulate viewer behavior and marketing (original) serialized drama over other content’ (Jenner 2017, 317). In the case of Chinese



streaming services, the design of their interfaces, which provides an enormous library of content and are easy to navigate, demonstrates their intention to keep the viewers on their platforms for as long as possible.

However, for viewers of imported television content, binge-watching is not always possible. In mainland China, where traditional linear TV scheduling is seldom arranged for foreign television programmes, the accessibility to the content on streaming services determines whether viewers have the ability to binge-watch. In other words, the kind of accessibility pattern offered to streaming users implies the kind of consumption behaviour the streaming services expect them to have.

In 2013, the year when English-language television flourished on China's streaming platforms, Chinese viewers were able to watch the newest episode of a hit show for free on a streaming service only a few hours after its airing in the original country. Viewers could also stream it anytime they wanted to, paying very little in the way of fees. However, after the '先审后播' (censored, licensed, then aired) policy was launched in March 2014, all streaming services had to take down their unlicensed programmes before they could apply for approvals to stream them again – a process that took approximately a year (Entertainment China 2017). As a result, very few foreign television series were able to reach Chinese viewers on these services without a lengthy time delay. This policy change affected the entire streaming industry, especially as the streaming services attempted to retain the numerous viewers who had recently ceased accessing illegal downloading websites and were developing a habit of

consuming foreign television content legally. Despite the complexity of the situation, however, no platform has completely forsaken the market of English-language television series. Consequently, they have come up with strategies to cope with this time-delay issue. As of November 2018, based on a series' supposed value, streaming services have employed different scheduling strategies for different shows. In this section, I examine several representative series' scheduling by Sohu Video and Tencent Video to illustrate the different accessibility patterns to English-language television content.

As discussed in Chapter 1, as opposed to their Western counterparts such as Netflix and Amazon Prime Video but similar to Hulu, Chinese streaming services operate on a hybrid subscription/advertising-based model, where pop-up adverts can be skipped by subscribers but not non-subscribers. Chinese streaming services endeavour to convert non-subscribers to subscribers and to keep subscribers for as long as possible, which resulted in different subscription plans as well as different strategies of accessibility. Subscription allows users to watch all of the available content on these services while those who are not willing to pay for subscriptions are restricted from accessing content with the tag of '会员独享' (VIP subscribers only). On some occasions, there is a way for non-subscribers to watch members only content. Every week, one episode of a specific series might become free to watch for a limited time period for non-subscribers. In the meantime, subscribers are privileged in being able to stream the series' whole season whenever they want, such as Sohu Video's *The Big Bang Theory* and *Legends of Tomorrow* (2016 –). Hence, accessibility to a specific series is

different for viewers with different subscription contributions. This indicates the streaming services' strategies towards different viewers based on an integrated logic of both linear and nonlinear television. Non-subscribers are being forced to wait for a new episode every week at the same time and if they miss the window period then they lose the access to the episode, which is very similar to linear television viewing. In this way, if non-subscribers can no longer endure this restricted accessibility, they might then start to pay for subscription. Even if they do not subscribe, as long as they keep visiting the service every week, the service still benefits from advertising.

Due to the '先审后播' (censored, licensed, then aired) policy, most available English-language television series had actually already been aired in their original countries at least half a year before they were made available in China, which means there is always a temporal discount for both subscribers and non-subscribers. Nonetheless, some streaming services still try to attract viewers by creating a linear 'American' viewing experience. Taking *The Big Bang Theory* as an example, one episode of the series airs Thursdays in the United States, whilst in China linear television series usually air consecutively every weekday through the entire week. Hence, weekly scheduling is rather an 'American' thing for Chinese audiences and streaming services. As an instance of such special scheduling, Sohu Video released one new episode of *The Big Bang Theory* weekly on Wednesdays, even though the episode was actually from a previous season that had been aired a year ago in America. After the whole season became available on Sohu Video, viewers can then binge-watch all the episodes, if

they chose to pay to be a VIP subscriber. This is a very unique schedule strategy that was only adopted by Sohu Video. Once again, by creating a seemingly linear scheduling of American television, Sohu Video was actually promoting the idea of ‘watch American Television in the American way’ as part of its leading American TV provider strategy.

Chinese streaming services encourage VIP subscribers to binge-watch the series they like or even download the episodes on their smartphones. As Jenner argues that ‘binge-watching reaches beyond assumed or actual viewing behaviour, but has implications for how VoD providers like Netflix or Amazon position themselves as an alternative to scheduled, synchronized and “traditional’ television”’(2017, 304). More flexible than traditional television channels, Chinese streaming services provide different plans of accessibility for viewers who have different demands for the autonomy of the viewing experience.

Unique among Chinese streaming services, Tencent Video offered real linear scheduling for Season 7 of *Game of Thrones*. In 2017, Tencent Video released the series in mainland China simultaneously with HBO in the United States. The company launched a series of promotions about this release on social media, which was a crucial part of the implementation of its premium subscription service. As of November 2018, the service has obtained the first seven seasons of the series, but only subscribers are allowed to binge-watch all the episodes; otherwise, only Episode 1 of each season is free for non-subscribers. This restricted accessibility becomes a motivation for non-subscribers to subscribe to Tencent Video.

The fact that Chinese streaming services attract viewers with different types of accessibility to *Game of Thrones* and *The Big Bang Theory* indicates that viewers might have different degrees of demand for them. As a matter of fact, considering the genres and market values of these two series, distributors choose to import and release them accordingly. Here I revisit the terms high-end television and routine television proposed by Roberta Pearson (2019, 111), to better understand the different distribution activities of different imported television series. High-end television generates ‘critical acclaim and intense media coverage or a vast and avid fandom that breathlessly awaits the next series’ whilst routine television does not. Not to repeat what has been discussed in the previous chapter, here I would like to emphasize that different types of television content can have distinct temporal signatures in transnational distribution (Pearson 2019, 125). In the Chinese context, then, high-end television series should ideally be imported and released in the country with little or no time delay so that the series can benefit from this temporal premium and then perform optimally on the platform. Yet, because of the severe restrictions on foreign television content in mainland China, English-language television series are usually scheduled to stream with a temporal discount, in other words, far past their original airdates in their original regions, which gives illegal file-sharing and downloading websites the space to flourish.

Hence, for a high-end television series, such as *Game of Thrones*, Tencent Video was determined to overcome hurdles to achieve simultaneous release in China of Season 7 and then provide access to the series only as bait so that more viewers will sign up for its VIP

subscription. At the same time, services also try to retain the streaming flow of English-language television series by providing free viewing for most routine series in their content libraries, such as *The Big Bang Theory*, which has already gained a large audience base and hardly suffers from temporal discount. Although this series has been critically acclaimed and widely popular in the United States, it is a routine series in China, insofar as it is a long-running network sitcom that is one of Chinese viewers' most familiar American television programmes. In most cases, Chinese viewers who watch these kinds of routine series are not overly concerned with time delay nor do they have the incentive to locate illegal file-sharing websites and download this content. By contrast, many domestic productions are scheduled to stream for free in a linear order along with their broadcast on traditional television channels, where foreign television programmes are hardly allowed to be broadcast. As Johnson argues, online TV could offer 'a prime locus to explore the ways in which traditional linear broadcast TV is being reconceptualized for an on-demand environment' (2017, 121). By combining linear and nonlinear logics, Chinese online streaming services create a variable accessibility model specifically for English-language television series, the type of content that faces trouble in achieving circulation in this transnational context.

### **Interactive Interfaces**

To watch an English-language television series on a streaming service, Chinese viewers typically need to go through two or three tiers of web interfaces: first tier home interface, the gateway page of the streaming service (see Figures 2.1 & 2.2); second tier designated display

interface, the page concentrating only on recommending and introducing English-language TV (see Figures 2.3, 2.4 & 2.5); third tier content player interface, the page with a screen that the content is streamed on (see Figures 2.6). Some streaming services lack the second tier designated display interface for English-language TV, if they do not intend to put much effort in promoting the type of content. The previous section has already analysed the first and second tier interfaces. This section focuses on the third tier player interface, taking Tencent Video's *Game of Thrones* as an example, in order to demonstrate the multiple user affordances Chinese streaming services offer.

Third tier player interface is the actual page on which viewers stream the chosen content, where viewing the content should be the foremost activity viewers conduct. As Johnson states, 'Interfaces utilise user-experience design to display the content on offer within online TV services and to facilitate certain forms of user behaviour over others' (2019, 109). The use of interfaces by services can also be understood as 'circulation power', which is the ability to 'direct audiences toward certain kinds of experience and content, and therefore away from others' (Hesmondhalgh and Lotz 2020, 386). These assertions emphasize the expected user behaviour, which is the user watching the content without distraction. In fact, this is how most Western online television platforms are designed. For example, Netflix's player page is simply a screen, which enables viewers to pause, adjust the progress bar, turn on subtitles, zoom the screen and so on. The interface provides very little information about the content, such as the title and plot summary. Amazon Prime Video also embeds IMDb pages to introduce the actors

currently appearing on the screen. For Western users, these features may be enough, since watching the content is the ultimate purpose. However, Chinese streaming services player interface is far more complicated and incorporates multiple features.



**Figure 2.6** Tencent Video's player page of *Game of Thrones*, translation in red by me, as of November 2018.

On the player page of *Game of Thrones*, viewers are given copious information regarding the series (see Figure 2.6). Right under the screen, there are *view amount*, indicating how many times the series has been watched; *real-time viewers*, showing how many viewers are watching the series at the same time; relevant information including *region of origin*, *year of release*, *genre*, *ratings*; *likes and dislikes*, similar to what YouTube provide, including both positive and negative options (see Figure 2.6). In addition, there is a direct link to click for viewers to share the series on other major social media platforms. Further down, there is even more relevant information, including *plot summary* and *cast & crew list*. All these informational affordances cover almost everything viewers might want to know about the series, which potentially keeps viewers from leaving the interface to access other websites or platforms to seek out further information. This practice is similar to Amazon Prime Video's



incorporation of IMDb hyperlinks, but includes much more information within the interface. Hence, Chinese services both mirror features of dominant global service, Amazon Prime Video, and incorporate local ones, which is in the logic of their overall business practices, as discussed in Chapter 1.

Scrolling down, viewers can then produce or read reviews in two forms: *long reviews* and *short reviews*. The section of viewers' reviews takes a significant proportion of the interface (see Figure 2.7). There is even an invitation written by the service saying, *if you have something to say about the plot, lines, characters, or anything relevant, please share with us*. Besides reviews, the interface also showcases fan-made videos by placing them in the *relevant video list*. On the one hand, these engagement affordances can also retain the viewers by guiding them to conduct various activities even after they have watched the series. On the other hand, by providing user-generated content, the streaming service presents not only official narrative of the television series but also other peer viewers', which enhances viewers' participation in a broader conversation about entertainment culture. This participation could be further transformed into audience loyalty.

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### 深度解读 Long Reviews

如果你对剧情/台词/人物角色或任何角度有你的深度思考和观点，请与大家分享。

**鲜有度客** 2016/7/21 ★★★★★  
 这是维斯特洛决战前的跳板季  
 上个月，《权力的游戏》第六季已经季终了。这季的特殊性想必只要对这部剧集有些了解的人都知道，剧集的故事蓝本已经从原著小说走向了独立编剧，毕竟年近七十岁的乔治·马丁到现在才写了五卷本的《冰与火之歌》，也就是剧集前五季的故事发展的蓝本，但是制片人实在等不及了，于是，HBO还是在今年的春季档美剧推出了10集版的第六季《权力的游戏》。三足鼎立之势逐渐形成其实从第二季逐渐形成的“五王之战”，到第三季随着“血色婚礼”这一重大事件的发生... 展开



★有用(553) ★没用(38) ★回复(35) ★分享

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**光子** 2016/7/17 ★★★★★  
 有种历史剧，叫别人拍的魔幻剧  
 许多年以后，黑城堡总司令琼恩·雪诺面对曾经浴血奋战的战友的刺刀，恐怕会想起当年在临冬城和史塔克一家领养冰原狼的时刻。好吧，请原谅我借用了《百年孤独》式的开头，但是我并非一时心血来潮的使用这种经典开头，只不过，想借用这本经典，来诉说对权力的喜爱。我还清晰记得当年看完《百年孤独》后合上书本的画面。当时的我眼前浮现的画面就仿佛自己站立云端，俯视着一片苍天大陆，冷眼的看着生存在这片土地上的种族或生或死，或兴或灭。当年的《百年孤独... 展开



★有用(464) ★没用(48) ★回复(28) ★分享

查看更多

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### 精华短评 Short Reviews

**腾讯评论** 2016/7/1  
 【VIP会员看全季！】《权力的游戏》第六季腾讯视频独家上线！VIP会员一口气看全季，这个周末独享这部“世界上最好看的电视剧”！苦等一年冰火粉们，赶快奔走相告吧~  
 ★(3744) ★(37) ★回复(111) ★查看回复(111)

**一浮生如** 2016/9/8  
 这才叫电视剧，国产的跟美剧比就是杀马特，国产即使大碗云集也难出好片，刚出的封神传奇真是烂到家，看三分钟直接看不下去。宣传说大碗云集只不过是博眼球的噱头而已，什么时候也能跟美剧一样务实一点？人家电视剧都是几年一期或一年一期，一期也就十几二十集，国产尼玛一年能拍上百集或许还更多。  
 ★(60) ★(1) ★回复(1) ★查看回复(1)

**sorry** 2016/12/24  
 唯一一个让你猜不透谁是主角的电视剧！每当你以为这个是主角，结果他一会就挂了！我擦，真心猜不透  
 ★(129) ★(0) ★回复(1) ★查看回复(1)

Figure 2.7 Tencent Video’s review section for Game of Thrones, translation in red by me, as of November 2018

腾讯视频 电视剧 综艺 电影 VIP影院 人间至味是清欢 热度榜 全网播

### 《权力的游戏第七季》简介 Plot Summary

导演: 马克·米罗/阿兰·泰勒/迈克·沙茨曼/杰雷米·波多瓦 演员: 琳娜·海蒂/基特·哈灵顿/彼特·丁拉基/麦茜·威廉姆斯/艾米莉亚·克拉克/苏菲·特纳


故事主要讲述了在虚构的维斯特洛大陆上，有七国九大贵族，大家勾心斗角争夺铁王座。这场史诗般的权力斗争主要在辉煌过的龙家、狮家、狼家展开。东边有前朝御姐格雷安娜家族的统治者—美丽的龙母；她身边有看日晷成长的巨龙精她夺回政权；北境有忠厚的狼家—史塔克家族，但他的命... 详情

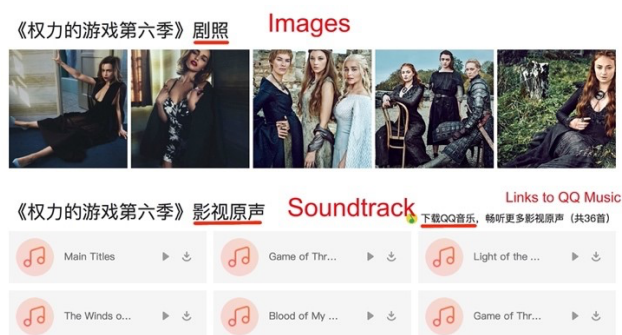
### 《权力的游戏第七季》主演 Cast

琳娜·海蒂 演员 基特·哈灵顿 演员 彼特·丁拉基 演员 麦茜·威廉... 演员 艾米莉亚·... 演员

斯巴达300勇士 01:54:02 视频战争血肉横飞  
 微恨与偏见与僵尸 01:37:44 “灰姑娘”开挂秒杀行尸走肉  
 圣杯经·骸骨之城 02:09:59 暗影猎人刀斩群魔  
 新特警判官 01:29:47 史泰龙作品翻拍  
 期盼已久终于会面，龙... 01:35 龙骑龙霸气登场吓呆...

### 《权力的游戏第七季》小视频 Short Videos





**Figure 2.8** Tencent Video's *Game of Thrones*-related content, translation in red by me, as of November 2018.

Moreover, Tencent Video offers hyperlinks related to the soundtrack of the series (see Figure 2.8). If viewers click on these hyperlinks, they will be directed to QQ Music, Tencent's own music streaming service. This design once again echoes what Amazon does with its various products, keeping the audience within the corporation's walled garden. As China's biggest internet company, Tencent has the capacity and incentive to integrate all of its services together. By contrast, small-scale streaming services, such as Sohu Video, might not be able to adopt this kind of strategy.

However, whilst all the above features are designed to retain viewers and to offer them a more user-friendly interface, there is another unique feature that can affect the viewing experience. Chinese streaming services have adopted a unique commenting function that is not seen on major Western streaming services: the bullet screen, also called shooting comments. Viewers can produce bullet screen comments in a different designated area from the ones mentioned earlier, and then the comments flow from the right to the left on the screen, overlaying the actual streaming content, which makes it look like the screen is covered by flying bullets (see Figure 2.6). These comments are kept within the video and remain available

for viewing when the video is played the next time. This form of engagement allows viewers to communicate with each other while watching the video. In this sense, the bullet screen functions as a social platform, where interactive activities materialize between viewers and the actual viewing content being played. For instance, in bullet screen comments, viewers bring up previous plotlines to discuss with others or just simply state the date and time when they watch the content to create a sense of communal viewing. This feature will be further discussed in the next chapter.

Along with the review function, the bullet screen provides viewers with the opportunity to interact with other viewers, which is not a possibility Western streaming services generally provide. The logic of allowing users engagement reveals how Chinese streaming services perceive Chinese viewers. In this sense, the viewers are invited to take advantage of various informational and interactive affordances, which might give the viewers an impression of user autonomy. By providing this sense of user-autonomy, Chinese streaming services distinguish themselves from most of their Western counterparts in terms of their different perceptions of viewing behaviours. Johnson understands this user-autonomy as an illusion of user agency and argues online TV interfaces have three functions: '1. to create an illusion of abundance and plenty; 2. to minimise interactivity while creating an illusion of user agency; 3. to orient user behaviour towards viewing' (2019, 113). The first and third functions clearly apply to Chinese streaming services, as the informational affordances offer many texts to occupy viewers and nurture user loyalty towards the content or the service. The second function might

seem to be contradictory to the interactive affordances. However, the fact is that both the review sections and the bullet screen are embedded within the player interface. Hence, viewers are given the illusion that they are able to engage with each other and the service freely, yet in a walled garden. Daniel Chamberlain's argument supports this, 'the media interfaces is effectively a scripted space, impressing consumers with an engaging experience that largely obscures the complex script that makes it possible' (2011, 243). The more the viewers participate in these activities, the more texts can be generated from their comments and other features such as *view amount*, which can be exploited by the service as promotional material. For example, as a kind of secondary text derived from the text offered by the series, characters' nicknames are first created by viewers and then being used by the distributors in promotional material (see the example of *Sherlock* in the Introduction). Also, if a series receives a large number of views then the series is very likely to be recommended by the service's own algorithm to other viewers who have not watched it. The following section then focuses on the promotional practices surrounding English-language television series in mainland China.

### **Promotional Practices**

Being an online streaming service provides Tencent Video with multiple promotional means that was not practical in the age dominated by broadcast television. J. P. Kelly argues that 'online TV is an amalgamation of both old and new media logics, extending established practices of broadcast flow while capitalising upon the new promotional, economic and textual possibilities inherent in digital media' (2011, 123). This brings out the discussion of

how Chinese streaming services utilize these possibilities. This section examines online streaming services' promotional practices for English-language television series, once again looking at Tencent Video's campaign for *Game of Thrones*' Season 7, which spread through Tencent Video's own service, Chinese social media platforms as well as offline venues.

Online streaming services constantly exploit their interfaces as the foremost platform to promote their major programmes, by making the programmes visible and easily accessible for viewers on the first-tier home page. Beginning in July 2017, when a viewer opened Tencent Video's service, *Game of Thrones* was placed as the No.1 recommendation in the 'hit TV shows' section, with a hyperlink directly to its third-tier player page. Daily and weekly push-notifications containing news stories on the new season's production were constantly sent to viewers. Even months after the release of the whole season, *Game of Thrones* still stayed on the service's home page as one of the top 3 recommended programmes. During the season's two-month long run, Tencent Video launched official trailers made by HBO before every episode was released, providing subtitles in the Chinese language. Viewers were also given options to watch fan-made reviewing videos and comment during watching with the use of the bullet screen function as a way to interact with other viewers, which kept the 'buzz' stoked among them (Gilardi et al. 2018). Additionally, a list of related promotional videos, such as interviews with the cast and crew, were also available on the service. In these ways, Tencent Video attempted to retain the viewers on the service, even after they had just finished watching the newest episode. The above promotional activities were all conducted within Tencent

Video's own interface, which was only part of its campaign for the HBO series. As an online streaming service, Tencent Video used all the possible online space within its own interface to ensure every viewer that visited the service was constantly recommended to watch *Game of Thrones*, which echoes some of broadcast television's conventional promotional strategies, such as playing trailers between different scheduling slots.

Thanks to the proliferation of social media in the digital era, online streaming services are able to exploit social media to achieve their marketing agenda rather than promoting their programmes only internally on their own service platforms. By providing interactive and collective media experience, social media can be used to create the cultures of anticipations associated with television series. In this sense, Twitter's Chinese counterpart, Weibo serves as an ideal platform for Tencent Video to extend the campaign. In 2017, as a microblogging website, Weibo had 165 million daily active users and more than 60% of these users are in the age group of 18-30, which is the demographic that streaming services mostly desire (Sina 2017). Tengxun Meiju (Tencent US TV) is Tencent Video's official Weibo account for English-language television series. The account is responsible for the promotion of Tencent Video's exclusive imported English-language television series on Weibo. Prior to the release of the pilot, the account posted news reports on the series' production process with relevant images. The hashtag #权力的游戏 (*Game of Thrones*) was even mentioned in the posts that were actually regarding other programmes. During the campaign, the account was flooded with posts about reminders of the scheduling plan and associated trivia on a daily basis. In

these posts, the series' characters were usually addressed with their Chinese nicknames created by fans. Instead of only using promotional materials provided by HBO, the account also included fan-made videos and memes and also reposted viewers' posts, which were usually very culturally localized. As further evidence of the importance of Weibo, after the broadcast of Season 5, the death of Jon Snow (one of the series' main characters) was a trending topic on Twitter globally and on Weibo locally. In mainland China, Chinese fans also expressed their sorrow about his death and discussed possible plot twists. The character's fate even drew attention from viewers who were not fans of the series. Tencent Video used #雪诺到底死没死(Is Snow dead or not) to motivate viewers to continue the discussion of this plotline. Apart from Weibo, WeChat was also used by Tencent Video. WeChat can be seen as a mixture of Facebook and WhatsApp and is also owned by Tencent Video's parent company, Tencent. The instant message app can automatically send subscribers different kinds of posts, including articles and reviews. Tencent Video registered a public WeChat account, with a specific section designed for *Game of Thrones* on the account's home page. During the campaign, the profile pictures of Tencent's Weibo and WeChat accounts were both the same image of Jon Snow, which constantly reminded users of the series. Therefore, influential social media platforms were widely used by Tencent Video, which demonstrates the logic of promotional practices of television in the digital era and viewer engagement is essential for online distribution.



Online promotional campaign was easy to operate for Tencent Video, since it only required the utilization of the promotional materials provided by HBO and the secondary texts produced by fans. In fact, this online campaign model is widely adopted by Chinese streaming services to promote both domestic and imported television programmes. However, as a rare case, Tencent Video even launched offline promotional activities. In April 2017, Tencent Video invited actor Nikolaj Coster-Waldau, who played Jaime Lannister, to Shanghai for a fan-meeting, which was not a common promotional practice for imported television. Three selected fans obtained free tickets to the meeting by reposting Tencent Video's Weibo posts. The fan-meeting was live broadcast on Tencent's own Live streaming app: Tencent Live. In addition, from July 21 to August 13 in 2017, Tencent Video held a *Game of Thrones* themed exhibition in a major shopping mall in Beijing. Fans were invited to the venue to celebrate the season's release and have an up-close and personal look at the simulation models of the props that appeared throughout the series. These offline promotional activities required more financial input but could enhance fan engagement, which also helped generate publicity to a greater extent, as the discussion of the exhibition became trending topic on Weibo.

All the above promotional practices for *Game of Thrones* have shown that the promotional practices for online distribution of television combine both old and new media logics. Chinese streaming services use their interfaces as internal platforms to keep offering texts to occupy viewers, which mirrors broadcast television's promotional practices within their own channels or networks. Streaming services also use external platforms, such as social

media and offline venues to target potential viewers and to create media hype. These promotional practices can also be understood as creating paratexts to promote the series. These paratexts as Andrew J. Bottomley argues, ‘serve to assign value and hail target audiences, informing viewers that a television series is a comedy or a drama, intended for teens or families or gay men, and so on’ (2015, 484). Before viewers start to watch the series, they develop expectations of the series through their interpretations of the paratexts offered by the streaming service, because paratexts create texts and ‘they manage them, and they fill them with many of the meanings that we associate with them’ (Gray, 2010, 6). Moreover, streaming services’ branding agenda also benefits from these paratexts, which is discussed in the final section of this chapter.

## **Branding Agenda**

Chinese streaming services’ online distribution of English-language television series not only serve to draw subscribers, but also help to identify the services themselves, in other words, to achieve their branding agenda. In Bottomley’s definition of television branding, ‘a brand is the identity of a television programme or network and branding the process through which that identity is developed and communicated to the viewing public’ (2015, 483). Hence television branding involves not only the name of the network or service, but also ‘a set of associations, thoughts, feelings, attitudes—that both identifies the programme or network and relates it to key constituencies (i.e., target or niche audiences)’ (Bottomley 2015, 483). For online television branding, some of the traditional television network branding concepts and

strategies are retained and also improved (Johnson 2012; Wayne 2018; Havens 2018). In this sense, this section then investigates the ways Chinese streaming services brand themselves with English-language television series.

The earlier discussion of the exhibition strategies exploited by Chinese streaming services shows that some of them organize and place all the English-language television series they possess on one specific second-tier display page. A similar practice is also observed on Netflix, where films and television series are framed and filtered by different standards, such as genre or categories. Meanwhile, Western broadcast and cable television networks also have different channels specializing in different types or genres of television programmes, such as Sky's Sky Crime mainly broadcasting crime dramas in the United Kingdom. These services' or networks' different categories or channels not only target different demographics of audience, but also serve to establish their parent services' or networks' overall brand. As mentioned in Chapter 1, Sohu Video has been importing American television talk shows and variety shows rather than only television series to enhance its American TV channel and identifying itself as 'No. 1 US TV Provider', which is part of its overall branding image as an 'upscale' video streaming service. Since English-language television series' target audience is well-educated, young, urban Chinese with disposable income, they are the ideal demographic that a 'upscale' streaming service seeks.

Another branding strategy that involves English-language television series is to exploit certain series' programme brands and their producers' network brands. Johnson (2007) has

examined how HBO as a network brand has been constructed through the use of logos, slogans and programmes. This network brand has been fully exploited by Tencent Video as HBO's exclusive distributor in mainland China. The Chinese streaming service constantly mentioned their partnership in its promotional material of *Game of Thrones*, presenting itself to viewers as a quality streaming service with 'high-end' HBO productions. In fact, the phrase HBO 出品 (produced by HBO) is directly used in different one-sentence summaries for various series, such as *Westworld*, *Big Little Lies* and *Watchmen* (2019 – 2019). The use of imported HBO series to achieve branding agenda has been proved effective in the United Kingdom by Johnson. She argues 'programmes can contribute to the brand equity of more than one corporation' (Johnson 2007, 14). Yet, this kind of branding strategy is not uncommon in mainland China.

In another case, iQiyi also reached a content agreement with Netflix in 2017. Netflix's critically acclaimed in-house production, *House of Cards*, was previously licensed with Sohu Video in mainland China but soon was pulled from the streaming service and later released on iQiyi labelled as subscription only content. Netflix itself has been establishing its own network brand with 'Netflix Original' content like *House of Cards*, which has also been exploited by the Chinese streaming service to enhance its branding identity. Hence, Chinese streaming services not only employ the branding logic rooted from Western television producers but also directly use branded English-language television series to achieve branding agenda.

## Conclusion

This chapter has explored Chinese online streaming services in terms of their distribution and marketing activities surrounding English-language television series. Due to strict government policy, foreign television series can chiefly only be circulated and distributed on online streaming services, which requires these services to create a series of interactive platform features, such as localized exhibition interfaces and different accessibilities for different tiered viewers. Meanwhile, they also brand their platforms with this content. These facts show that the localization of distribution is significant for imported television series to attract local audiences. The feature of the bullet screen, the exploitation of viewer-generated texts and the design of interfaces are the localization tactics that I have discussed. These practices, in turn, suggest that the study of transnational television requires more attention to its local distributors and distribution practices.

I have also argued that digital media has generated a series of technological features for the streaming services as well as some alterations of marketing strategies. When Chinese streaming services distribute television content, they provide local viewers with multiple interactive and informational affordances to better cater to the viewer's consumption habits. In the Chinese market, the lack of the cultural proximity of English-language television series is obvious, but the demand for this content is significant. Hence, the next chapter aims to understand the viewers as the second agent in the online distribution of English-language television, by further examining viewer practices via these interactive affordances.

## Chapter Three Online Viewer Practices of English-Language TV

On September 17, 2018, the 70th Primetime Emmy Awards was held in Los Angeles. *Game of Thrones* won the award of Outstanding Drama Series for the third time after having been absent in the previous year's competition. The ceremony was not broadcast live through any streaming services or television channels in mainland China. Yet, Weibo feeds related to the ceremony generated more than 8.8 million instances of browsing, most of which were regarding the HBO drama's winning. Meanwhile, some viewers went to Tencent Video to stream the series' Season 7 and posted words, such as '发来贺电' (congratulations) via the bullet screen to celebrate. Along with other Chinese social media services, Weibo and Tencent Video's bullet screen became the platforms where viewers and fans of the series or generally English-language television share the moment together within the series' viewer community.

Chapter 2 examined the online distribution practices conducted by Chinese streaming services, where the adoption of the bullet screen and the exploitation of social media were briefly discussed. However, the discussion focused on the perspective of the distributors, in terms of how these practices help them attract and retain viewers. In order to understand the online viewership of English-language television content itself, this chapter explores the viewers practices surrounding English-language television content, by looking at the bullet screen, one of the interactive affordances provided by Chinese streaming services. The bullet screen functions as participatory tool to enable viewers to conduct other viewing activities

rather than just viewing. I argue that with a participatory culture, Chinese streaming services offer a virtual group viewing experience by providing the bullet screen. Chinese viewers of English-language television series then form a noticeable viewer community within the bullet screen, which presents the cultural identities of the overall online viewership of English-language television content. Meanwhile, the viewer practices with the use of the bullet screen also underlines how cultural proximity affects transnational television's local viewership.

The chapter first discusses how Chinese viewers of English-language television content perceive themselves as viewers with higher cultural capital. The chapter then introduces the idea that Chinese streaming services with a participatory culture that characterizes YouTube but not Western streaming services, such as Netflix and Amazon Prime Video, which justifies the adoption of the bullet screen. Following, the chapter explains the mechanism of the bullet screen and the method for analysing bullet screen comments. Finally, the chapter analyses the comments produced by viewers of five different television series. Because the chapter's goal is to examine bullet screen commentary where it appears in greatest abundance, the five selected television series are relatively popular among local viewers and bear different degrees of cultural proximity to local viewers.

### **Viewers of English-Language TV: Cultural Capital and Cultural Identity**

As argued in Chapter 1, consuming English-language television series is a unique cultural activity for a unique demographic that is culturally specified. These viewers are mostly well-educated and reside in China's first and second tier cities. Yet, most of the scholarly works on

Chinese viewers of English-language television concentrate on identifying these viewers (Tan 2011; Jiang and Leung 2012; Gao 2016), whilst there are also researchers that have been trying to understand how these viewers perceive themselves and the act of watching such television content. For example, In *American TV Fans, Media Consumption and Identity Construction*, Wenhua Wei (2017) examines Chinese fans' consumption of American television content in order to understand how this specific demographic constructs its identity with the cultural capital they obtain from foreign media products. Similarly, Shuzhen Huang has also discussed the identity construction process of Chinese fans of American television by observing these fans' activity on the internet and argues that 'the act of watching American TV series itself has become a kind of cultural capital' (2012, 47). She goes on to write, 'the process of watching American TV series is also a process of establishing their social status (identity)' (2012, 47). Both Wei and Huang used the term 'cultural capital' and argue that Chinese viewers can acquire cultural capital from watching American (English-language) television, both the television content and the act.

Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) concept of cultural capital, Straubhaar offers 'a series of identifiable sets of knowledge and disposition that people tend to use when deciding what they want to watch on television' (2003, 77), including education, age, foreign language ability, knowledge of other countries and cultures and so on. His argument emphasizes again on the ability guaranteed by cultural capital to consume imported television, which in the context of mainland China, is also true. Most Chinese viewers of English-language television



possess higher cultural capital from better sources of education and better foreign language skills. In the meanwhile, the fact that they have higher cultural capital to consume this television content helps them establish their social and cultural identities. As Huang notes that there is a hierarchy of identity among viewers of different foreign television content with American (English-language) TV viewers on top and the identity comparison is often triggered (2012, 46). Huang also gave an example that viewers of English-language television series consider viewers of Taiwanese television as ‘immature teenagers’ and viewers of Korean television as ‘housewives who gossip’ whilst consider themselves as ‘well-educated elites with good tastes’ (2012, 46). Thus, the ability to watch or even the act of watching English-language television is a way to demonstrate these viewers’ cultural capital and then to construct their cultural identity. Meanwhile, this cultural identity means significant to the viewers of English-language television, as it also distinguishes them from viewers of other television content (foreign and domestic). Thus, the sense of belonging to this viewer community is also important to viewers of English-language television series.

Wei noticed, ‘American drama fans not only have a high self-evaluation, but they also have a high recognition and evaluation of the entire community’ (2017, 94). To seek and join this community is part of the process of viewers of English-language television establishing their identity. China’s rapidly developing internet world provides these viewers with online space to form the community. In the late 2000s, online forums founded by fan-subtitling groups, such as 1000fr.com and Yidianyuan, became the first and foremost platforms for

viewer of English-language television to conduct fan activities as a community. However, because these forums were also the major informal circulation and distribution venues for fan-subtitled English-language television programmes, as of the late 2010s, they have been forced to shut down or become mainly invisible on the internet, as a result of the Chinese authorities' rigorous crackdown on the informal distribution networks<sup>6</sup>. Viewers then sought other social media platforms or websites with social media features for community engagement, such as Baidu Tieba and Douban. These different online media platforms cater to fans' different needs and help enhance the idea of a viewer community of English-language television series.

However, all the online media platforms are separated from the streaming services, the main platform where most Chinese viewers watch English-language television series. Even though viewers can pause the streaming anytime they want, they still need to access other social media platforms to conduct or participate in other activities with other viewers. Chinese streaming services' various interactive and participatory affordances then allow viewers to stay on the streaming platform where the interactions between them occur. Hence, this chapter focuses primarily on English-language television viewers' viewing practices on streaming services during the streaming session in order to understand whether there is a viewer community facilitated by streaming services' interactive and participatory affordances and whether this viewer community demonstrate the cultural identity shared by the overall

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<sup>6</sup> This informal distribution network will be further discussed in Chapter 5.

viewership of English-language television. Before addressing these questions, I first provide the background of the participatory culture of Chinese streaming services.

### **Online Streaming Services with A Participatory Culture**

As previous chapters have discussed, Chinese online video streaming services formally distribute television content via the internet, which is the same business practice shared with their Western counterparts, such as Netflix and Amazon Prime Video. This is essentially true, considering Chinese streaming services have gradually adjusted their business model from an advertisement-based one to a subscription-based one by expanding their content libraries with original or exclusive programmes which is in sync with these Western services. However, significant differences exist between Chinese streaming services and Western ones in terms of viewer interaction and participation affordances. Chapter 2 has argued that when distributing television content, Chinese streaming services offer an interface that enables an array of interactive affordances, such as three different viewer commentary functions, whilst Western services only enable very limited user interaction and participation possibilities; viewer commentary functions have not been adopted by either Netflix or Amazon Prime Video.

Chinese streaming services' deployment of the additional interactive affordances could be partially explained by their unique service model. Defining Western online television services as 'closed', Johnson explains, 'Netflix, BBC iPlayer and Now TV do not depend on the participation of users for the video content that they offer; nor do they operate open

platforms that enable any user to upload content to their service' (2019, 39). In this respect, instead of being closed one-way video content providers, all five major Chinese streaming services also serve as open platforms for users to upload and share self-made videos, which further distinguishes them from Netflix and Amazon Prime Video. This service model has been retained ever since it was adopted by Chinese streaming services in the early 2000s.

Most Chinese online streaming services were initially online video-sharing platforms designed for amateur video creators, an idea inspired by the worldwide popularity of YouTube<sup>7</sup>. However, due to the reconstruction of the internet industry, online video-sharing platforms were forced to reconsider their business practices. The increasing demand for audio-visual products and the rapid development of digital technologies then triggered the transformation of these video-sharing platforms. As of the late 2010s, major Chinese streaming services, including Youku, fundamentally focus on providing licensed streaming content, but their platforms still remain open for users to upload videos, which resulted in the current hybrid service model.

Another reason for the 'open' streaming services is that the user-generated content could still benefit the services' current business model. Even though, Chinese streaming services hardly depend on user-uploaded videos to generate direct revenue, they still welcome the potential traffic brought by these videos. More obviously, streaming services exploit these

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<sup>7</sup> With a highly resemblant name, Youku as one of China's pioneering online video platforms, aimed to become YouTube's Chinese equivalent in its early age of development.

user-uploaded videos and texts for the promotion of their licensed streaming content. As mentioned in Chapter 2, Tencent Video encouraged viewers to watch fan-made videos related to *Game of Thrones* by listing them right next to the player screen of each episode. The utilization of user-generated videos and social media components such as review and commentary have proven to be powerful forms of promotion, especially for imported content since most of the foreign production companies lack the capacity for conducting campaigns in China (Curtin and Li 2018, 346). In other words, the Chinese streaming service model considers viewers not only as users from whom revenue can be directly generated but also sources of labour that either actively or passively help enhance viewership. Yet, the above discussion is made from the perspective of the distributors. Since this chapter also concentrates on viewer practices, it is then essential to investigate viewer interactions and participations from a different approach.

Since most Western online television services are ‘closed’, viewer interactions and participations can hardly be found on them. However, as already indicated above, YouTube, as a more participatory Western video streaming platform, shares more similarities with Chinese streaming services in terms of interactive and participatory affordances. In fact, YouTube has been constantly considered as an online social media platform, when it is being studied in terms of online media engagement and online community. Launched in 2005, after more than a decade’s development, YouTube has become the most visited video streaming website in the world. It provides individual and organizational video creators with a platform

to circulate their videos and viewers with publicly available and accessible videos. Jean Burgess and Joshua Green define YouTube as a site of participatory culture, meaning ‘participants approach YouTube with their own purposes and aims and collectively shape YouTube as a dynamic cultural system’ (2009, vii). The participants include not only the video contributors but also the audiences. For audiences, the site offers multiple possibilities of interaction and participation during the viewing process. Viewers can actively achieve commenting, subscribing, and sharing on the display page of a video, while interactions between viewers take place.

Even though not every user is interested in exploiting these social network settings provided by YouTube, to a group of active users, YouTube is a social network site, i.e., there is an online community formed among these active users. Confirming this assertion, Dana Rotman and Jennifer Preece further investigate YouTube users and argue that to those users, ‘YouTube is an online community that serves as a platform for communication and interaction rather than a mere broadcasting application’ (2010, 330). In their research, they point out that ‘The opportunity for personal interaction changed users’ perception of YouTube from a broadcasting tool to a place when personal relationships can be built’ (Rotman and Preece 2010, 326). All the above arguments demonstrate that YouTube presents itself with a participatory culture, which is as Henry Jenkins explains,

A participatory culture is a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one’s creations, and some type

of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed to novices. A participatory culture is also one in which members believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connection with one another (at least they care about what other people think about what they have created) (2016, 4).

Thus, Chinese streaming services that share similarities with YouTube should also be considered as sites with a participatory culture, since they not only allow viewers to watch the viewing content but also to engage with it, to interact with other viewers about it, and to create secondary texts from it. In other words, when viewing videos on Chinese streaming services, certain viewers who wish to use these services as participatory media are enabled by various interactive and participatory affordances, in which way the participatory culture then leads to specific viewer practices. To highlight the significance of understanding viewers culturally from examining viewer practices on media platforms like YouTube, Jean Burgess argues that these user practices should be considered as a ‘continuum of cultural participation situated in everyday life’ (2011, 326). One way to examine the viewer practices on Chinese streaming services is through the bullet screen, which is a unique commentary function adopted by all the five major streaming services. For viewers, the most common and convenient way of participation during the viewing session is posting comments by using the bullet screen.

### **The Bullet Screen as A Participatory Tool**

The bullet screen was first adopted by a Japanese video streaming website called Niconico, in 2006. Two years later in 2008, Chinese video-sharing website Acfun introduced it to Chinese

netizens and then other online video websites, including live stream and video-sharing ones, such as Bilibili, also employed this function within their player interfaces. As of the late 2010s, all five major Chinese online streaming services: Tencent Video, Sohu Video, iQiyi, Youku and LeTV that focus on providing films and television programmes have featured this function. Their applications of this function share the same basic logic: viewers type their comments in the designated blank area and click send and then comments appear as text in Chinese characters and move via animation across the viewing screen, superimposed on top of the streaming content.

Among all the five services, Tencent Video and LeTV inform viewers with how many bullet screen comments one episode has at the beginning of the streaming, also in the form of a bullet screen comment. After being presented with the quantity of existing comments, viewers then can choose whether they want to turn off the bullet screen at the beginning or anytime during the streaming. In other words, the bullet screen is an optional function, which some viewers might find disturbing. For any viewers, to stream the content does not require them to sign in, but to produce bullet screen comments does. After signing in, viewers are then able to write comments containing up to thirty Chinese characters. These bullet screen comments always remain anonymous, as viewers' usernames are not displayed along with their comments. Yet viewers' subscription plans are partly shown in the comments. Tencent Video users' bullet screen comments are presented in different colours, depending on the user's subscription plan. Non-subscribers' comments are in plain white whilst VIP subscribers'



are in gradient colours with a small avatar of one of the main characters of the streaming series attached. With iQiyi being an exception, Sohu Video, Youku and LeTV also present the viewers' comments in different colours, according to their different subscription plans, whilst LeTV even differentiates the comments in different sizes of font. In this respect, even though the bullet screen comments are anonymous, viewers are still able to partially establish their subscriber identity thanks to the different presentations of comments.

Xueqing Li describes the effect of watching a video with the bullet screen switched on, 'words in different colours suddenly appear out of nowhere and swoop across the screen, bombarding the viewer with jokes and snarky remarks about the video they are watching' (2016, 2). The description specifically emphasized one very popular use of the bullet screen: to produce secondary texts deriving from the primary text of the content being streamed. In fact, the bullet screen was initially used in mainland China to subtitle Japanese animated series by some language savvy users for their peers who did not have any Japanese language skills. These Japanese animated programmes were often related to a specific Japanese online culture, 'otaku', which is explained by Mizuko Itō, Daisuke Okabe, and Izumi Tsuji as a constellation of "fannish" cultural logics, platforms, and practices that cluster around anime, manga, and Japanese games and are in turn associated with a more generalized set of dispositions toward passionate and participatory engagement with popular culture and technology in a networked world (2012, xi).

This kind of online culture has penetrated many Chinese online user communities. Otaku fans encourage the spread of their favourite anime content by adding sassy or funny comments via the bullet screen and then inviting others to watch the same content on the same site. In this sense, viewers can actively participate in the viewing session by doing something more than just viewing. As Cao describes, the use of the bullet screen is ‘transforming spectatorship into participation’ (2021, 34). With active participation, viewers can then form a viewer (fan) community. Otaku is not the only type of online culture that can be observed from bullet screen comments. In fact, any genre of viewing content or any specific film or television series can potentially generate a certain viewer community that manifests in bullet screen comments and uses the bullet screen as a participatory tool. For English-language television viewers, it has been argued in this chapter that there is a viewer community of this television content formed on the internet. Before analysing the bullet screen comments of English-language television series in order to understand the viewer practices of this television content, I offer some methodological considerations.

### **The Intense First Seven Minutes and the First Episode**

Chinese viewers’ habits of viewing streaming content and their use of the bullet screen can provide us with possible ways to study the bullet screen comments. When streaming a new programme, not every viewer continues to watch the whole episode in its entirety. Viewers can choose to terminate the streaming any moment during the streaming when they realize the content is not what they like. Alternatively, they can also forward the programme by

dragging the progress bar or adjust the play speed, a feature offered by every streaming service. Many viewers that use the bullet screen are also likely to post comments to announce their presence when they first start the streaming and then turn off the function. Chinese streaming services' own research has confirmed these viewer habits.

According to *Tencent Video 2018 Television Series Index Report*, the rate of the bullet screen comment sending is the highest in the first seven minutes of one programme. In the meanwhile, 35% of the viewers choose to stop the streaming after the first seven minutes. There are also 20% of the viewers who start to drag the progress bar or put the programme in speed play mode after the first seven minutes. Hence, the viewer activities conducted via the bullet screen is the most intense in early minutes, which means if users want their comments to be seen, they will most likely post them in the early minutes of a streaming session. Yet, posting a bullet screen comment can also be a spontaneous user activity, due to its anonymity and instantaneity. For a popular series such as *Game of Thrones*, a single episode can generate as many as thirty million bullet screen comments, which makes it impractical to record and analyse every comment without accessing the service's own database. Also, many of the bullet screen comments can be meaningless texts, such as a series of scribbled English letters. However, this kind of commenting itself is not meaningless. Even though these bullet screen comments are not ongoing discussion about narrative content, they can still be seen as the viewer's intention to identify themselves as part of the audience since after all they are using the bullet screen to demonstrate their existence. Therefore, the bullet screen comments that

are generated in the first seven minutes of the streaming of a programme is the ideal sample unit for analysing the bullet screen activity, since the first seven minutes have proven to be the most intense period of time for viewer interaction.

Another factor that needs to be considered when studying bullet screen activity is which episode of a programme should be selected as the study sample. Tencent Video's report has shown that after streaming three episodes of a programme, 40% of the viewers decide to abandon the programme (2018). As discussed extensively before, the transnational simultaneous online release of Season 7 of *Game of Thrones* in 2017 has helped Tencent Video receive widely positive media hype. Unsurprisingly, the streaming service has made this happen again in 2019 for Season 8. As of April 2019, based on the number of views shown on the display page of *Game of Thrones*, the available seven episodes of Season 7 have been streamed 640 million times in total and the first three episodes of Season 8 have been streamed for more than 200 million times in total, with the third episode is currently only available for VIP subscribers. However, Tencent Video does not specify how many views each episode has received but gives the number of the bullet screen comments each episode has. Here I illustrate the quantities of the bullet screen comments in the series' ten different episodes, from Season 7 Episode 1 to Season 8 Episode 3(See Table 3.1).

Episode	S7E1	S7E2	S7E3	S7E4	S7E5	S7E6	S7E7	S8E1	S8E2	S8E3
Quantity	70,580	36,883	29,612	25,232	26,484	30,019	35,390	230,247	181,811	172,771

**Table 3.1** *The quantity of the bullet screen comments of selected Game of Thrones episodes on Tencent Video, as of April 2019.*

The diagram shows a downward trend of the number of the bullet screens from Season 7 Episode 1 to Season 7 Episode 4, which echoes the streaming service's own claim on the decrease in viewership after three episodes. Even though the number increases slightly from Episode 5, Episode 1 still has the most bullet screen comments. For Season 8, the number of the bullet screen comments also gradually declines episode by episode, with the season's premiere episode garnering more than 230 thousand bullet screen comments and the number for Episode 3 is 172 thousand. The first episode of a series always receives more bullet screen comments than other episodes do since obviously the first episode is released ahead of the rest of the series, which means it has accumulated more views than other episodes. Hence, the bullet screen comments produced in the first episode provide an ideal sample to study the bullet screen comments in terms of quantity.

### **Five Selected Series**

Instead of only focusing on one series, I analysed the bullet screen comments for four different English-language television series: *The Big Bang Theory* from Sohu Video, *Young Sheldon* (2017 – ) and *Into the Badlands* (2015 – 2019) from iQiyi and *Westworld* from Tencent Video. I recorded the bullet screen comments produced in the first seven minutes of each series'

season premiere, considering being the first episode of a programme attract the most comments from viewers as argued earlier.

To select these four series, I took different factors into account, including genre, the release date and different service providers<sup>8</sup>. The release date of each series indicates how long the series has been garnering viewership which results in the different sizes of viewership and might facilitate different kinds of viewer practices. In the meanwhile, also as discussed earlier, different service providers present the bullet screen comments in slightly different manners and viewers' identities can be partially recognized, which can also indicate different viewers' motive to produce a bullet screen comment.

These four chosen English-language television series are of different genres, including situation comedy, science fiction drama and action drama. These series of different genres lie on different parts of the cultural proximity index, proposed by Pearson (2019) and discussed in Chapter 1. Situation comedies are not widely imported by Chinese streaming services, as they usually cause cultural discount and not culturally accessible to a larger audience because they require viewers to have more cultural capital obtained from having better knowledge of the countries where the stories are set. Science fiction and fantasy dramas are more culturally accessible, because their storyworlds tend to be less culturally specified. Hence, I hypothesize that each series' different degree of cultural proximity has an impact on the different kinds of

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<sup>8</sup> The reason why I did not include any titles from Youku and LeTV is that the two services have recently taken down all the English-language television series they used to stream possibly due to copyright expiration issues.

bullet screen comments produced by viewers. Besides these four series, I also chose a domestically produced Chinese costume drama *Ruyi's Royal Love in the Palace*, streamed by Tencent Video for comparative analysis. Comparing to the other four series, *Ruyi* contains more culturally proximate elements to the local market and appeals to a much bigger audience. The comparative analysis of *Ruyi's* bullet screen comments can help us understand whether viewer practices surrounding English-language television series differ from those surrounding domestic television content. In the following part of this section, I introduce the backgrounds of these five selected series and the characteristics of their viewership.

### ***The Big Bang Theory and Young Sheldon***

*The Big Bang Theory* is an American television situation comedy that has been running since 2007. As one of the earliest English-language television series to enter China via informal means, *The Big Bang Theory* was also among Chinese online streaming services' first batch of legally imported foreign programmes, which we could define as senior series. As of 2019, most of those senior series cannot be found on these services anymore, due to the content adjustment made by the services. In order to keep the proportion of foreign television programmes under 30% of one service's whole content library, previously popular series such as *Grey's Anatomy* (2005 – ) and *Desperate Housewives* have all been taken down to make room for series that are relatively new and more likely to attract new viewers, such as *Riverdale* (2017 – ) and *This Is Us* (2016 – ). Considering this situation, the survival of *The Big Bang Theory* indicates that long-running routine series can generate significant streaming

viewership. One reason is that senior series might have already nurtured a group of fans who have better knowledge of the series and can easily become recurring viewers for new episodes, which means as long as the series is renewed, these viewers will reliably return to the service to stream the series. They are also very likely to be the active bullet screen comments creators, due to the comprehensive series knowledge they already possess.

Meanwhile, many new viewers choose to stream *The Big Bang Theory* because it enjoys a positive reputation from years of running and winning American television industrial awards, which is fully reflected in its high user ratings on Douban. The character Sheldon Cooper (played by Jim Parsons) from *The Big Bang Theory* is also one of the Chinese viewers' most familiar and beloved English-language television characters. As of April 2019, Season 8, Season 9, Season 10, and Season 11 of *The Big Bang Theory* are available on Sohu Video, with having been streamed for 310 million times, 230 million times, 44.52 million times and 31.56 million times respectively. These numbers have shown that the retention of *The Big Bang Theory* is significant for Sohu Video. As mentioned in Chapter 1, Sohu Video targets a niche demographic, well-educated, young, urban, audiences, which is also the major audience of English-language television content. Hence, similar to Tencent Video's *Game of Thrones* and Youku's *Sherlock*, *The Big Bang Theory* is Sohu Video's major attraction to English-language television viewers.

As a spin-off prequel to *The Big Bang Theory*, *Young Sheldon* was released on iQiyi on December 19, 2018, five months after the conclusion of its Season 1 in the United States. The



comedy focuses on the character Sheldon Cooper at the age of nine, living with his family and attending high school. Being the prequel to *The Big Bang Theory*, the series have already located a specific group of viewers who were planning to watch the series. According to iQiyi's own 'Popular TV' list on its service, ever since the premiere date, the series has been ranked as No.2 among all the foreign television series in terms of popularity, based on its streaming times, the quantity of the bullet screen comments and viewers' recommending.

These two series are both situation comedies that usually contain culturally specific content that are not widely shared by local audience. In other words, *The Big Bang Theory* and *Young Sheldon* can encounter cultural discount that potentially reduces their appeal to Chinese viewers. However, the numbers of views of these two series have shown that they are relatively popular among Chinese viewers. Hence, the reason I chose these two series is to find out whether cultural discount causes certain types of viewer practices shown in the bullet screen.

### ***Into the Badlands and Westworld***

*Into the Badlands* is an action drama that features an array of martial arts as well as science fiction elements. The story is set in a post-apocalyptic world in the future and based loosely on the classic Chinese tale *Journey to the West*. To Chinese viewers, this series is generally culturally accessible since it concerns a virtual world rather than any existent cultural settings and the original story it is based on is widely familiar to Chinese viewers. Moreover, the series stars an American-born Hong Kong actor Daniel Wu, who has been featured in more than 60

Chinese language films. The actor is not only famous in mainland China but also across East Asia. Even though in the context of Hollywood, Wu has not yet achieved much significant success, the idea that an American series having him as the leading actor is very appealing to Chinese viewers. Many of the series' Douban reviews confirm this, with one review saying, 'It is such a pleasant surprise to see Chinese martial arts in American dramas. The leading actor being Chinese gives me a sense of intimacy.' (@Jiangnankaiye, Sep 22, 2019). In fact, due to Wu's massive fan base in mainland China, the series has engendered impressive viewership, ranking as the No.1 popular English-language television drama on iQiyi. In this respect, Wu himself, the series' martial arts elements and its relation to *Journey to the West* have all become incentives to drive viewers to stream the series.

HBO's *Westworld* is also a science fiction drama that depicts an American-old-west themed park in the 2050s. The series presents a grand landscape of a fictional world with the use of advanced visual effects and contains complex narratives. The series' high-profile production value reminds Chinese viewers of another HBO production, *Game of Thrones*. Season 1 of the series received an average rating of 8.9 by Douban users and ranks as No.1 American science fiction drama on Douban whilst *Game of Thrones* Season 1 ranks as No.1 American fantasy drama. Chinese viewers have shown great interest in the series, which was also observed for *Game of Thrones* in the previous chapter. In fact, Tencent Video's promotion of *Westworld* has been trying to exploit *Game of Thrones*' media hype and already nurtured viewership, as the former series is selected by Tencent Video as the first recommendation for

viewers who have finished streaming the latter series, which indicates that Tencent Video believes *Westworld* can be targeted at the viewers of *Game of Thrones*. As examined in Chapter 2, in mainland China, HBO has helped Tencent Video and itself achieve a branding effect with HBO's high-end productions. In this sense, viewers of *Game of Thrones* or viewers who acknowledge HBO's brand name might also become the viewers of *Westworld*. Thus, analysing the bullet screen comments of these two series can show how viewers deploy the cultural capital they already possess instead of the cultural capital they gain from their knowledge of English-language television content.

### ***Ruyi's Royal Love in the Palace***

*Ruyi's Royal Love in the Palace* is a 2018 Chinese Qing Dynasty costume television drama that centres on the marriage of one of China's most famous emperors, Qianlong, and his Step Empress Ruyi. Based on historical events, the series tells the story of not only this couple, but also a group of characters who reside in the Palace over time. Tencent Video started releasing the series on August 20, 2018, two episodes every day from Monday to Thursday. As of 2019, the series has been streamed for more than 16 billion times.

Starring one of China's most famous actresses, Zhou Xun, as well as being the sequel to the critically acclaimed drama *Empresses in the Palace* (2011), the series drew substantial attention even during its development. After acquiring the streaming right, Tencent Video then started a series of promotional activities, treating the series as one of its annual major projects.

As Tencent Video's most streamed television series in 2018, *Ruyi* also generates a fairly large amount of bullet screen comments. According to *Tencent Video 2018 Television Series Index Report*, the first episode of the series generated 290,816 comments while the finale generated 601,589 comments. This quantity of data makes *Ruyi* a suitable sample for analysing bullet screen comments on domestic productions. Moreover, the series' cultural proximity can help us understand how such factor affect local viewership. Now, we turn to the discussion of these bullet screen comments.

### **Participating in Group Discussion**

Television viewing has taken on new forms in the digital era, with new technologies constantly shifting viewers' perception of being an audience. Elizabeth Evans has argued, 'Downloading [television] can ultimately be seen as having *both* a fracturing and a unifying potential in terms of its role in an individual's perception of being a part of "an audience"' (2011, 172, original emphasis). She explains,

For some it is seen as dividing the audience into disparate individuals; for others it helps them form new kinds of audiences, ones that are not defined by national broadcasting structures or whoever happened to be home and sitting in front of a particular channel at a particular time (Evans 2011, 172).

This assertion applies to streaming television as well. Streaming as a technology offers viewers the freedom to watch or engage with television content at any time. In this sense, streaming can also offer viewers the opportunity to be part of an audience, as they choose

specifically what content they want to watch. Lili Liu, Ayoung Suh and Christian Wagner argue, 'By viewing time-synchronous comments (semantic information) together with videos, users feel as if they experience the video as part of an interactive community of (anonymous) viewers, across differences in time and space' (2016, 542). With the use of the bullet screen, the feeling of being part of an audience can even be enhanced.

All five chosen series' bullet screen comments show that the most common use of the bullet screen is to announce a viewer's presence, which mostly happens in the very first minute of the streaming. Viewers' comments such as 'I'm here' or 'who else is watching this with me?', are widely observed in every series' bullet screen comments. Sometimes, the comments can include details as specific as a date, an actual name of a viewer or the location the viewer is at. Many viewers also simply comment 'Here to punch in' (as in punching in at work). Viewers who post these comments intend to claim their identity as part of the series audience. In the first seven minutes, this type of comments takes almost one third of the total. With these comments, a sense of viewing with others is created for viewers. Viewers who switch on the bullet screen then 'participate' in a group viewing session.

In fact, this kind of group viewing experience is not only enhanced by simply stating one's identity but also by recognizing others'. Another very common interaction between viewers via the bullet screen is that viewers are enabled to 'like' the comments, which means they can click on a certain comment and the total amount of likes a comment receives is shown in the end of the comment, very similar to the practice of liking a picture on Instagram or a

tweet on Twitter. Once again, since most of the bullet screen comments are presented anonymously, it is not always possible for one viewer to specifically communicate with another viewer. Liking a comment that stating another viewer's identity or status is then a way to express one viewer's recognition of this another viewer's existence. For example, one of the most common and most liked comments is 'Is anybody watching with me?', which is observed in every series. In this way, acknowledging other's comments strengthens viewers' feeling of viewing in a group.

The group viewing experience facilitated by the bullet screen gives viewers an illusion of watching something live, even though the content is not live streamed. When audience watch a live event on broadcast television, they are not and cannot be all physically together, yet they are still aware that many others are watching the event at the same time. The online streaming technology enables viewers to watch the streamed content at any time they personally want, which means most of the viewers watch the content at different time and their communication with each other via the bullet screen is not always instant. However, since the bullet screen retains all the comments that have been posted ever since the first time the video was streamed without revealing the knowledge of when these comments were produced, viewers who read these comments can feel as if other viewers are watching with them at the same time. After knowing the existence of others (even in a delayed temporal manner), viewers then start to participate in discussion.

The streaming content itself provides viewers with materials to discuss about, which is as Ann Gray calls ‘a very important part of the pleasure of television serial’ (1992, 199). With the bullet screen, viewers do not need to physically gather together to share their thoughts about the streamed content, gossip about the characters and moreover establish inter-personal relationships, which is widely observed in the bullet screen comments. This kind of viewer practice can even travel between different series or services. For example, the storyworlds of *The Big Bang Theory* and *Young Sheldon* explicitly intersect with many shared main, recurring and guest characters, which provides viewers with abundant story materials for discussion. In bullet screen comments, viewers regularly discuss the connections between the two series, mainly regarding the characters’ personalities and their relationships with each other. In one bullet screen comment of *Young Sheldon* Season 1 Episode 1, a viewer writes, ‘She (young Sheldon’s mother played by Zoe Perry) looks really like Sheldon’s mother in Big Bang!’, following several other comments that share the same thought. Then a bullet screen comment writes, ‘She is the real-life daughter of that actress (Laurie Metcalf)’, which then generates the discussion of the series’ well-chosen cast. Another observation is that viewers reveal that Sheldon’s older brother treats him well on *The Big Bang Theory* whilst the two characters do not get along well on *Young Sheldon*. This point also generated a series of discussion about how life has changed for these two characters in the time period between the two storylines. Conversely, similar conversations about these topics are also observed in the bullet screen comments of *The Big Bang Theory* Season 11 Episode 1. Viewers move between Sohu Video

and iQiyi to trace the discussion of these two series. The bullet screen, in this sense, fulfils viewers' need to exchange knowledge instantly and enhances the idea of participating in group viewing. It is as if the viewers are participating in group discussion in a virtual room with a screen playing the streamed content they all choose to watch. They cannot see each other physically but they feel the connection.

Similar viewer practice was also observed in the bullet screen comments of *Ruyi's Royal Love in the Palace* Episode 1. Many viewers of the costume drama claim that they are fans of the series' prequel *Empresses in the Palace*, with the use of the bullet screen. They also post the connections they discover between the two dramas in terms of shared characters and related plotlines, even though the two series have two totally different casts. For instance, the Empress Dowager in *Ruyi* is the leading protagonist in *Empresses in the Palace* but played by a different actress, Vivian Wu. Almost every scene with Wu in it has comments from viewers calling her 'Huanhuan', which is the character's nickname in the previous series. In fact, *Ruyi* does not give any clear plots to connect itself to *Empresses*. It is the viewers who put these two series in the same story universe by together discovering these connections and discussing via the bullet screen.

Back to the earlier argument by Evans, the act of downloading can potentially break viewers' sense of being part of an audience since 'the viewers can be more convinced that they are the only one watching it' (2011, 166). It is true that streaming television bears this same impression of solo viewing, partly because the streamed content is not streamed live or



at least not being watched by all the viewers at the same time. Yet, the bullet screen counteracts this impression by giving the viewers a sense of participating in a group viewing session. Each bullet screen comment is produced at and forever attached to a specific moment of the story development, regardless of how many times the content is streamed by how many viewers. As long as the bullet screen is switched on, viewers can always continue the discussion with others that follow. In this sense, the bullet screen works equally for viewers of English-language television and of domestic television in terms of offering a sense of group viewing. Yet, different series generate different discussion which brings the examination of viewer practices to bear more particularly on the genre or the cultural elements of the streamed content.

### **Cultural Proximity Issues**

There are different types of discussion related to the series being streamed that have been identified in the bullet screen comments. The above examples have demonstrated two types of discussion: first, the discussion about the series' storyworld, including setting, plotlines and characters, especially when two series are related; second, the discussion about the series' production details, such as its cast and production design. Both of these two types of discussion were observed in the bullet screen comments of both English-language and Chinese television series. However, there is also a third type of discussion that were widely observed in English-language television series but rarely in the Chinese one, which is discussion engendered by cultural proximity.

Discussion of cultural proximity is usually ignited by questions. Viewers post comments containing questions regarding certain cultural elements they find confusing in the series, whilst others respond to these questions by posting explanations. *The Big Bang Theory* and *Young Sheldon* have more comments of this type than the other three series. As these two situation comedies that are mainly created for American audiences, they lack cultural proximity to local Chinese viewers. Factors including non-shared histories, different social values, and unique American popular culture references, result in Chinese viewers' curiosity and queries. One typical example was found in the bullet screen comments of *Young Sheldon* Season 1 Episode 1. In the second minute of the episode, the Cooper family is about to have dinner and Sheldon (played by Iain Armitage) puts on a pair of gloves before the family members say a prayer, because he does not want his hand to touch his brother's. A bullet screen comment writes, 'Why is he wearing gloves and what are they doing?'. The question is soon answered by another comment, saying 'It's called praying before eating, they are Christian'. As a traditional Christian family in the 1980s' American South, the Cooper family practices a lifestyle far different from the ones of most Chinese viewers and the ritual of praying before eating is not widely known by Chinese viewers.

Another example regarding cultural proximity issues was observed in *The Big Bang Theory* Season 11 Episode 1. The character Penny (played by Kaley Cuoco) has a conversation with another character Bernadette (played by Melissa Rauch) about Sheldon's upcoming wedding and Penny recalls the time when her boyfriend Leonard proposed a

specific themed cake they should get for their wedding, ‘Leonard could barely finish the words *Doctor Who* wedding cake before I shut that down hard.’ One bullet screen comment writes, ‘What is Shenmi Boshi (the Chinese name of *Doctor Who*)?’ while another comment simply asks ‘Why is this funny?’. The viewers who posted the first comment clearly did not know of the British TV show and the second viewer might do but still did not get the joke. The comedy’s laugh track at that point indicates that Penny said something funny, yet for these two viewers and possibly many others, their lack of knowledge of the Geek culture hinders them from understanding this ‘Geek’ joke.

However, cultural proximity does not only engender questions but also ignite subjective opinions. Back to *The Big Bang Theory* episode, the two characters’ conversation continues, and Bernadette soon admits to Penny that she is pregnant again while breastfeeding. A viewer commented on this, writing, ‘Awesome, American companies usually give three months of maternity leave, basically no need to work for the two years’. Even though this viewer’s knowledge of maternity leave might not be accurate and what he or she actually meant was not even clear, the comment does show that the viewer chose to use the bullet screen to express opinions instantly, especially when cultural or social differences appear.

On the contrary, *Into the Badlands* and *Westworld* cause less cultural proximity issues. Despite the language, these two series contain few specific cultural elements of one country or area. Even though many scenes of *Westworld* take place in an American-west themed park, the series deals more with the conflicts between human beings and artificial intelligences,

which results in viewers' continuous discussion about the science fiction topics involved in the series. One specific exception is that viewers' constant mention *Game of Thrones* or HBO, with comments such as, 'Is this going to be as good as Game of Thrones?' and 'HBO is the guarantee of quality'. On the one hand, *Westworld* benefits from HBO's brand name and the positive reception of *Game of Thrones*. On the other hand, *Westworld* becomes more culturally accessible to viewers not only because it contains less culturally specific elements but also because viewers are more familiar with HBO and HBO's high-end production.

*In the Badlands* offers another significant example. As aforementioned before, the action series features actor Daniel Wu, who already has a large fan base in mainland China. Hence, a hypothesis is that viewers who do not usually watch English-language television series might choose to watch *Into the Badlands* because of Wu and these viewers might lack the cultural capital other viewers who regularly watch English-language television series have. In this sense, to Chinese viewers the actor Daniel Wu becomes a major attraction to Chinese viewers, which is proved by numerous bullet screen comments saying, 'I'm only here to watch Daniel!'. One bullet screen comment even says, 'Is this a Chinese drama?'. Featuring a well familiar actor to local viewers, which is a constituent element of cultural proximity (Strauhbaar 2002, 84), *Into the Badlands* bears a kind of cultural proximity that is not owned by any of the other three English-language television series.

Finally, *Ruyi* appears to be highly culturally proximate to local Chinese viewers. Historical dramas about dynastic palace intrigue have been prevalent in Chinese television

market for decades and Chinese viewers have a fairly proximate connection to it, hence they discuss more about the cast and the production design, and they like to quote the lines in comments. For example, *Ruyi*'s bullet screen comments contain many praises for the actors, in which the actors are addressed by their real names instead of their characters' names. As such, with its high degree of cultural proximity *Ruyi* generates different bullet screen comments than *The Big Bang Theory*, *Young Sheldon* and *Westworld* do, which proves that English-language television content can cause cultural discount that leads to viewers using the bullet screen to seek answers and explanations.

### **Spoilers and Viewer Hierarchy**

Arguably, participating in a discussion with others by commenting can enhance some viewers' viewing enjoyment (Wan, Moscovitz and Wu 2020, 207). However, another common use of the bullet screen is to give spoilers, which might ruin some viewers' viewing enjoyment. When watching a drama with constant plotline twists, such as *Westworld*, many viewers tend to avoid any information that could potentially reveal any plot of the next episode or even the upcoming scene. Some bullet screen comments produced in the early minutes of *Westworld* Season 1 Episode 1 say, 'I'm going to turn off the bullet screen just to avoid spoilers', which directly admits the use of the bullet screen to give spoilers and the negative viewing experience spoilers can cause. In the third minute of *Westworld* Season 1 Episode 1, a bullet screen comment writes, 'Just finished watching, the male protagonist was killed by the female protagonist in the end'. This comment then generated several following comments,

condemning the spoiler, some of which even containing strong profanity. In the meanwhile, some other viewers might enjoy reading spoilers. When the story develops to an intense dramatic point, some viewers use the bullet screen to ask for assurance, which can also be satisfied by other viewers.

Regardless of whether spoilers disrupt viewers' viewing enjoyment or not, the viewers who are able to give spoilers possess more power in terms of affecting the viewing experience and the groups discussion in the bullet screen. Rebecca Williams has argued that spoiler sources are able to 'control the flow of spoilers to fans and to set the agenda of fan discussion through the revelation or concealment of specific spoilers' (2004, 5). The relationship between viewers who offer spoilers and viewers who seek or receive spoilers can be understood as a hierarchy, 'with spoiler sources positioned as dominant, followed by spoiled on-line fans and then unspoiled on-line fans' (Williams 2004, 5). The earlier example about the actress that plays young Sheldon's mother being the real-life daughter of the actress that plays adult Sheldon's mother also demonstrates that some viewers possess more knowledge of the series than others. In this case, this specific spoiler or piece of information did not contain revelation of any plotline but did lead to the discussion about the series' cast-selecting, which means the spoiler source or information giver has acquired a dominant role in igniting discussion.

This kind of viewer hierarchy can be observed in all the five selected series' bullet screen comments, but more explicitly in *The Big Bang Theory* and *Young Sheldon*. Since these two series constantly generate questions about cultural proximity issues, those viewers who have

better knowledge of aspects of American popular culture are inclined to contribute by using bullet screen comments to answer these questions. However, instead of answering questions to enlighten others, some viewers communicate, implicitly or explicitly, their possession of the cultural capital ostensibly required to comprehend the series' references, by posting patronizing comments such as, 'You should spend more time watching American TV!' or 'This is America not China!'. These viewers who consider the series as more culturally proximate to them appear to place themselves in culturally superior position to those who ask questions.

Even within the overall online viewers community of English-language television content, this kind of hierarchy also exists. Senior fans who have better English-language skills or more knowledge of English-language television series tend to deploy their cultural capital to establish social status within the viewer community. They distinguish themselves from other junior fans or casual viewers by taking on important roles in online fan activities. For example, on a Chinese question-and-answer website, Zhihu, various questions regarding topics surrounding English-language television series are asked by netizens every day. Instead of giving simple or concise answers, some senior fans of English-language television tend to write lengthy answers. Since the website enables users to use pictures and videos to better illustrate their answers, many of the answers given by senior fans are in the form of an academic essay, sometimes even with a reference list. These senior fans' social and cultural identities are then being acknowledged by fellow fans.

However, the viewer community emerged in the bullet screen comments has its own features. First, the anonymity of these comments determines that viewers cannot practically establish their identities or maintain a dominant position. Second, the bullet screen only allows viewers to post a maximum of thirty Chinese characters, which means these comments take on concise and intensive forms. Hence, the viewer hierarchy within the bullet screen viewer community is perceptible but not as powerful as the viewer hierarchy within the overall online viewer community of English-language television.

## **Conclusion**

Chinese streaming services share a kind of participatory culture by inviting viewers to conduct more activities than just viewing. As a unique streaming service interactive affordance, the bullet screen functions as a participatory tool for viewers to participate in group viewing and discussion during the viewing process. These bullet screen comments are anonymous, short and instant, but effective enough for viewers to form a viewer community and even a viewer hierarchy. Depending on the degree of cultural proximity of the streaming content, viewers tend to conduct different viewing practices and present different kinds of cultural capital within the viewer community, as demonstrated in their comments. Meanwhile, the viewer community illustrates how viewers of English-language television series perceive the act of consuming this television content as a way of gaining cultural capital as well as constructing cultural identity, which helps us understand the viewership of English-language television in the context of online distribution.



This thesis thus far has examined two key agents of the online distribution of English-language television content: local distributors and local viewers. In the following chapter, I introduce another factor that influences content imports and circulation: the local censorship of imported audio-visual products. To do so, I investigate how English-language television series is censored by distributors before being consumed by viewers and what the censorship reveals about China's online television industry.

## Chapter Four Online Self-censorship of English-language TV Series

*The Good Wife* tells an inspirational story about a housewife who was cheated on by her husband and then she started working so hard that she became a self-reliant and successful female lawyer. Of course, this drama also exposes the darkness, corruption and loopholes of the so-called capitalist democracy and the law system, which is extremely suitable to be a case study for the CCTV legal channel (@WangaMagazine, April 29, 2014).

The above is one of the many synopses of popular American television series posted by Chinese netizens on Weibo in April 2014, when China's highest authority responsible for media oversight at the time, the SAPPRT issued an order to remove several American television dramas from Chinese streaming services, including *The Good Wife* and *NCIS: Naval Criminal Investigation Service* (2003 – ). By using satirical discourse, these comments subtly expressed Chinese netizens' resentment towards the country's censorship of American television and tried to deliberately re-write these synopses in a narrative that fits in the socialism with Chinese characteristics.

Chapter 2 and 3 have discussed Chinese streaming services' online distribution practices and Chinese English-language television series' viewer practices. In this chapter, I introduce another agent that plays a significant role in online media distribution: China's censorship system. In a country with neither a motion picture content rating system nor a television content rating system, what kind of foreign films and television series can be imported to be

shown on Chinese screens falls under the discretion of the Chinese authorities<sup>9</sup>. However, the censorship of overseas television content is of a slightly different mechanism than that involving film content. Imported films are required to obtain a licence for theatrical release and to be included in the imported films quota, which means film is directly censored by the authority. For imported television series, however, content is self-censored by the distributors, and the censorship standards are interpreted by the distributors based on relevant censorship documents, such as *Management Regulations on Television Series Content* (SARFT 2010) and *Administrative Regulations on the Importation and Distribution of Overseas Audio-visual Programmes (Draft for Solicitation of Comments)* (NRTA 2018). The self-censorship system does grant the streaming services some autonomy surrounding what to censor and how to censor it. However, this partial autonomy does not mean that streaming services can ignore the general censorship rules that apply to imported films, since certain topics, such as nudity, homosexuality and violence are restricted from being included in any audio-visual products.

In this chapter, I first examine the state documents regarding the process of importing overseas audio-visual products, which provides the provisions on the self-censorship system adopted by Chinese streaming services. This policy overview demonstrates how Chinese distributors make decisions about what content to import and how to censor the content they

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<sup>9</sup> The censorship of film and television used to be tasked by the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT) between 1998 and 2013, and the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT) between 2013 and 2018. In 2018, the SAPPRFT was abolished and the administration and supervision of television industry was inherited by National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA). Film censorship is conducted by China Film Administration (CFA).

import. Then, I investigate how different topics that are specifically forbidden by the state documents have been censored in both imported English-language television series, as well as how the state's attitudes and tolerance towards these topics change, which is also reflected in the censorship of domestic productions. This chapter also takes the agency of the viewers into account by looking at how they react to such censorship mechanism. Through this analysis, I argue that the broad and ambiguous censorship provisions and self-censorship practices encourage both cautious and dynamic activities from Chinese streaming services when they self-censor English-language television series. On the one hand, Chinese streaming services import selected English-language television series and adopt technical strategies to censor the content to cater to local viewership without violating the country's regulations on media products. On the other hand, the self-censorship can still generate negative feedback from Chinese viewers due to viewers' active viewing practices enabled by interactive affordances and their own cultural identities, which can result in some viewers accessing informal distribution platforms.

## **Importing and Censoring Foreign TV Series and Self-Censorship**

### **Mechanism**

On September 20, 2018, the NRTA released *Administrative Regulations on the Introduction and Dissemination of Overseas Audio-visual Programmes (Draft for Solicitation of Comments)*, which is the newest version of the provisions on importing and broadcasting of foreign television programmes. The regulations cover four major aspects of the importation

of foreign television programmes: importing, broadcasting, managing and legal responsibility, which all apply to both radio and television broadcasters and online video streaming services. For the importation of foreign television programmes, an annual importing plan, containing all the titles a service plans to import for the year, is first proposed by an online video streaming service that holds corresponding permits to be allowed for such practice and then submitted to the Provincial Radio and Television Department for approval. After the preliminary review by the Provincial Radio and Television Department, the NRTA then registers and publishes the relevant information about all the foreign television programmes declared by each service that meets the overall requirements on the Online Registration Platform for Imported Overseas Films and Television Programmes, accompanied by each programme's registration serial number. This platform is not open to the public but only for internal use within the National and Provincial Radio and Television Department to supervise and monitor the actual importation practice of each streaming service and television station. When any service or television station broadcasts foreign television programmes, it should indicate the registration serial number in the programme header. Foreign television programmes that have not been registered and announced on the platform should not be broadcast or made available to stream.

The specific process of importing foreign television programmes for Chinese streaming services can be roughly explained as follows. First, the Chinese distributor of a foreign television programme needs to obtain the Information Network Transmission Right granted

by the copyright owner of the content they distribute. The Information Network Transmission Right is the right for any Chinese distributors to legally distribute a film and television series, regardless of the content being imported or domestic, with the authorization of the content's producer through licensing. This provision protects the legal rights of producers and discourages unauthorized circulation of film and television content. Yet, informal online distribution platforms tend to not obey the provision and distribute as many titles as they want without licensing, which will be further discussed in the next chapter.

Second, there are two permits issued by the NRTA that Chinese streaming services need to obtain in order to launch the imported television programmes online. One is the Information Network Broadcasting Audio-visual Programmes Permit, which enables the streaming service to import foreign television programmes and to conduct online distribution. The other permit is the TV Programme Distribution Permit for the imported programme itself and every time a new programme is imported a new permit is required. In other words, the TV Programme Distribution Permit largely determines if a certain television programme can be shown on streaming services. Before submitting the programme to the NRTA for applying this permit, the distributors usually need to censor the programme in advance, in order to eliminate any elements that might potentially upset the NRTA. This requirement is specified by the NRTA: the qualified online video streaming services must conduct self-censorship and delete any illegal and inappropriate content according to the general rules before applying to the administration for review and approval of the overseas films and television programmes to be transmitted online. The content

review standards for online overseas films and television programmes must be consistent with the standards for general films and TV programmes (2018, translation by me).

The term ‘general rules’ refers to Article 16 of the *Administrative Regulations*, which lists most of the general forbidden topics that should not be seen in imported overseas audio-visual programmes:

- (1) Violating the basic principles established by the Chinese Constitution and inciting resistance or undermining the implementation of the Constitution, laws, and administrative regulations;
- (2) Endangering China's national unity, sovereignty, and territorial integrity, disclosing state secrets, endangering national security, damaging national dignity, honour, and interests, and preaching terrorism or extremism;
- (3) Defaming the great cultural traditions of the Chinese nation, inciting ethnic hatred, ethnic discrimination, violating ethnic customs, distorting ethnic history or national historical figures, damaging ethnic feelings, and undermining ethnic unity;
- (4) Inciting to undermine China's national religion policy and preaching cults and superstitions;
- (5) Endangering Chinese social morality, disrupting social order, damaging social stability, preaching obscenity, gambling, drug abuse, rendering violence, terror, instigating crimes, or teaching criminal methods;
- (6) Violating the legal rights and interests of minors or damaging the physical and mental health of minors;

- (7) Insulting or slandering others or invading others' privacy, infringing on the legal rights and interests of others;
- (8) Other content that violates Chinese laws and administrative regulations (NRTA 2018, translation by me).

In addition to these general rules, Article 18 of the *Administrative Regulations* also states that no foreign organizations or individuals that engage in activities that harm China's national dignity, honour, and interests, endangers social stability, or hurts national feelings can be involved in the production of programmes that are being imported (NRTA 2018). This means that Chinese distributors need to ensure that none of the programme's cast and crew members are 'blacklisted' by the Chinese government. A significant contemporary example involves the 2019 ban of the Hong Kong singer and actress Denise Ho, whose music, film and television work have all been taken down from Chinese online music and video streaming services in the wake of her official identification as an anti-Party activist (Victor, Qin and May 2019). Most of Ho's television work was produced in Hong Kong and labelled as overseas television content by the NRTA, which indicates that any individual's anti-China or anti-Party stance can result in his or her work to be completely forsaken by the Chinese market.

Apart from Article 18, many of the above content regulations appear to be broad and vague and the interpretations of these topics are ever-changing. Considering China does not have an existing rating system for either films or television programmes, all content should meet the same standard which is also not clear. Whether a particular television programme is



appropriate largely depends on how the NRTA perceives it. However, the censorship systems for films and television programmes are different. The censoring of imported foreign films is conducted by the CFA, after which the films can then obtain a permit for theatrical release and be included in the imported films quota, which means the film is firstly self-censored by the distributors and then handed over to CFA to review. For imported television programmes, however, the censorship standards are determined by the distributors based on the above documents, which creates an inconsistent self-censorship mechanism.

Each Chinese online distributor is required to establish a censorship system, which is responsible for organizing the censoring of the programme content to ensure that the programme is legal and appropriate. The distributors are required to be equipped with professional programme editors and censors who conduct the censoring based on their interpretation of the NRTA content regulations. Hence, each streaming service's self-censorship system remains dynamic, and the ways these streaming services censor their programmes vary. However, there are two factors that can be speculated as having an impact on how online streaming services develop their self-censorship system. First, both imported and domestic films are directly censored by the CFA, which means the films that are initially released in cinemas and eventually land on online streaming services are in an already censored form. In other words, the streaming services have these censored films to set standards for self-censorship in terms of what content is forbidden. Second, China's online streaming industry's self-censorship mechanism has only been employed for less than a

decade whilst the history of the country's institutional censorship of films can be traced back to the 1990s (Wang, 2013). The censorship of films can largely affect how Chinese streaming services constitute their self-censorship system. Moreover, the NRTA guidelines also emphasizes that television programmes and films should be subject to the same censorship. Therefore, the censorship mechanism of films and Chinese streaming services' self-censorship mechanism of foreign television programmes should share the same or at least similar logic. Bearing this assertion, this chapter now turns to an examination of the censorship of the most common topics that are forbidden by the NRTA with the discussion of how the same topics being censored in films.

### **Sex and Nudity: The Missing Minutes**

As an overall conservative East Asian country, mainland China has rigorous regulations and censorship policies surrounding sex and nudity on the screen. Article 363 of the Criminal Law of People's Republic of China (1997) states, any media products that contain nudity and suggest sexual acts could be classified as '淫秽物品' (obscene articles), whilst anyone who is involved in the production, circulation and promotion of these products could face prison sentences of up to ten years. This is only a brief summary of numerous articles of laws regarding the spread of obscene content. The Article specifies the range of possible obscene articles: pornographic books, films, videotapes, tapes, pictures, and other obscene articles that specifically depict sexual acts or sexually explicit pornography; scientific works on human physiology and medical knowledge are not obscene articles; artistic literary and artistic works

containing pornographic content are not considered obscenity (Chinawriter 2015). However, the line between 'artistic' and 'obscene' is both ambiguous and unrecognizable, with the laws giving no specific details regarding the standards. There is a common understanding found in numerous propagandist materials: if the content mentally poisons young people and endangers social morality or national fine cultural traditions, then that content is obscene. Even though it is not a legal category, most related restrictions have corresponding expressions in this sense. Despite of these ethical norms, it is entirely up to the authority, the Ministry of Culture of the People's Republic of China, to decide whether certain content in cultural products is regarded as obscene or not.

As for films and television programmes, it is the duty of the NRTA and CFA to censor and monitor them respectively. Producers of domestic audio-visual products tend to achieve distribution by avoiding including any 'obscene' scenes at very early stages of their development; any film and television project that is highly associated with sexuality would be terminated at the outset. This self-censorship at development stage results in domestic films and television shows with Chinese characteristics, in which people rarely have sex and seldom talk about it. In this sense, the institutional censorship mechanism regarding the depiction of sex and nudity is more often deployed on imported audio-visual products. That being said, foreign films and television series containing explicit sex or nudity scenes are usually not considered to be imported by Chinese distribution companies, whereas high-profile foreign films and television series that contains a few sex or nudity scenes might make the

businessmen think twice. Rather than forsaking importing a film or television series that has the potential to appeal to a large local audience, importing them and then cutting out these inappropriate scenes is the most common solution for Chinese distributors.

However, having deleted scenes means the films and television series are shortened in terms of running time and could potentially distort their plotlines. Yet, the film distributors put more effort in attempting to wholly retain a film's plotline with some innovative censoring techniques than television series distributors do for foreign television series. The most recent and significant example of the censoring of the depiction of nudity is the Chinese release version of the Academy Award-winning film *The Shape of Water* (2017). The romantic fantasy drama was officially imported to release in mainland China in March 2018. Thereafter, the censored and revised theatrical version provoked a heated discussion on Chinese social media such as Weibo (Hao 2018). In one scene, the female protagonist, Elisa (played by Sally Hawkins), is fully naked and showing her back to the audience, whereas in the censored one, she is covered in black shadows, giving the impression that she is wearing a skinny one-piece skirt. In other scenes, where a frontal view of her naked body appears, the Chinese release crops the frame to show only her face with other body parts cut out of the frame. By doing so, the film managed to keep its plotline intact, and the audience was mostly impressed by this innovative censor technique (Hao 2018). A film blogger, Dushedianying posted on Weibo, 'Today I witnessed the "high-end" censor move of the Little Black Dress' (@Dushedianying, March 15, 2018). This same method was also employed for the Chinese release of the 2017

film *Blade Runner 2049*, in which several scenes containing nudity have been cropped. Since these changes arguably disrupt the overall photographic style and scene design, many netizens expressed their strong opposition towards this damage of artwork resulting from the Chinese film censorship (Hao 2018).

Foreign films that are censored and then released tend to be those that distributors perceive could potentially attract a larger audience with their merits, such as having received critical acclaims or starring an actor who is presently popular in mainland China. These films are often imported in an untimely manner, for instance, in the United States, *The Shape of Water* was widely released in theatres in December 2017 and on home video in March 2018. Around the same time in 2018, the film was only just imported in China, which means the Chinese audience might have already gained access to the film through informal distribution means. Hence, in order to minimize the potential audience loss caused by the film's delayed release in mainland China, the Chinese distributors indicated that the film was in an un-censored form (even though it is not true), by stating that the Chinese release had no deleted scenes and had the same length as its original version in promotional materials (Wenchuangzixun 2018). In this sense, a film, like *The Shape of Water*, being non-censored could be its major attraction to Chinese cinema audience. That being said, foreign television series being in an un-censored or complete form with no plotlines being distorted is not always considered by the Chinese distributors as something important since innovative censoring techniques are rarely used. Also, as discussed in Chapter 2, most English-language television

series can only be imported one year after the initial overseas airdate, so temporal discounts are mostly inevitable. Hence, what is more commonly emphasized by Chinese television distributors is the simultaneous distribution of English-language television series, as analysed in the cases of *Sherlock* and *Game of Thrones*.

Without the urge to employ innovative censoring techniques to retain complete plotline, cutting out an explicit scene in its entirety is the most common method to censor nudity and sexual content. Among most of the imported English-language television series, HBO productions are the mostly likely ones to be censored for nudity scenes since HBO itself mostly caters to adult viewers. One relevant example involves the Season 8 premiere of *Game of Thrones*, which showcases how the censorship mechanism works in the context of online streaming. The fantasy drama is famous for its explicit content, which draws attention from both local audiences and censors. In the streamed version of the Season 8 premiere on Tencent Video, a full six minutes of scenes were removed, which leaves the episode to be 48 minutes long, whilst the original version lasts 54 minutes. The ‘missing’ six minutes of the episode contains explicit sexual and violent activity, the excision of which actually damages the main storyline of the premiere. Tencent Video’s viewers expressed their disappointment and anger towards the censored version by posting comments on both the bullet screen and on external social media platforms, mostly pointing out the fact that they paid for content that is incomplete (Agence France-Presse 2019). Despite being suspicious about the incomplete plotline, some viewers did not realize the episode had received cuts until they read such posts.

Weibo user Heishuinike posted a comparison chart that demonstrates the difference in length of each episode and comments, such as ‘@xfanaj: I’m not gonna use Tencent Video anymore’ (@Heishuinike, April 15, 2019). Those who were aware of the missing of these scenes had already gained access to this full version of the episode via informal means. Hence, many viewers were encouraged to use the links or websites to access the uncensored version provided by others on social media. As one of the most exclusive and high-profile English-language television series provided by Tencent Video, *Game of Thrones* is the reason for a large amount of fans to subscribe to the service by paying a monthly fee. However, the streaming services never responded to this negative feedback.

Comparing to the attention the removed scenes of *Game of Thrones* has received, the censored versions of other English-language television series tend to provoke much less discussion, since most of them do not engender as large a fanbase as that of *Game of Thrones*. For instance, another HBO production, an American drama series, *Big Little Lies* also contains numerous explicit depictions of sexual activity and nudity, with even one scene where a male character’s genitals are being exposed. In the Chinese streaming release, all of these explicit scenes have been cut to meet the standard of no obscenity. As Table 4.1 shows, all Season 1 episodes of *Big Little Lies* on Tencent Video have been noticeably shortened.

	S1E1	S1E2	S1E3	S1E4	S1E5	S1E6	S1E7
HBO	49:08	52:08	49:45	50:21	49:19	49:26	56:39
Tencent Video	49:02	50:42	44:11	49:47	48:34	49:24	56:19

**Table 4.1** Lengths of each episode of the original HBO’s version and Tencent Video’s version of *Big Little Lies* Season 1.

These removed scene in practice affect the series' plotline. In the Episode 2, the two characters, Celeste and Perry Wright, played respectively by Nicole Kidman and Alexander Skarsgård, are seen to be fighting with each other, which then results in an explicit sex scene (see Figure 4.1). In the Tencent Video version, the depiction of their sexual intercourse is deleted, leaving the scene to be only the physical fight between them (see Figure 4.2).

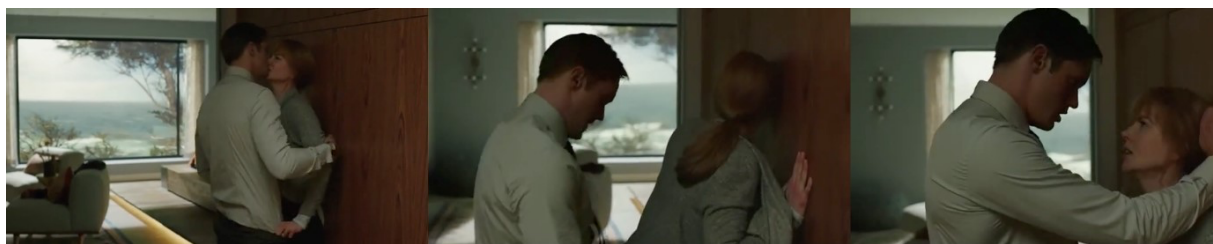


Figure 4.1 Screenshots of the sex scene of HBO's *Big Little Lies* Season 1 Episode 2.

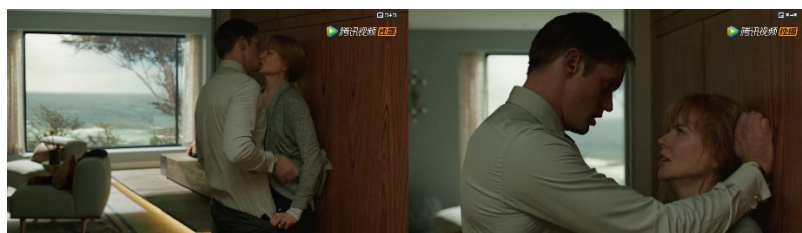


Figure 4.2 Screenshots of the sex scene of Tencent Video's *Big Little Lies* Season 1 Episode 2.

As another example, in the Episode 7, a scene of Celeste taking a shower shows her breasts briefly exposed. In Tencent Video's version, the scene is edited into a closer shot, only focusing on the part above her chest (see Figure 4.3), adopting the same technique used to censor *The Shape of Water*.





**Figure 4.3** Original HBO's version and Tencent Video's version of the shower scene of *Big Little Lies* Season 1 Episode 7.

*Big Little Lies* focuses on domestic abuse; many of its depictions of sex provide a rationale for the exploration of Perry's violent propensity towards Celeste so are narratively and thematically significant. Ironically, the bloody, violent scenes are mostly retained, which means the rationale behind the couple's complicated marriage is not presented to the viewers in Tencent Video's version. As the *General Rules for Television Series Content Production for Chinese TV Producers* states, along with homosexuality, sexual abuse and violence are all taboo topics for Chinese television series to include, which somehow can be kept in an English-language television series, which reflects the streaming service's own decision on retaining certain elements but deleting others (Guancha 2016). The above example represents online distributors' own interpretation of appropriate content, especially when series like *Big Little Lies* do not engender much media discussion. The self-censorship of online streaming services then appears to focus on censoring content that are recognized as inappropriate on a

macro level by both imported films and television series. Yet the streaming services like Tencent Video also benefit from their semi-autonomous self-censorship system which results in their borderline censoring decisions, such as removing nudity scenes but retaining domestic abuse scenes.

### **Homosexuality: The Neutered Translations**

As of the 2020s, there has been a series of progressive LGBTQ movements around the world whilst in China, the media representation of LGBTQ people and communities has generated official and public controversy. Studying news reports related to homosexuality on Chinese media, Yixiong Huang (2017, 338) argues that there has been a gradual change of the media representation of gay people from a ‘negative perception to a more positive one with less discrimination and prejudice’ even in some official media of China. By contrary, Jiang Chang and Hailong Ren (2017, 317) contend that the Chinese gay community is ‘still tainted with sin and perversion in the mainstream public discourse’. Whatever the status of homosexuality in Chinese society is, gay people are mostly unseen or silenced in mainstream public media discourse. However, on social media, Chinese gay people have obtained more space to express themselves and a niche market for entertainment content about LGBT has developed. In the meanwhile, the Chinese government has also implemented policies to rectify gay content in film and television series

The 2016 version of *General Rules for Television Series Content Production for Chinese TV Producer’s*, a set of criteria for production companies, once again emphasizes the banning

of pornographic and vulgar content, but this time the article of the display of abnormal sexual relations or sexual behaviour was added (Guancha 2016). Displays of avowedly abnormal sexual relations or sexual behaviour are defined as ‘incest, homosexuality, perversion, sexual assault, sexual abuse, and sexual violence’. Yet, despite its decriminalization in 1997 in China and depathologization in 2001, the state media discourse still considers homosexuality as an abnormal sexuality, the depiction of which on television could potentially ‘harm the social morality and cause adverse effects on minors’ (Sina 2016). A week before the release of the *General Rules*, a domestic gay-themed web series<sup>10</sup>, *Addiction* (2016), was abruptly scrubbed from China’s video streaming sites following the banning of a web comedy that includes depictions of bisexuality (Horwitz and Huang 2016). However, this did not stop online streaming services from creating borderline gay-themed web series. These series are usually adapted from online novels that have already engendered a large number of followers. On online novel services, these novels are classified as ‘BL’ (boys love), which usually aims for female readers and features homoerotic relationships between male characters. In the web series adaptations, the blunt and explicit gay depictions are usually completely revised, being replaced by brotherly and obscure content. What is not changed is that these series typically have two good-looking male protagonists who constantly flirt with each other in a very subtle but comic way, which is very appealing to young female viewers. A series of this kind can

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<sup>10</sup> In the context of Chinese streaming industry, a web series/comedy is specifically produced for and distributed on streaming services. They usually have low production value and target a certain niche market, depending on its genre.

easily interest fans of BL novels and generate heated discussion on social media, which might also draw the attention from the censors. In 2018, Youku's hit web series *Guardian* (2018) was taken offline for 'content adjustments' after having attracted 1.8 billion views (Zhang 2018). The streaming service did not specify whether or not this takedown was a result of the series' gay undertones. It is in the services' interests to assert their ostensible independence from censorship, but the NRTA has been widely speculated as the force of this takedown on social media (Zhang 2018).

The above incidents show that the Chinese authorities believe that the depictions of homosexuals on mass media can be seen as potentially socially disruptive and further damage to the stability of the society. The *General Rules* provisions indicate that homosexuality is regarded as seriously harmful as sexual assault, sexual abuse, and sexual violence, although it is not officially a crime according to the current constitution. It is worth noting that the *General Rules* was only given to the production companies rather than released to the public, which means these taboo elements are never allowed to be included in television productions from development, let alone to be consumed by an audience. Even if gay-themed series such as *Addiction* and *Guardian* make it to the steaming platform, they are still very likely to be taken down by corresponding force to 'minimize the damages'. But the fact is that production companies never really stop making shows that might be interpreted as a gay-themed work by viewers, because *Guardian*'s 1.8 billion streaming views suggest that a substantial audience exists for boys'-love and similar connotatively gay series. Again, the 'ideal' media environment does not cater to viewers who regularly consume series with content that is later subject to censorship and the actual media environment is being monitored and censored by the

authorities. But not everything that contains homosexual content will be banned since the enforcement of the regulation is inconsistent and the degree of the tolerance on this kind of content is unpredictable. Therefore, the state's ever-changing standards in interpreting homosexual content provides Chinese streaming services with the leeway to produce series that contain borderline homosexual narratives and also to make decisions on importing certain English-language television series depending on whether the main theme of the series is about homosexuality but not whether it depicts homosexuality.

For instance, specifically gay-themed English-language television series, such as *Looking* (2014 – 2015) and *Queer as Folk* (2000 – 2005), both focusing on gay men's life in contemporary American society and both having received positive feedback from Chinese viewers (with Douban viewers' ratings as 8.7 and 9.1 respectively), are generally absent from any formal streaming services. Meanwhile the series that have other main themes rather than homosexuality but contain queer culture elements or gay characters are available, such as *Orange is the New Black* (2013 – 2019) and *Modern Family* (2009 – 2020). It also appears that English-language television series that occasionally reference or depict homosexuality are not strictly censored at all. Hence, the censorship standard of homosexual content in imported television series remains at a superficial level.

One way to censor scenes containing homosexual content is also to remove the scene entirely, especially when sexual activities involved. However, kissing is allowed and not categorized as a sexual activity, but only if the kissing does not eventually lead to further sexual activities. So if one character is identified as gay, as long as he or she does not conduct any sexual activity, the character then needs no censoring. *Modern Family* is a notable example.

The comedy features a married gay couple, Mitchell and Cameron, played by Jesse Tyler Ferguson and Eric Stonestreet respectively. Due to the series' overall comedic setting, the couple do not usually engage with each other in an explicitly sexual way, which resulted in most of their scenes being uncut. Meanwhile, comparing to comedies like *Modern Family*, drama series with more main characters and more complicated narratives require streaming services to adopt other methods.

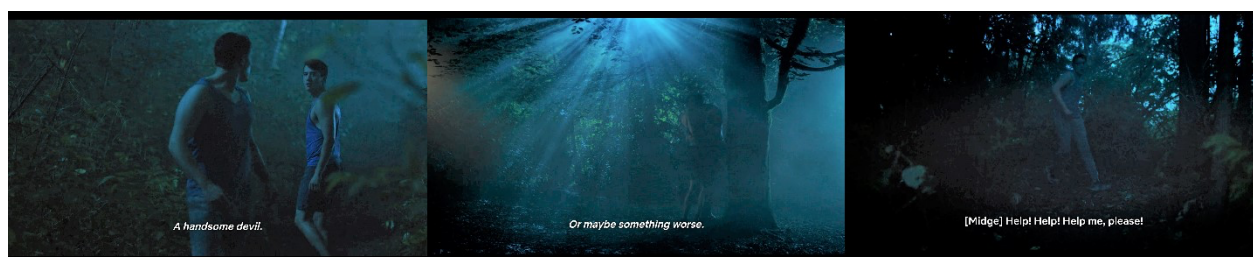
In a novel form of censorship, Chinese streaming services have left intact scenes in which use gay references, but with subtitles altered to provide incomplete, neutered translations, which indicating the streaming services' perception of their viewers that most viewers do not have the English-language skills to notice the mistranslations. However, as previous chapter has argued, there are active viewers who not only have abundant knowledge of English-language culture but also practice attentive viewing experience, which is fully demonstrated in the following example.

*Riverdale*, as one of Tencent Video's current major VIP subscriber only content, has a total of 20 million views for its first two seasons that are available to stream. The teen drama focuses on the life of a group of high school teenagers. One of the main characters, Kevin Keller, played by Casey Cott, is openly gay in the story. In Season 2 Episode 1, the episode opens with Kevin walking alone in the woods wearing a vest, with his muscular torso being emphasized, which implies that he is cruising for a sexual partner. The character then encounters another young man, who is also wearing a vest and has the similar body type. After explicitly staring at each other, the two characters then start kissing and stop due to hearing gunshots and someone's calling for help. Kevin follows the sound to find another character Midge Klump (played by

Emilija Baranac) struggling getting off a car and soon to be comforted by Kevin (see Figure 4.4). Along with this original first scene of this episode is the voiceover of another main character Jughead Jones (played by Cole Sprouse). In the voiceover, Jughead says,

Every fairy tale comes with the same warning: Good children should never go into the woods alone. Stray from the path and who knows what you'll encounter. A hungry wolf. A handsome devil. *Or maybe something worse.*

In the Tencent Video version of this episode, the scene of the two male characters making out is deleted whilst the part of the line 'Or maybe something worse' in sync with the scene is also missing. The screen ends with them checking each other out then follows Kevin's astonished face and his comforting Midge (see Figure 4.5).



**Figure 4.4** Screenshots of the opening of Netflix's *Riverdale* Season 2 Episode 3.



**Figure 4.5** Screenshot of the opening of Tencent Video's *Riverdale* Season 2 Episode 3.

Following up this plot, when Kevin's friend Betty (played by Lili Reinhart) confronts him about how he found Midge in the woods, Kevin firstly claims that he was night-jogging and then confesses he was actually cruising. The complete conversation goes (in the Tencent Video version, the part of the conversation in italics has been completely edited out),

Betty: Okay, it's just us now. Night jogging?

Kevin: Yeah. I'm trying to get in shape for wrestling. *OK, fine, I was cruising Fox Forest. But I'm going out for wresting.* I had to tell my dad I was jogging.

Betty: And he believed you?

Kevin: Yeah, He wants to believe me.

Betty: *Hey, look, I get it, you're post-Joaquin, but cruising? Come on, Kev, you know I hate that. Why can't you just use Grindr like every other gay guy in the world?*

Kevin: *Because nobody's who they say they are online. At least, in real life, what you see is what you get. There's no surprises.*

Betty: Moose and Midge were shot literally 300 yards from Fox Forest and the person who did it is still out there. Tell me you won't go back at least not until he's caught.

Kevin: Ok, fine. I will not go back. Scout's honor.

In fact, the deleted part of the conversation does not affect the main storyline involving characters getting shot in the woods. However, the fact that Kevin is a homosexual who cruises in the woods and chooses not to use Grindr, a gay dating app, is not made explicit for Chinese viewers in this version.

Many viewers soon realized the lack of logic for the first scene and the conversation. In a later scene, Betty goes into the woods to find out Kevin is again 'jogging' and she then lectures him about how dangerous and degrading it is to look for sex in the woods. This scene



is not deleted or edited, presumably because the conversation is rather subtle. The characters do not use terms such as gay or cruise, which draws the attention from viewers. One bullet screen comment reads, ‘what is he doing in the woods?’, following another one, ‘I don’t understand either’. Clearly without seeing the scene of Kevin making out with another guy in the woods in the opening or the complete conversation between Kevin and Betty, some viewers find it very confusing why Betty makes such a big deal out of ‘night-jogging’ in the woods. Another two bullet screen comments give their answers, ‘Because Kevin saved Midge so he feels validated which makes him want to go back into the woods again’ and ‘Betty thinks it is dangerous for him’. Regardless of the irrationality shown in these answers, the misunderstanding of this sub-plotline is evidently generated here. However, there are also viewers who somehow have come up with the rationale behind Kevin’s night-jogging in the woods, ‘He’s gay’, ‘He is looking for sex’ (see Figure 4.6).



Figure 4.6 Screenshots of the bullet screen comments of Riverdale Season 2 Episode 2, translation in red by me.

In the rest of the episode, edited subtitles rather than deleted scenes serve to negotiate and obscure explicitly or connotatively gay content. When Kevin once again goes into the woods to cruise, he meets a man in a car who invites him to get in the car, which after a second thought he rejects. The man then gets upset and urges him to get in the car and calls him ‘little tease’. The bilingual subtitle shows the Chinese translation of this phrase is ‘小屁孩’, which literally translates back to English as ‘little brat’. In this way, the sexual intention of these two men’s action has been defused, at least for the literal meaning of the conversation. However, as indicated by the bullet screen comments, viewers are not always easily misled by edited scenes or subtitles. There are, in fact, viewers with better English-language skills and these viewers’ attentive viewing practice as well as their efforts to enlighten others implies a viewing community, which echoes the argument made in Chapter 3 about English-language television viewers’ use of the bullet screen as a tool to form an audience.

The methods of altering narratives I have outlined are widely used by streaming services to filter homosexual content in English-language television series. Apart from Tencent Video’s *Riverdale*, LeTV’s version of *Orange is The New Black* has also been censored for nudity and homosexual scenes with similar cropping and neutered subtitling. These two series are not mainly gay-themed but contain extensive gay elements that receive considerable attention from Chinese fans of English-language television. As long as the gay content is not about sexual activity and only relevant to subplots, the streaming services appear to think the

neutered translation and altered narratives works as practical censoring methods, yet English-language viewers' attentive viewing practices challenge the distributors' act.

### **Violent Content: The Double Standard for Imported TV and Domestic TV**

Apart from the above two topics, violence is specifically discussed in relevant articles of laws towards the production and distribution of television programmes. According to *Administrative Provisions on Internet Audio-Visual Programme Service*, audio-visual content that contains 'intense murder, bloody, violent, suicide, kidnapping, drug addiction, gambling, spirituality, etc.' must be cut and deleted before release (SARFT and MII 2007). In this sense, the bloody battles are nowhere to see in Tencent Video's *Game of Thrones*, and another globally popular series with extensive violence, *The Walking Dead* (2010 – ), is not available on any Chinese streaming services. Although it is hard to evaluate to what degree deleted scenes of violence result in viewers' confusion about television series plotlines, it is fair to say that the lack of certain violent content could potentially damage the story setting of the series. Yet, this standard does not apply to domestic productions, especially the genre of screen texts depicting Sino-Japanese Wars, in which graphically bloody scenes are common. Moreover, these scenes are not only violent but also highly stylized. Chinese netizens call these series '抗日神剧', roughly translates as super dramatic anti-Japanese dramas, in which Chinese characters often show extraordinary skills. For example, in one episode of an anti-Japanese television drama, *Kangri Qixia* (2011), a battalion-commander character tears a Japanese soldier's body in two with his bare hands. This incident suggests the NRTA's

considerable tolerance for graphic violence in domestic television series, as long as it illustrates the bravery and capacity of the Chinese soldiers.

For English-language television series, the censorship of violent content has been evident in the case of *Game of Thrones*, as discussed earlier. Tencent Video's release of *Rome* (2005 – 2007) offers another instructive case. Co-produced by HBO and the BBC, the historical drama features numerous violent scenes that help illustrate its storylines. Many viewers went to Tencent Video to watch the series and quickly realized that many scenes had been cut, their viewing experience consequently compromised as well. Viewer Fanfu posted a comment in the player page's comment area, saying, 'What the hell is this? I can't even figure out the plot with so many scenes cut' (@Fanfu, January 2, 2020). Clearly, English-language television series and domestic television series face a double standard censorship system in terms of violent scenes.

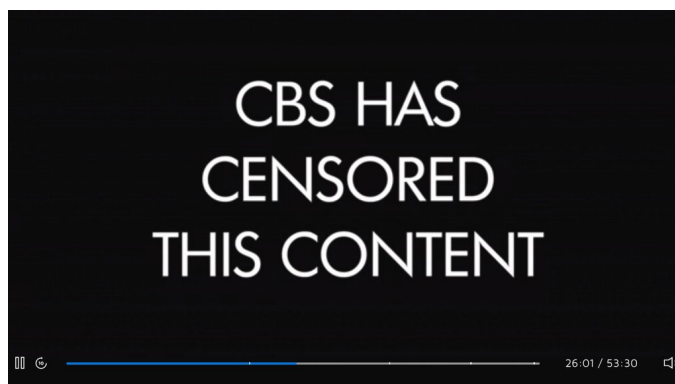
As these examples indicate that the censorship of violence largely occurs only for foreign films and television series, whilst domestic productions are effectively exempt from censorship of violent content as long as the content is used to portray positive patriotic soldiers. This raises the issue of a double standard censorship system for English-language television, which brings out the political proposition that often hinders the importation of English-language television series containing 'sensitive' topics.

## **Sensitive topics: the Banned Discussion and Episode**

‘Sensitive’ topics refer to the political topics that are deemed anti-government and anti-party, or anything regarded as disruptive to Chinese social harmony. These political topics include not only the content stated in the *General Rules*, but also Western media reportage of China that shows different stances from the preferred stance of Chinese officials. Hence, the censorship of sensitive topics is employed at the macro level by all Chinese media industries. For the Chinese online distributors, the foremost factor in deciding what films or television series should be pursued for import is whether those films and series contain sensitive topics or can generate conflicts between avowedly foreign values and Chinese ones, since foreign television producers are understood as unlikely to follow the Chinese rules and produce the type of programmes that fit the Chinese context. Yet, as the following case shows, Western producers are aware of the potential censoring of their productions containing political topics and can even be influenced by Chinese streaming services’ decisions in whether to include the topics.

On May 2, 2019, the American streaming service CBS All Access aired Season 3 Episode 6 of *The Good Fight* (2017 – ). The episode is distinctive in that in its streaming version, the screen was covered for eight and a half seconds with a placard reading ‘CBS has censored this content’ (see Figure 4.7). The censored content was understood to be that week’s ‘Good Fight Short’, a short music cartoon in the style of *Schoolhouse Rock!* (1973 – 2009). These shorts are related to specific political or legal topics addressed in the episode. The plot of the episode

deals specifically with Chinese censorship. While viewers might think the placard was a satirical device, the underlying content was actually censored by CBS itself (Nussbaum 2019).



**Figure 4.7** The 'censored' message of *The Good Fight*, CBS All Access.

According to *The New Yorker*, 'the segment had been fully written and animated, then vetted by legal and run through all the regular corporate oversight' (Nussbaum 2019). However, less than two weeks before the episode was planned to air, the show's creators Robert and Michelle King were asked by CBS to cut the cartoon segment. After negotiation, the creators agreed to have the segment covered with the placard with the song muted too. Jonathan Coulton, the writer and performer of the song featured in the cartoon, says the song is called *Banned in China*, which features many political topics that are generally banned in China, such as Winniethe-Pooh<sup>11</sup> and the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests (Nussbaum 2019). The song also mentions the fact that American films and television shows are often banned or censored in China, including CBS's own *The Good Wife*, which *The Good Fight* is a spin-off and sequel to. Coulton also says that in the end of the song, he sings that that he hopes this

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<sup>11</sup>Due to the cartoon character's resemblance to Chinese president, Xi Jinping, discovered and shared by Chinese netizens, Winnie-the-Pooh has been selectively banned from Chinese social media.

song gets banned in China, which is not going to happen since the song has already been self-censored by CBS (Nussbaum 2019).

Foreign television series and films that contain political elements that the Chinese government might find sensitive are routinely censored by the relevant government authority or self-censored by the distributors after being successfully imported and before being released in China. The censorship of *The Good Fight* was not the handiwork of Chinese distributors. The series has never been formally imported in China and has little chance to do so, considering its aggressively political plots, which has already resulted in the ban of its precursor series *The Good Wife*. In other words, the actual consequence of the episode censorship is that the American viewers are prevented from viewing content that could offend the Chinese government. It is the first time for an American television series' producer to censor it in its original country for China. Coulton confirmed that CBS' Standards and Practices division had expressed concern that such a sequence would endanger company executives working in China (Nussbaum 2019). Such a rare case indicates that American entertainment companies are willing to censor their own content to preclude conflicts with the Chinese government.

English-language television series like *The Good Fight* are not only unlikely to be imported but also banned from discussion on major media platforms. Around the same time in 2019, British television network Channel 4 aired a miniseries called *Chimerica* (2019 – ) whilst a drama series called *Years and Years* (2019 – ) was aired on the BBC and co-produced

by the BBC and HBO. Both of these two series contain plotlines that are highly related to China: *Chimerica* specifically takes the 1989 Tiananmen Square Protests as the lead to its main plotline; as a sci-fi drama, *Years and Years* creates a future world where China and the United States start a new world war. Neither of these two series have been formally imported in China, but they both received attention from the Chinese censors. On China's film and TV database website Douban, neither of these two series are listed; even though their profiles were initially created by users, the listings were deleted by Douban immediately after. Not only films and television programmes, books and music albums that contain sensitive topics are also banned to be listed or discussed on Douban.

According to a published list, *Non-existent Books, Films/TV shows and Music on Douban*, Douban's database has deleted or not included total of 82 titles of films and TV shows, more than half of which are from the United States or the United Kingdom (Anonymou 2019). The third season of *The Good Fight* is also unavailable on Douban where the first two seasons and the upcoming fourth season are listed. Even though the fourth season has not been aired yet, there are a total of 237 short comments under the listing, most of which are users' whining about the fact that they are unable to comment the third season under its own listing. Douban user, Ersanling posts, 'Bizarre, I could only find the reviews of the third season on the page of the fourth season' (@Ersanling, January 2, 2020). Some users even make funny remarks regarding the incident. Bufudezhu posts, 'Let's guess whether *The Good Fight* goes offline first, or Trump goes offline first? Turns out that Douban went offline first' (@Bufudezhu,



January 1, 2020). Chinese internet users regularly use the word ‘harmonize’ to describe the action of deleting or banning a certain topic by the authorities. Douban user, Fenguangjiyue writes,

The third season of *The Good Fight* was harmonized by Douban? I can’t even rate it? Be generous and kind! The sixth episode is only just a little joke, if you compare it with the whole show. In fact, if you want to lead the public opinion, you might as well sponsor CBS to keep making the show, maybe it’ll work out wonderfully (@Fenguangjiyue, January 2, 2020).

Some savvy users post comments and reviews that contain subtle jokes about politics and sensitive topics, discourse that is somehow usually tolerated. Meanwhile, some users specifically expressed their anger towards being censored and harmonized. Douban user traci posts, ‘The third season has been pulled off from Douban? The entire show is about satirizing American politics, so we can’t let them satirize us for even once? People who can be easily swayed are not even watching American TV at all’ (@traci, January 2, 2020). Meanwhile, not every user understands the reason for this censorship, as Miao writes, ‘The third season’s page has disappeared. Why are you afraid of something that is fabricated?’. These users’ quotes express their resentment towards the censorship of media products and also indicate that they have watched the series, which is most likely via informal distribution platforms. Informal distribution platforms in this respect, fulfil viewers’ need to access English-language television series that are widely banned from formal online streaming services as well as mainstream media platforms.

However, even a political television series is successfully imported, the censoring method adopted by formal streaming services tend to be drastic. HBO's *Veep* (2012 – 2019) has been imported by Tencent Video and is available on its service. But the fifth season provided by the service is incomplete with only nine episodes available when the season actually has ten episodes. Season 8 Episode 5 follows the main character, President Selina Myers, played by Julia Louis-Dreyfus, to Camp David, where she has a secret meeting with the Chinese president, Lu Chi-Jang, played by Tzi Ma. The two characters discuss cyber-espionage and the possibility of freeing Tibet, which is the main plotline of this episode. Besides the cyber-espionage topic, the Tibet issue is one of the most notable forbidden political scandals that concern the Chinese government. By touching these highly sensitive political topics and having the actor Tzi Ma, who resembles the real Chinese President Xi Jinping, this episode has been excluded from the watchlist by Tencent Video. Episode 9 instead becomes Episode 8, and Episode 10 becomes Episode 9. This incident was also observed by Chinese viewers. Douban user, Zhicibutanfengyu, posted a comment under the listing of *Veep*, that says,

Because of mentioning Dalai Lama and Diaoyu Islands, so episode 8 disappeared on Tencent Video and Tencent tagged episode 9 as 8. I had to download the whole season from Zimuzu to check episode by episode. This is outrageous, I don't care if you have the copyright or not, this is purely control of ideology! (@Zhicibutanfengyue, January 2, 2020)

Despite complaints like this one, Tencent Video never released the eighth episode and in the following year still imported the sixth season of *Veep*. When the main plotline of an English-language television series or series episode contains politically sensitive topics, streaming services become more cautious; no scene deleting or subtitle editing is used, not including the episode and altering listings to give the impression that the offending episode never existed is the only way to meet the self-censorship standard. In the Douban user's comment, Zhicibutanfengyue also mentions Zimuzu, one of the few remaining informal English-language television content streaming and downloading websites that can be accessed on the Chinese internet. The comment indicates that even though users such as Zhicibutanfengyue initially relied on formal streaming services like Tencent Video for legally distributed streaming content, they often prefer to watch a series in its complete form and resented the formal services' self-censorship, which then resulted in users' migration to informal distribution sites.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has examined and compared the censorship system for certain imported films and the self-censorship system for imported television programmes. Chinese streaming services receive less control from the NRTA whilst all imported theatrical-released films must be reviewed and censored by the CFA. The censorship provisions for online streaming television content are highly ambiguous, leaving the streaming services space to manage the content they distribute, resulting in a slightly loose self-censorship system. However, the

bullet screen comments and other social media users' comments, regarding Chinese streaming services' self-censorship practices, indicate that Chinese viewers' viewing practices are attentive. Some viewers are aware of the censored series and they even help enlighten other viewers about the complete plotlines, which once again demonstrate the unique cultural identity of English-language television viewers.

Even though the local authority holds the complete power over what content should be censored by the local distributors, the local authority only enhances supervision and management when certain topics in online television content engenders wide online discussion and attracts media attention. Hence, the censorship mechanism itself bears a kind of uncertainty and is always subject to the overall political atmosphere at the time. Meanwhile, the power relationship between the local distributors and the local viewers is often shifted towards the latter when viewers' need for better television content is not satisfied. In other words, even though viewers are willing to pay for subscription to consume formally distributed English-language television series, they also demand not only unedited content but also more available titles.

Since the number of foreign television series should not exceed thirty percent of each streaming service's overall content, there are always English-language television series that are not formally imported by streaming services. Hence, Chinese viewers have to turn to alternative platforms to find more titles. This leads to discussion of the final agent of the online distribution of English-language television content: the informal distribution platforms. In the

next chapter, I investigate the practices of informal distribution on Chinese internet to finally complete the jigsaw puzzle.

## Chapter Five The Informal Distribution Network of English-Language TV

According to Douban, the highest rated English-language television series of 2020 has been Season 11 of *Shameless* (2011 – 2021). The series' final season has been rated by 23,663 Douban users and scored an average rate of 9.6. In the same list, ranking as the second is Season 5 of *Better Call Saul* (2015 – ) with an average rate of 9.5 based on 39,648 users' rating. Both of these two American series appear to be widely popular among Chinese English-language television fans. However, there is one question that can be asked here: where did these viewers watch these series? *Better Call Saul* has been formally imported and streamed by Tencent Video whilst *Shameless* cannot be found on any of the formal streaming services. The most likely way for Chinese viewers to watch *Shameless* is via file-sharing or streaming services that cannot be considered as formal distribution platforms.

Previous chapters have examined China's major formal streaming services for English-language television series, from aspects of distribution activities, online viewer practices and online television's self-censorship. All these major services, Tencent Video, iQiyi, Sohu Video and Youku, are recognized as legitimate platforms, meaning they have been given permissions by the NRTA to import and distribute foreign television series online. They hold the right to distribute these series in mainland China, under the authorizations of the series' copyright owners. However, there are also streaming and file-sharing platforms that have conducted informal distribution of English-language television series for years. In fact, as the above case

shows, these informal platforms hold titles that are not available on major formal streaming services, and they can also reach a relatively large audience. Moreover, most of these informal platforms do not require paid subscriptions from their viewers, which means that these platforms might have absorbed the market share left by the formal streaming services. In part owing to these and other dynamics, investigating informal online distribution of English language television series helps better understand China's online streaming industry and the distribution of foreign television content.

This chapter looks at China's two major informal online distribution platforms for English-language television series: YYeTs and Renren Shipin, both having been derived from the famous fan-subtitling group YYeTs Zimuzu. After more than a decade's development, these two services have adopted various localized business features in order to cater to local viewers. In China's current streaming ecology, they fill in the market gap that is left by the formal streaming services, but they are regularly disrupted by the authorities and then self-reorganized, because of the grey business they practice and the formality of them is in flux. I examine these two services from their development history, content exhibition strategies, user-friendly features, interactive affordances, and business model, which are all relevant to the informal distribution economy, in order to find out the dynamic relationship between formal and informal online distribution practices. I argue that, on the one hand, the informal distribution network poses a challenge for the formal streaming services, because of the copyright infringement issues and market erosion; on the other hand, the informal distribution

network provides fans with an opportunity to consume more content in an uncensored form with less or no cost. The informal distribution economy faces ongoing legal challenges, and while its prospects for survival are uncertain at best, the sector reveals much about Chinese screen distribution and consumption.

### **The Informal Online Distribution Network in Mainland China**

In his book *Shadow Economies of Cinema: Mapping Informal Film Distribution* (2012), Ramon Lobato offers extensive analyses on the informal systems of film circulation from a global perspective. Lobato's work substantially informs this chapter's questions and discussions about the informal distribution of television. For example, how do the informal and formal distribution networks interact with each other and how do they shape the ways Chinese viewers consume foreign television content? To answer these questions, this section starts by first identifying the informal distribution system of foreign television content in mainland China, which makes it essential to recognize the analytical distinction between formal and informal distribution.

In the context of media economy, Lobato asserts that 'formality refers to the degree to which industries are regulated, measured, and governed by state and corporate institutions. Informal distributors are those which operate outside this sphere, or in partial articulation with it (2012, 4).' As mentioned earlier, major Chinese streaming services, such as Tencent Video and iQiyi function completely within the formal distribution network, meaning they are regulated and supervised by the NRTA. Streaming services, such as Renren Shipin, distribute



informally obtained and unauthorized foreign television content and often bypass the state's regulations and censorship on importing foreign television content. However, the lack of formality does not necessarily mean that informal distribution networks matter any less than formal ones in terms of how they form Chinese audience consumption habits of foreign television content. As Elaine Jing Zhao argues, 'the unauthorised circulation of audio-visual content has played a crucial role in the broadening media diet of Chinese viewers' (2019, 64). In fact, the informal distribution network of foreign television in mainland China has been and still is largely affecting Chinese audiences' consumption of this media content.

Even though foreign television series were initially brought to the Chinese viewers by conventional Chinese television stations in the early stage of the country's television history, which is through a formal distribution system, it was not until the popularization of pirated DVDs in mainland China when English-language television series engendered its first sizable audience base (see Chapter 1). What has followed the decline of the pirated DVD market is the rapidly developing internet technologies, which led to Chinese viewers accessing free audio-visual content as much as they want through online circulation means. In the late 2000s, P2P file-sharing and downloading websites became the major distribution platform for English-language television series as well as films. Yet, both the pirated DVD business and online distribution activities remain in the informal media economy sector that lies outside the country's legitimate and regulated film and television distribution network. Hereby, the informal distribution network exceeded television broadcast in size, scale, and reach, which

means informal distribution network has played a vital role in shaping Chinese audiences' taste of English-language television from the very beginning. Echoing the above discussion, Lobato (2012, 4) also argues informal distribution is not a marginal but a central feature of film culture, especially on a global scale. Even though Lobato's book only focuses on circulatory dynamics of cinema, his point applies equally to the informal distribution network of English-language television series in mainland China. Moreover, the study of the informal distribution system of foreign television can also reveal the power relations within China's television distribution networks as well as the cultural politics of distribution, which will be further explored in this chapter.

In the socio-economic context of China, power relations exist in the distribution networks involve agents including the state (the country's legal and supervisory body), the formal distributors (television broadcasters and online streaming services), the audience, and the informal distributors. The last agent, informal distributors are the illegal file-sharing platforms and the initial content circulators behind these platforms: the fan-subtitling groups. Again, instead of being a marginal agent of the distribution of English-language television series, these fan-subtitling groups were essentially the foremost agent that helped achieve the popularization of this specific television genre in mainland China and they 'typify slippage between state regulation and market-driven media consumption' (Davis and Yeh 2017, 1). Hence, I recognize the fan-subtitling groups as the major informal distributors this chapter

concerns. The analysis of why and how the fansub-titling groups that function as an informal distribution network have contributed to audience practices in mainland China follows.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, even though China has been including English as one of the major compulsory subjects for students at all different educational levels, it is still not possible for English-language films and television programmes to be consumed by a larger Chinese-speaking audience without being dubbed or subtitled in Chinese language. Also, for formal distributors, dubbing or subtitling is part of the process of formally importing foreign audiovisual products, since it is required by both the NRTA and the CFA that imported television series and films must be subtitled before obtaining the formal permit to be distributed. For films and television programmes that are formally imported by formal Chinese distributors, the dubbing or subtitling work is usually completed by professional dubbing and subtitling individuals or organizations that are hired or owned by the distributors. Meanwhile, most of the foreign films and television programmes that are illegally circulated and distributed online usually appear without Chinese subtitles since the legal importing procedure does not apply. To Chinese viewers, these films and television programmes are called ‘生肉’ (raw meat), which means non-subtitled content, as opposed to ‘熟肉’ (cooked meat) meaning subtitled content. Consequently, Chinese fans who had the ability to translate and edit subtitles then voluntarily took the job of ‘cooking the meat’ for other viewers. These volunteers started working together and formed fan-subtitling groups to produce subtitles for English-language films and television programmes.

The fan-subtitling community started to grow in 2002, when some Chinese fans of the famous American situation comedy *Friends* gathered together to found an online fan forum called the F6 forum, from which the F6 fan-subtitling group was derived and became China's first English-language fan-subtitling group. The group focused on producing subtitles in Chinese language for the American sitcom's each episode in order to better cater to fans who were not fluent in English. Later, more and more fan-subtitling groups gradually emerged on the Chinese internet, such as YYeTs, YDY, Fengsoft and Ragbear. These fan-subtitling groups specifically concentrated on English-language television series and occasionally films in English whilst there were also groups specializing content in other foreign languages, such as TSKS for Korean dramas. The members of these groups were mostly university students and graduates who devoted time and effort to the collective work with the ambition to provide Chinese viewers with an array of English-language television content that cannot be found on Chinese television. With ongoing technological and political reorganization within China's media industry, the venue where fan-subtitling groups' work is circulated also changed in time.

In the early 2000s, fan-subtitling groups circulated subtitled television programmes on platforms that operated as file-sharing forum websites. Major Chinese fan-subtitling groups, such as YDY, Fengsoft and Ragbear, usually required users to be registered to access their filesharing forums with an invitation code shared by other existing registered users, which means the forum was a user network to include only those who were extremely eager to join the forum and also discreet enough to keep the forum in the shadow of the internet world.

Moreover, even users who were successfully registered still needed to be active enough on the forum, meaning as much visit to the site as possible was required, in order to gain access to different tiered groups, under which subtitled work was shared. As a result, the forum functioned as an exclusive walled garden that prevented other casual viewers who could not stay active on the forum from accessing original exclusive subtitled files. Hence, some highly active users circulated subtitled files and uploaded them onto other online hard drives or social network platforms, such as Baidu Tieba, so that other viewers could download the content without having to spend time figuring out how to join the forums. As the major audience of English-language television series, Chinese university students used another means to disseminate subtitled work. Almost every university in mainland China had a campus file transfer protocol that could only be accessed via an on-campus network, in effect providing students with a platform to freely distribute film and television files that were downloaded from file-sharing forums. In fact, these file-sharing platforms soon helped spread English-language television series all over mainland China. Since 2003, as many as 246 active fan-subtitling groups have been observed on the Chinese internet (Li 2016, 63). The new era of online entertainment provided the numerous fan-subtitling groups with the soil to vigorously expand, and the fan-subtitling culture even received attention from the Western world. In 2006, a New York Times article called *Chinese Tech Buffs Slake Thirst for U.S. TV Shows* was released, featuring interviews with several subtitling group members. Chinese fan-subtitling groups were described as the organizations that aimed for ‘making American popular culture

available in near-real time free to Chinese audiences, dodging Chinese censors and American copyright lawyers' (French 2006). Chinese media outlet also started to report the story of fan-subtitling groups, which seemingly validated these volunteer's work. However, the 'Chinese censors' and 'American copyright lawyers' soon responded to this rapid developing sector of the informal media industry.

In 2007, the SARFT and the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (hereafter MIIT) released the *Administrative Provisions on Internet Audio-Visual Programme Service*, which required any websites that provided internet audio-visual programmes to obtain the permit from the SARFT, otherwise they must shut down their service (SARFT and MIIT 2007). Elaine Jing Zhao and Michael Keane noted that the state's action was partially a result of the pressure from domestic and international copyright owners (2013, 729). Consequently, most fan-subtitling groups had to terminate their file-sharing forums and started to only provide subtitle files rather than video files with subtitles embedded, both of which were provided before. For fan-subtitling groups, this way was to avoid being considered as video content circulators but only subtitle file providers. In the following decade, formal Chinese streaming services started purchasing the streaming rights of many popular English-language television series from their overseas copyright holders. The informal distribution network then experienced a gradual but drastic reconfiguration as a result of the formal online streaming services' entering the market of English-language television content.

As of the late 2010s, most of the previously famous fan-subtitling groups have disappeared from the Chinese internet world, such as Fengsoft and YDY. The Chinese authority's continuously rigorous crackdown of unauthorized online video platforms and the whole media industry's development of intellectual property protection scheme resulted in these fan-subtitling groups' annihilation. Meanwhile, the Chinese viewers' new online video consuming habits pushed some fan-subtitling groups to change their business to sharing files via file-hosting service providers, such as Baidu Wangpan, a cloud service similar to iCloud. However, for Chinese netizens, the most convenient way to access online videos is through online streaming. In this sense, only two services, YYeTs and Renren Shipin that were derived from the same fan-subtitling group, YYeTs Zimuzu, have survived. Even though remain the identity of 'informal', these two services continue to be accessed by Chinese viewers of English-language television series and the fan-subtitling work is still appreciated by viewers and subtly being monetized by the service runners. These two services, YYeTs and Renren Shipin have been chosen for this chapter to help explain the mechanism of the informal distribution network in the age of online streaming.

### **YYeTs and Renren Shipin**

Before going into details about how the current informal distribution network functions, this section provides a brief history of the development of YYeTs Zimuzu, one of the major fan subtitling groups in China to demonstrate the constant reconfiguration of fan-subtitling groups. There are currently two available informal online streaming services YYeTs and Renren

Shipin, both of which benefit from the ‘brand’ name ‘YYeTs’. These two services provide unauthorized English-language television series with subtitles but the services themselves are not entirely illegal. Regarding television distribution systems, Lobato and Julian Thomas (2015) present an inclusive spectrum of formality that locates formal systems at one end and informal systems at the other. They further explain, ‘Rather than a binary division, this schematic views informality/formality as a continuous line. Differences between the systems are variances of degree rather than fundamental oppositions’ (Lobato and Thomas 2015, 47). In other words, the degree of the formality of a distribution system can change, for which the development of YYeTs and Renren Shipin is an ideal example.

Founded in 2003 by a Chinese student known as Xiaoguishen studying in Canada, YYeTs Zimuzu was an amateur fan-subtitling group that specialized in translating and subtitling English-language films and television programmes and distributed them online free of charge. The purpose of the group was stated as ‘for fans to share, communicate and learn’ (Chen 2011). The name of YYeTs translates as ‘everybody enjoys TV shows’. The English letter Y resembles the upside down version of the Chinese character ‘人’, and ‘人人’ means ‘everybody’, pronounced as ‘renren’. In 2006, YYeTs Zimuzu established an independent forum called YYeTs Yingshi and gradually became one of the most visited film and television file-sharing sites in mainland China. The group had more than 1,000 subtitling group members and the site attracted more than 900,000 registered users with more than a dozen channels, including action, comedy and variety (Chen 2011). Unlike other forums, such as YDY and



Fengsoft, YYeTs opened its door to everyone; users could register freely without invitation codes and then access any files without having to constantly visit or contribute to the site. Thanks to the 1,000member subtitling group, YYeTs' subtitling work was widely popular among Chinese viewers. The group was always able to upload new television episodes only hours after they were aired in their original countries, and this minimized time delay helped the site win more viewers, which in practice proves that the temporal premium of distribution can even benefit informal distributors. By 2012, the site had become the biggest online content library for Chinese fans of English-language television series with its user-friendly interface and large, frequently updated quality subtitled content (Chen 2011).

After almost a decade of steady development, the prevalence of file-sharing websites finally drew attention from copyright holders and their international lobbying advocates. In October 2014, YYeTs and other well-known file-sharing forums, were investigated by the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) on suspicion of piracy. The MPAA (2014) released its annual worldwide survey of audio and video piracy with 'blacklists' of websites offering links to pirated downloads and the world's ten largest markets for pirated audio and video products, notably including YYeTs, which caused the site a series of crises. In November 2014, five servers owned by YYeTs were sealed up by the broadcasting and television law enforcement departments (J. Zhang 2014). Since the management team members of YYeTs were based in Canada and could not return to China to handle the situation, the servers were directly seized. On the next day, YYeTs temporarily closed its site and

announced that it was ‘cleaning up’ its content. However, a few days after this announcement, a number of netizens found that YYeTs could be accessed again from mainland China. The site's domain name was resolved and the IP address showed that its server was located in South Korea and Singapore (Wang 2014).

YYeTs was then briefly back on the internet. In mid-December 2014, when users logged in to the old URL, they would be redirected to the new website (L. Zhang 2014). Compared with the previous website, YYeTs had not made more changes except adjusting the font and enabling a new logo. However, the new website only existed for a week. Late December, YYeTs announced its official closure. In less than two months, YYeTs came back again with a new identity. Early February 2015, YYeTs announced on its official Weibo account that its transformed American TV drama community ‘Renren Meiju’ was launched as scheduled (Wang 2015). A notice and a link to Renren Meiju appeared on the official website of YYeTs. The original YYeTs subtitling group was to be transferred to Renren Meiju (the name was soon changed to Renren Shipin). The community would only provide news articles, schedules, audience ratings and other information about American television series. This means that YYeTs was no longer a file-sharing website but instead became a community website for English-language television series fans.

In fact, it was not only the name of YYeTs was changed, but also the site’s management team. On December 16, 2016, YYeTs posted an article 十年人入，重新出发 (Decade of YYeTs, Restarting Now) on its official Weibo account, revealing the incident happened in 2015. The

article states that during the closure in 2015, a third party invested in the project of Renren Shipin (initially known as Renren Meiju) and started carrying out cooperation with YYeTs (Sohu 2016). The two parties shared the brand name and internal data in order to further develop the website. This indicates that the site, previously known as a non-revenue generating amateur file-sharing platform, had become a profitable project for the investment market, suggesting not only a new direction but a complete shift from the site's original goals and values. The article also emphasized that due to large differences and contradictions between YYeTs and Renren Shipin in ideas and values, YYeTs withdrew from the project. The negotiation between the two parties had reached to an agreement: Renren Shipin would no longer use YYeTs's name and its fans for any publicity or marketing purposes; none of the subtitling group members would work for Renren Shipin either full-time or part-time; YYeTs also would not authorize Renren Shipin to use its name for any business activity with other parties. On January 4, 2017, YYeTs released another clarification announcement on its official Weibo account, once again reiterating the termination of the project with Renren Shipin:

our original intention was to promote and develop YYeTs through the cooperation, but ever since we started working with them (the other party), we did not really get a chance to participate in the YYeTs project. Not only did the project fail, but our opportunities to conduct other projects were also restricted (Lu and Deng 2017, translation by me).

The line between formal and informal was gradually blurred for YYeTs. As of 2020, based on information obtained from Tianyancha.com, a company that offers detailed company

verification services, YYeTs and Renren Shipin are owned by two different companies: Shanghai Quanju Network Technology and Shanghai Zhongduomei Network Technology respectively. Both of these two companies have been publicly funded by other investment companies. It becomes clear that YYeTs and Renren Shipin are two independent online video services. However, the platforms' names often confuse Chinese viewers. In Chinese language, YYeTs is usually called Renren Yingshi, which shares the same first word with Renren Shipin. Adding to the possible confusion, 'Yingshi' means films and television shows and 'Shipin' means videos. For Chinese viewers, when referring to watching audio-visual content, these two words are often used interchangeably. Hence, many viewers expressed their confusions about which one is the original YYeTs on Zhihu.

However, in terms of service model, the two sites operate differently. Both YYeTs and Renren Shipin are available to access via different means. YYeTs' website home page includes a link to its file-downloading page, download links to its Windows/Mac OSX client applications, QR codes for Android/Apple smartphone applications and even a download link to its smart TV application, which means users can choose either to download files to their computers or to directly stream online streaming content on their smartphones and smart TV sets. Renren Shipin's website home page only provides smartphone application download links, with no file-downloading options. In this sense, YYeTs remains a file-sharing platform, while Renren Shipin functions as an online video streaming service, similar to Tencent Video and other formal streaming services.

In fact, YYeTs remains an informal platform, whilst Renren Shipin has become a seemingly formal streaming service since it has obtained an Internet Cultural Business Permit by the Chinese government, a permit shown on its website homepage. This permit does not allow the service to circulate online video content but holding such permit means Renren Shipin is being included in the formal media economy regulated and supervised by the state. However, same as YYeTs, the English-language television series Renren Shipin provides is still not formally imported. Hence, the degree of its formality has increased but it cannot be considered as a fully formal streaming service as Tencent Video.

My argument throughout this section has been that the informal distribution network has been in a flux and a contested space involving negotiations or conflicts with fellow fans, with state regulators and with commercial companies. YYeTs and Renren Shipin are ideal samples for the study of the informal economy, since they are both derived from the same fan subtitling group and have developed different distribution practices that are both categorized as informal. In the following section, I further explore this informal distribution network by taking a closer look at the different aspects of how it functions and how it interacts with the formal distribution network. Moreover, we can also learn how the degree of the informality of informal online distribution network constantly changes.

### **The Fan-Subtitling Group Culture**

After having become informal online streaming services, YYeTs and Renren Shipin have both retained the fan-subtitling groups cultural elements. These cultural elements have been

appreciated and shared by numerous Chinese viewers through the subtitled work the groups produced since even before the online streaming age. The fan-subtitling group culture was mostly reflected in the translation work, which appears to be more vivid and contains elements of fan-subtitling groups' own cultural reproduction.

As a kind of audio-visual product in a foreign language, English-language television series can only be better consumed by most Chinese viewers through reasonably appropriate translation. Local Chinese viewers, especially young well-educated ones, put a high premium on the quality and accuracy of translation. However, in mainland China, adopted by formal distributors, the official translation of foreign films and television programmes is usually too rigid, or in other words, not localized enough. As a widely known term to Chinese netizens, '翻译腔' (translationese) means that the translation of a foreign language text in a film or television series appears to be ungrammatical and awkward in the local language use, due to translator's overly literal translation of the foreign language without considering the local language users' usual language habits. For example, if a character says 'hey, guys', which is simply a greeting, the formal Chinese screen translators always directly translate the two words instead of using a localized greeting. The direct translation of these two words is however almost never used on any occasion by Chinese viewers. This can cause the lack of clarity in translation and often the local language users find it funny and confusing. Chinese official translation of foreign films and television series often encounter this issue (Li 2016),

which is usually due to the translator's lack of knowledge of the cultural context and inflexibility of translation skills.

In contrast, fan-subtitling work proves to be more effective and flexible in terms of the reevaluation of the texts being translated. Translated work produced by fan-subtitling groups is always considered as more creative and localized with their 'folk expression that is both down to earth and suitable for Internet communication' (Li 2016, 62). Back to the earlier example, the fan-subtitling version of 'hey, guys' would usually be translated into a simple Chinese greeting word, such as 你好 (nihao), whilst a more creative version could be 老铁们好 (laotiemenhao), which is a trendy greeting phrase that is constantly used in Chinese internet world. The more accurate and localized translation style is because on the one hand, fan-subtitling groups are not under the supervision of formal Chinese distributors and the work they produce is not reviewed or censored by the state authority, which means they have the greater autonomy in how to translate the subtitles. On the other hand, fan-subtitling groups are usually formed by a group of English-language television series fans (many are Chinese students studying in English-speaking countries), who are also capable of translating English-language texts. Their passion and affection for this type of television content as well as their internet-focused mindset help them better understand the context and then produce the subtitles that are more localized to Chinese viewers. This echoes Tessa Dwyer's argument of the liberation of fan-subtitling work. As she argues,

Instead of approaching translation as unwanted interference, fansubbers respond proactively towards perceived failings, transforming limitations into possibilities and proposing a course of creative reinvention... the fansubbing phenomenon is exploding standard screen translation practices, exposing supposed rules and formal constraints as mere conventions. (Dwyer 2017, 137)

Moreover, fan-subtitling groups provide not only subtitles but also some further explanations of certain cultural references that viewers might find confusing in the form of annotation. These annotations are usually put below the subtitles in a smaller font or a different shade, which is rarely found in the official translated work provided by formal Chinese distributors. The fan-subtitling work revalues translation as a vital mediating tool and offers linguistic and cultural diversity to Chinese viewers.

Another cultural element of fan-subtitling work is its use by Chinese viewers for learning the English language. As mentioned in Chapter 1, Chinese English teachers have validated watching English-language television series as an efficient way of learning the language. The fan-subtitling work provide bilingual subtitles to viewers, in which way viewers are given the original English texts so that they can directly learn the vocabulary and test their listening skills. In the case of formal streaming services, when they began operating in the early 2010s, English-language television series were only given subtitles in Chinese language, which reduces the language-learning opportunity. The bilingual subtitles and the creative and localized translation style then became part of fan-subtitling groups' cultural articulation that was very much appreciated and shared by Chinese viewers.



Apart from the quality of the subtitles produced by fan-subtitling groups, the efficiency of producing these subtitles also help fan-subtitling groups garner viewers. Comparing with formal streaming services, fan-subtitling groups can always deliver subtitled content to local Chinese viewers in a much quicker manner. The formal importation process of foreign television series requires a long window period, since the Chinese distributors need to first obtain the full season of a foreign television series with Chinese subtitles embedded and submit them to the local bureau to review for state approval and censorship, which means most English-language series can only become available to stream for the local viewers in a greatly delayed manner and resulted in the temporal discount of the distribution. Since fan-subtitling groups do not seek to comply with this policy and the distribution itself is seen as an individual behaviour under no state supervision, subtitling groups can present episodes swiftly after their airdates in their original countries by dividing workload. A fan-subtitling group first obtains raw materials (i.e., content in original, un-subtitled form) from their peers abroad and then allocates translation work to multiple members. Each translation member is responsible for translating the content of only a few minutes and another member proofreads the whole episode. Then the episode is subtitled and made available for downloading. In order to win more viewers, different fan-subtitling groups compete with each other, accelerating the production speed by having more members work together. More importantly, the subtitled work needs to be reviewed or censored by no other parties. Thus, major formal streaming services are unable to provide translated content as quickly as the fan subtitling groups can.

The quality of fan-subtitling work has been widely appreciated by viewers, which even resulted in several cases where formal distributors stole the subtitles produced by fan-subtitling groups. In 2014, YYeTs posted a statement on Weibo, saying that Tudou stole and used the subtitles the group translated for *The Voice* (2011 – ) without paying any credit to the group (You 2014). Tudou, as a formal online streaming service, held the exclusive online streaming right of the American competition show whilst YYeTs also circulated the show and produced subtitles for it on its file-sharing website. Tudou then accused YYeTs of illegal online circulation of audio-visual content. The case was never settled. Similarly, it was claimed by YYeTs that iQiyi (then named Qiyi) used the fan-subtitling group's original translated subtitles for *America's Next Top Model* (2003 – ) (Cui 2011). However, YYeTs's demand was only for iQiyi to keep the name of YYeTs and the name list of the translators in the credits. The demand was finally satisfied by the streaming service.

One condition that led to the unauthorized use of the fan-subtitling groups' work is that these subtitles are produced in a timely manner and provided in an open network to anyone which means the use of these subtitles can relatively help formal streaming services rapidly update their content library at almost no cost. The formal streaming services are the legal distributors of these shows. As such, they do not tend to worry about the infringement issues that might occur. After all the copyright of these subtitles remain in a grey area. Another reason is that the fan-subtitling groups' work is the result of the groups' cultural reproduction, the value of which is highly acknowledged by the viewers. By using the fan-subtitling groups'

work, to some degree, the formal streaming services indirectly include elements of informality. However, the relationship between formal streaming services and fan-subtitling groups can also take on a friendly form, as the Korean drama *Descendants of the Sun* (2016) imported by iQiyi in 2016 was a collaboration with fan-subtitle group called Phoenix Angel (Li, Du and Fan 2018). In this case, the fan-subtitling work was recognized as formal by the formal Chinese distributor of the series, which means formal and informal distribution networks are always intertwined with each other.

### **Content Exhibition Strategies**

Chapter 2 examined the content library of formal streaming services, in terms of how many available titles they possess and also briefly discussed the fact formal streaming services are not allowed to import English-language television series more than thirty percent of the total programmes in their content library. Chinese informal distribution network contrasts with a formal distribution model that relies on a windowing system and conventional distribution structures (see Chapter 2) and the state's policy does not apply to them due to its informality. As long as these informal distributors (fan-subtitling groups) are able to obtain sources of English-language television series from overseas with no or very little time delay, they can circulate the content on their platforms with subtitles as soon as possible without having to consider the usual formal importation process. Hence, the number of available titles on informal streaming and file-sharing platforms can easily exceed the number of formally

imported titles on formal streaming services, which has become the biggest advantage of the informal distribution network.

With an abundant content library, informal streaming services' exhibition strategies then appear to be different from their formal counterparts'. By exhibition strategies, here I refer to the interface of these services, including the first-tier home page and the second-tier display page of English-language television series, which was also discussed in Chapter 2 in the context of the formal streaming services. The challenge for formal streaming services is that they hold a relatively limited number of available titles, so the exhibition strategy focuses on promoting the most famous or exclusive titles, which is the case for Tencent Video's *Game of Thrones*. For informal streaming services, they have a daily updated content library with almost unlimited available titles, which their exhibition strategies then try to emphasize. Also, since these informal services do not directly require paid-subscriptions, in-site advertising is the foremost way to gain profits, which will be further discussed in following sections. The more time viewers stay on the site, the more in-site advertising they will see. Taking a close look at YYeTs and Renren Shipin's interfaces can help understand how much they have used the limited online space to exhibit their content library and to encourage viewers to watch those series and accompanying advertisements.

As mentioned earlier, YYeTs offers both online streaming and file-downloading services, and Renren Shipin only offers online streaming via smartphone apps. In this section, I examine the two platforms' exhibition design and content libraries in order to understand the

affordances and experiences they offer viewers. Based on the same logic discussed in Chapter 2 — that the design of the streaming service’s interface contributes to viewing behaviours — these two informal platforms concentrate mostly on English-language television series, which means to show the viewers the immense size of their content library is vital in winning viewers who fail in finding enough available titles on formal services. The design of YYeTs’s file-downloading homepage and PC app’s homepage demonstrates that they have developed multiple categories to present the available titles they possess.



Figure 5.1 YYeTs’s home page of its file-downloading site, translation in red by me, as of June 2020.

YYeTs’s file-downloading site presents the navigation menu right under its logo and insite search bar (see Figure 5.1). Second-tier pages appear under headings: ‘Homepage’, ‘Collection’, ‘Translation Projects’, ‘Information, Subtitles’, ‘Content Library’, ‘Ranking List’, ‘Today’, ‘Scheduling’, ‘Notice’ and ‘Partnership’. Under the navigation menu are the three most conspicuous promotional sections: ‘24 Hours Hot Downloads’, including the most

downloaded 13 titles in the past 24 hours; rolling posters of four recommended titles; and 'Today's Scheduling', under which are links to YYeTs's various social media official accounts. These three promotional sections are updated daily to make sure when users log into the site, they can have an immediate sense of what is newly available to download and watch, which is a very efficient way to showcase the site's abundant content library and timeliness in providing it. By scrolling down the homepage, users can choose to click on other sub-sections: 'Information of Film and TV', providing review articles news stories of different titles; 'Hot Topics', presenting users comments on various titles; 'Newly Posted', titles that are newly made available; 'Evaluated Recommendations', recommended watch lists on certain topics; 'Showing in Cinemas', film titles that are shown in cinemas all over the world; 'Finales', final posts of certain titles; 'Recommended New Shows', again a list of shows that aired recently. All the above sub-sections are based on the content library YYeTs holds, which means whichever recommended title users click on will take them to the download address page. Similar to formal services constantly promoting their 'hit TV shows', making new content most visible is informal services' upmost purpose in interface design. The difference is that formal streaming services usually use a certain title as their major promotional material for weeks since they simply do not have enough titles. For YYeTs, new episodes are aired or released every day, hence, the service can constantly change the promotional material, weekly or even daily.

YYeTs's PC app's homepage is also designed according to a logic of showcasing newest content. The homepage looks more simplified, but the user experience is widely maintained (see Figure 5.2). Under YYeTs's logo and in-site search bar is again four rolling posters of recommended titles. Then the page is equally divided into seven different sections: 'Today's Hit Show', 'New Hit Shows', 'Japanese Hit Shows', 'Hit Movies', 'Unaired New Shows', 'Aired New Shows', 'New Season's Scheduling'. Even though two out of these seven subsections are about films and Japanese TV shows, it is clear that the site's main focus is English-language television series. The exhibition logic again is to promote the site's diverse and fresh content library since unlike formal services, YYeTs does not stream domestic television content that appeal to a bigger audience.

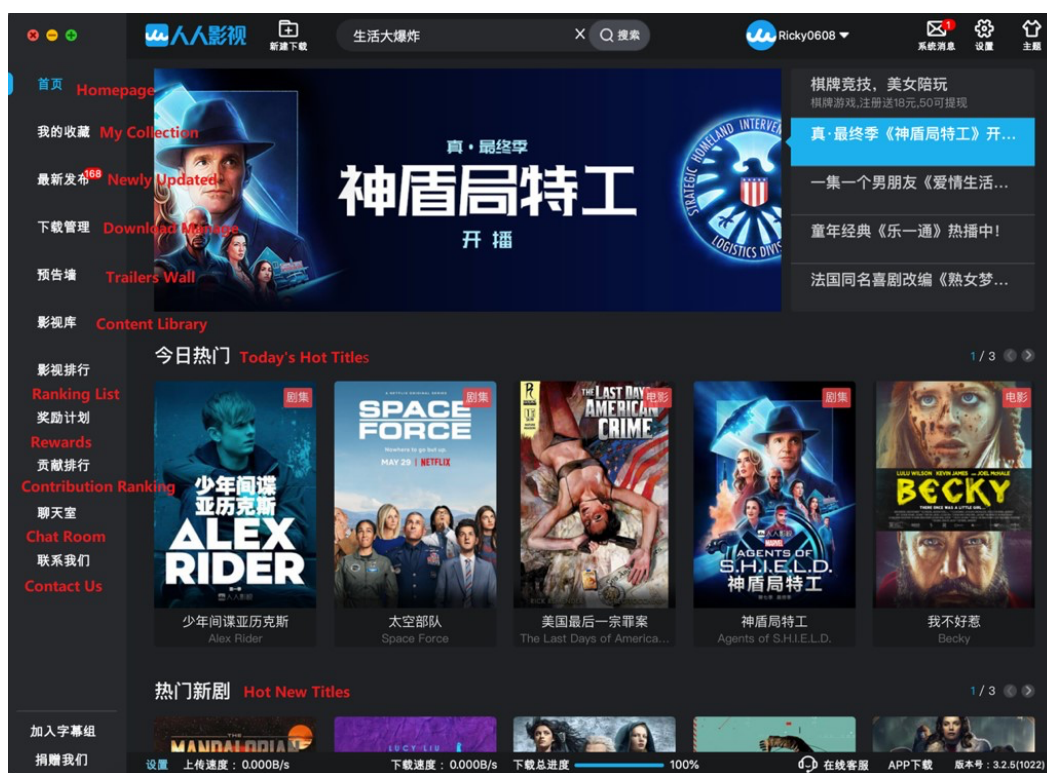


Figure 5.2 YYeTs's home page of its PC app, translation in red by me, as of June 2020.

However, this comprehensive design only appears on the webpage whilst the streaming app has a different design. Compared to the multiple sub-sections that contribute to the display of its content library, YYeTs's smartphone app is much more simplified and has a less complex structure (see Figure 5.3). The app's home screen appears as a set of browsing threads in the fashion of Twitter, containing review articles, news stories and Weibo posts, which differentiates it from any other formal video streaming apps. The app's only other three functional pages are 'Ranking List', 'Content Library' and 'Personal Centre'. Ranking List includes all the titles that are recommended on YYeTs's website homepage with no further subsections whilst 'Content Library' simply presents available titles in an order based on the update time with only one filter of titles' original release countries. The same titles that can be found on YYeTs's website can be located on this app, but the intention to generate more browsing time and retain users with its abundant and frequently updated content library is not as strong as its website version has. The obvious lack of dedication to the design of the app indicates that YYeTs treats its downloading users and streaming users differently. To the contrary, Renren Shipin can only be accessed via smartphone app, which has a more userfriendly interface.



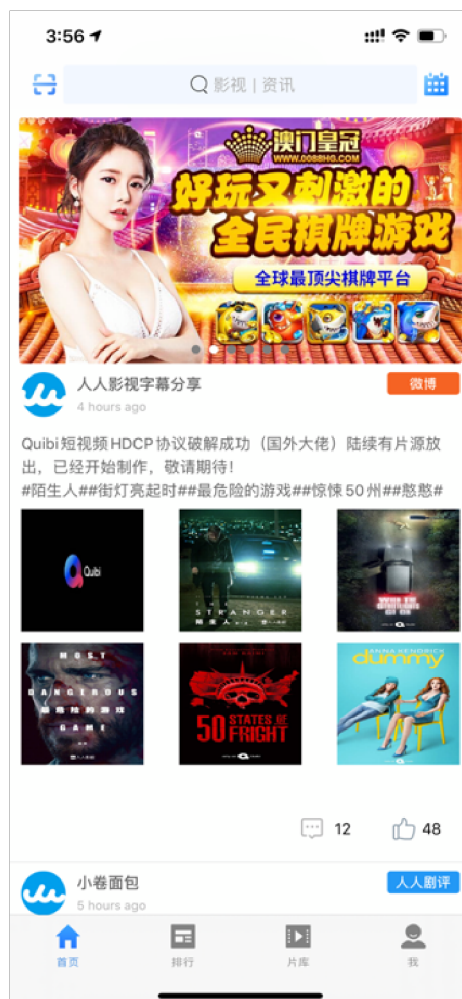


Figure 5.3 YYeTs's smartphone app, as of June 2020.

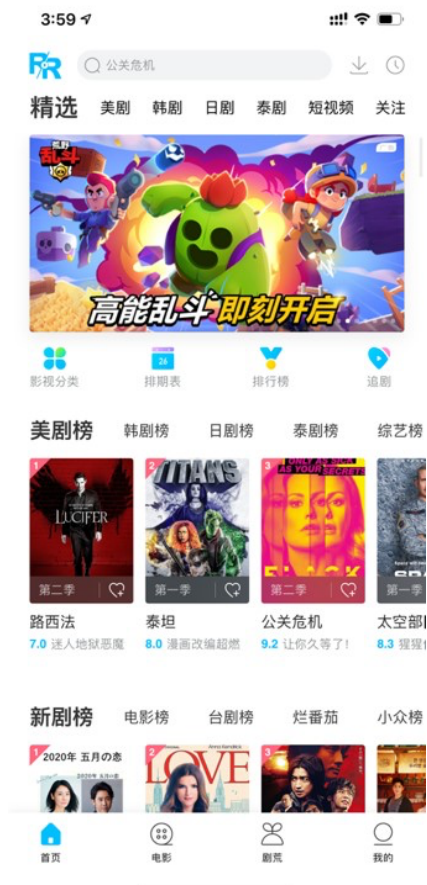


Figure 5.4 Renren Shipin's smartphone app, as of June 2020.

Renren Shipin's smartphone app looks similar to its interfaces of formal streaming apps such as those of Tencent Video and iQiyi. The app's homepage presents its logo and in-site search bar at the top, below which are six rolling posters of recommended shows and notices (see Figure 5.4). Then there are four small icons of the names: 'Classifications of Film and TV', 'Scheduling', 'Ranking List' and 'Personal Watch List'. 'Personal Watch List' keeps a record of users' watching history of both TV shows and films. Following these icons are a classic set of sub-sections common to streaming services' mobile apps, featuring multiple ranking lists under different genres, such as American TV shows, Korean TV shows, films

and even a list of Netflix productions<sup>12</sup>. This content appears under the channel name of ‘Selections’, which can be switched to other channels, including American TV shows, Korean TV shows, Thai TV shows and short videos. The interface clearly shows that Renren Shipin is not only a streaming app for English-language television series but more broadly for other foreign television programmes and films. However, English-language television content that covers the most space of the homepage is the service’s major attraction to users. With unlimited content libraries, the two services’ interfaces then offer different user affordances, which further demonstrates the viewing experience they present to users.

### **User-Friendly Features**

The user orientation of Renren Shipin overlaps substantially with that of YYeTs, but due to the differences between the mechanisms of these platforms, the two sites involve different navigation methods, leading to different user affordances. YYeTs users are required to access the website only via desktop apps or browsers if they prefer a better interface, whether through the website or the PC app while Renren Shipin is only available as a smartphone app. Even though these two are both very competitive, in terms of the abundance and the update frequency of content library, YYeTs could potentially lose the users who are more inclined to watch foreign television shows on their smartphones due to its smartphone app’s less comprehensive exhibition design.

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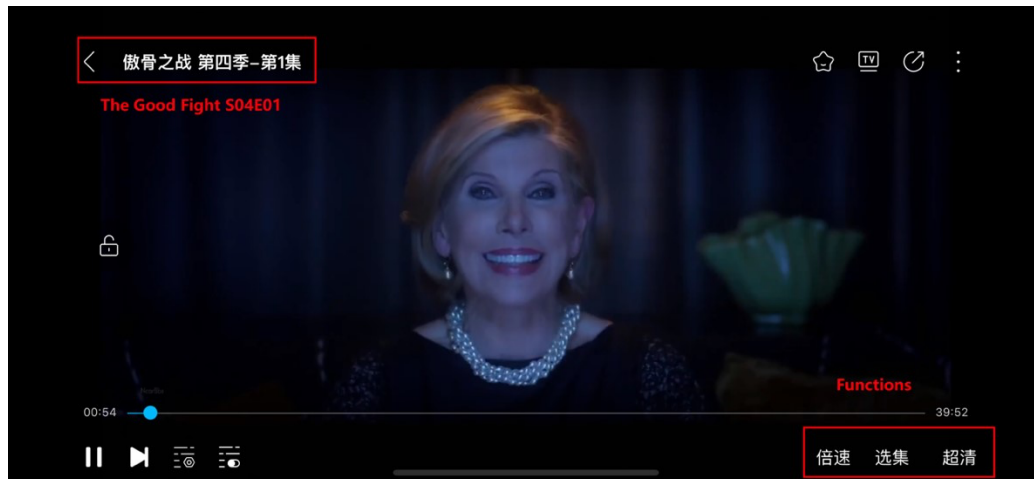
<sup>12</sup> Indicating the use of Netflix’s brand name, similar to Tencent Video’s branding practice discussed in Chapter 2.

The design of the interface provides users with different user affordances, which then indirectly affects ways the platform can monetize viewer activities. It is not only the homepage design that prevents users from further exploring the YYeTs app; the display page of each title also lacks user-friendly affordances. When users choose a certain title and click on it, they are directed to a display page with not streaming screen but a ‘task bar’. Users can only gain access to the actual streaming content if they do what the app requires, by two options: invite friends or finish tasks. Users need to send an automatically generated QR code to their friends via other social media and ask them to download the app and register, after which the users are rewarded with a two-month VIP pass and a one-month VIP pass for the invited friends. These passes allow users and their friends to obtain access to any titles that are available on the app. Another option is to finish tasks including daily signing in, binding users’ accounts to a mobile phone number, streaming advertisement videos and following various YYeTs social media accounts. By finishing these tasks, users can win Renren coins, an in-site virtual currency that can be spent on purchasing a VIP membership that is valid for different lengths of time. A one-month VIP membership costs 350 Renren coins, 1500 coins buys a six-month one, and 2500 coins a twelve-month membership. Even if users accomplish all the tasks, they can only receive a maximum of 1387 Renren coins, less than enough for a six-month VIP membership. Hence, inviting friends is a much more sustainable way to obtain longer membership, but it also requires more time and effort on the part of users. This leads to a key feature of this platform, that it rewards certain kinds of digital labour and interaction with

fellow users. In this respect, YYeTs harkens back to the user labour previously as a characteristic of exclusive file-sharing sites. Users can get an array of content without paying for it, but they instead need to exchange their time and labour.



**Figure 5.5** YYeTs's display page of *The Good Fight* Season 4 Episode 1, translation in red by me, as of June, 2020.



**Figure 5.6** Renren Shipin's display page of *The Good Fight* Season 4 Episode 1 translation in red by me. as of June 2020.

Compared to the YYeTs app, Renren Shipin's app arguably offers more user-friendly affordances and fewer complications for users to watch streaming content. By simply registering with a mobile phone number, users can access any available content on the Renren

Shipin app. The design of the display page of each title is highly similar to other formal video streaming services': the episodes list following the streaming screen, below which are relevant videos and more recommended content. The display screen also enables various functions, such as adjusting the screen ratio, the video quality and the play speed. This design echoes other formal streaming services, such as Tencent Video and iQiyi, which makes sure that most users accustomed to watching streaming video on their smartphones can have a user-friendly experience with Renren Shipin's app. In contrast, YYeTs does not structure its app for ease of navigation by everyday users who are accustomed to mainstream streaming services' features. This distinguishes YYeTs from major formal streaming services but seemingly characterizes Renren Shipin as a mainstream streaming service.

As mentioned earlier, the affordances and experiences a streaming service offers indicate what kind of behaviour it expects its users to have. On the one hand, Renren Shipin has only one form of user application, smartphone streaming app that provides with its users a more user-friendly exhibition and accessibility design, which is very common to be seen with most formal streaming services. On the other hand, YYeTs is accessible through three different means: file-downloading website, PC user application and smartphone streaming app. When sharing the same content library, the two file-downloading applications are much more comprehensive, well-designed whilst the streaming app is only presented in a troublesome and simplified way. This leads to another question: considering the differences in interface design, how differently do these two perform in user numbers and user loyalty?

As of late 2020, YYeTs and Renren Shipin can both be downloaded from Apple's App Store under the category of Entertainment, but the number of downloads of the two varies greatly. Data from Apple's App Store shows that Renren Shipin ranks as No.4 in the Top Charts of free apps when Tencent Video ranks as No.3 and iQiyi ranks as No.5. In the same chart, YYeTs only ranks as No.56 left far below other major video streaming apps. Hence, usage statistics here indicates that most common users would prefer to use Renren Shipin instead of YYeTs as for streaming videos. If we only consider this chart as the proof of user activity then Renren Shipin competes with Tencent Video and iQiyi, not with YYeTs.

User feedback can also be analysed with the information Apple's App Store provides. As of June 2020, in Apple App Store, Renren Shipin has 22,000 ratings and a rating of 4.4 out of 5 whilst YYeTs has 36,000 and a 4.8 rating. Considering the huge gap in user activity, this data partially reflects these two apps' user preferences, but the reality is that not every user rates the apps they download. The more possible causes for rating an app might be extremely positive or negative user experiences, or that the app itself motivates its users to rate it in the App Store. In fact, as a free app, YYeTs encourages users to rate the app as five and write a review of no less than 300 Chinese characters. In return, users are rewarded with a VIP membership if they email screenshots of their reviews to YYeTs. As a result, the app has accumulated a number of long reviews and an average rating of 4.8. In this sense, YYeTs creates multiple ways to encourage users to engage with the app and YYeTs, and to participate in the app's promotional activities. The users are not just consumers but also loyal followers.

However, when users intend to find a streaming service that gives them access to a large content library of Englishlanguage television series free of charge, they might be inclined to choose Renren Shipin because it does not require them to accomplish various tasks before they can stream the content. Apart from this kind of user engagement, both of these two platforms enable user engagement in various ways.

### **Interactive Affordances**

In mainland China, both formal and informal online streaming services have a dynamic relationship with their users, as both forms of service include user-generated content to encourage viewer engagement. In particular, as argued in Chapter 2, formal streaming services providing foreign television content attempt to maintain an engaging and interactive environment as well as ample texts for viewers to engage, due to the complexity of English-language television series in the overall Chinese streaming ecology. On the one hand, as a result of the authorities' tightened censorship and strict regulation on media content, foreign television content is only allowed to be licensed and formally distributed on streaming services but not on other platforms, such as television. On the other hand, in the earlier 21st century, via informal distribution networks, foreign television content originally obtained extensive circulation by unauthorized fan subtitling groups and individuals, indicating that fans have been actively engaging in the circulation of this content since the outset. Hence, for informal distributors to retain user engagement is key for the sustainability of their services.



One common interactive feature is, once again, the bullet screen function. As mentioned in Chapter 3, the bullet screen is a significant and unique Chinese streaming service feature that every major formal streaming service has included, which is also found on these informal streaming platforms. In fact, the bullet screen has always been an informal element in online streaming economy since it was first adopted by live streaming platforms such as Douyu and Bilibili on which numerous unauthorized content was distributed and the bullet screen was constantly used by viewers to add subtitles to streaming content. The informal streaming economy has historically operated with less state oversight than the formal economy. Hence, it is not surprising to observe that both YYeTs and Renren Shipin have followed their counterparts', to allow viewers to post bullet screen comments alongside streaming content.

Even though as discussed earlier, compared to Renren Shipin, YYeTs has a highly simplified display page with only a few interactive functions that are available to viewers, the bullet screen is one of them. As for Renren Shipin, it includes almost every basic interactive function that Tencent Video has, including the bullet screen. Viewers exploit the bullet screen to discuss the show's plots and any trivia that can be grasped from the show. The bullet screen plays an equally important role in creating active user engagement for YYeTs and Renren Shipin than it does for formal streaming services.

Besides the bullet screen, YYeTs and Renren Shipin provide their users with many other interactive affordances on their display pages. A comment area appears below the file-downloading address on YYeTs's website and two user applications. The comments appear

simultaneously on all three platforms. On Renren Shipin's display page of a certain title, there is also a discussion area that is available for users. In both comment and discussion sections, users can communicate with each other and 'like' each other's comments. Both the bullet screen comments and comments posted in the designated comment area focus on programme content such as story elements and character actions occurring at or near the moment of an episode at which the bullet screen comments appear, and users need to visit the display page to see them. Site homepages also include spaces designed for user engagement. On YYeTs's file-downloading website, two sub-sections allow viewers to comment on any topic, reply to each other and even post their own reviews. The website also has an online public chat room that can direct users to a resource requesting room for users to request a certain title or episode, a feedback room to give feedback on the user experience, a complaints room to make complaints about inappropriate user behaviour and a false resource report room to report an invalid downloading source. The overall chat room system presents a user experience preserved from the Chinese BBS forum age (the early 2000s), which enables a public space for site and user interaction. The chat room is also available on YYeTs' PC user application but not on its smartphone app. The conversations in these above areas are not always relevant to certain titles, meaning that they could be about a user's daily life or any social topics. In this sense, the open interaction area works as a community for users, which is similar to an online social network.

Meanwhile, YYeTs and Renren Shipin also take advantage of other popular social-media and short-form video apps. On YYeTs's website, the links to YYeTs's official Tik Tok account, Weibo account and WeChat account are placed right beneath the scheduling notice. As discussed earlier, following these accounts can help users earn Renren coins for streaming content on its smartphone app, so YYeTs considers the social media as a necessary tool to engage with its users. YYeTs's official Weibo account has more than seven million followers, and as of mid-2020, its official Tik Tok account has 85,000 likes and 24,000 followers. YYeTs communicates with its users via these social media platforms and aims to attract more users by posting original content daily. Renren Shipin also has an official Weibo account and an official Tik Tok account, with 8.9 million followers and 784,000 followers, respectively. However, Renren Shipin does not provide links to these accounts on its streaming app. Users can actively find these accounts and follow them in order to receive the information about what content is newly made available. YYeTs and Renren Shipin use other popular apps to promote their own, a practice also common to formal distribution platforms. In this sense, the informal distribution network uses formal social media apps, which indicated that this kind of informal economy includes formal elements.

The fact that both formal and informal streaming services have enabled their apps with multiple in-app user interactive functions shows that interactive affordance is a fundamental element of a friendly user experience that users expect. These services also exploited external app social media platforms to conduct promotional activities. YYeTs again shows its unique

engagement logic: on the one hand, it encourages users to follow its social media account with the hope of generating more traffic that can be monetized; on the other hand, it remains as a comparatively exclusive file-sharing platform for loyal users by requiring them to earn Renren coins by finishing various tasks.

### **Informal Distribution Services' Business Model**

In previous chapters, I have argued that within the formal Chinese distribution network, the distribution of foreign television series can be tailored and fit in the local streaming services' business model, which can help the platforms generate revenues from paid subscriptions and advertising. However, for the informal distribution economy, paid subscriptions are a mostly impractical option for two reasons: first, consumers expect informal streaming service to be free or much less expensive than formal ones; second, since the informal economy is usually untaxed and unregulated, if the services charge viewers, they can be recognized by the authorities as commercial organizations, requiring taxation and regulation. In addition, informal services do not pay for streaming rights of the content they feature, freeing them from one of the largest operating expenses that formal services face.

File-sharing forums first appeared to be the platform to circulate foreign film and television content for which the uploaders did not hold copyrights. Even though the subtitling groups reproduced this content with the subtitles they translated, the distribution action remained informal. The fact that both YYeTs and Renren Shipin have faced pressure from both the state and the content's copyright holders as well as lawsuits from major streaming

services has proved their informality. However, they have developed two different types of business model that the informal economy sustain.

First of all, different investors are behind two services. According to Tianyancha.com, Renren Shipin had two court announcements. On September 16, 2019, Renren Shipin and Sohu Video had a dispute over infringement of the right to disseminate informational works on the Internet, and the lawsuit was eventually settled out of court. On December 24, 2019, the trial of Renren Shipin and iQiyi on infringement of the right to disseminate works on the Internet was held. According to the requirements of the *Notice of the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology on Carrying out the Special Rectification Work of APP Infringing Users' Rights and Interests* (2019), MIIT organized third-party inspection institutions to inspect the apps in major app stores, supervise their operations and urge more than 100 enterprises to implement rectifications of their operational problems. The first list of the problematic apps, which included Renren Shipin, was published before the trial. The app failed in self-discipline and was to be taken down from major app stores. However, as of June 2020, Renren Shipin remains available in Apple's App Store and ranks as No. 4 in the store's Top Charts of free apps.

Despite the lawsuits and the state authority's sanction, both Renren Shipin and YYeTs have continued their transformation from non-profit amateur file-sharing platforms to viable businesses. The two services have both been financed by investors. Renren Shipin has completed five rounds of financing, mainly for research and development, rights acquisitions

and marketing. YYeTs also had one round of financing, in 2019. The services no longer appear to be ‘generating power for love’. While providing free film and television content with subtitles, Renren Shipin and YYeTs have also been trying to generate revenues via different means, such as advertising.

Since YYeTs does not offer paid subscription plans, its business model is largely funded by in-site advertisement sales. Three types of advertisements appear on YYeTs’s various user applications. First, on the file-downloading site, ads appear across the page in the form of GIFs and pictures, which can also be found on the smartphone app and the PC downloading application. Second, when users launch the smartphone app, they usually see a brief video advertisement before the homepage appears. (Sometimes viewers have the option to skip the ad.) Third, the smartphone app has a feature exclusive to its streaming service. When a video is played, a full-screen advertisement (which can also be skipped) first appears. One or two short video advertisements then appear at intervals amid in the streaming content, which requires viewers to fast-forward to avoid. The advertisers tend to be online-gambling and illegal VPN providers, informal business that do not advertise on major formal streaming services. As a file-sharing website, YYeTs practices its business in a gray area, where state supervision is functionally absent.

In contrast, while Renren Shipin’s library also includes titles never formally acquired for streaming, its business model works in a way that is similar to formal streaming services’. Renren Shipin’s smartphone app is not as flooded with advertisements as that of YYeTs. It

also has adopted launching-page ads and instream video ads, but the advertisers are usually nationally known companies, and the ads are highly consumer-targeted, such as Jingdong, China's well-known online retailer, and Pinduoduo, China's largest interactive e-commerce platform. Ironically, users can even see Tencent Video's advertisement on Renren Shipin but not the other way around. In this respect, as an informal streaming platform, Renren Shipin does not consider formal streaming services as competitors but business partners with which it can negotiate. By providing informal resources, Renren Shipin does not always attract highprofile advertisers. Compared with formal streaming services such as Tencent Video and iQiyi, Renren Shipin's lower advertising prices and niche user groups is the reason why it is selected by advertisers (Tech Planet, 2019). In 2018, the number of daily active users of the three major streaming services, Tencent Video, iQiyi and Youku exceeded 100 million. As early as May 2017, iQiyi has announced that the total number of daily active users reached 310 million (Tech Planet 2019). Therefore, the advertising price of these three platforms, which can better create brand effect for the advertisers, will be higher than the advertising of informal platforms.

According to Tech Planet, in the fourth quarter of 2019, the advertising information of three major streaming platforms showed that the price of the placement of instream video ads in the first and second tier cities was no less than 80 yuan (\$9.2)/CPM<sup>13</sup>. Comparatively

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<sup>13</sup> CPM=Cost Per Mille, the advertising cost per thousand views.

speaking, Renren Shipin does not charge differently according to the city where the advertisement appears. Instead, Renren Shipin's patched ads are charged monthly, at different prices according to different categories such as British and American dramas, Japanese and Korean dramas, and so forth, and there will be patched ads of the advertisers for all the films and TV series that are updated that month. Other than for patched ads, Renren Shipin's other advertising types' prices are all lower than the three major streaming services.

	iQiyi	Youku	Tencent Video	Renren Shipin
Instream Video Ads	40	45	45	4
App Launching-page Ads	70	95	80	40
Homepage Ads	45	800,000 yuan/day	70	43
Unit: yuan/CPM				

**Table 5.1** *Four streaming services' advertising prices (Tech Planet 2019).*

Among different categories, advertising on English-language television series is the most popular, hence the most expensive, which further proves that Renren Shipin is considered a major streaming platform for this content. The price is quoted at 2 million yuan per month and advertisers could get a 50% discount at the lowest price. More notably, iQiyi charges a 50% premium for advertising specifically targeted for Korean and American television series. This means that for the major streaming services, TV series' genres or geographic origins are a factor in the services' varying ad rates. Furthermore, a service that is highly concentrated on this content remains competitive, because English-language television series offers cultural capital to users as well as prestige, distinctiveness, and crucially, economic benefit from services that host that content.



The commercialization process of Renren Shipin has been relatively slow, and the initial way to generate revenue was mainly in-app advertising before the app was funded by investors. In recent years, Renren Shipin has implemented a subscription plan that allows viewers to stream the content in HD quality and to disable all in-stream video advertisements. Moreover, Renren Shipin has founded an in-app e-commerce shop to sell electronic products, lifestyle products and even products produced in-house that are related to the films and television series it provides. With paid subscriptions, in-app advertising and autonomous retail products, the business model of Renren Shipin has gradually begun to mirror those of major formal streaming services. Meanwhile, in July 2020, YYeTs sought to further expand its business by selling 'retired' hard discs containing hundreds of films and television series but shortly halted this practice, presumably due to copyright infringement issues (Qishi 2019). Again, both Renren Shipin and YYeTs are online distributors providing informal content, but they have developed two different business models that show two different degrees of similarity to formal streaming service models.

YYeTs and Renren Shipin provide users with a catalogue of titles that are entirely informally distributed, titles with streaming and downloading rights never formally acquired. However, while they are now both funded by publicly acknowledged investors, i.e., engaged in a formal commercial activity, YYeTs still operates as an informal platform, with no legal streaming right to distribute streaming content online. In other words, YYeTs operates in a mostly informal way as an amateur file-sharing platform. In contrast, Renren Shipin is

licensed by the Chinese government with an Internet Cultural Business Permit, which is shown on its website homepage. For a licensed streaming service, such as Tencent Video, not only is this permit required, but a license number is also required for each title it holds in its library. Renren Shipin does not have license numbers for its content, simply because the site never formally acquires that content. In a word, Renren Shipin the platform itself is formalized but the content library it holds is still informal.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has examined the current informal online distribution network of English-language television series. Thanks to the legacy of the fan-subtitling groups, informal streaming and file-sharing platforms can continue to serve the local viewers of this specific transnational television content. Since the informal distribution network largely ignores regulations regarding the importation of foreign television content, informal services can include as many titles as they can capture in digital form, providing their greatest advantage in attracting viewers. However, with the lack of a paid subscription business model, informal streaming services need to maintain its operation by generating revenues from selling in-site advertising and attracting funding from investors, which is more of a formal economic activity. YYeTs and Renren Shipin also represent different degrees of informality and the informality is in a state of flux constantly. Informal streaming services borrow user engagement features from formal ones and share similar business model features with them, blurring the lines between formality and informality.

In previous chapters, I have examined three essential agents in the process of the online distribution of English-language television series: the formal distributors, the viewers and the supervision authority. Finally, this chapter presents the last but not the least important agent, the informal distributors. The informal distribution network has been through constant reorganization and reconfiguration, accordingly to the local political, technological, and cultural development within the Chinese market. After almost two decades, the informal distribution network has taken on a new distribution form, which is mainly through online streaming platforms, in sync with the formal distribution network. Meanwhile, the informal distribution platforms still cater to the viewers of English-language television series and still struggle to overcome challenges brought by their formal counterparts as well as the local authorities.

## Conclusion

Moving from the formal streaming services to online streaming viewers, from the state's supervision and censorship system to informal distribution networks, this thesis has provided a panorama of China's current online streaming industry, from the angle of the online distribution of English-language television content. It has been argued that traveling to mainland China, this specific transnational television flow has encountered both cultural and political barriers and also engendered a sizable audience which has led to unique cultural and economic phenomena. Entering the 21<sup>st</sup> century, China has witnessed great technological development in its media sector. Not only has the online space been occupied by numerous social media networks but also provided traditional media products with a newly emergent distribution venue. Television content, as a conventional media content that has been consumed by Chinese viewers via television sets for years, has landed on online streaming platforms, after having been constantly moving around from other platforms that have been widely replaced by the online streaming technology, such as DVDs and downloading. Consequently, this newly emergent platform has brought a series of chain effect on how distributors distribute and market television content, how viewers consume and engage with television content, how the state supervises and manages television content.

In the case of this thesis, English-language television content differentiates itself from domestically produced television content in terms of distribution and marketing model. Chapter 2 has elaborated on this specific model and the associated economic activities it

triggers, which leads to the discussion of the viewer practices discussed in Chapter 3. The two chapters consider the dynamic relationship between formal distributors and Chinese viewers as the essential cause as well as result of this distribution model. Chapter 4 and 5 then further explored the other two agents that have played important roles in forming the current distribution model of English-language television series in mainland China. All in all, this thesis asserts that the study of a transnational television flow in a specific country requires the consideration of the different agents that influence the country's media environment substantially. Again, China has a unique online streaming industry, since the country has an enormous user base and foreign media service providers are always not welcomed. In other words, media products, such as English-language television content, offer a valuable opportunity to examine the country's online streaming industry, because the industry itself lacks the ability or capacity to produce these products due to the country's increasingly tightened policies on media content. Meanwhile, there are always consumers for these products, which makes it impossible for the industry to ignore the market demand. The case study of *Game of Thrones* perfectly proves this assertion. Hence, this thesis offers a potentially effective way for further media industry studies of China or a certain country that is as unique as China. Moreover, this thesis also presents ideas to understand transnational television trade when a country's state supervision directly decides how the television content can be distributed and consumed, which results in the formal distributors' manoeuvre to achieve business agenda as well as the audience's rebellion against the media domination.

This thesis provides a series of discussions regarding the already existent scholarly research on western online television and the debates that challenge these concepts and assumptions when the context of discussion is mainland China. The integration of curated television content with noncurated user generated texts through streaming services' interfaces speak for the uniqueness of the Chinese online steaming industry, which is both technologically and commercially innovative to western streamers. The online TV concepts and/or debates presented by scholars such as Johnson, has been widely reconsidered by this thesis, in terms of how effective they are in an industry that is not western or not dominated by western streaming tycoons. Hence, the specificity of the Chinese context is evident and further academic exploration of the Chinese industry is more than necessary.

### **Online TV and Chinese Netizens**

The online TV model that is currently employed by Chinese companies considers interactive affordance as a key feature that no service can bear to exclude. It is not only foreign television content that benefits from interactive affordances but also other genres. Now if we look at a much bigger picture, we can see that the whole online media industry in mainland China includes non-curated user-interaction/engagement feature in almost every media service model. For example, as one of China's most used music streaming service, QQ Music enables users to not only listen to streamed music but also produce comments on the bullet screen. Another example is that Chinese fitness app Keep encourages users to send bullet screen comments while they work out. Indeed, almost all the non-social smartphone apps can now

be social. Whether you watch a film or listen to a song or do a plank, you are given the option to share the moment with strangers via the bullet screen or other social functions embedded within these apps. In this respect, China's online media industry has in the 2020s entered an era where shared user experience is an essential engine that drives the online traffic from one service to another. For media like online television, watching or binge-watching (which is another online TV feature) now comes with social activities that can all be conducted within the same interface.

Alternatively, the user-engagement feature can also be understood as a participatory culture phenomenon. Chinese netizens are more and more inclined to show their identities in the internet world. From Weibo to Douban, different netizens with different tastes, educational backgrounds, cultural preferences and even political stances, gather together on different social media platforms to exchange opinions and ideas about social topics. Media platforms, such as online streaming services, are also being exploited by Chinese netizens for social use. The cultural phenomenon here is always being able to speak out and to look for a sense of belonging. From the perspective of cultural study, this is an ideal starting point to understand how the current Chinese netizens perceive the online culture and how they respond to the constantly changing online world.

### **Informal Distribution Economy**

This thesis has talked about the informal distribution networks that have influenced Chinese viewers' consumption habits of foreign television and film content. As Chapter 5 has noticed,

this informal economy involves not only mainland-based companies that are currently supporting these informal distribution platforms financially, but also parties that are based overseas. For example, from the early years to nowadays, informal distributors have been relying on partners that live abroad and have access to original foreign television content. These organizations or individuals circulate and transmit an array of resources to fan-subtitling groups (most groups are based in mainland China). The fan-subtitling groups then produce subtitles and make the content available for viewers to access on different informal platforms. This kind of content generating mechanism has been deployed for years and has helped the informal distribution economy grow. Chapter 5 has examined this mechanism from the final end of its process, the online streaming/downloading platforms. Yet I have also noticed other very interesting and unique informal economic activities that have largely evolved from this informal distribution network.

After years of living in the United Kingdom, I have encountered many occasions where I tend to watch a Chinese or even English-language film or television series but have no access to the formal Chinese streaming services, due to the geo-blocking protocol that is employed by almost all the services, both Chinese and Western. Then I was introduced by a friend to a website called Duonao (now named as iFun). This website provided the online streaming service of a huge number of film and television series, both Chinese and foreign. Until then, it was nothing special since there are millions of illegal or in the context of this thesis, informal film and television content distribution platforms all over the world wide web and most of



them are not very easy to use. However, as soon as I started browsing the website and played one episode of *Journey to the West* (1986), I realized that this website was almost identical to those Chinese informal streaming services, such as Renren Shipin. It has a well-designed interface which shares the similar aesthetic and functional logic with the Chinese ones and has also enabled the bullet screen function couple years ago. When the streaming content being played, there are also constantly popping out ads that cannot be closed. The viewer experience offered by Duonan is basically identical to the one offered by Renren Shipin. Moreover, English-language television series streamed on Duonao are circulated from Chinese fan-subtitling filesharing platforms. The essential difference is that Duonao's server is based outside China and anyone who uses a mainland China based IP address is unable to access the service. In other words, Duonao is only provided to users that are based in other countries or regions rather than mainland China.

This thesis has not included services like Duonao, since they are not accessible for mainland users, yet it does not mean that services like Duonan are isolated from the informal distribution economy. In fact, Duonao has employed the informal distribution model that has been developed by Chinese informal distribution services, such as Renren Shipin. As Chapter 5 has argued, this model itself was also derived from the formal distribution model that has been designed specifically for Chinese users, with a focus on user interaction and engagement affordances (also discussed in Chapter 2 and 3). In this sense, it is clear that all of these distributors, formal or informal, domestic or overseas, believe that the interactive/engaging

distribution model can better cater to users that are accustomed to Chinese internet culture.

This observation then brings out something more for us to think about.

First, besides the easy access and no or low-cost service fee, how essential interactive affordances such as the bullet screen are to informal distribution service users? Is there any difference in how different users (mainland and overseas) use these functions? Are the ways overseas informal distributors monetizing these services similar to the way Chinese informal distributors do? These and many more questions can be asked if we want to better understand this specific internet culture that has an impact on Chinese users' consumption habits of online television.

Meanwhile, for Western online television tycoons, it is very unlikely for them to penetrate the Chinese market by directly launching their services in the country. However, services like Netflix can still play the role as content providers and work with Chinese streaming services since they already have an audience base thanks to the informal distribution network. Except for mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong have been covered by Netflix and local producers also produce domestic television content funded by Netflix. Meanwhile, iQiyi has also launched its service in Taiwan and directly competes with Netflix in the market, which is so far the only case where global streaming services and Chinese streaming services perform on the same stage. In the future there might be more and more international business activities surrounding Chinese streaming services, and foreign service and content providers might be able to share the cake of mainland China eventually.

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