# The Dangers of Translation: Interpretations and Re-presentations of a Chinese Internet Celebrity

Ye Tian

University of Manchester, UNITED KINGDOM

y.tian@translation.ac.nz

ABSTRACT

This paper highlights the power of translation to silence the weak and subvert the strong. Different translations of the same source may result in contradicting interpretations. To better understand this phenomenon, the paper explores the hermeneutic nature of translation, arguing that it can diminish the authority of the author and thus give voice to those previously muted. The metaphor of the death of the author is presented to remind us that translation can sometimes be violent. The dangers of translation make it a powerful double-edged sword. On the one hand, it is a weapon to deconstruct the hegemonic meaning-making of dominant actors, yet on the other, it provides more powerful translators with a tool to silence dissenting voices. The paper closely examines a case study showing the various interpretations, or semiotic translations, of the image of Ding Zhen, a Chinese internet celebrity. The paper probes some of the many translations of his picture and highlights a set of contradicting interpretations to illustrate the dangers of translation.

KEYWORDS: hermeneutics, interpretation, semiotic translation, translation theory, violence

## 1. Introduction

In many popular metaphors, translation is represented as something artistic, beautiful, and important. In the public sphere, it has been visualised as a "dance" (Gregor, 2020), while in academic circles, it has been discussed as a "bridge" or a "window", linking self and otherness (see Tan, 2006). Other metaphors, however, allude to duplicity of translation and translators, for example, in the well-known Italian idiom *traduttore traditore* ("translator,

traitor"), which highlights the danger of betrayal in the translation process. With these metaphors as its starting point, this paper reconceptualises translation as a potentially dangerous meaning-generating action and highlights how it can be accompanied by power and struggle. Translation will be considered in a broad sense: intersemiotic translation deals with not only the transfer of meaning of linguistic signs but of all signs in general. This position responds to a call from Kobus Marais (2018) for translation studies to look beyond what is termed linguistic bias. The paper highlights the inherent dangers of translation, arguing that it has the power to both silences the weak and subvert the strong. To illustrate these dangers, the paper details an incident that has sparked thousands of comments on Chinese online platforms and beyond since late November 2020. This incident is theorised as being within the scope of the hermeneutics of translation and allows for some scrutiny of translation's many metaphors.

## 2. Picture-interpretation, hermeneutics, and the dangers of translation: A theoretical exploration

As stated in the introduction, in this paper, I refer to the concept of translation in a broad sense. Specifically, the interpretation of pictures is a process of translation. Roland Barthes (1977: 34) claims that to read pictures[1] is to decipher "a series of discontinuous signs" and "assume that they form a coherent whole", that is, to interpret and understand not only the naïve, literal message but also the symbolic one. A picture is always coded, however straightforward it may seem. The semiotics of Peirce (1994), which emphasise a sign's triadic structure (representamen, object, and interpretant), provides a framework within which we can consider the relationship between a picture and its meaning. It has been argued that an interpretant can always become another representamen, making any interpretation of a sign an ongoing process because once the reader grasps an interpretant, they immediately lose it as it evolves into another representamen, requiring further interpretation. This endless chain highlights the multilevel nature of a picture as a text. In this sense, grasping a complete idea of the picture becomes impossible, as one's interpretation at any particular time is only capable of revealing one or some layers of meaning, leaving the entire complex unsolved. In

---

[1] Barthes, in his text, talks about "image". However, as I will later employ the term to refer to the media-constructed belief or knowledge, in avoidance of confusion on terminology, I use "picture" in this discussion. To be clear, picture here refers to what Barthes terms image.

other words, there is a limit to the number of interpretants that can be activated at any one time within an individual brain.

This is to say that the interpretation of the picture becomes a process without an end product, unless one chooses or attempts to pin down meaning by transferring the interpretant onto a linguistic sign, which, at first glance, the multiple signs (in this case picture and language) combined may seem more definite than that of the presence of any single model (e.g. picture). Thus, museums have signposts to introduce their masterpieces, artists explain their work by giving talks or writing books, and governments promote their ideology by writing reports or sending tweets. The intention behind this article is not to suggest that all kinds of linguistic signs bear the same meaning, or even similar ways of decoding, but rather that the process of making an effort to express a fixed meaning is obvious.

This is where translation comes in. Roman Jakobson (1959)'s classification of translation has long been a useful theoretical framework for the discussion of intersemiotic translation. In claiming the interpretation of a picture is a process of translation, however, it is not necessary to depend on this source, especially at a time when Jakobson's theorisation is questioned and challenged within translation studies for its linguistic-centric tendency when discussing translation (Marais 2018). Rather, from a broader semiotic perspective, the underpinning idea of the claim is straightforward. As Dinda Gorlée (1994:106) states:

> Translation is semiosis. It takes as its point of departure the verbal sign as referring to its object. Tracing back the particular way in which a sign is encoded is followed by the creation, in the mind, of an interpretant, the meaning of which is equivalent to, or a more developed version of, the meaning of the first sign. This interpretant also becomes a sign, which is the starting point of a second triadic relation.

In other words, intersemiotic translation is not merely one of the translation typologies but rather *is* the process of addressing signs. Taking the idea of translation as semiosis from

Gorlée does not necessarily mean translation only concerns itself with issues of verbal signs, as she suggests. As mentioned above, in fact, many scholars, including Blumczynski (2016) and Marais (2018; 2020), have proposed the idea that translation is never language-centred. Based on this conceptualisation, all translations used in this paper will refer to the (bio)semiosis process that generates meaning.

Translation studies has a long tradition of questioning the very idea of faithfulness, and this doubt can be directed to address specific questions. For instance, if interpretation and talking about a picture is translation, then how and why can such translations generate multiple understandings, some that even contradict each other? How can outcomes of translation be so different if they share the same source text or sign? Questions such as these lead to the argument that hermeneutics lies at the core of translation, and it is because of this that multiple and contradictive target texts/signs are allowed based on the same source text/sign. In other words, a hermeneutic core enables the subversive nature of translation and its latent danger.

Before proceeding, it will be useful to briefly review the hermeneutics of Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer. Heidegger, in arguing that understanding is fundamental to existence, states that, from a discovered world prior to "the understanding self-projection of Dasein":

> It takes its possibilities, initially in accordance with the interpretedness of the they.
> This interpretation has from the outset restricted the possible options of choice to
> the scope of what is familiar, attainable, feasible, to what is correct and proper.
> (Heidegger 1996: 181)

In other words, our understanding is always limited, always "subsumed in the reign of finitude" (Ricoeur 2016: 23). Heidegger argues that Dasein's existence is itself a possibility of the truth, because "there can be no question of a judgement's corresponding … with reality without a prior conceptualisation of that reality, and there can be no such conceptualisation of

reality without Dasein" (Mulhall 1996: 99). In this regard, "we must … learn in our theorising to do without 'foundations'", that is, to interpret without "the supposedly original intention of the author" (Madison 1994: 249). From this position, the author can be challenged, questioned, and even abandoned, while prior conceptualisation, or "prejudice", as Paul Ricoeur (2016) terms it, breaks in. Authority hardly belongs to the author in this case. Rather:

> Authority cannot actually be bestowed, but is acquired and must be acquired, if someone is to lay claim to it. It rests on recognition and hence on an act of reason itself which, aware of its own limitations, accepts that others have better understanding. (Gadamer 1975: 249)

This is to say that hermeneutics, or interpretation, can be dangerous because the interpreter always intrudes into the original and always takes pieces of the original away. Interpretation threatens the authority of the original because it transfers authority to the receiver. When an author releases a text, the text contains the author's power, yet by interpreting the text, readers are empowered by exposure to it, posing a threat to any author who wishes to maintain control over the content they produce.

While some threats of interpretation come subtly, others can be outright violent. Heidegger (1997: 211) himself confesses "that my interpretation is violent and excessive", and even claims that violence is necessary to entrust the interpretation to "the concealed inner passion of a work in order to be able, through this, to place itself within the unsaid and force it into speech" (141). However, Heidegger's violent interpretation has been doubted by many, who question him for not interpreting but hijacking Kant for his own philosophical discussion. Indeed, in Heidegger's own book, he claims that his purpose of interpreting Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* is to make it "a laying of the ground for metaphysics and thus of placing the problem of metaphysics before us as a fundamental ontology" (ibid., 1). In reference to this, Edwin Alexander (1981: 293) asks, "Is not this the approach of a propagandist rather than of an interpreter?"

It is not the aim here to judge whether Heidegger was a propagandist or interpreter, though two observations linked to the theme of translation are worth highlighting. Firstly, the expectation of interpretation (of Kant, in this case) as to reveal a text's original meaning is not unfamiliar to scholars of translation studies. However, the field has long moved on from discussions of fidelity and faithfulness, and now tends to focus more on questions of difference rather than sameness. Recently, for example, Marais (2018) reconceptualised translation as a process where signs *change*. Secondly, the act of interpreting something for the interpreters' own purpose is supported by familiar theories in translation studies, most notably the Skopos theory (see Nord, 2018). To summarise, even if Heidegger's violent hermeneutics seem controversial to some philosophers, this method of interpreting has long been discussed in translation studies.

It is important at this point to discuss the application of hermeneutics, which will prove more useful for the analysis than a mere discussion of theories (the importance of applying hermeneutics is discussed by Madison, 1994). By applying hermeneutics to translation, George Steiner (1975: 296–413) offers us a hermeneutic motion and makes the violent danger of translation explicit. According to Steiner, translation begins calmly and docile. It trusts the original and, thereby, the author, but only because it believes there is something worth taking. This trust is dangerous, not only for the author but for the interpreters/translators. Their trust in taking everything from the author and recovering it afterwards is "hazardous" (ibid.: 319), as it is likely that an exhaustive meaning can never be communicated.

Following this peaceful first step, the translation becomes fierce, breaks the balance, and starts to be aggressive. Any translation without this second step, or, in other words, with a target text that is "entirely 'unbroken'" (378), should be seen as untrustworthy. Hence, the translation at this stage becomes "incursive and extractive", as "understanding, recognition, interpretation is a compacted, unavoidable mode of attack" (297). The author is now in danger, under attack from the translation, while the translation becomes more eager to tear things off, steal things away, and snatch whatever is left. A once submissive figure becomes bellicose, and the unprepared author is left accusing the translation of betrayal, and framing those who practice it as *traduttore, traditore*.

*Ye Tian, The Dangers of Translation: Interpretations and Re-presentations of a Chinese Internet Celebrity, 78-102*

After this robbery, translation will "no longer turn to (the original) because the translation is of a higher magnitude" (298). That is, the translation enters a new stage, being "incorporative, in the strong sense of the word" (ibid.). Despite what it has taken, the translation is still not satisfied or cannot even be satisfied. It continuously adapts the things it robs from the author, and changes their shape to undertake a comprehensive appropriation. As Steiner (299) points out, "Writers have ceased from translation… because the inhaled voice of the foreign text had come to choke their own".

In hermeneutic motion, the translation appears not only dangerous but violent, so much so that Steiner wishes to rebalance the translated and the original. In this last stage, translation works according to the original, in an attempt to make the opaque clear and the hidden explicit. However, such a balance is difficult to rebuild, as the author is now robbed and dead. The translation, in this case, does not have any responsibility for the restoration of balance, and thus "it restores less than the original contains" (397).

These steps reveal that the danger of translation arises from the hermeneutic tradition; that is, there is always more to a sign than the intention of the author. What it means to translation and interpretation alike is that the original meaning is always unfixed, thus empowering the translation or interpretation to be aggressive. Using the term in semiotics, "a sign is not really 'comprehended' when we stare at it and ascertain that it is an indicating thing that occurs" (Heidegger 1996: 74). Peaceful staring will simply not achieve what we want. Translation, in this sense, is the presentation of an interpretation. As translators, we are always dangerous, and our hands remain dirty as we rob and reshape the original.

## 3. The violence of translation, and the death of the author: Retouching the Metaphors of Translation

Having outlined the dangers of translation, we can now start to think about the metaphors that remind us of such dangers. A range of metaphors have been used in this manner. For instance: "In China, translation … enables one to see how a culture is 'originally' put together, in all its

*cruelty*" (Chow 1995:198, emphasis mine), and "British playwrights unwittingly testify to the *recalcitrant power* of the same texts that they seek to displace, if only by the sheer act of choosing these plays for translation" (Mortensen 2002, 59; emphasis mine), to give just a few examples.

As has been mentioned, the whole of the meaning is never known to interlocuters, and once the author and their authority have been toppled, our interpretation of the meaning can be quite different. "Does an author really know so exactly and in every sentence what he means?" Gadamer (1975, 489) asks. We can find an echo of this point in Barthes. For example, when he talks about "the pleasure of the text", he discusses texts that are enjoyable to read, comparing these with texts that read painfully:

> Text of pleasure: text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a comfortable practice of interpretation.
>
> Text of bliss: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with a language. (Barthes 1975: 13)

Barthes focuses here on the importance of text, but text alone. He stresses that writers' efforts to make a text joyful and pleasurable to read do not always resonate with their readers. As a writer, he feels the need to "seek out the reader without knowing where he is" (Barthes 1975, 4). If there is a failure to reach readers, this may leave the text open to interpretation based on readers' own experience, that is, the "praxis", or, "the time and place of reading: house, countryside, near mealtime, the lamp, family where it should be, i.e., close but not too close […] Extraordinary ego-reinforcement (by fantasy), the unconscious muffled" (Barthes 1975: 51). In other words, readers, armed with the praxis, rob the author's home, only to realise that the author was never even there.

What is the fate of the author if they fail in their search for the reader? Barthes gives a powerful answer, clearly expressing the chance of danger or violence, with the title of his work: *The Death of the Author* (1977). On the one hand, the death of the author removes the possibility of eventually finding the truth of a text. For us, with our focus here on signs, the truth is much like what early hermeneutics would claim to find, where the author is the authority who holds the entire meaning of the sign, or the author who has power because he nourishes the sign and has a relationship with it like that of "a father to his child" (Barthes 1977: 145). On the other hand, the burying of the author creates an understanding that the sign used to be confined by the existence of the author, but that this is no longer the case. Barthes suggests that the death of the author replaces the "true place of the writing, which is reading" (1977: 147).

Barthes talks about reading, yet this point also holds for translating. We have discussed how presenting the reading of the picture is a form of translation. For Barthes, the author's death happens when interpretation occurs. In translation, interpretation and writing – in the glossary we adapted earlier, interpretation and presentation – happen simultaneously, at least from the spectators' perspective, and hence the author dies at the time that translation comes into play. We can feel a similar sense of danger within Steiner's hermeneutic motion, where the translational voice choked the original. In other words, while Barthes talks about the author's death, Steiner discusses the murder: the translator is the murderer and the translation is the lethal weapon. If translation gives a voice to the silenced, or empowers the weak, translation mutes the previously voiced, ceases any original meaning-making, or, most dangerously, causes us to forget the original.

The death of the author and the choking of translation is of course, metaphorical, and it is wrong to apply these metaphors to all translations. While acknowledging the prevalent danger of translation, it should not be seen as always violent and deadly. Some authors are more tenacious than others, while some translators are more empowered. As this paper will later demonstrate, not every reader or translator can cause the author's demise.

## 4. **Why dangers of translation matter: The hidden agenda of translation**

The reason it is important to reveal the dangers of translation is that allowing them to remain invisible may lead to another equally, if not more, dangerous situation: the agenda of killing the author being hidden behind a seemingly truth-telling translational effort. Indeed, translation has long been seen as rendering the same meaning to different audiences, especially in the discourse beyond translation studies. Even worse, in the case of translating pictures, as is the concern of this paper, the saying "seeing is believing" further emphasises how pictures are very likely to be considered trustworthy and true. Translation scholars, and arguably scholars from other disciplines like journalism, have long been aware of this hidden agenda. In translation studies, Venuti's (2008) advocacy for the visibility of translators is a classic interpretation. Such visibility not only offers translators "exemplary modes of cultural resistance" (Venuti 2008: 267) but also indicates translators' manipulative power. In journalism, the concept of framing captures a similar concern about the power of picture-takers. As Figure 1 simply illustrates, pictures can be deceitful. Indeed, "framing effects refer to communication effects that are not due to differences in what is being communicated, but rather to variations in how a given piece of information is being presented (or framed) in public discourse" (Scheufele and Iyenger 2014: 4). Introducing framing into translation studies, Mona Baker comments that framing is an action to "consciously participate in the construction of reality" (Baker 2006: 106).
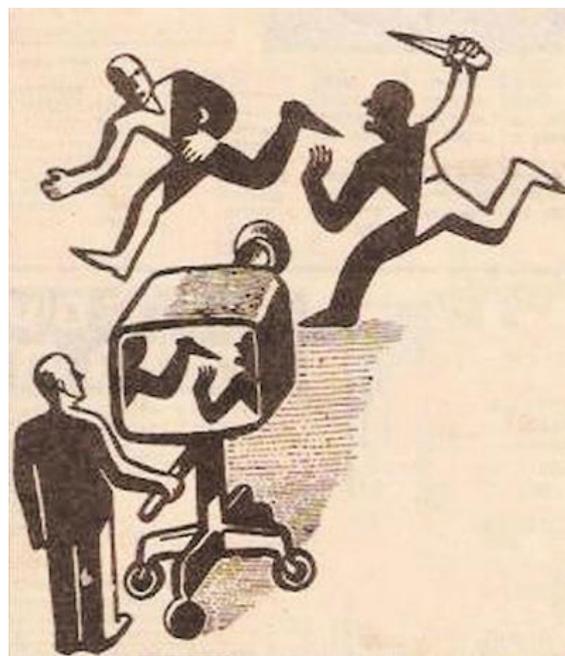


Figure 1: Media Framing Theory, accessed at https://www.myenglishclub.com/blogs/media-framing-theory

Beyond academia, however, the presence of a translation or picture can be misunderstood as *the* reality in many cases. As an example, the translation of a book brings together different language-group readerships and generates an essentially *utopian* community (Venuti 2013, 11–32). By introducing a source text created in a foreign culture, translation creates a *phantom* of understanding among target readers. These readers believe they have equal access to the source text and thus belong to the same readership community as readers of the source text. In other words, the source text encounters the target text readers, and "such individual encounters are … profoundly mediated by what is made available to read at any given time: what is translated" (Damrosch 2003, 117). In the multimodal sense related to this paper, the source text becomes whatever has been captured that target text readers believe they have *direct and equal* access to. This belief stems from ignorance of the fact that the author may have already been robbed or killed, even if metaphorically – as discussed in section 3 – because, as Damrosch points out, the translation is all that they are given.

## 5. Narratives around a new Chinese internet celebrity: A case study

To demonstrate the dangers illustrated by the above theoretical discussion, the paper now examines the role of translation in a real-world case concerning a Tibetan boy who became an internet celebrity before being promoted worldwide as an iconic figure by Chinese officials.

### 5.1 The accidental rise of a new internet celebrity

In late 2020, a video clip went viral on Chinese social media platforms. The clip featured Ding Zhen, a Tibetan boy living in Sichuan Province in southwestern China. It was apparently recorded by accident according to the video shooter, Hu Bo, who claimed that he intended to record a video of Ding Zhen's younger brother before capturing the 10-second clip that would make Ding Zhen an overnight celebrity (see Chen and Yang 2021). Shortly after the clip was uploaded, Ding Zhen won millions of fans who were attracted by his sweet and wild [甜野] appearance – sweet as in his handsome appearance, and wild because he lived in a remote and deprived area of China that had not yet been encroached upon by urbanisation. By December 2020, just a month after the video clip was uploaded, Ding Zhen's name was among the most searched keywords on Weibo, one of China's most popular social media platforms. By March 2023, Ding Zhen had 2.997 million followers on Weibo.

Soon, the local government of Ding Zhen's hometown recruited the team for a documentary project named "Impression of China" (or, "符号中国", literally "The Sign of China") to film a new documentary named "The World of Ding Zhen: A month-long travel with him"[2]. Following this documentary, Ding Zhen became hugely popular in East Asia, and known all around the world[3].

Many believe, however, that Ding Zhen's newly found fame was no accident, and that, actually, the Chinese government was behind the promotion (see Su, 2020). The local government certainly reacted promptly to the video, as the contract of the aforementioned government-sponsored documentary was signed only a week after the clip went online, with the documentary published the following week. This rapid reaction is believed to be a successful case of the government's intention to utilise new media (Wang, 2022).

The government's involvement in promoting Chinese internet celebrities is hardly a new development, especially when these celebrities are connected with a positive image of life in the country's rural areas. Earlier, Li Ziqi, a girl who lives happily with her grandmother in rural China and spends her days growing plants, making food, dyeing clothes and such all by herself, has long been seen as representing a specific image of China. The promotion of Li Ziqi's image (Fu, 2019) strongly resembles what Chinese authorities and their affiliated media have done with that of Ding Zhen (Yu, Zhou, and Zhou, 2020). Both started with no apparent government intervention before the state-run Xinhua News Agency quickly commented and promoted them, tagging both as "the new face of China" or "the sign of China". Even a spokesperson for the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Hua Chunying, tweeted about Ding Zhen, praising his "bright, sunny and innocent smile" (SpokespersonCHN, 2020).

---

[2] The video is uploaded to YouTube and can be accessed via:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S0ymkN9j7Os

[3] For instance, a Japanese TV programme has featured a report on him
(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=clHK5CDgt9A), and Korean YouTubers have also shot videos about him
(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sjvDeYdw5h4)

Figure 2: One of the photos Hua Chunying used to promote Ding Zhen on Twitter.

Interpretations of what might be hidden beneath this "sign of China" soon began to vary. Mainstream Chinese voices insisted that Ding Zhen was a genuine sign representing and promoting China's image. Yet some dissenting voices appeared on Chinese and foreign social media platforms disagreeing with this mainstream account, potentially subverting the official narrative. Here, I will look more closely at these opposing voices before presenting a theoretical discussion regarding what these diverse interpretations can tell us about translation.

Xinhua News Agency journalists Junjie Yu, Wei Zhou, and Wenchong Zhou (2020) claim that Ding Zhen represents his hometown, a deprived but beautiful rural area of Sichuan, China mostly inhabited by Tibetans. Yu, Zhou, and Zhou's article (ibid.), published in early December, was aimed at promoting tourism in Ding Zhen's hometown, Litang. The strategy proved successful, as the town saw a 620% increase in tourist visits since Ding Zhen's video was made available online. Titled "A Far-away Area Goes Viral with Ding Zhen, Don't You Want to Be There?" (*translation mine*), the article highlights difficulties in developing

Litang's economy, concluding that "only through the tourism industry can Litang develop". This narrative about Ding Zhen and his hometown alludes to the problem of poverty, but only by claiming that Ding Zhen's popularity is helping to improve the town's situation. It complies with the message that the Chinese government wants to transmit. The government has acknowledged the prevalent poverty in Chinese society and outlined a plan to solve absolute poverty by 2020. A wider poverty alleviation campaign has been carried out in some particularly affected regions (see Xinhua, 2020). Until very recently, most news stories mentioning poverty in China focused on explaining the government's poverty-fighting campaign and praising its astonishing achievements.

However, things are different in the public discourse. One response that has circulated on Twitter reads "He hasn't received a single day of education and lives in one of the most under-developed regions in China, yet people adore him for his 'natural beauty'? It's not like he has a choice" (ZeyiYang, 2020). This is one of a number of comments[4] that challenge government representatives such as Hua Chunying promoting Ding Zhen for his natural beauty. The fact that a 20-year-old boy, Ding Zhen, is illiterate is seen not as a sign of innocent beauty but of poverty. That particular comment highlights a flaw underlying the innocence and natural beauty narrative. Ding Zhen's region is not only suffering from poverty, but he, despite his popularity, is illiterate.

In 2010, the Chinese government published the Middle and Long-Term Programme for Educational Reform and Development (2010–2020), according to which, by 2020, China should "eliminate illiteracy among young and middle-aged people" (Xinhua, 2010). By the time Ding Zhen became an internet celebrity at the end of 2020, most, if not all, Chinese media were boasting about the success of the programme.[5] Translating the sign of Ding Zhen stands out as a way of highlighting the pressing need to alleviate poverty further and promote education. The fact that the picture of an illiterate boy was manipulated by the official voices

---

[4] The paper, however, refrains from claiming any representativeness of this opinion. The simple fact that it appears is enough to work as evidence of the existence, rather than prevalence, of such an opinion. Whether it is held by the majority of social media (Twitter) users is not the focus of the discussion here.

[5] See He and Li, 2019, for example, when they call China an "Educational Strong Power" that has developed from "A Nation of Illiteracy"

to emphasise the achievement of eliminating poverty makes the boy more "pitiful and pathetic", to quote from a response to that tweet.

## 5.2 Different agents, different roles: A link to theory

For this case study, at least four agents require scrutiny: Ding Zhen, Hu Bo the video shooter, the combined Chinese government and Xinhua News Agency (hereafter named "the Chinese official voices" as it is impossible to separate these two entities), and social media users. Importantly, by using the term agent, I make no assumption that each of these actors or groups can produce a unanimous interpretation of the picture. Rather, interpretations vary within agents. This is especially so for assigning all social media users to be one agent. There are, of course, diverse voices on social media platforms that have reacted to Ding Zhen's fame. By referring to social media users as a single group, I mean the voices on Twitter as analysed in 5.1. The purpose is mainly to highlight how these voices go against official narratives, which is illustrative of how translation creates difference. Thus, I mainly focus on conflicts of narrative between the Chinese official voices and social media users represented by Twitter user @ZeyiYang. That said, the roles of Ding Zhen and Hu Bo are also worthy of discussion.

Looking first at Ding Zhen, who, as a living person as well as a constructed sign, can be viewed as the first meaning generator in this story. His appearance, or at least his appearance in the picture, is the object that allows all following translations to happen. However, despite the importance of him being present, he is perhaps the weakest in terms of power in the chain of translations that this paper seeks to analyse. He was not even the intended object of the recording, and by accidentally appearing in front of the camera, any of the multiple dimensions of his existence as a person immediately collapsed. The video clip is about him, yet he has little to say about what should or should not be shown to the audience. Even if the video shooter did abide by ethical standards by asking for permission before releasing the video, it seems the only power Ding Zhen had here was to agree or disagree with the video being made public. Either way, as soon as he is captured on camera, Ding Zhen is no longer a person living in three-dimensional space, but is now flattened, a sign of a two-dimensional world. Whether Ding Zhen wished to appear in the video or not, and whether this

representation is whom he wants to be, is unknown. Our ignorance of his initial intentions means that we lack essential information when we interact with the figure of Ding Zhen in the model of the hermeneutic circle. Instead, other information comes to fill this gap, some of which goes against a favourable narrative. For instance, earlier photos of Ding Zhen smoking led to criticisms that he was not a good role model.

However, even Ding Zhen, or rather his picture as captured in the recording, constitutes a sign that is interpreted and re-interpreted. The boy is not an author himself. What interpreters take from him is only the picture, or the object, to use Charles Sanders Peirce's term, which is insufficient to become a sign with meaning. Picture-taking and meaning-making are two separate processes, and the former does not necessarily have any say over the latter, thus making the former vulnerable to manipulation.

What about Hu Bo, then? He is the author of the video and thus the creator of the sign. Hu Bo equipped himself with a tool, or perhaps a weapon – the camera – and used it to decode and re-code the figure of Ding Zhen. With the means to manipulate the image of Ding Zhen, he made himself more powerful. To say that Hu Bo is the author of the first sign is to identify not only the process of capturing the video, but also the process of Hu Bo becoming an interpreter. He came to this impoverished county with a purpose, which acted as a guiding principle for him to frame the landscape and local people in a certain way. By framing Ding Zhen in this way and manipulating his picture, Hu Bo aims to convey his vision and achieve his purpose – as he later said in an interview – of collecting and demonstrating a "real smile" (Chen and Yang, 2021).

However, once Hu Bo has produced this initial sign, he becomes voiceless. A particularly significant modification of the sign occurred as the video circulated on the internet, as the video was in many places represented by a screenshot of Ding Zhen – the video became a picture. By reducing the video to a picture, the consumers of the sign frame it as a new one that is more useful for their meaning-making purpose. The context of the video clip is lost, and all that is left is Ding Zhen alone. The video shooter, then, has left future interpreters with an empty sign, reflected by a two-dimensionalised Ding Zhen, a frame somewhat

deliberately selected, a representamen that lacks an interpretant, and a hollow sign that becomes open for further interpretation and composing. As we will see, the Chinese official voices and social media users become the consumers of this empty sign.

It is at this point that the Chinese authorities enter the picture and take the role of the most powerful agent in the chain of sign interpretation. The power of the Chinese authorities comes from their political and financial dominance, which makes their views easy to disseminate. As an example, just see how swiftly the local government was able to react in making a documentary for the purpose of image-building. The authorities here act as reader and author simultaneously but of the picture rather than a linguistic text. In the authorities' interpretation, Hu Bo's intention is now irrelevant. In order to promote its political, economic, and social perspective, the Chinese authorities are not satisfied with being just a reader and cannot see themselves as a silent interpreter. They need to present their interpretations and spread their message. To specify their meaning, the authorities write their interpretations explicitly. By attaching words to the picture, the authorities successfully hijack it and make it a political tool. The authorities impose their interpretation onto the sign and then use it as evidence to amplify their political narratives, such as how to accomplish their poverty-ending project and depicting and promoting a positive image of China's development. This motivation is clear when we observe responses to this messaging on social media, where discourse around the picture and the authorities' words becomes a political battlefield.

The Chinese official voices thus become another author of this picture. They are not, however, a *co*-author, as the core idea of this concept is that "no one owns" the sign (Duranti, 1986: 239), and that speech only becomes meaningful when readers act as co-author. When Ding Zhen becomes a symbol of Litang and of China, it seems that this concept of co-authoring seems to be in action. The picture does not constitute any meaning by itself or rely strictly on the intention of Hu Bo. Only when the Chinese official voices read it and represent it does the picture become meaningful in a certain way, acting as a starting point for further translation and interaction.

We should not ignore the fact that the idea of *co*-authorship only emphasises the contribution

of ideas to a text. It does not necessarily tell us anything about the power relations within the mutual creation. In our case study, the authorities' translation of the picture is so powerful that we hardly hear anything from Hu Bo. His voice is lost at two points; first when the video is cut down, and second when the Chinese official voices add new meanings to the content. The focus becomes the government's official message, and the picture itself is a mere footnote to the language. In other words, by repurposing the shortened video and screenshot (see discussion in 5.1), Chinese officials silenced the voice of the video shooter while offering a new voice to the picture that expressed their preferred message. The picture is now politicised. The discussion and responses that came after referred only to Chinese official voices rather than the video shooter – additional evidence of his inaudibility.

Turning now to the role of social media users, who read and responded not only to the picture itself but also to the message constructed by the Chinese official voices with linguistic signs. This acts as proof, to some extent, of our earlier observation that authorities take over authorship and become the author. To respond to the political propaganda spread by the Chinese authorities, social media users decided to return to an interpretation of the picture – the cut video or screenshot but not the original video – as their starting point. Their re-interpretation of the picture reveals an intentionally hidden message, unearthing a secret hidden by the authorities, either intentionally or unintentionally. In the response on Twitter, this new interpretation discredits the Chinese official voices, claiming that they ignore or intentionally overlook the pressing needs of poverty and illiteracy and instead present a non-urgent self-congratulatory message. While the Chinese official voices use the picture to promote their claims that the area's local economy is flourishing, social media users deconstruct this claim and make a new claim upon its ruins, by saying that, in fact, the economic problem is unsolved.

From these new interpretations and responses, we see a new role emerge. These social media users are readers, authors, and subverters. They subvert the power of the author, or at least the author the government claims itself to be. Subversion, in this case, is not so much about overthrowing a political power or the reign of a hegemonic party; rather, for those who interpret the picture, or the "sign of China", in another way, they topple the Chinese official voices' narrative, thereby depriving it of its power of meaning and explanation. What remains

is an empty picture, while a new meaning, the ongoing problem of poverty, is added.

To position this case within the theoretical discussion presented earlier, the hermeneutic danger enables translation to work as a subversive power. In translating the story of Ding Zhen, the Chinese official voices show themselves to be more powerful than any individuals. This remains the case until individuals, as translators, decide to translate and deconstruct the narratives presented by the Chinese official voices. This act of translation empowers these individuals to subvert authority, perhaps not with a wide influence but at least on an equal footing as the Chinese government and state media. By translating the picture in their own way, the social media commenters changed their position from invisible to visible, from unheard to heard, and from bottom to top. The Chinese official voices, eager to take back control of power, can censor social media content, but only where their power allows them to, for example, on Weibo or other Chinese platforms. The comments posted on Twitter remain available to view and thus alive.

We can see here how a shift of power, however subtle, is ultimately a dangerous change. If, as Carmen Africa Vidal Claramonte (2019: 225) claims, it is symbolically dangerous to silence someone, it is perhaps equally dangerous to give them a voice. While acknowledging the power of language, and indeed any sign, Vidal Claramonte (ibid.: 220) argues that the result of translation is that "the original goes for a walk and suddenly becomes a surprisingly new [picture][6]". Changing the original appears to catch people by surprise, as if the translation works in the background and only by looking at the result can we realise its existence. This belief seems troublesome. If translation, as she writes, enables us to see differently, it also enables people to listen to those who cannot usually speak. One should not be at all surprised by the change this process brings about, as this is exactly the translation's purpose. Translation, by allowing others to talk, deconstructs the power of silencing and allows a symbolic struggle. If we observe the present case through this lens, we see how translation is dangerous as it magnifies alternative voices other than the government's. There is no denying that the Chinese government intends to mute certain problems in its propaganda. For example, as analysed previously, the fact that Ding Zhen was illiterate and his hometown

---

[6] The original citation uses 'image'. The reason for the change of the word is explained in footnote 1.

*Ye Tian, The Dangers of Translation: Interpretations and Re-presentations of a Chinese Internet Celebrity, 78-102*

is one of the most underdeveloped is never mentioned by official voices. Social media users chose to translate the picture of Ding Zhen and the government's statement, not to echo what was already said but to offer alternative narratives for those who otherwise would not be heard.

Regarding the earlier discussion of violence in translation, in this case Hu Bo "writes" using the picture of Ding Zhen, allowing little of Ding Zhen's own voice to be heard. Then, the Chinese official voices assume the position of the video shooter, speaking *for* Hu Bo, as if he himself is voiceless. Once the Chinese official voices present their interpretation, it leads to further translation. Indeed, even if the Chinese government fails in "telling people what to think … it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about" (Cohen 1963: 13). The fact that the discussions on social media examined in this paper were stimulated by the actions of the Chinese authorities is perhaps proof of this observation.

## 6. Conclusion

Arguing against an instrumentalist view of translation, Lawrence Venuti says that "the instrumentalist dichotomy of word-for-word vs sense-for-sense translation" assumes that "form and meaning are immediately accessible to the translator without aggressive interpretation" (Venuti 2019: 11). In reading Venuti and contemplating the dangers of translation, it becomes evident that translation always has power in the way it reshapes the original and makes it unrecognisable, hidden beneath the concepts of equivalence and sameness. When hermeneutic philosophers first investigated translation, they tended to imagine the author being brought to the reader (see Schleiermacher 2009). However, if we re-examine translation through a more current theoretical lens, the importance of the author decreases, along with their authority. This empowers readers to have their own translations that may reinforce or contradict the original. The idea of dangerous hermeneutic-based translation fits perfectly into the Peircean semiotic cycle, where an interpretant always turns into a representamen, waiting to be interpreted again. Another way to look at this is the original text being constantly torn apart, with new text replacing it, only to become yet another "original" text waiting to be torn. Because of this process, many authors no longer have the privilege, or the hierarchical authority, they would like to have over their own text,

with some even finding themselves diminished or deceased after being translated.

To this end, we can say that translation is dangerous, and that the dangers are three-fold. First, translation camouflages as being the same as the original, while secretly producing an agenda of "change everything" (Venuti 2013). This makes revealing the dangers of translation necessary. Second, translation is a weapon that can be used to further the hegemonic meaning-making of the dominant agent. Third, translation provides more powerful translators with a tool to silence certain voices and make them invisible. The result is that we, the observers, are largely ignorant of whether the original author has a voice or not.

In this paper, I wish to contribute to the already lively discussion on the subjectivity of translators and to go beyond the binary of viewing translation as either a bottom-up subversive force of cultural resistance or a top-down manipulative force of agenda setting. Using the concept of danger, the paper combines both aspects and gives this combination a theoretical lens. Translation is also explored here beyond a traditional and limited language-centric view. By considering multimodal examples, the paper illustrates how modes interact in the process of creating the dangerous force.

Admittedly, the paper only includes a limited number of agencies in its discussion, and the translation of the picture is more complex than the negotiation of four agencies. As stated in 5.2, different voices are likely to emerge within any agency identified. Further research may benefit from examining the more nuanced role of multiple agencies and the power struggles that exist not only between agencies but within them.

# References

Alexander, Edwin. (1981). 'Hermeneutical Violence: Heidegger's Kant-Interpretation'. *Philosophy Today*, 25(4): 286–306.

*Ye Tian, The Dangers of Translation: Interpretations and Re-presentations of a Chinese Internet Celebrity, 78-102*

Baker, Mona. (2016). *Translation and Conflict: A Narrative Account*. London & New York: Routledge.

Barthes, Roland. (1975). *The Pleasure of the Text* (Richard, Miller. Trans.). New York: Hill and Wang.

——— (1977). *Image, Music, Text* (Heath, Stephen. Trans.). London: Fontana.

Blumczynski, Piotr. (2016). *Ubiquitous Translation*. London & New York: Routledge.

Chen, Xuanbin and Yang Yudi. (2021). '拍摄丁真的 "微笑收藏家" 胡波：希望他能走得更远[The "Smile Collector" Hu Bo who First Filmed Ding Zhen: I hope he can travel farther]'. *China News*. Available online at [https://www.chinanews.com.cn/sh/2021/01-05/9379126.shtml] (accessed 09 September 2022).

Chow, Rey. (1995). *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Claramonte, Carmen Africa Vidal. (2019). 'Violins, Violence, Translation Looking outwards'. *The Translator*, 25(3), 218-228.

Cohen, Bernard Cecil. (1963). *The Press and Foreign Policy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Damrosch, David. (2003). *What is World Literature?* New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Derrida, Jacques. (1973). *Speech and Phenomena* (trans. Allison, David B.). Illinois: Northwestern University Press.

Duranti, Alessandro. (1986). 'The Audience as Co-Author: An Introduction'. *Text*, 6(3), 239-247.

Fu, Qing. (2019). '李子柒海外走红的启示[The Implication of Li Ziqi's Becoming Famous overseas]'. *South China Daily*. Available online at [http://media.people.com.cn/n1/2019/1210/c40606-31497902.html] (accessed 22 February 2022).

Gadamer, Hans-Georg. (1975). *Truth and Method*. New York: Crossroad.

Gorlée, Dinda L. (1994). *Semiotics and the Problem of Translation: With Special Reference to the Semiotics of Charles S. Pearce*. New York: Rodopi.

Gregor, Katherine. (2020). 'Translation as a Dance. *Los Angeles Review of Books*'. Available online at [https://lareviewofbooks.org/short-takes/translation-as-a-dance/] (accessed 22 February 2022).

He, Miao. and Li, Yihuan. (2019). '中国为什么能从"文盲大国"迈向教育强国？[How China Turns from "A Nation of Illiteracy" to an Educational Strong Power?]'. *Renmin Net*. Available online at [http://politics.people.com.cn/n1/2019/1121/c429373-31467337.html] (accessed 22 February 2022).

Heidegger, Martin. (1996). *Being and Time* (Stambaugh, J. Trans.). New York: State University of New York Press.

———. (1997). *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*. (Taft, Richard. Trans.). Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Madison, G. B. (1994). 'Hermeneutics: Gadamer and Ricoeur'. In Kearney, R. (Ed.). *Twentieth-Century Continental Philosophy*. London and New York: Routledge.

Marais, Kobus. (2018). *A (Bio) Semiotic Theory of Translation: The Emergence of Social-Cultural Reality*. London and New York: Routledge.

———. (2020). '"Eleven Different Names, One Practice": Towards a Phenomenology of Translation', *Perspectives*, 29(3): 311-325.

Mortensen, Peter. (2002). 'Robbing the Robbers: Schiller, Xenophobia and the Politics of British Romantic Translation'. *Literature and History*. 11(1): 41-61.

Mulhall, Stephen. (1996). *Heidegger and Being and Time*. London and New York: Routledge.

Nord, Christiane. (2018). *Translating as a Purposeful Activity: Functionalist Approaches Explained*. London and New York: Routledge.

Peirce, Charles Sanders. (1994). *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* (Electronic Edition). Charlottesville: InteLex Corporation.

Ricoeur, Paul. (2016). *Hermeneutics and the Human Science: Papers on Language, Action and Interpretation* (Thompson, J. B. Trans.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Scheufele, Dietram A., and Shanto Iyengar. (2014). "The State of Framing Research: A Call for New Directions". In *The Oxford Handbook of Political Communication*, edited by K.

Kenski and K. H. Jamieson. DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199793471.013.47.

Schleiermacher, Friedrich. (2009). 'On the Different Methods of Translating'. In Venuti, Lawrence. (ed.) T*he Translation Studies Reader*. London and New York: Routledge.

SpokespersonCHN. (2020). Twitter content. Available online at: [https://twitter.com/SpokespersonCHN/status/1333005030585143296] (accessed 22 February 2022).

Steiner, George. (1975). *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*. New York and London: Oxford University Press.

Su, Youpeng. (2020). ' "保护"丁真： "甜野男孩"走红背后的政府之手 ["Protect" Ding Zhen: The Hand from the Government behind the "Wild and Sweet" Boy's Becoming Famous]'. *South China Weekend*. Available online at [https://www.infzm.com/contents/197416] (accessed 22 February 2022).

Tan, Zaixi. (2006). 'Metaphors of Translation'. *Perspectives: Studies in Translatology*. 14(1): 40-54.

Venuti, Lawrence. (2008). *Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation (2nd Edition)*. London & New York: Routledge.

———. (2013). *Translation Changes Everything: Theory and Practice*. London & New York: Routledge.

———. (2019). *Contra Instrumentalism: A Translation Polemic*. Lincoln : University of Nebraska Press.

Wang, Tianying. (2022). '由"丁真效应"探析基层政府新媒体能力建设 [Ding Zhen Phenomenon and The Construction of New Media Ability from Basic Level Government]'. *Journal of China Social Science*. Available online at [https://theory.gmw.cn/2022-02/17/content_35524516.htm] (accessed 12 September 2022).

Xinhua. (2010). The Middle and Long-Term Programme for Educational Reform and Development (2010-2020). Available online at [http://www.gov.cn/jrzg/2010-07/29/content_1667143.htm] (accessed 22 February 2022).

Xinhua. (2020). Find out China's Poverty Alleviation Achievements in 1 Minute. Available online at [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-10/26/c_139468383.htm] (accessed 22 February 2022).

Yu, Junjie, Zhou, Wei, and Zhou, Wenchong. (2020). '丁真带火的远方，你想去吗？ [A Far-away Area Goes Viral with Ding Zhen, Don't You Want to Be There?]'. *Xinhua News Agency*. Available online at [http://www.xinhuanet.com/gongyi/2020-12/08/c_1210920983.htm] (accessed 22 February 2022).

ZeyiYang. (2020). Twitter content. Available online at [https://twitter.com/ZeyiYang/status/1333237739983147008] (accessed 22 February 2022).