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Insider, outsider or multiplex persona? Confessions of a digital ethnographer's journey in Translation Studies

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ABSTRACT

Much attention has been paid to online collaborative translation in the past three decades. Methodologically, how we examine various forms of translation practices and communities on the internet is a challenge. Whilst digital ethnography has been recognised as a feasible methodology, the ethnographer's positionality throughout the process of fieldwork is often overlooked in the Translation Studies context. In this paper, I present a confessional tale consisting of three vignettes foregrounding the challenges, doubts and anxieties that I have confronted while using digital ethnography to study a Chinese online translation community. My reflections proceed from an analysis based on an insider/outsider dichotomy to the realisation of an alternative perspective, the multiplex persona. I argue that in the digital space, the notion of a multiplex persona, which views subjectivity and positionality from a decentred, multiplex and multi-dimensional perspective, is more constructive in helping researchers understand where these dilemmas come from, why they emerge, and how negotiations between the ethnographers and their informants develop.

KEYWORDS

Online collaborative translation, online communities, digital ethnography, self-reflexivity, insider/outsider, multiplex persona, translation process.

1. Introduction

This paper reflects on the journey of my PhD research, during which I used digital ethnography to examine the process of collaborative translation in a Chinese online translation community. Although digital ethnography is a widely applied methodology in qualitative research, it is still emerging in the Translation Studies (TS) ¹ context. Throughout my fieldwork, I encountered invigorating ups and disheartening downs as well as unexpected impasses. I write about these experiences in a first-person narrative in the genre of a "confessional tale" (Van Maanen 2011), consisting of three ethnographic vignettes (see Section 4). As noted in Yu (2020), ethnography is both a "process and a product" (167). As a product, it is the ethnographer's representation of the culture and the people he or she studies in writing. Confessional tale is a style of ethnographic narratives, aiming to "explicitly demystify fieldwork ... by showing how the technique [of participant observation] is practiced in the field" and, in particular, the "minimelodramas of hardships endured (overcome)" (Van Maanen 2011: 73). In a confessional tale, the ethnographer is visible and the reflections are written from the "[f]ieldworker's [p]oint of [v]iew" (Van Maanen 2011: 76-77). Through my narration, I reflect upon three questions: What does it

mean to be a digital ethnographer? To what extent does a digital ethnographer negotiate his or her position with others? How should he or she deal with ethical and positional dilemmas inside and outside the field?

A participatory culture that permeates the internet acts as a catalyst promoting online translation undertaken by ordinary individuals who may or may not have formal training in translation as, for example, is the case in fansubbing. These practices are often referred to as user-generated translation (UGT) and crowdsourced translation. UGT, drawing on the notion of user-generated content, “describes the harnessing of Web 2.0 services and tools to make online content[,] be it written, audio or video[,] accessible in a variety of languages” (Perrino 2009: 62). Fansubbing, scanlation (scanning, editing, and translating Japanese manga), and similar practices, organised and carried out by volunteer translators in the digital space, are all forms of UGT. The other term, crowdsourced translation, is sometimes used interchangeably with UGT. Crowdsourced translation is carried out by internet users who translate online materials collaboratively with no or little remuneration (McDonough Dolmaya 2020). Examples include the TED Open Translation Project (Olohan 2014) and multilingual translations of Wikipedia entries (McDonough Dolmaya 2012). Although the features of UGT and crowdsourced translation overlap, they also differ from each other. While UGT emphasises the users’ initiatives and leaves the impression that it is an unsolicited and unpaid act undertaken by amateur translators, crowdsourced translation encompasses both bottom-up and top-down approaches, as well as both paid and unpaid tasks, and is hence more inclusive (McDonough Dolmaya 2020). To date, translation practices on the internet have become rather complex. It is not uncommon to see a mix of user, corporate and crowdsourced initiatives taking place on the same digital platform. For instance, the media organisation TED organises and oversees the process of subtitling, which is a form of top-down crowdsourced translation. However, the translations are carried out as a result of the audience’s own willingness, and thus are user-generated. Given that the boundaries of crowdsourced translation are yet to be defined (Jiménez-Crespo 2017: 17-25; McDonough Dolmaya 2020), I will use ‘online collaborative translation’ (OCT) as an overarching term throughout this paper to refer to the diversity of digitally-mediated translation activities, whether they are UGT or crowdsourced, written or multimodal, including the OCTs that my digital ethnographic study focuses on in Yeeyan, an online translation community.

Among the many aspects of OCT, TS scholars have paid much attention to the motives for participation, which is crucial in our understanding of such practice and the sites where it takes place, as well as the participants’ self-identification and negotiation of their insider/outsider statuses. Whether it is through a close reading of TED volunteers’ blog entries (Olohan 2014) or

the use of the survey methodology (O'Brien and Schäler 2010; McDonough Dolmaya 2012), a number of motivations for participation have been revealed, including obtaining new knowledge, practicing translation, learning about new ideas, sharing information, networking, and pure altruism, which are categorised as intrinsic (social, community, or political) and extrinsic (career, monetary, or product-related) motivations (McDonough Dolmaya 2012; Olohan 2014). Here, I shall highlight citizen-led OCTs driven by the specific intrinsic motivations of effecting social and political changes or expressing personal aspirations (Baker and Blaagaard 2016: 16). These kinds of OCTs differ from other types of crowdsourced initiatives given the absence of the "involvement of a third party or benefactor" (Baker and Blaagaard 2016: 16). As such, the discretion that citizen-led OCT participants exercise during translations is less restricted than in other types of crowdsourced translation, which may be influenced by their patrons. Yeeyan, where I conducted a 19-month-long digital ethnography, is an online translation community where both corporate and user-generated crowdsourced translation activities are organised.

Yeeyan is a popular online translation community among Chinese internet users and has received scholarly attention in recent years (e.g. Zhang and Mao 2013; Fan 2015; Yang 2018; Yu 2019). One of the main reasons why I selected Yeeyan as the field site for my doctoral research was the vibrancy and diversity of collaborative translation in this community. In order to understand how a translated text is produced in collaboration by multiple social actors connected through digital media, I chose to adopt an ethnographic approach after discussing with my supervisors, as well as TS and non-TS colleagues. However, my ethnographic journey ended up being filled with identity crises and self-reflexive attempts at grappling with positional dilemmas.

2. (Digital) ethnography and self-reflexivity in translation research

Although uncommon, the use of ethnography is not unknown in TS research, particularly in the studies of translators and translation processes. One of the pioneering ethnographic TS works is Koskinen's (2008) study of Finnish staff translators working in the EU, in which she positioned herself as a "'double agent', partially an insider, partially an outsider" (Koskinen 2008: 8). Prior to her academic fieldwork, Koskinen had already obtained an insider's view when she was working as a Finnish staff translator. The same insider's perspective was later enhanced through her re-entry to the field as a researcher, which was also when the insider/outsider conflict occurred. As she acknowledges, being aware of and reflecting on the researcher's own involvement in the studied context is essential, given that "*my observations, my interpretations, my knowledge and understanding, as well as my*

personal contacts and *my* skill in eliciting information (and *my* limits in all these) delineate the research” (Koskinen 2008: 37, original emphases).

Similarly, self-reflexivity plays a central role in Marinetti and Rose’s (2013) study of the reception of an English play adapted for the Italian stage, which is a collaborative translation project. The two authors initiated the project and played the roles of translators and coordinators. Other agents involved in the project were the actors and the director of the play. During their collaboration process, conflicts arose between the authors and the director due to the differences of their positionality and vision of the form and purpose of the adapted play. The two authors regarded themselves as insiders of the project, as well as the ‘authority’ who had the power to make decisions as to the “form and content of the project” (Marinetti and Rose 2013: 175). However, their authority and insider status were challenged by the director who held a different professional disposition, i.e. theatrical performance. In the early stages, the authors were “kept away from rehearsal[s]” (Marinetti and Rose 2013: 174). When they were invited back to participate, they compromised in terms of revising their word choice in the Italian translation of the play at the request of the director.

The tensions described by Marinetti and Rose not only led to the changes of the project plan (2013: 175), but also the authors’ newly evolved view on collaborative translation, “a process shaped by changing power relations” (Marinetti and Rose 2013: 175), which is reminiscent of my own ethnographic experience. Besides these two studies, longitudinal and immersive ethnographic work has also appeared in other translation research (e.g. Flynn 2005; Sturge 2007; Fabbretti 2014; Li 2015; Tesseur 2015), albeit sporadically.

It is worth re-iterating that OCT is part of a global participatory culture enabled by networked media. Moreover, OCT is especially prominent in East Asia, a region that plays an important role in both importing and exporting media content worldwide (Lee and Lim 2015). A large amount of media content (especially that originally produced in hegemonic languages like English, French, and Spanish), whether films, TV dramas or entertainment shows, floods into countries like China, Japan, and Korea. Reciprocally, Japanese anime and manga, as well as Chinese martial arts and fantasy novels, are attractive to consumers from other linguistic areas. In this process of internet-mediated, trans-cultural, trans-national, and trans-geographical media flow, volunteer translators make significant contributions as intermediaries. With regard to the media flow entering East Asia, Li’s (2015) netnographic study of a Chinese subtitling group addresses the question of whether fansubbers have a sense of belonging in the community through their collective activities. As for the translation of the media content in English, Fabbretti (2014) undertook participant

observation by joining different online scanlation networks as a translator and a moderator in order to examine how Japanese manga travel from Japan to the Anglophone world. Beyond the Asian context, online ethnography is also used by Dombek (2014) to examine the volunteering motivations of Polish translators on Facebook.

Undoubtedly, these works are important in paving the way for future studies. However, the growing interest in ethnography in OCT research has not yet been paired with a nuanced methodological discussion of digital ethnography as a self-reflexive and contextual experience. This may relate to the limited ethnographic references to draw on in the TS literature: for example, a chapter on ethnography as a research methodology was not included in one of the most authoritative TS references (*The Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*) until the publication of its third edition (Baker and Saldanha 2020). A reconstruction of the microhistory of “[t]ranslation ‘in the making’” (Buzelin 2007) that encompasses not only the end products but also the processes and the people involved is rare. As Fabbretti (2014) notes, he finds it difficult to balance reading the texts “objectively” given his own “emotional involvement with the community” (163). By participating in the actual translations with other community members, our ‘intrusions’ are bound to influence the production of the translated texts. In this article, I argue that as translation researchers, being aware of our own positioning in the research context is essential in shaping the interpretation of the translation practice, the process and the social actors we study. Fortunately, the literature in anthropology offers a wealth of discussions regarding the ethnographer’s positionality, with much being written about insider/outsider statuses.

3. Insider/outsider debates

The scholarly debate on an ethnographer’s positionality grew in popularity when anthropologists started to study the familiar and the distinction between ‘the self’ and ‘the other’ was no longer clear-cut (Mercer 2007: 3). This kind of research, i.e. when a researcher studies a social domain of which she is a member, is increasingly popular (Bonner and Tolhurst 2002: 8) and is often referred to as “insider research” (Mercer 2007). According to Merton (1972: 21), “[i]nsiders are the members of specified groups and collectivities or occupants of specified social statuses; [o]utsiders are the non-members.” Such stratification can be observed in many aspects in society, as we perceive ourselves and others as insiders and outsiders based on a wide range of parameters, such as gender, age, nationality, ethnicity, language, educational background, geographical location, religious belief, occupation, and community membership. Sharing a certain degree of insiderness is believed to help the researcher secure a smoother entry into the research field and establish a good rapport with the locals (e.g. Abu-

Lughod 2000 [1986]; Sherif 2001; Bonner and Tolhurst 2002). A classic piece is Abu-Lughod's ethnography of a Bedouin community (2000 [1986]). The author's half Arab identity gave her confidence in conforming to cultural appropriateness in the field (Abu-Lughod 2000 [1986]: 11). Similarly, as regards Sherif's study of an Egyptian community (2001), she admits that her insiderness (being half-Egyptian and having family members in Cairo) has granted her instant access to a large number of informants. For Bonner and Tolhurst (2002: 9), possessing nursing knowledge saved them time to learn about the fundamentals and protocols of clinical practices.

Besides a binary division between insider and outsider statuses, several authors argue that the boundary between insider/outsider identities is ambiguous (e.g. Clifford and Marcus 1986; Karim 1993; Mercer 2007; Dwyer and Buckle 2009). Insider/outsider statuses constantly fluctuate, "shifting back and forth along a continuum" (Mercer 2007: 13). In his ethnographic study of the systems of faculty appraisal at two higher educational institutions, Mercer reveals that the degree of insider/outsider status depends on a number of factors, such as the familiarity with the informants, informants' bias, and communicative reciprocity. In other words, it is very difficult to separate the two.

In the digital space, the issue of the insider/outsider status is more complex. On the one hand, digital ethnographers might have various degrees of digital media literacy, and may not need to worry about being refused entry into the field, especially if they have chosen a familiar one. On the other hand, registering as a member in an online community, for example, does not automatically entail full membership. Additionally, to some extent, digital ethnographers can be less 'intrusive' in the sense of being less physically visible. In one case of insider research (Paechter 2012), the author was a member of an online divorce community for a few years prior to her fieldwork. Upon the commencement of her study of the same community, she continued to use her community pseudonym and created another account under her real name through which she disclosed her researcher identity. Then, questions arose as to which Paechter was the 'real' Paechter and how the balance of emic (folk or inside) and etic (neutral and analytical) perspectives (Davidson *et al.* 1976: 1) was to be dealt with. As Paechter herself notes, she continues to struggle with the ethical challenges brought to the fore by her hybrid insider and outsider identities, with which she deals through an "attempt to act throughout with integrity and good faith" (Paechter 2012: 84).

Departing from those studies, my own wrestling with insider/outsider statuses references the development of my own identity. However, my perspective moves beyond the negotiations in the field site itself and the long-standing insider/outsider debate. Throughout the reflections about my

shifting between insider and outsider statuses, I realise that while the insider/outsider continuum can help us identify the troubles and struggles that we confront, it is not directly pragmatic in solving the identity crises a digital ethnographer accumulates. In the following section, I reassemble my ethnographic journey through three vignettes that illustrate how an analysis of my positionality progresses from an insider/outsider dichotomy to a perspective of 'multiplex persona'.

4. Multiplex persona inside and outside the field site

Inspired by Merton's (1972) critique on indoctrination of the insider/outsider and Schrag's (1986) thesis on (inter)subjectivity situated in relation to 'others' in a networked space, I borrow the term "multiplex persona" (Schrag 1986: 198) to refer to the aspects of a digital ethnographer and her informants' identities which unfold throughout communicative praxis. 'Praxis', as within the space of the interactions between a digital ethnographer and the informants, can be translated into languages, actions, performances or accomplishments (Schrag 1986: 18-19). On the one hand, a perspective of 'multiplex persona' is neither an either/or binary division nor a both/and continuum, but multiplex and multi-dimensional. As social actors, our identities, online and offline, are influenced by numerous factors. Each individual has "not a single status, but a status set" (Merton 1972: 22) and often "belong[s] to multiple, overlapping communities" (Rosaldo 1994: 183). Digital ethnographers are no exceptions. A digital ethnographer, who is also a social researcher, attempts to know better not only the studied subjects, but also him or herself. This "process of knowing involves the whole self" (Rosaldo 1994: 177) that is a "complement of various interrelated statuses which interact to affect both [our] behaviour and perspectives" (Merton 1972: 22).

On the other hand, the term 'multiplex persona' denotes a decentred view on subjectivity (Schrag 1986: 198), i.e. intersubjectivity. According to Schrag (1986: 143), "[t]he subject [...] is announced in the conversation and in the participatory social practices." Accordingly, "I" and "you" are "always interconnected and inseparable [...]" (Pensonea-Conway and Toyosaki 2011: 383). With respect to how two or more subjectivities interlace and co-emerge, it depends on the contextualised 'praxis'. As will be demonstrated throughout the following vignettes, it is both where I, a female, the digital ethnographer, stand in relation to my informants, and also where they stand in relation to me, in addition to how they perceive me and my research project. In the process of the co-construction of knowledge, the digital ethnographer and her informants are variably powerful and mutually vulnerable.

4.1 A Translation Studies researcher, an ethnographer and a social scientist²

As discussed above, the use of digital ethnography has been sporadic in TS research. I embarked on an ethnographic journey because of the change of my PhD topic area and, subsequently, the intellectual conversations with scholars from other disciplines, particularly those outside my home institution.

Officially, I was a PhD student in Translation Studies at University X in Hong Kong. I initially intended to study the translation of political journalism articles. It was “product-oriented research” (Saldanha and O’Brien 2013) in which the comparison of the source and target texts was the main analytical focus. During the research process, I turned to the internet to look for data and accidentally encountered the Yeeyan community. I became increasingly interested in how volunteer translators translate collaboratively and how they interact with each other during this process. As a result, I decided to change my PhD topic to examine collaborative translation in online communities. Such a change was risky given the uncertainties embedded within “participant-oriented research” (Saldanha and O’Brien 2013). In addition, the new project required completely different methodological and theoretical approaches that led to my own anxieties. On top of that, my peers’ suggestion of not to continue with it, but to play safe, added another layer of worry. However, when I doubted my own decision, my two supervisors supported and encouraged me to explore further.

In order to understand the process of collaborative translation and its participants, I needed to collect first-hand data in the Yeeyan community. However, I had no clue where to start with and how to conduct fieldwork. It was a professor in Information Systems from University Y who told me about netnography, and a group of sociologists and anthropologists from a department of applied social sciences at University Z with whom I studied ethnography. It is necessary to note that the abovementioned three universities are all publicly funded and under the administration of the University Grants Committee (UGC), a government advisory committee in Hong Kong. PhD students enrolled in UGC-funded programmes are allowed to take cross-institutional courses. Moreover, it is customary for students to sit in courses at a different university upon the approval of the course instructor. In my case, my participation in the ethnography course at University Z was regular, yet not credit-bearing. While immersing in this ethnographic community, two incidents provoked me to re-evaluate the boundaries between different disciplines and to confront my identity as a researcher, in which I reflected on the demarcation between Translation Studies (as in Humanities) and Sociology and Anthropology (as in the Social Sciences).

Upon my arrival in the social sciences department, I felt I was an ‘outsider’ as I had assumed that everyone else was an affiliated member. However, it turned out that other PhD students came from different disciplinary backgrounds, such as Chinese Studies, Communication Studies, and Social Development and Public Policy. However, they did not seem to feel that they were outsiders. Why did I? Was I a purist, acutely conscious of the border between TS and other disciplines? As a PhD student in TS, I was often asked what TS is by non-TS people. For a long time, translation has lacked recognition as an independent discipline, sometimes viewed purely as a practice. While the 1950s marked the beginning of studies in translation (Gambier and van Doorslaer 2016: 1), it was only in the 1970s that TS scholars attempted to establish a TS discourse (Holmes 1972; Lefevere 1992; Tan 2017). Additionally, my sense of translation as an independent discipline might have been reinforced by the local circumstances. The post-colonial city of Hong Kong where I lived and studied uses both English and Chinese as its official languages and bilingual materials permeate every corner of the society. Almost every university in Hong Kong has a translation department or a translation programme. It was not until I immersed myself in a different department, where all kinds of interdisciplinary research were undertaken, that I realised the extent to which I had been shaped by my discipline into a TS researcher.

As a relatively young discipline, the definitions, the borders, and the foci of TS have always been of concern during its development history. Despite the fact that “a set of turns” (Gambier and Van Doorslaer 2016: 2; Snell-Hornby 2010) is often used to describe the intersections between TS and other disciplines (as in linguistic, cultural, and sociological turns), “a new turn does not necessarily supersede the previous one as if TS was a linear set of obsolete turns” (Gambier and Van Doorslaer 2016: 3). “Different turns can coexist” (Gambier and Van Doorslaer 2016: 3) and denote the intersections between TS and other scholarly communities. The interweaving of TS theories with the methods and theories in other disciplines is also reflected in the PhD projects that many of my peers conducted, which were associated with the traditions of Chinese exegetics, art history, literary criticism and sociology. Thus, I had always regarded interdisciplinarity as a feature of PhD studies and believed that TS scholars could equally be literary critics or social scientists. However, my experience of the PhD candidature defence ignited my confusions regarding disciplinary demarcations.

Usually, the defence seminars in my department were only attended by ‘insiders’. However, my ethnographer friends came to mine as supporting each other at our important events was a tradition among us. They were not only cross-disciplinary, but also cross-institutional, and thus caught the

attention of the chair of the panel. He asked who they were and someone replied, "They are social scientists." I said nothing on the scene, but pondered, "Is there a difference?" It made me realise how much I was immersed in ethnography and had become desensitised to my dual identities: someone who was officially registered as a PhD student in a translation programme, yet who was effectively studying in two departments at two universities.

Besides the panel chair's curiosity, it was also during my candidature that I started reflecting upon my bumpy ethnographic journey in TS. My application of digital ethnography in studying OCT was heavily questioned by one of the examiners, who was a TS scholar. Most of the questions he raised were concerned with my subjectivity in the field, the unpredictability and duration of fieldwork, my choice of community activities, and my dialogical and interactional co-creation of research data. During the defence, I reacted rather strongly as I thought those issues were commonly shared challenges in ethnography. In retrospect, it is difficult to conclude whether the questions were due to his curiosity or his doubts about the validity of an ethnographic approach. Nevertheless, back then I felt that while I had had a relatively smooth entry to a methodological community, the acceptance of ethnography-as-method encountered a few thorns in my TS department.

In view of the above anecdotes, a series of questions revolving around my researcher identity arose: "Am I still doing research in TS? Am I still a TS researcher or am I becoming a social scientist? Why do such distinctions matter if interdisciplinarity is advocated in academia?" Reflecting on these questions, I still see myself as a TS scholar in terms of my departmental affiliation, but I envision my research as interdisciplinary. About half a century ago, Merton (1972: 31) pointed out the "dysfunctions of group affiliation for knowledge." Likewise, some addiction to disciplinary demarcation and an insistence on methodological ownership also "dampen the relevance of insider and outsider identities for the validity and worth of the intellectual product" (Merton 1972: 31). The meticulously drawn disciplinary boundaries I experienced partly result from the market forces in academia (Delabastita 2013), the competitiveness in higher education and other political and ideological pressure in society. When it comes to evaluating a scholarly inquiry, it is important to remember the possibility of transcending disciplinary purism. While TS imports, adopts, and adapts 'outsider' methodologies and concepts, translation, in a broad sense, can also become "an interpretive lens" (Gambier and van Doorslaer 2016: 6) for other disciplines. Ethnography, which is interpreted as "the translation of cultures" (Asad 1986: 141), sets an example of the inter-relatedness of different communities of intellectual development. Considering TS scholars'

increased interest in ethnography, can we envision an ethnographic turn that coexists with many other turns in the field?

4.2 Yeeyaners, translators and academic researchers

My identity crisis was further complicated vis-à-vis my negotiations with Yeeyaners at the level of community literacy. Notwithstanding that I registered as a community member, I still asked myself: “Am I already a ‘real’ Yeeyaner upon registration?”, “Who are the other Yeeyaners?” and “Are they translators outside of Yeeyan as well?”. Unlike an immersive experience in a physical locale, digital ethnographers do not usually enjoy the luxuries of face-to-face communication and physical proximity. With this digital community being significantly text-based, I could not see their facial expressions. Even with the aid of emojis, I struggled to detect the tone of each sentence with my interlocutor, which was supposed to help me evaluate the vibes in a specific communication event. I even had no way to find out whether my informants were female or male during the early stages of our communications, and thereby, I hesitated if I should send, for example, a formal hand-shaking emoji or a more intimate hug emoji, which occurred several times in my initial encounters with other Yeeyaners. Also, despite my interest in translation, my practical translation experience, and my theoretical knowledge of it, all of which I regarded as aspects of insiderness, I struggled to establish a rapport with the locals (i.e. other Yeeyaners). It seemed that there were even more uncertainties in conducting digital ethnography than traditional ethnography; thus, I puzzled whether or not there even were any locals or insiders to begin with. My engagement in the first collaborative translation project helped me answer this question.

Only after four months of observation did I summon up the courage to approach Yeeyaners. A recruitment post titled ‘Global Spread of Dengue Virus Types: Mapping the 70-year History’ in Yeeyan’s Collaborative Translation Camp caught my attention. Someone named Wayne³ posted it. He turned out to be an experienced Yeeyaner who had been a community member for more than three years and the administrator of three sub-communities. My application to join in this task was partially attributable to my interest in medical knowledge and partially to the timing of the fieldwork as I was ready to approach Yeeyaners.

Prior to my PhD studies, I had worked as a freelance translator for a few years. Now I had not only practical experience, but also theoretical knowledge since both my MA and PhD degrees are in translation. I took it for granted that I saw myself as a ‘professional’ translator and hoped that others would recognise my experience and knowledge, and that my expertise would facilitate my fieldwork. However, my first encounter with

Wayne deflated my expectations: in his opinion, I was a novice. Apparently, in a non-professional online translation community, the measure and value of a member were not professional expertise but community experience and, occasionally, gender.

For most of the collaborative translation projects organised in Yeeyan, the project initiator usually recruited translators by asking them to apply via QQ (a social networking tool). Following the instructions left at the bottom of the post, I applied to join in the QQ group, which was approved by Wayne who initiated the dialogue with me afterwards. The conversation began with the exchange of conventional greetings. Soon after that, Wayne took the lead and told me that he had recruited enough translators for the Dengue virus article. However, he had another one on the Ebola virus that awaited translation. Despite having no details of the article, I agreed to participate and we began to discuss how to organise the project immediately. In the early stage of our communication, Wayne treated me as an apprentice and positioned himself as an adviser. As recorded in my fieldnotes, he bluntly gave me a series of matter-of-fact instructions, such as: "I will send you the original text so that you can post it on Yeeyan to recruit other translators. If someone applies, ask him to join this QQ group [giving me the code]. After that, I'll create a QQ chat room and we'll start to translate." While giving me the instructions, he was also sending me the article to be translated. I was stunned by all those instructions in one fell swoop and had no idea which group he was talking about, so I told him, "I am new in Yeeyan. I have never recruited translators before." Wayne clarified my confusions and gave me more guidance on how to proceed with the project.

When all these issues were settled, I started to ask my potential informant questions related to my research, e.g. "Do you do translation at other times too?". Unexpectedly, he gave me a long answer, which made me feel overwhelmed again⁴:

Mm, I'm not a translator. I am a researcher. I conduct academic research in immunology, so I am exposed to these materials all the time [...] Well, with regard to these articles, they are not translated, but originally written in English. I've read a lot, so I want to translate them. Because the materials that I have are the latest, I would like to share them with other people. Moreover, when the translation is completed, I can give you some feedback. In the meantime, you can learn and improve.

I skimmed through the document and responded: "Ah, I see. Academic research. This is an academic article written by German scholars." Wayne reacted to it right away: "Yes, yes, yes. These are academic articles. Usually, for you who are not the researchers in this field, it is very difficult to find them. You see, this article is very recent, it was published in 2014." Throughout our communications, Wayne repeatedly emphasised his identity as an academic researcher, which gave me the impression that he preferred

to be recognised as a researcher rather than a translator, although he was communicating with people in a translation community. So far, Wayne had not shown any interest in knowing who I was. It was fine for him to treat me as a novice since I was unfamiliar with the organisational procedure and I was new in the community. However, I did not have a good impression of him from our initial contact. I found several of his statements to be condescending.

Firstly, by emphasizing “I’m not a translator. I am a researcher,” it sounded to me as though he was implying that translation was inferior to academic research, a perception of translation as a subordinate practice and research field. Nevertheless, I kept the thought to myself and refrained from arguing about how pervasive and important translation was and telling him that Translation was an academic discipline with a capital T. Secondly, although I might have overreacted to Wayne’s innocent self-introduction, his elaboration on why he participated in Yeeyan obviously positioned himself as ‘authority’ and a ‘gatekeeper’ by offering feedback and help so that others could learn and improve. At the time, this seemed rather arrogant. In addition, without asking about his interlocutor’s background, Wayne had taken it for granted that I was an outsider to academic research, and thus had no idea of how important timeliness was for research findings. Despite the fact that I felt annoyed, I was too green to contradict him because of my novice community experience. I was also too scared to argue with him because I was afraid of losing an informant. Worse still was the fact that I probably had no right to feel uncomfortable because I had not told him who I was yet. In this sense, I was a self-censoring and tactful ethnographer who was trying to manage what impressions to leave on others, and the digital nature of my fieldwork site made my presentation of self less candid⁵. It might be true that Wayne positioned me as a novice in terms of my community literacy and as an outsider in terms of academic experience. Likewise, I might have done the same to him when I judged his ignorance of translation as a profession and as a discipline.

Reflecting on my interactions with Wayne with hindsight, I realised that I also found some of his other statements uncomfortable, and to some extent, mansplaining, especially his comment on my appearance. During the collaboration process, there were a few instances in which Wayne and I talked to each other via voice calls, thus, I knew he was male and he knew that I was female. In one of our conversations, he asked about my background, including the question as to where I was originally from. I answered honestly, “Chongqing.” He responded immediately, “ah, no wonder you are pretty.” This comment led to my subsequent behaviour of changing my QQ profile photo, which was a real photo, to a cartoon picture. Because of this incident, I had also created a new QQ account with a gender-neutral profile picture for the purpose of conducting fieldwork, which was

exactly what Paechter (2012) did for her study. Obviously, at that stage of fieldwork, I was not only a novice Yeeyaner, but also an inexperienced ethnographer who did not think of self-protection beforehand. In the meantime, my dislike of gender-related comments were probably also influenced by the stereotypical discourse on intellectually and/or financially independent women in Chinese society which was rather derogatory, for example, using terms like *Shengdoushi* (圣斗士 or 剩斗士, 剩 as in 'leftover' and 斗士 as in 'fighters') to refer to female PhDs.

This relatively rough experience of interacting with a key player in my first collaborative translation project made me realise that when it comes to the initial positioning in an online community, community literacy and personal perceptions weigh more than the duration of one's membership obtained from registration. The more Yeeyaners I communicated with, the better I understood them and why they became members. Although Yeeyan positioned itself as a translation community, the people who participated in Yeeyan were not necessarily 'professional translators'. As noted above, Yeeyan is an online community where ordinary users, driven by similar or different motivations, get together and translate voluntarily. The participants' motivating factors in those kinds of digital platforms are so heterogeneous, fluid, diffuse, and ad hoc that it is difficult to evaluate a member's sense of belonging and how they might perceive themselves and each other. Whether Yeeyaners see themselves and each other as insiders or outsiders depends on different types of positionality.

In the case of my encounter with Wayne, the aspects of our subjectivities and identities that unfolded were multiple, such as novice community member, experienced community member, translator, and academic researcher. On the one hand, each of these aspects can be measured against an insider/outsider spectrum: Yeeyaners vs non-Yeeyaners; male vs female; or academic researchers vs non-academic researchers. On the other hand, they co-exist and are the constituents of an individual's status set: Wayne, being an experienced Yeeyaner, a non-professional translator and a male academic; and me, being a novice Yeeyaner, a translator and a female academic. More profoundly, a perspective of 'multiplex persona' also guides us to recognise the intersubjectivity embedded within this praxis event. As argued earlier, the researcher and the informants are equally important and can both become the *subjects* of the study. The aforementioned aspects of subjectivities and identities are decentred in the sense that they encompass the ethnographer and the informants' positionality. Therefore, the struggles and discomfort that I had experienced could also be the result of an attempt to keep a "balance [...] between self-as-subject and other-as-subject" (Pensoneau-Conway and Toyosaki 2011: 389). In this case, can such a balance be achieved? As will be shown in the last vignette, although we sometimes continue to hold our stringent insider

bias, at other times our perceptions can change because of the reciprocity between the ethnographer and her informants.

4.3 Professional and non-professional translators

Traditionally, “the object of ethnography is to describe the lives of people other than ourselves [...]” (Ingold 2008: 69). The online environment certainly challenges such a distinction and “confound[s] sharp boundaries between off-line and online contexts” (Coleman 2010: 492). As research has shown, ethnicity and race still matter in digital media as they do in traditional offline settings (Nakamura 2007). Reflecting on my uneasy interaction with Wayne in light of my later participation in the community and my engagement with him and other Yeeyaners pushed me to question insider and outsider identities further: perhaps it was a notion of professional expertise that exerted a great impact on our respective positionality in the community. This also helped me re-examine my prejudice against Wayne as well as achieve a degree of intersubjectivity between myself and other Yeeyaners such as Carmen and Zoe, who were recruited for the collaborative translation task.

After uploading the Ebola virus article to Yeeyan, posting a new recruitment announcement, and creating a QQ chat room for the project, Wayne finally asked about my background: “By the way, what do you study?” (assuming that I was a student). “Translation 🤔,” I said. In order to show my friendliness, I appended a smiling face to my reply. Wayne continued to ask whether I was an undergraduate or a postgraduate student and where I was studying, questions to which I answered honestly. He was surprised to find out I was a PhD student in translation and living outside Mainland China. However, he could not help giving me another lecture:

Well, although you study translation, you can’t translate novels only. You need to learn how to translate a variety of articles in different areas, for example, economics, technology and so on. You will need to find a job in the future, won’t you? Or you may work as an interpreter for a professional conference, right? I remember that we had an interpreter who majored in English in our institute a few years ago. When he first arrived, he couldn’t interpret for our meetings and conferences about professional academic research.

As seen above, even after having known that I was an insider of the domain of translation, Wayne still regarded me as a naive student living in the ivory tower of academic research. His lengthy remarks made me uncomfortable, again, at the moment of the exchange. To me, it sounded as if he thought people who studied translation were all literary translators, asserting that they/we would not be able to interpret what he regarded as *professional* content, based on one single instance. I have to confess that, as a translator and a TS researcher, I took this comment personally and felt offended. I was shocked by his ignorance of translation, translator training, as well as

his arrogance. What made it even more difficult to handle was that he himself was translating in a translation community. I had no clue why Wayne gave me a lecture on the importance of gaining *professional* knowledge and *dared* to comment on a subject in which others specialised in: to save face? To strengthen his position as a leader? Or was it simply his personality?

It is also interesting to note that our later communications were rather profession-focused and Yeeyan's community experience played a less important role. In Wayne's opinion, translation and interpreting were merely skills serving other 'real' professionals, which was an assumption that many non-translation professionals might have. From the view of a trained translator and TS researcher, translation is both a profession and a discipline. Also, due to my institutional training and practical translation experience, I had always believed that I could produce a translation of professional quality. These were my ingrained values. However, when I translated the Ebola virus article, I began to question myself. Am I really a professional?

Despite knowing that domain knowledge plays a crucial role in translation, and that I could rely on various resources to familiarise myself with the content, the medical terms, the subject knowledge, and the experimental procedures peppered through the Ebola article were all obstacles, preventing me from understanding the gist of the text. The 563-word text took me three hours to translate, which was significantly longer than would be the case when translating content that I was familiar with. I started to worry how the other two translators, Carmen and Zoe, fared with it as both asked for an extension to submit their parts. The formality of the interactions with the informants were very similar, beginning with greetings and then proceeding to seemingly casual chats on each other's backgrounds and participation motivations. Carmen, who majored in English and then became a civil servant, shared her frustration that she experienced during the translation experience. As she puts: "I indeed knew nothing about these things. I am very sorry that I couldn't do it well. Nevertheless, I promised to do it, so I forced myself to finish it. Sigh ... As the old saying goes 'differences in profession make one feel worlds apart'."

Carmen's words resonated with my own experience. To a 'professional translator' like myself, the sentence structure in the text was not complicated, but I was absolutely stymied by terms like pyrazinecarboxamide and adenovirus-vectored IFN-alpha. On the contrary, the other translator, Zoe had a very different experience. She said: "I don't think it is difficult. It might be because of my specialty. I major in biology. I often read those academic articles." These two instances, on the one hand, showcase how the status of being a professional translator was irrelevant in

this case. On the other hand, my interactions with Zoe and Carmen were significantly less frequent than that with Wayne. This might be due to the different roles that we played during the translation processes. Whilst Zoe and Carmen were translators, Wayne and I were co-project managers who, thus, needed to communicate with each other on a regular basis. It is also interesting to note that gender might have played a role in my interactions with Zoe and Carmen. As we were all female, our discussions were more gentle and did not lead to any sense of discomfort. None of us engaged in lengthy lectures or expressed judgemental remarks.

Beyond tackling the negotiations of disciplinary identity and collecting data, conducting digital ethnography also required my engagement in actual collaborative translation tasks with other Yeeyaners. The vignette narrated above, which might seem just a rather mundane anecdote from my daily life as a community member, was also an important moment for self-reflexivity. This time, I mulled over the issue: “what is professionalism in translation?”. When I initially entered the fieldsite, I probably had the insider perspective of what being a professional translator entails, for example, formal training in translation, being certified and/or paid to translate, which were my starting point for analysis. Admittedly, distinguishing professional and non-professional translators against these criteria is problematic, particularly in the context of a participatory culture as discussed in this paper. Obviously, every Yeeyaner’s translation experience varied substantially. Throughout the fieldwork, it also turned out that people with whom I had been talking in Yeeyan were well-educated and many of them were academics like me. When it came to the issue of self-identification, none of them thought of identifying themselves as a Yeeyaner or a translator. Their self-positioning was often historically, contextually, and professionally informed.

Through mutual engagement in the same collaborative translation project, I and other Yeeyaners interacted with each other regularly, shared our backgrounds and life stories, discussed various translation issues and a number of other things that came to mind. The more we talked, the better we understood each other. Like many other ethnographers, my expectation of conducting fieldwork was to understand people through observation, participation, and communication. I have become more aware that communication and participation are not a unilateral act, but achieved through mutual understanding between the co-participants, including the researchers ourselves. The process of understanding them is also a process of letting them understand ourselves. By the end of our collaboration, Wayne had recognised my translation competence and sought professional linguistic and translation advice from me. I had also recognised his professionalism in medicine and biology. I *corrected* his viewpoint on translation and he shared with me the knowledge of medicine, explaining

the use of different animals in medical experiments. Although we had never become an *insider* of each other's professional domain, we were by then *Xiaohuoban* (Chinese internet slang meaning 'little buddies') who "discover[ed], share[d] and translate[d] the essence written in the languages other than Chinese" (About Yeeyan 2020).

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have presented a retrospective narrative about my experience of conducting digital ethnographic fieldwork in a Chinese online translation community. Throughout my narrative vignettes, I have juxtaposed the insider/outsider dilemma with the emergence of a multiplex persona that I and other social actors involved alongside me were holding. The aspects of 'multiplex persona' include such roles as TS researcher, ethnographer and social scientist, as well as community member (novice or experienced), authority, gatekeeper, adviser, academic researcher and professional translator. As illustrated in the vignettes, the insider/outsider status is considerably more complicated in the digital world, especially when digital ethnography is applied to an interdisciplinary study, and this complexity is twofold.

On the one hand, the struggles with my researcher's identity at a disciplinary level described in the first vignette made me realise that instead of restricting ourselves to a single disciplinary domain, TS scholars who take on board the practice of digital ethnography can find it more rewarding to engage with the broader discussions taking place in anthropology and other related fields. Conceptually, translation can also be a heuristic tool and an interpretive lens through which disciplinary demarcations are revisited. On the other hand, the latter two vignettes delineate the negotiations between my informants and myself at the levels of community experience and professional domain. My narration in those two sections highlights how digital media complicate the issue of positionality. Being a digital native, sharing the same interest (i.e. translation), speaking the same language (i.e. Chinese), and sharing similar backgrounds (i.e. well-educated academics) did not grant me an instant trustworthy rapport with the people I studied. This was largely due to the nature of Yeeyan, a non-professional online translation community: unlike professional practices where different social actors play a specific role and engage in a specific aspect of translation (e.g. choosing a source text, linguistic transferring and editing), the self-motivated individuals gathering in a community like Yeeyan engage in online translation activities for a number of different motivations and do not even necessarily label themselves as translators. Thus, in my field site, the notion of professional translator became irrelevant regarding the negotiations of power, identities and positions.

The three confessional tales I shared above also show that when doing research on digital media, how a digital ethnographer and her informants position themselves in relation to each other is highly contextual and unpredictable because of the fluid and ad hoc characteristics of online practices and online communities. Consequently, it has become increasingly difficult, even fruitless, to establish whether someone is an insider or an outsider. Rather than continuing to be troubled by these labels, understanding positionality through the concept of multiplex persona may be a more positive and constructive notion as it recognises a dynamic, complex and fluid situation of both the digital ethnographer and her informants' positionality, as well as the intersubjectivity between the parties. The intersubjectivity is first concerned with the equality between the researcher and the researched. That is to say the ethnographer is one of the people in the community, instead of being an authority. The intersubjectivity also relates to the mutual understanding achieved between the researcher and the informants through their interactions.

As social beings in a world where digital media and technologies are ubiquitous, we are located in a variety of divergent, often vacillating moments across time and space. Our personae are open to constant changes because of our continuous exposure to new social events, social settings, new people, new experiences and new stories. While an insider/outsider dichotomy is useful in diagnosing identity confusions and negotiations, multiplex persona helps us explain where these negotiations come from, why they occur and how we can overcome the dilemmas. In its abstract form, multiplex persona is also a perspective that views positionality as a decentred entity that encompasses our multi-faceted characters, roles and aspects of identities, presented to and perceived by others and ourselves in the momentary communicative events.

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Biography

Chuan Yu is a Lecturer in Translation Studies at Monash University. Her research lies at the intersection of Translation Studies, Anthropology, and Media and Communication Studies. Her current research focuses on collaborative translation, online translation communities, the use of ethnographic methodologies in TS research, citizen media and Chinese internet research. She writes and publishes in the areas of translation and social sciences, discussing online translation theoretically and methodologically. Chuan also undertakes translation work and teaches translation.



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Notes

¹ Throughout this paper, my use of Translation Studies excludes Interpreting Studies.

² My reflections are limited to my personal experience during a particular period of time in a particular context. They do not represent the experiences of other graduate students and scholars in my department or in other departments at other universities.

³ Given that gender plays an important role in the reflection, genders are signified through the choice of anonymised names.

⁴ The conversations were conducted in Chinese. These are my own verbatim translations.

⁵ As not only a novice community member in Yeeyan, but also a novice ethnographer, I was thinking about using this first collaborative project to test the water and the feasibility of engaging in the community activities. When I decided to use the exchange between Wayne and myself for research purposes, which was during the conversation presented in this paper, I sent him my study information sheet and sought his consent. Due to the convenience of digital technologies, I successfully retrieved the authentic dialogues from the chat history stored in QQ.