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The transnational flow of BBC
Sherlock: Investigating the role
of Chinese fans in the success of
BBC Sherlock in Mainland China



Photo: Writers' Strike: Ray Chiang

**Centre
for Cultural
Policy
Studies**

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1 Introduction

1.1 Research approach

In Mainland China, which is considered one of the biggest potential cultural markets in the world, western cultural works have always stood a ground among viewers. Apart from Hollywood blockbuster movies, which have gained much recognition throughout the years, the popularity of Western TV shows and films have also witnessed a massive rise. While viewers downloaded episodes of TV shows through P2P services and continue to do so today, in 2010, Sohu TV's purchase of *Lost*, followed by *The Big Bang Theory*, *Gossip Girl*, *Modern Family* and many others, started to change the way fans access those TV shows. At the same time, as Chinese investors invest more in Hollywood films, many producers are also looking to organising more commercial events in China in response. This is partly due to global distribution of these cultural productions, but also a result of the expansion of social networking sites and fan communities. The expanding interests of Chinese viewers cause the formulation of 'very specific singular interests' (Damm and Thomas, 2006: 5) especially online.

However there exists a natural 'gap' that local viewers come across in their reception of these works: geographical and time difference, language and cultural difference, and also policies and access to the Internet, which is a distinctive issue in Mainland China. With this as a background, the essay tries to identify how the TV series, BBC Sherlock gained such popularity among Chinese viewers online and also explores the role of Chinese Sherlock fans in promoting the series. Starting from the huge popularity of Sherlock in Mainland China, it investigates why fans are attracted to Sherlock, how they actively try to narrow the 'gap' and what other factors have played a part in the process. Also, it presents fans' perspectives of the changing 'gap.' The essay argues that in the special status of Mainland China, Chinese fans of Sherlock have played an active part in contributing to the spread and promotion of Sherlock, but are also either assisted or restricted by online platforms, government policies and Internet access.

1.2 Outline of chapters

The introductory chapter explores the current landscape of research by reviewing some of the literature in the area of study; therefore setting the definitions and parameters that would be used in the project. Also, it gives a detailed explanation of the methodology used.

The analysis chapter first states the current popularity of BBC Sherlock in China. It then brings forward the concept of the ‘gap’ that exists in the transnational flow of cultural products. The chapter then goes on to exploring how fans of Sherlock, as active audiences, have contributed to the changing of this ‘gap’, what factors affect the process, and also how fans’ perception of the ‘gap’ have changed.

The last chapter concludes the study and reflects upon the research process. It also poses possible directions for future research and practice in this field.

1.3 Definitions and parameters

The study selects various parameters to conduct a more feasible research. In terms of cultural works, it studies the fans of BBC’s Sherlock (2010), a British TV series created by Steven Moffat and Mark Gatiss. The series is a contemporary adaptation of the Sherlock Holmes series, originally by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Since its debut in 2010, BBC’s Sherlock has seen three seasons, and has become a worldwide phenomenon-sold to over 200 territories (BBC News, 2014), and its season three has become the UK's most watched drama series since 2001. (Radio Times, 2014)

In terms of geographic parameters, it focuses on fans of BBC’s Sherlock in Mainland China. This is due to a number of reasons. Firstly, the success of Sherlock in China is a huge one, and one in which fans played a very important part in promoting, while no official sources of viewing and promotion were introduced. As a very direct western-to-eastern cultural flow, it is of great significance to study the popularization of Sherlock in China. Secondly, being a researcher,

a fan and a user of many social media platforms from Mainland China, studying a familiar region allows for more convenience in obtaining information and selecting research participants.

Last and most importantly, though it is not to be ignored that in many aspects of fan studies and television studies many academics are calling out for a more ‘transcultural’ (Chin and Morimoto, 2013) ‘regional’ or ‘geolinguistical’ approach (Sinclair, Jacka and Cunningham, 1996), the unique status of Mainland China, with its national broadcasting and internet restrictions, still proves to be a big issue for Chinese fans, which is different from other Asian countries. In this case, a transnational approach is more practical because it covers the special condition of Mainland China.

The most important concept that is to be used in the essay is the ‘fan’, which is the main subject of study and data collection. The word ‘fan’ is abbreviated from ‘fanatic’, which in history has developed to refer to ‘excessive and mistaken enthusiasm’ (Jenkins, 2013: 12). The concept of a ‘fan’ was initially a passive and rather negative response to the star system (Lewis, 1992: 10), and pushed fans to an area of alienation - fanatic, socially weak groups of people without a life.

Hall’s theory of an actively interpreting audience in the decoding process (1980) was considered a changing point for the study of fans. Early researchers such as De Certeau(1984) and Fiske (2001) all contribute to a more active image of the fan. De Certeau suggests that audiences interpret texts beyond the dominant meaning - those monopolised by the ‘elites’. He compares these audiences to poachers who “move across lands belonging to someone else, like nomads poaching their way across fields they did not write, despoiling the wealth of Egypt to enjoy it for themselves.”(1984: 174)

Fiske believes that fan culture is a heightened format of popular culture, and that fans are ‘excessive readers’ (1989). He states that audiences of popular culture to a certain extent engage in semiotic productivity, whether meanings or pleasures, out of cultural products, but those who can be characterised as ‘fans’ often can produce texts that can be circulated and thus form communities and culture (Lewis, 1992: 30). Also, he points out that fans and the cultural industries share a complicated relationship in a sense that fans cannot produce texts without

cultural products, but they also provide producers with free and useful feedback for further marketing. (Lewis, 1992: 47)

De Certeau's concept of textual poaching was then extended by Jenkins to explain his concept of the fan and fandom. Jenkins views fans as the centre of the sphere, people who are active participants, readers and consumers. Through a more self-reflective and sociological ethnographic approach, Jenkins attempts to defend and justify the role and image of 'the fan' in audience. In his book, *Textual Poachers*, he identifies at least five dimensions of media fan culture in his works: its relationship to a particular mode or reception; its role in encouraging viewer activism; its function as an interpretive community; its particular traditions of cultural production; its status as an alternative social community (Jenkins, 2013: 277-280).

Jenkins refers to his subjects of study, fans of television and films as the 'media fans' - embracing multiple texts such as American and British dramatic series, Hollywood genre films, comic books, Japanese animation, popular fiction especially science fiction, fantasy and mystery and at the same time constructs boundaries that generally exclude other types of texts(2013: 1).

Hills gives out a more common definition of the 'fan' as 'somebody who is obsessed with a particular star, celebrity, film, TV programme, band; somebody who can produce reams of information on their subject of fandom, and can quote their favoured lines or lyrics, chapters and verse.'(Hills, 2002: ix) Fans are often highly articulate and can interpret media texts in various ways. Also, very importantly, fans are not socially atomised, and instead participate in communities and activities.

In the essay, the concept of Jenkins's 'media fan' is adopted, referring specifically to fans of BBC *Sherlock* as 'the most visible and identifiable of audiences' (Lewis, 1992: 1). The distinction between a 'fan' and a 'viewer' or a 'non-fan' here is mainly through a receptive and productive point of view-fans actively understand the original text in various ways, but not necessarily in a resistive way. Also, fans engage in communities, big or small, and may produce fan works in different ways, and the level of participation or quantity of production does not affect the status of an audience as a fan. Lastly, to be a 'fan', one must also identify as a fan

him/herself. This is very important in gaining a sense of identity when investigating the many motives of fans in interviews.

According to a recent online investigation conducted in 2013, some main features of Chinese viewers of British TV series are as follows:

- **Relatively balanced gender proportions:** Compared to a 58:42 male: female ratio in the overall viewers of online videos in China, the ratio of British TV viewers is 51:49.
- **Young, educated:** 70% of these viewers are aged between 21 and 35 years old. 69% of the viewers have a degree of Bachelor's and upper.
- **Unbalanced income and expense:** 32% of them are white-collar workers, 25% students. 30% have a month average income of 5000-9999 RMB, while an equal amount of viewers are students who do not have income or have an income of lesser than 1000 RMB.

(Enfodesk, 2013)

These young, educated and relatively prosperously lived Chinese audiences are from a generation of people who have gotten to know the Internet since they were young, and therefore are very used to the online environment as today. They mostly grew up watching pirated DVDs and then on to using P2P services to download videos. It is from this group of people that emerges a more specific group of audiences - the fans of Sherlock. They are not only viewers of the series, but may also be enthusiasts, reviewers, translators, cultural porters creators and even producers of amateur content.

1.4 Current landscape of study

1.4.1 Western fan studies

Hills (2002) suggests that a general theory of media fandom should be established, because too many previous works have been focusing on cultures of single works/media perhaps as an

attempt to separate themselves from other areas of study. However, this ‘immediately cuts themselves off from the transmedia and multimedia consumption of media fans.’(2002: 2)

He points out several flaws of past studies of fan culture, for example moral dualism in dealing with the ‘good’ fan and ‘bad’ non-fan in trying to break the stereotype of the image of fans. By arguing for the many contradictions that exist in fans and their activities, Hills tries to present an all rounded and relatively rational way of studying fandom. That is, the ‘dialectic of value’ of fan cultures:

- Both challenge and intensify commodification;
- Display self-reflexivity and what might be termed reflexive pre-reflexivity;
- Function as ‘interpretive communities’ while also providing a shared cultural space for intensely private sentiments and attachments;
- Construct hierarchical forms of internal and external cultural distinction/difference while preserving ideals of the ‘fan community.’

(Hills, 2002: 182)

Also, he argues that the online fandoms cannot merely be viewed as a reflection of ‘offline’ fandoms, as the importance of new media is on addressing the mediation instead of ‘new’.(2002: 172)

Until recent years, the majority of fan studies has been focusing mostly on Western media and fan communities. This situation does have to do with the fact that many studies on local fandoms are in different languages and is thus difficult to be understood by western scholars.

Though many local fan studies have proliferated over time, few studies focus on the reception of transnational or transcultural reception of cultural works by fans. According to Darling-Wolf, even fewer works ‘have considered the significance of fan culture on an increasingly global scene, fostered in particular by the advent of the Internet as a tool for intercultural, and potentially worldwide, fan activity’(Darling-Wolf, 2004).

Darling-Wolf's study on fans from 14 countries on a global online fan community for popular Japanese idol Kimura Takuya explores how fans define their global identities and the process of 'virtual cross-cultural identity formation'(2004). One of the main findings was that even though fans have different national and cultural backgrounds, they constructed a virtual, common cultural identity which is able to unite all participants. However, it is to be noted that as a global fan community, its choice of language is English - which influences communication between fans from different backgrounds to some extent. This is why most of the participants in the community are usually middle class and likely to be higher educated, therefore with higher English skills.

Kääpä and Guan (2011), studying the translocal reception of two different films, the Finnish and Chinese reception of *Jade Warrior* (Jadesoturi, 2006) and *A Christmas Story* (Joulutarina, 2007), tries to investigate how audiences in different cultural contexts understand transnational cultural products. By analysing audiences and their comments of the chosen works on 'culturally specific online communities (which are linguistically if not geographically inclusive contexts)', they examine how these audiences utilize the transcultural works in different ways, such as personal politics, criticizing social problems, 'critiquing normative conceptions of national cinema to celebrating cultural diversity'. Through analysis, they argue that transnational circulation of cultural products causes different modes of audience engagement. Also, these audiences in different contexts generate meanings that may "challenge the reductionist uses of transnational cinema as Hollywood's other, especially in the audiences' sets of expectations about frequently used designators such as popular culture and commercialism."(2011)

Chin and Morimoto (2013) try to present a broader way of understanding border-crossing fandoms by emphasizing the use of the term 'transcultural' over 'transnational'. Through a series of discussions such as the reception and fan production of *Harry Potter* and works of *Leslie Cheung* in Japan, they argue that 'the genesis of transcultural fandom lies in the affinities of industry and/or semiotic practice between two or more popular cultural contexts'. Compared to a cultural or national difference or similarity, fans identify themselves as fans to a larger extent because of the affinity between themselves and the transcultural object. The concept of a transcultural fandom is broader than that of the transnational, providing much more possibilities.

This approach is actually similar to that of Sinclair, Jacka and Cunningham(1996) who adapts a peripheral view in studying global TV. They point out main transformations of the audiovisual landscape through post-Fordism, and criticise the view of cultural imperialism. They state that though discussions of globalization is often countered with the local, which is equated with the national, they would consider giving emphasis to the ‘regional’, where it is understood to be both ‘geolinguistic and cultural as well as geographic’(Sinclair, Jacka and Cunningham, 1996: 23).

1.4.2 Fan studies in China

In comparison, studies of fans in China are relatively scarce. Most of the research identified are fixated on the theories of western fan studies (see Tao 2009, Cai and Peng, 2011) or offer only a descriptive view of fans in China, failing to address the inner motives and how they identify themselves as a global audience. These studies also tend to take a more negative approach towards fan culture because it is often related to consumerism and misleading of youths. In most cases, the emphasis is on how to guide fan culture towards a healthy end.

On the other hand, studies conducted on the unique nature of subtitle groups in China offer much insight for studying fans. Jiang (2011) analyses Chinese online subtitle groups working on popular US TV series, and tries to identify some of the key factors in these fans’ behaviours. In the study, much emphasis is placed on the demographic status and inner motives of fans participating in subtitle groups. Yu (2012) investigates some of China’s most famous subtitle groups, providing the background, history and current status of these groups. The study focuses on how subtitle groups in China act as a ‘bridge between China and global cultural products in the online era’, and what threats they might face as grassroots organisations.

Zhang and Alatan (2013) embraces a different approach by discussing the trend of ‘domestication’ in online Chinese subtitles of US TV series, and brings into discussion the traditional theories in Chinese translation, and comes to a conclusion that the modern ‘domestication’ of subtitles is on one hand related to traditional translation methods but also includes much unique Chinese online languages and terms, which is a result of both the digital era and also the personnel structure of subtitle groups - many are amateur translators and not

professionally trained to translate foreign texts. However, they also argue that subtitles made by fans are more relevant to the viewers' daily lives and therefore can be better understood, making it a unique cultural product of the digital era.

As of now, Chinese fan studies have not yet formed a system of its own. Regarding transnational reception of TV series, most research done have not touched on the inner motives of viewers or how they define themselves as part of the global audience. As one of the most popular foreign TV series in recent years, the popularity of BBC Sherlock and the outburst of its Chinese fans, prove to be an excellent ground to study the forming of a transnational fandom and the many issues that exist within.

1.5 Methodology

1.5.1 Methods used and basic information

Cultural studies 'focuses on actual audiences in natural settings rather than theoretically or laboratory constructed audiences' (Ruddock, 2007: 11). Therefore, to understand the many social and historical contexts of fans, the essay mainly applied qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews and other nethnographic methods, combined with secondary quantitative data from online sources.

As the main source of information collection, online, semi-constructed in-depth interviews were used to gain a detailed understanding of individual Sherlock fans in China, digging into their experience in the fandom, their motives for being a fan, their views of identity as a global audience, and how they understand the current status of the 'gap' in transnational flows of western works.

The outline of the interview is made up of 15 questions, which covers general topics such as how the interviewee first knew about Sherlock, why, and through what channels they watch Sherlock. It also touches on what kind of fan production or activity the interviewee has participated in. Lastly, questions regarding their opinions on the 'gap' in watching Sherlock, and how things

have changed for them in viewing and consuming foreign cultural products over the past ten years or so, are asked. Before the actual selection, a test interview was conducted with one particular fan to gain some feedback and to modify the outline.

The selection process was set on Sina Weibo, home to over 50 billion registered users (Sina Tech, 2013), and the most popular micro-blogging site in China. A public post was made with the BBC Sherlock tag (#神探夏洛克#) to recruit volunteers, and was open for fans to apply via private messaging. After collecting the information of potential interviewees, a simple interview agreement stating the basic information and ethics of the interview was given to potential interviewees, and those who agreed were then asked to arrange a time period to attend the interview. Through this selection, 9 fans were chosen as final participants.

The demographic information and online IDs of participants are as follows:

Online ID English/Chinese	Gender	Age Range	City of Residence	Occupation
Jufan/焗饭	F	21~25	Beijing	Undergraduate History student
Qingniao/青岛明月汤	F	21~25	Beijing	Worker in IT sector
Chou/下雨了打晚了	F	21~25	Shanghai	Business Master student
57/Mr.57	F	26~30	Beijing	Freelance illustrator
Qianqiu/千秋	F	16~20	Beijing	Undergraduate Art Student
Juanshu/倦抒	F	31~35	Shanghai	Worker in education sector
Ququan/月泉泉	F	21~25	Beijing	Interior designer
Misaqu/弥撒曲	F	31~35	Beijing	Worker in film sector

Anguang/暗光	F	16~20	Beijing	High school student
Xiaojiu/妖小九	F	21~25	Beijing	Film studies Masters student

Figure 1 Statistics of interviewees

The interview took place online through Chinese instant messenger Tencent QQ, and was held in a relatively informal way. Though the outline of the interview was structured, the interview itself did not strictly follow the outlines but focused on the personal experience of the interviewee, allowing them to express their ideas clearly. After transcribing the interviews, the records were then translated into English.

Another part of information collection comes from public online platforms, such as Youku, Douban, one of the biggest cultural social platforms and Weibo, China's biggest microblog and social media site. These information gathered are mainly numeral data, comments and opinions on the series itself, which help indicate the popularity of Sherlock in China.

1.5.2 Ethics

Methods of netnography and in-depth interviews conducted online are naturally faced with ethical issues. Kozinets raises possible considerations for conducting netnography online, for example, whether online communities count as public spaces, how to gain informed consent from online community members, who owns data on online forums, and so on (Kozinets, 2009: 140). In online spaces, the complexity of obtaining such information is certainly higher. Firstly, it may be hard to determine the nature and ownership of these data. Secondly, when asking for much accurate information such as age and income, it is in fact hard to sure whether the information given are truly accurate.

In the case of interviews, the risk of obtaining false information is reduced. In the selection process, the researcher clearly presented the intentions of study, and also how and what parts of the interviews will be used. The interviewees were aware of the nature of this research as stated by the interviewer in the interview request:

*The interview on Chinese Sherlock fans is conducted in text only, through instant messenger QQ in private, and lasts about 1 hour in total. Some of the questions may be on the interviewee's viewing and consumption habits. Personal information such as the interviewee's online ID (can be chosen by interviewee), gender, age, geographic location, education and job status will be collected for justification purposes only. The contents of the interviews are strictly restricted to the use in the essay itself, and will **not** be posted elsewhere.*

The main reason for using online IDs (such as Weibo ID or QQ alias) is to protect the interviewees' privacy. Undoubtedly, for users who are used to life and communication online, their online identities may be equally important, functioning exactly like real names and therefore should be treated in the same way (Kozinets, 2009: 144). Despite this, in the specific case of this research, legal issues regarding piracy are an important factor in the interviews. Keeping a certain level of anonymity in interviewing lowers the risk of being rejected and at the same time, combined with demographic data of the interviewees, raises the credibility of data.

1.5.3 Strengths & Limitations

As a qualitative method, the interviews aim at gaining an overall view of how the interviewee's personal experience as a Sherlock fan, tries to identify some of the reasons these fans are attracted to Sherlock, and their opinions on the 'gap' in transnational fandom. The findings in the interviews and online platforms, however, cannot and does not represent the experience of the whole of Chinese Sherlock fans or are able to draw a quantitative conclusion on others. To gain a general view of fans of Sherlock, second hand data was collected from official online surveys conducted by research companies.

Conducting in-depth interviews online and through text-based IM services is a choice made due to the specific nature of the research and the main audience of BBC Sherlock itself.

Firstly, compared to face-to-face interviews, online-based interviews are able to conveniently connect with interviewees across different areas. Secondly, using IM as the platform of

interviews lowers the workload in transcribing interview records, not missing any detailed information in recording, or causing any trouble of understanding if there are accents or online slangs used. Thirdly, using text based IM allows for more comfort and privacy for interviewees and therefore has a much higher rate of being accepted by participants. On one hand, compared to email interviews, text based IM interviews have the advantage of letting interviewees decide when and what to respond to the interviewer, and be able to measure their statements before they send them. On the other hand, it is also a relatively synchronous method, allowing for real-time reactions.

However, CMC (computer-mediated communications) is often limited by the utilization of medium used. CMC as a research method causes the loss of expressions of emotion, and also body language, which plays an important role in interpersonal communication. The main weakness of interviewing through IM is that the interaction it offers may be ‘thin and often rather rushed and superficial’ (Kozinets, 2009: 46). However, considering the unique nature of Sherlock fans in China, who are relatively young, extremely active online and much used to the online environment and online slangs, using text-based IM as the means of communication is actually closer to the fans’ natural activities-posting and discussing online and in an ID-based (instead of real-person) situation, mirroring their actual communication status. Using text-based IM as a platform for interviews can narrow the psychological distance between the interviewer and interviewee, and can provide a more casual and equal atmosphere of communication. Also, some follow-up interviews are conducted, depending on the feedback from the first interview. The second interview focuses more on the individual’s experience and specific points where required.

Another weakness in methods is that due to the nature of the Chinese language, many terms and expressions do not have a very accurate English meaning. This can range from a Chinese idiom to modern Chinese (even Japanese) online slangs. In order to shorten the gap of understanding to the minimum, notes and a list of terms used are provided both in and out of the essay, giving more information of the origin and meaning of these terms. Also, the process of transcribing and translating the interviews might to some extent be affected by the researcher’s own experience

and understanding. As a solution to minimize this influence, the interviews were literally translated and directly quoted where possible.

In summary, a combination of second-hand quantitative data collection, first-hand depth interviews conducted via text-based IM services, and also information collected on public online platforms takes into consideration each method's strengths and weaknesses and also the nature of the fans being studied.

2 Analysis

2.1 The ‘Sherlock trend’

Just after the extreme popularity of US TV series since Prison Break (2004) and The Big Bang Theory (2007), in 2012, BBC’s Sherlock season 2 received massive attention from Chinese viewers, announcing the advent of the British TV era. Despite not been officially broadcasted in Mainland China, Chinese social media platforms such as Weibo was hoarded with information and discussions related to the series within a month after its airing in the UK. These news, interviews, discussions of actors, behind the scenes, scripts and costumes all contributed to a new wave of viewing.

BBC’s Sherlock is the most popular British TV series online in Mainland China as to date. On the British TV channel of China’s largest online video website, Youku, BBC Sherlock’s three seasons are listed top three in most-played videos - the third season getting over 70 million views on Youku only (Youku, July 2014). Compared to second-popular British TV series Downton abbey, the hits for the third season is more than three times the amount of views for Downton Abbey’s season one.



Figure 2 Top watched British TV series on Youku (accessed 22nd July, 2014)

Of course, compared to local TV series released in the same year, Sherlock’s viewership is relatively low, but this is due to various reasons. Most local TV shows have more than 40 episodes per season, making it difficult to simply compare the total views of different TV series.

Also, local series have the advantage of language, which is also important in the audience's selection of shows. The following table compares viewing data of three seasons of different TV series released in 2012 to 2013, BBC Sherlock, Downton Abbey and China's DBI (新神探联盟), which adapts a similar way of portraying 'old detectives' in modern life as BBC Sherlock has.

TV series	Country of origin	Episodes	Total views (million)	Average views per episode (million)
BBC Sherlock Season 2	UK	3	24.5	8.13
Downton Abbey Season 3	UK	9 (includes Christmas special)	11.5	1.26
DBI	Mainland China	35	46.6	1.33

Figure 3 A comparison of views for three TV series released in 2012-2013 on Youku

Source: Youku Index (accessed 25th August 2014)

It can be observed that there is a very big difference in the amount of episodes between Sherlock and DBI, which is also one of the reasons local TV series have more total views. However, the average views per episode of BBC Sherlock, which is much higher than that of the other two series, proves its popularity online.

The extreme popularity of Sherlock in China even caught the attention of those back in the UK. In December 2013, British Prime Minister David Cameron set up an official Weibo account online during his visit to China. Surprisingly, in a question-and-answer activity on Weibo where Chinese netizens could submit questions, posts asking the Prime Minister to 'urge Sherlock crew to be quick!' received nearly ten thousand reposts. What is even more amusing is that the Prime Minister replied to the question in his official response, stating that 'I know that Benedict [Cumberbatch] is hugely popular in China; he's a big star. Sadly I can't tell them what to do, as it's an independent company...' and that 'I will do everything I can to say that people in China want more Sherlock Holmes and more of the modern version.' (The Daily Dot, 2013)

One month later, Sherlock producers Sue Vertue and Steven Moffat addressed their greetings to Chinese fans, stating that ‘sometimes it is a mystery to us how our mad idea of updating the Sherlock Holmes stories has found fans as far away as China.’ (Kejixun, 2014)

One might wonder what are the main factors that caused this tremendous and unexpected trend of Sherlock in China. In fact, the first round of reception of Sherlock in China is through pirated videos on the Internet. In the study, the active role played by these Sherlock fans is the main focus of discussion. As audiences of transnational cultural works, they are also influenced by many external factors in their reception process. These external factors create a natural ‘gap,’ which will be discussed in the following section.

2.2 The ‘gap’ for audiences in transnational flows of cultural works

In the Internet era, much convenience is granted in the transmission of data and information, easily crossing the geographic borders, which, in the past, are truly difficult barriers to overcome. In a sense, piracy has succeeded in transporting many western works into everyday Chinese audience’s lives and, as a result, cast much influence. In the process of the transnational flow of cultural works, a natural ‘gap’ exists between the origin of production and the foreign audiences. This ‘gap’ can be concluded as follows:

2.2.1 Geographical barriers and time difference

Geographical barriers and time difference is the unchangeable factor that exists in transnational fandom. Some basic outcomes of this difference may be that the viewers in another country may not be able to view the show as soon as it airs, and they may not be able to attend conventions and activities held in other countries and get in touch with the cast and crew in person.

As online technologies develop, time difference issue can be solved to an almost instant status. During the broadcast of Sherlock’s season three, pirated videos were available for download just a little more than ten minutes after the original air time, while Youku’s official translated version was broadcasted three hours after the original. What is more significant, however, is the mass

number of Chinese fans who chose to use live streaming services provided by foreign websites to watch the raw version of the show live - at 3am in the morning.

When asked about the ‘gap’, one interviewee, Misaqu explains:

For me the only gap now is the ‘geographical distance between me and the creators and cast of the show’. She states that apart from this, she does not feel much of a gap because the speed of the Internet allows fans to obtain information updates at almost the same time.

(Personal Interview, 2014)

2.2.2 Language barrier and cultural difference

The second gap that exists between Chinese fans and the original work is the language difference - unlike many European languages, which have common originations, Chinese (Mandarin) uses a completely different set of characters. It is impossible for one to understand English without a proper English education. Also, as a fast-paced crime series, Sherlock is also unlike everyday soap operas. It often brings up complicated sentences, idioms and specialized vocabulary, making it even harder for viewers to understand. It is no wonder the majority of Chinese Sherlock viewers has a high status of education.

Many of the interviewees stated that language is the primary issue in their reception of Sherlock. A young university student Quanquan explains how language plays an important part in understanding Sherlock:

Quanquan:

English language skills are very important in viewing western works like Sherlock. Because young people like us nowadays start learning English since we are very small, it is natural that we have less obstacle in accepting foreign shows. However, for viewers with a relatively low level of English education, it would be extremely difficult for them to quickly

understand the contents in Sherlock. Even if the videos come with Chinese subtitles, they are still too fast to be understood in an instant.

(Personal Interview, 2014)

In a follow-up interview, she also states her perception of the influence of fundamental cultural differences on different platforms:

Quanquan:

Also I think discussions on Chinese and English-based platforms are a bit different, perhaps because of our different ways of thinking. Sometimes I am surprised when I read western fans' analysis of the plot or characters, because I never thought that far. Most of the contents on Chinese platforms are translations or reposts of those on Tumblr or other global platforms, or some funny pictures, even though there are deeper discussions as well.

(Personal Interview, 2014)

2.2.3 Cultural policies and internet access

In Mainland China, the State Administration of Radio Film and Television (SARFT) has strict control over cultural imports, limiting the number and content of works that can be officially broadcasted. For example, according to an official paper regarding management of foreign television drama imports by SARFT in 2012, the administration aims at strengthening the examination and approval management methods of both importing new series and renewing distribution for following seasons. One very important restriction is the restriction of broadcast on TV channels: 'foreign shows must not be broadcast during prime time. The time broadcasted for foreign shows must not exceed 25% of each channel's daily total.' (SARFT, 2012). As a result, major online video websites have been fighting over this newly developed market since 2005.

Quanquan, who was from Taiwan, poses some thoughts comparing Taiwan and Mainland China:

Quanquan:

I lived in Taiwan before primary school, and there were lots of cultural products from Japan and America, bookstores were full of foreign products, and you could watch TV series from all over the world, so for me, it was easy to obtain foreign products ten years ago. When I came to the Mainland I felt a bit isolated, and also the Chinese internet has banned many sites, so I couldn't find the things I wanted to read or watch.

(Personal Interview, 2014)

As for internet access in China, according to China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC)'s 33rd Statistical Report on Internet Development in China, by the end of December 2013, though the number of Internet users in China had reached 618 million, and the internet penetration rate was 45.8%(CNNIC, 2013), still low compared to most developed countries, for example, UK (89.90%), and United States (86.75%) (Internetlivestats, 2014). This limits the population of people who can get access to cultural products distributed online.

Apart from normal access to the Internet, another major issue that is special in Mainland China is the censorship, often referred to as 'The Great Firewall of China'. Many foreign websites are constantly blocked, limiting access to some major services. For example, many of Google's services, Tumblr, Facebook and Twitter are not accessible in Mainland China. This makes it quite difficult for fans to engage in global fandom discussions and also download legal products from the Internet. To 'cross the firewall' (翻墙, a phrase frequently used by Chinese netizens), many countermeasures have been developed, such as purchasing VPN services, altering host lists, installing specialized internet browsers and so on. However, not all online users are capable of obtaining these services and technologies, and therefore have limited access to blocked foreign sites.

When asked about the accessibility of certain platforms and services, Qianqiu explained:

If there were legal downloading platforms like Steam, I would definitely pay for downloading... but it is difficult to use Google services in China. Compared to pirated videos, iTunes is also not that popular.

(Personal Interview, 2014)

Another interviewee, Juanshu, explains that the unstable status of the Chinese internet is the main reason she does not engage in the global fandom:

Juanshu:

Yes, I mainly stay on Tieba(Baidu's 贴吧, a post-bar, similar to a forum where people can freely participate in discussion of a certain topic, which is the theme of the bar). I don't like foreign sites because they are censored, and you have to 'cross the firewall' for most of them. I'm very lazy, whenever I open the software, viewing local sites becomes very slow.

There is still, geographical and language gaps that exist, but if not for other limiting factors, like the internet status or global payment, I think many fans would want to obtain first-hand information, and be willing to purchase legal copies of the series (as long as they are not too expensive). On purchasing, though iTunes has a lot of resources, but still, many of its features are not available or not stable for Chinese users, so I guess that is part of the 'gap' as well.

(Personal Interview, 2014)

Having presented an overall background of the current status, the following section will begin to explore why Sherlock became such a popular trend in China despite these existing gaps: The quality of the show itself, which turned viewers into fans of Sherlock; the ways fans have participated in narrowing the 'gap' for the spread of Sherlock; other factors that have contribute to the process, and how fans view the change of the 'gap'.

2.3 Transnational content: turning viewers into fans

The spread of Sherlock in China is almost an entirely spontaneous one: what Jenkins identifies as a grassroots convergence - the 'increasingly central roles that digitally empowered consumers play in shaping the production, distribution and reception of media content.' (Jenkins, 2006: 155) According to findings in the interviews, one main factor that drives Chinese fans to love Sherlock is its content and portrayal.

Jenkins points uses 'pop cosmopolitanism' to explain many issues in transnational fan cultures. He explains that in the age of media convergence, the flow across national borders is 'facilitated by both commercial strategies and grassroots tactics' (Jenkins, 2006: 154). Pop cosmopolitans, according to Jenkins, embrace cultural difference and want to distinguish themselves from their local communities. The transcultural flows of popular culture 'inspires new forms of global consciousness and cultural competency' (2006: 155).

In the case of Sherlock's popularization in China, the charm of transnational content sure is appealing to young, educated Chinese viewers who have global insights and are attracted to western cultures. The element of Sherlock, as well as the quality and innovative portrayal of the original story, is the main reason many fans are in love with the show:

Jufan:

...I was attracted by the series because the element of 'Sherlock Holmes'. I have read the original novels when I was a child, and the movie played by RDJ and Jude Law is also one of my favorites. So I have already been a fan of Sherlock Holmes itself before I first saw BBC Sherlock. But when I finished watching the series, I was amazed at the modern elements shown in the series. The story lines are awesome, which make me feel that I am contemporary with Holmes. But in the scenes of 21st Century, you always can get a glimpse of the shadow of that old, elegant era. Many subtleness coincide with the original work, making the series a very exquisite one. So I think the story is the most important factor in

the series, it's the soul of the whole series. Those outstanding actors also express the substance of the series perfectly. It is worth watching many, many times...

Juanshu:

I've always wondered what Sherlock Holmes and Watson would be like if they were living in the modern world as we are today. Therefore, the series was just what I was looking for. Looking for traces of the original novel while watching the series became great fun for me. Also, though I feel there is a difference in personality of the main characters compared to the novel, I have to admit that the BBC version sure appeals to audiences, the actors have also done a brilliant job in portraying the characters.

(Personal Interviews, 2014)

Also, the setting of two main male leads (which is different from the original novel where Watson was more of an aide) is also one of the reasons fans, especially female fans, were attracted to the BBC portrayal. This little hint of 'bromance' somehow ignited great interest among young Chinese fans:

Misaqu:

The chemistry between the two actors is just right, their appearances and styles are complementary. The creators are good at discovering potential between the two characters, amplifying some unsaid relationships - from partners to soulmates, bringing the nature of their relationship to a much higher level, without putting intended hints on homosexual issues (I mean in the first two seasons).

Anguang:

I think 'bromance' is a kind of technique, and also sort of a trend nowadays? Sometimes one character alone may not be that attractive, but the chemistry between two of them may. I guess many fans like watching Sherlock simply because of the 'bromance' elements...

(Personal Interviews, 2014)

It is on the basis of the story of Sherlock Holmes and the chemistry between the two main characters that attracts viewers to watch the series. Through reading into the cultural texts of the show, viewers become fans, who then promote the show through various ways. However, one major gap that stands before them is probably the difference in language. The next section discusses how fans contribute to narrowing the language gap mentioned before, by forming amateur subtitle groups and translating organisations.

2.4 Fan subtitle groups: breaking the language barrier

As previously stated, any flow of cultural works into a culture with a different language meets this natural barrier of audiences not being able to understand the source language. Fan subtitle groups are not only tightly related to fan culture, but also play multiple roles in transnational communication.

For Chinese fans, the consumption of foreign cultural works is usually limited to two channels: firstly, officially translated and broadcasted works - dubbed versions of shows on television and films shown in theatres. However, official resources are mainly restricted by SARFT, which limits the availability of works that can be publicly accessed by citizens. Also, translating, dubbing and broadcasting all takes much time and effort. Take British TV shows broadcasted on CCTV for example, many classics such as *Jane Eyre* (1983) and *Pride and Prejudice* (1995) were translated and shown on TV, but more modern works are still scarce, because there is an absolute limit of time in broadcasting.

The second channel of obtaining cultural works is through pirated resources, which came into being side by side with the advent of video recording devices. Before the Internet became a part of everyday life for Chinese viewers, pirated CDs and DVDs roamed the streets. Pirated copies were cheap, and consumers had much more choices, but its dealers valued profit much more than quality, many of these translations were done by machines, sometimes providing misleading or poor-quality translations.

As the Internet developed, some individual fans started to gather resources and create their own versions of subtitles (Friends, in 2002). This led to more groups, each specifying in different shows or categories, eventually forming a cluster that has grown from ‘fans of western series’ to more of a ‘source of transcultural communication’(Yu, 2012). Fan subtitles groups in China, similar to the rest of the world, mainly operate on a non-profit basis, yet forming a strong grassroot force. Jiang(2011) identifies some of the inner motives of fans forming subtitle groups, for example construction of self identity, realising one’s worth and reconstructing meanings of texts.

Yu identifies three main characteristics of subtitle groups in China:

- Zero-cost sharing, which lowers the cost of transcultural promotion of works
- Zero-time difference competition, in which various groups compete to produce high-quality subtitles as fast as possible.
- Zero-barrier localization of text translations, through which vague, ‘western’ texts are appropriated into more localized sayings, enabling a much bigger population to understand these meanings.

(Yu, 2012)

Many interviewees emphasise the power of subtitle groups and subtitles in helping them break the language barrier and even in learning English, making them value subtitles more:

Qianqiu:

Subtitle groups offering subtitles is the fundamental power to me. I think Chinese viewers have always had a great need for western shows, that's why once we have subtitles, it would be much easier for us to know and watch these works.

Juanshu:

My English was poor at first, but after I watched the Harry Potter series, I tried to recite the lines in the films, this made me much more confident in speaking English. After that, I started to pay much more attention to subtitles of Western cultural works.

(Personal Interviews, 2014)

In the case of Sherlock, it is no longer an age where small groups struggle to translate the series, but on the contrary, where major groups compete with speed and quality of their subtitles. For example, major groups such as YYETS(人人影视), Ragbear(破烂熊), YTET(伊甸园), BTM(波特猴), FRM(风软), Kamigami(诸神) and XMQ(夏末秋) all produce free subtitles for Sherlock. In this high competency for the dominant position in the 'market,' fans also have preferences for different subtitles by comparing speed, quality and even visual effects of subtitles:

Juanshu:

I prefer Ragbear because of their quality. They are, of course, not the fastest, but their Chinese translation, compared to other groups, suits my taste best, it's near the 'faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance' - basic principles in translation. Also they would note all the related facts and references in the script. YYETS's subtitle is the fastest, but their translation is only of average quality, which of course isn't a problem, but I personally dislike subtitles which put too much elements of 'gay romance' into their translations.

Misaqu:

As a worker in the visual sector, I have a high demand for the overall visual effect of the video, so subtitles which has poor visual qualities, such as adding strokes of strange colours to the text, are not my type.

Chou:

Kamigami uses Songti(宋体, a serif Chinese typeface) which I dislike, also one of the groups, XMQ, uses a really bad typeface for their subtitles, I would rather watch the raw version than watch their version...

(Personal Interviews, 2014)

Among these various subtitle groups, a few like YYETS provide a bilingual subtitle, showing both the English script and Chinese translation on screen. Many interviewees prefer to use bilingual subtitles in order to understand the original text better and also to prevent misunderstanding in meanings.

Anguang:

I was at first very dependent on Chinese subtitles, but gradually I feel that the original English script indeed is sometimes a completely different kind of expression. Also, there are many puns or references that are hard to translate into Chinese.

57:

Because I want to experience the original context better, I would prefer bilingual subtitles. The power of subtitles is so great, that sometimes if you switch to another group's subtitles, you might even wonder whether you have watched this part.

(Personal Interviews, 2014)

A very interesting issue in the case of Sherlock is that despite many major subtitle groups providing high quality subtitles for the series, two specialised subtitle groups derived from the process of its popularization: iSherlock and AllforBC.

Established on March 12, 2012, iSherlock subtitle group is a non-profit affiliate of oral English organisation, MJE. The group is a non-profit online organisation made up of BBC Sherlock fans. Their main works revolve around the BBC Sherlock series and its cast and crew, including interviews (videos and written reports), events and official videos. AllforBC is a small non-profit subtitle group dedicated to the actor Benedict Cumberbatch, who plays Sherlock Holmes in the BBC series. The group was established in April, 2012, and focuses on the translation of news, interviews and subtitles of Cumberbatch's works. (Allforbc.com, 2014)

If some of the major groups mentioned above produce subtitles for Sherlock because they have already reached a level of an organised, stable, 'source of transcultural communication' (for example YYETS in translating mass amounts of TV series, films and even open courses), then these two specialized subtitle groups formed mostly because of a common passion for the series and its actors themselves. They not only translate works, but also many written interviews and news reports, providing an extremely all rounded pool of resources for fans who want to know more but are not educated enough to understand that level of English.

The long-developed culture of subtitle groups and grassroot translating organisations, combined with piracy, form an excellent ground for new audiences. Qianqiu explains this abundance in resources:

I'm only a hand stretcher (伸手党, someone who only need to stretch out one's hand to get free things)' in the fandom. Sherlock fans are too hardworking...I don't even have to consider the problem of not understanding interviews or lack of resources.'

(Personal Interview, 2014)

2.5 Fans, fanworks and social media platforms: multidirectional flows

Despite not being aired on TV in Mainland China and without an official promotion, the main channel of distribution is through piracy and spontaneous communications, in which the use of social media platforms by fans played an important part. Early fans post discussions, images and other resources on platforms, and also create works such as fanart, fanfiction and fan videos. The high level of exposure and fast pace of information transmission of social media platforms help fan discussions and fan works to be able to reach a large population of viewers, promoting the series.

A search for the keyword ‘BBC Sherlock’ on Weibo fetches more than 10620397 posts and reblogs (Sina Weibo, 2014). Baidu’s BBC Sherlock Tieba has around 300,000 active users. It has around 25,000 topics and over 3 million individual threads since its creation in 2010 (Tieba, 2014).

Viewer ratings for Sherlock among Chinese viewers on Douban are extremely high. The viewer rating is one of the most important indicators of how much the audiences enjoy the show in an overall perspective. On Douban, season one of Sherlock has a high rating of 9.2 out of 10, with season two 9.5 and season three 8.8.

Another factor that reflects the level of audience participation in discussing a TV series is the amount of short comments and reviews viewers leave on the page of a series. It can be seen from the data below that BBC Sherlock has a high level of participation:

TV series	Viewer rating (?/10)	Total no.of short comments	Total no. of reviews	Average no. of short comments /episode	Average no. of reviews /episode
BBC Sherlock Season 2	9.5	44568	587	14856	97.9
Downtown Abbey Season 3	8.9	11002	115	1375.2	14.3

DBI	7.7	995	16	28.4	0.46
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Figure 4 A comparison of statistics for three TV series released in 2013 on Douban

Source: Douban.com (accessed 25th August 2014)

Besides platforms like Weibo, Tieba or Douban, slash-oriented forums and groups also play an important part in promoting fanworks. There are more than 5500 BBC Sherlock fan fiction posts on China's most popular slash forum for western films, TV and games: MovieTVSlash. This number is much more than other Sherlock-related works, whether fanworks of the original novel(168), Sherlock Holmes movie(229), CBS's Elementary(22) or others. Another slash forum, 221D, is dedicated only to slash fans of BBC Sherlock, and is home to over 20,000 registered members and over 300,000 posts.

As relatively early fans of Sherlock, grassroot fan creations and posts on the Internet created chances for others to know about the series. The relationship between fan discussions, fan works and the platforms, for example Weibo, is a multi-directional process of 'accumulating passion':

Qingniao:

I met many friends with common interests on Weibo, and we post and share things related together. Passion accumulated through this process, and at the same time, other people who see our reposts would become interested in this fandom.

Misaqu:

On one hand, as a fan of Sherlock myself, I used this platform to repost lots of related information and pictures and succeeded in letting many of my friends become interested in the series. On the other hand, I was able to obtain information about the cast and crew thanks to those other fans who contributed in posting them.

(Personal Interviews, 2014)

Many of the interviewees knew the series through fan fiction, fanart and other fan works:

Qingniao:

I knew about the series in a QQ group made up of fanfiction writers. Someone recommended a BBC Sherlock slash fanfiction (the title of the work is hereby omitted to protect the privacy of its author) and said you don't have to watch the original series to read it. I was interested so I asked what this original series was. Also I've always been attracted to BBC's mini series, so I was especially interested in this one.

57:

I first knew about Sherlock while reading a fan comic posted on U17 (有妖气, China's biggest original comic community) in 2010, and then immediately started watching. I think a lot of this buzz has to do with fanwork creators, whether an interesting story or a beautiful picture all contributes to the promoting of Sherlock itself.

(Personal Interviews, 2014)

Most interviewees were positive about the effects of new media, especially social media platforms, on the spread of Sherlock. Fan reviews and fanworks of the series play an important part in creating a 'buzz' online. As the series developed, it also accumulated much popularity:

Chou:

From my experience the drive from social networking sites is extremely powerful. I value other people's opinion a lot in choosing what to watch, so if a lot of friends recommend something I would definitely watch it...When the first season came out Weibo wasn't that popular, so I think the effect was not that obvious. But then it came to season 2, it was like everyone else around was posting things about Sherlock. I even attended a fan activity in Beijing called I Believe In Sherlock Holmes.

Juanshu:

As admin in the BBC Sherlock Club at Baidu Tieba, I experienced much of the rise of Sherlock. In season 1, the media platforms did not have much effect, because before season 2, Sherlock was just ordinary like any other series. But as season 2 aired and more subtitle groups joined to make subtitles for it, and before season 3 Youku already bought the license to air online. In a sense, the media is always slower than the fans. As for airing on international TV channels like ICS, or during the International TV Festival, that is already far behind the fans' footsteps. That's why I think fans and their communities and platforms are the main reasons the series became popular.

Misaqu:

I think social media platforms definitely played an important role in the promotion of Sherlock. It is hard to imagine the show being as popular if not for microblogs like Weibo. I'm not saying that the quality of the series is low, but the effect of social media on promoting the show is much stronger than that of traditional media (and also the Internet before social media websites appeared.)

(Personal Interviews, 2014)

As a generation of digital natives, the early fans of Sherlock use these platforms as grounds for their creation and discussions, whether they consciously promote the series. Being brought into contact with related texts, new viewers are quick to catch on to the trend, where subtitles and videos resources have already been produced and ready to be viewed. This accumulation of popularity on social media platforms in turn attracts more viewers who may become fans.

2.6 The influence of legal streaming services and commercial events

In China, piracy is still a big problem for cultural products, whether local or foreign. The 2012 version of China's White Paper on IPR protection mentions that the piracy rate of film and TV products is still relatively high, at around 50% (National Library of China, 2012). Only in recent years have legal streaming services proliferated in importing western films and TV series, but are met with various obstacles as well.

In 2014, Youku purchased the official license to broadcast Sherlock's season three just three hours after its original broadcast. This change allowed for more viewers to watch the series through online streaming:

Xiaojiu:

Youku is a legal source and it only was two hours slower than the original... also they did a lot of promotion online to let viewers know about their streaming.'

Anguang:

It's official and also quite fast. Also, you would feel a sense of relief when you watch the legal version of a series you like...

(Personal Interviews, 2014)

According to Youku's index data, the total views of season 3 have had a tremendous rise, which is a positive implication of Youku's legal streaming services.

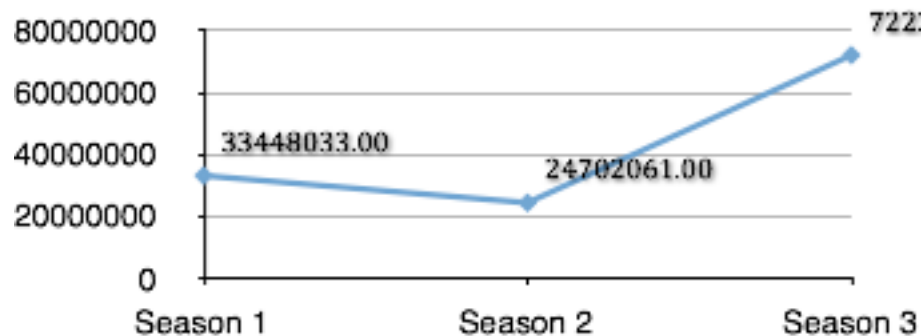


Figure 5 Total views of BBC Sherlock on Youku (Source: Youku Index, accessed 29th August 2014)

Even though some interviewees respond positively to watching legal streaming of Sherlock online, all of them still download pirated copies from the Internet. On one hand, this is due to the subtitle groups making subtitled copies of the videos, and as people want to watch the show, they would conveniently download the subtitled versions from web hosting sites. On one of the most

popular subtitle groups YYETS, though it is not possible to view specifically how many downloads of videos are made, the BBC Sherlock page alone has nearly 6 million views. YYETS produces more than 8 versions of video sources in different formats and resolutions, such as MP4, HR-HDTV, WEB-DL and so on. It also provides independent subtitle files for viewers to download.

On the other hand, in the absence of a legal distribution channel of tangible products such as DVDs and other merchandise in China, and considering the expensive mailing costs and time span, fans who prefer to keep a copy of high resolution versions of the show can only turn to pirated versions as a solution. In fact, this has been the case for many years, whether in purchasing Japanese animation, manga or games. Online streaming, though mostly legal, cannot satisfy fans who demand high visual qualities.

Many fans who still prefer the old method of downloading raise reasons regarding the quality of both the subtitles on Youku's streaming and also visual qualities of online streaming. Others mentioned that downloading copies of high quality videos serves as a kind of collection. Also, a few stated that watching a fast, lower quality version online before downloading a better version for collection is what they prefer. Compared to most casual viewers, fans are much more demanding:

Juanshu:

I like YYETS's bilingual subtitles. Youku's version only provided the Chinese subtitles, and also missed out other small elements on screen in their translation.

Misaqu:

Due to my job, I am extremely sensitive to the quality of graphics, and online streaming cannot provide me with the quality I need. Also, I prefer to be in control of my watching experience, and do not want factors such as a poor network connections or advertisements to disturb the watching process.

Qingniao:

If possible I still prefer downloading. It's much clearer, you don't have to wait for pre-loading, there are no ads, and you won't get stuck in the middle of playing...With downloaded versions, you have more control.

57:

I usually watch the series online first, and if I like it I will download a better version to save in my computer.

(Personal Interviews, 2014)

Along with online streaming, Youku also organised a special premiere, 'He Is Back' for season three in Beijing. As the only global platform that was able to broadcast Sherlock, Youku's CEO Wei Ming and David Elliott, Director Arts for the British Council, China attended the premiere and interacted with hundreds of fans and media representatives. Jufan, who was luckily chosen to attend the premiere, was satisfied with the atmosphere and excitement at the scene:

The organizers obviously don't have much experience in this kind of activities, but the atmosphere in the cinema is very good, you know, a lot of fans sitting together, watching long-awaited series play, cheering and giggling together, that's a very valuable moment. What matters is the atmosphere there, all over the hall are fans, we share common mania. Many people brought their own fanworks and the organizers also gave out merchandise. Everyone there was obviously happy and relaxed, we can share a smile of understanding on the story, I feel I am in a crowd of cohorts...

(Personal Interviews, 2014)

Organising official activities in China without having been broadcast on TV is quite an exception in Mainland China. This act by Youku not only reflects the power of online platforms and fan demands in promoting the series, but also contributes to the popularization of the series itself.

This move made by Youku to premiere *Sherlock* is a big one - but recent action by SARFT also proves the road to a zero-time-difference online broadcast would be met with much obstacles. In April 2014, a sudden forced removal of four American TV series from online platforms by SARFT (CeWeekly, 2014) caused instant chaos in the online video sector. The Administration then claimed that a compulsory ‘examination before broadcasting’ policy be applied to all online TV products.

The direct outcome of these policies might be that it would be impossible to broadcast foreign shows live, like Youku did with season 3 of *Sherlock*. Also, the import of different seasons of foreign series may be restricted because each individual season must be examined separately before broadcasting (Cn.tmagazine, 2014).

2.7 Chinese Sherlock fans and the changing ‘gap’

In the world today, audiences embrace different identities, and ‘every identity must define and position itself in relation to the cultural frames affirmed by the world system.’ (Planet TV 369) As fans of BBC *Sherlock* but from a different nation and culture, the conflict between obtaining information on local platforms and the seemingly ‘closer’ global platforms prove to be considered by many fans.

Developing online technologies have certainly played an important part in opening up to mass amounts of foreign works. Many of the interviewees, reflecting upon their own experience in recent years, are positive about the narrowing of the ‘gap’. The Internet has made it much easier for cultural products to be circulated around the globe. Compared to ten years ago, when it was mostly classical culture works that were imported and translated by official sources, more popular cultural products are being circulated both through pirated channels and legal purchases:

Misaqu:

Back in that time the only channel of watching it was through television broadcasting (a translated and dubbed version). I couldn't possibly watch it anytime I want, not to say find information about the series. Years later when DVDs became popular, I was able to re-watch it again and again. After the Internet, I could search in search engines, talk about the show on Douban, Mtime and IMDB, download subtitles by YYETS, that was when I could really find all the information I need. So watching Sherlock today, in this online and media environment, I'm really lucky that I don't have to experience all that again!

Qingniao:

...I think we are much nearer to global trends now. Ten years ago it would be extremely hard for me to know what is popular abroad, compared to now, so it would be even more difficult to get access to those products, let alone consume them. But ten years ago many of the foreign products were considered 'classics' (for example Gone with the Wind), and they were translated and produced in China, whereas now it's more popular cultural products, and many are distributed online.

(Personal Interviews, 2014)

Of course, the narrowing of the 'gap' does not indicate that there is no absolute difference between in Mainland China and abroad. As some explains, the chance to communicate with the production side, whether directly or indirectly, is still an important sign of the 'gap':

Anguang:

I think the gap still exists. If you look at Twitter or Tumblr, they are always the first platforms to know first-hand news and information. If you 'stalk' the production team on Twitter, it's much more convenient. Also, for example, many artists have had the chance to get their art seen by the cast and crew, because they posted those works on Twitter or Tumblr. Although for information and news, we do get to know them a little later than in

the UK, it's still hard to change to fact that as Chinese fans we have a much smaller chance of getting to meet them or even communicate on online platforms.

(Personal Interview, 2014)

In terms of whether they would feel a gap in 'the local' and 'global' fandom, many state that they do not feel a very significant gap, mostly because online resources and translations are already abundant enough for them:

57:

I am not a fan who would chase after the cast and crew, nor feel a need to purchase related goods, so I think for me, the gap is not a really big problem, because we have very convenient online networks giving us what we want, it's actually narrowing the gap, so the geographical distance doesn't matter that much to me.

Qingniao:

I think it's just a matter of 'wanting to see more great fanworks' and 'wanting more fans to see my works'. To me there is no difference between these channels, there isn't a mainstream or non-mainstream thing.

Chou:

There is of course still a gap because there is a fundamental difference between Chinese and western culture, I have also experienced it when making friends with foreigners. Especially after we now have more channels to communicate, it actually exposes more of our differences. However, I don't think this affects the fact that we all like the same thing, also, I think younger people like us have a much better ability in adapting to new culture, so it's not a big problem if one wants to engage in the global fandom.

(Personal Interviews, 2014)

According to Chin and Morimoto, “non-English (often non-Western) fandoms are not peripheral to ‘mainstream’ fan culture. Rather they are part of the transcultural interplay of fandom as much as any other, separated only by barriers of language, distribution and availability that have become eminently surmountable as fandoms have migrated online”(2013). In other words, although fundamental cultural differences still exist, the appreciation of the cultural works is mutual among fans across the globe.

3 Conclusion

This essay has investigated the spread and popularization of BBC Sherlock online in Mainland China. It positions the natural ‘gap’ that exists in the transnational flow of cultural products, and explores the formation of an active fan community and how these fans have played an active part in the grassroots initiated spread of Sherlock.

The innovative content of BBC Sherlock attracts much viewership. This transnational charm of content is the main reason casual viewers are developed into fans of the series. By creating subtitles, posting and creating fan works, these early stage fans succeed in promoting the show to many others. Online technologies narrow the time and geographic difference; fan-based subtitle groups and translators narrow the language gap; amateur fan creators publish posts, fanworks in virtual communities, creating a social buzz which in turn attracts more viewers, media reports and the attention of major video websites. In this process, the active part played by fans of the series comes before any official promotion or events targeted at the Chinese market.

Many external factors also influence the process in various ways. Apart from the natural ‘gap’ that stands in-between fans and the original works, social media platforms provides an excellent ground for fan works and discussions to spread instantly and across multiple borders. Legal online broadcasting and commercial events organised by major media websites and companies contribute to the further popularisation of the series. This resembles the future trend of online TV in China, providing a more stable source of cultural import. Government policies, on the other hand, still restrict the official cultural imports and netizens’ access to certain websites to a very large extent.

Through years of development, the changing of the ‘gap’ is still an ongoing process. It can be implied by fans’ perceptions that in obtaining information, the speed and accuracy of fans are already high enough to decrease the time difference. The relatively ‘local’ fandom operates well on its own, as resources are abundant, and local fans produce their own fanworks and participate in local communities. In this environment, many fans do not view the ‘gap’ as very significant.

Using mainly qualitative methods, the essay was able to identify many of the fans' inner motives or perceptions on the spread of BBC Sherlock, combined with their own experience. However, the main limitation to this method is that these experiences and motives do not necessarily apply to all fans of Sherlock. Secondly, data acquired from different second-hand sources, such as Youku and Douban, were originally built on different methods of data collection. Therefore, the accuracy of these data still remains to be questioned. Furthermore, the boundary between the so-called 'fan' and 'casual viewer' is not specific, as fans' identities are constructed through complex ways, and their identity of themselves may be fluid.

It is definitely not a stage to claim that the global fandom has reached a hegemonic status - even though conditions such as legal streaming and international shipping narrows the geographical and time difference, the 'gap' for Chinese fans now shifts to government restrictions targeting online distribution of foreign TV series. Judging from the measures taken by SARFT in early 2014, future cultural imports by websites still has to face strict examinations before contents can be broadcasted online. As Leaver points out, though technology have made geographical distances less important, the many economic and political aspects have emerged as more influential factors. He claims that there is 'a prevailing tyranny of digital distance which occurs when the potential and, indeed, expectation of near-synchronous global distribution of media is not fulfilled due to arbitrary boundaries which began as geographic but are now entirely in the economic and political domain' (2008). In other words, the 'gap' may be narrowing in some sectors, but is shifting towards the political and economic end. The findings in this essay may contribute to future strategies of transnational marketing of cultural products in understanding the active creation and participation of fans in Mainland China. This potential has already been grasped by major Hollywood films, who received massive attention and in turn expanded their commercial events in China. It is a considerable strategy for global distribution and promotion of TV series.

At the time of the research, policies regarding the import of foreign TV shows had not yet been specifically established. Therefore the essay only touched on a little of this issue. However, the cultural policies in Mainland China remain an important and powerful restricting factor

concerning transnational flow of cultural works. This would be a pragmatic direction for future studies to move on to.

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Weibo	新浪微博	www.weibo.com
Tieba	百度贴吧	tieba.baidu.com

Appendix

Glossary of Chinese online slangs in interviews

吐槽

Tsukkomi, originated from Japanese ‘突っ込み’ in , meaning to ‘butt in’, criticise in a violent way in humour shows. It mainly means to make seemingly negative comments in a funny way

翻墙

to ‘cross the firewall’, a phrase frequently used by Chinese netizens to describe using various technologies to break out of the government’s censorship of certain foreign websites

弹幕

Live comments

伸手党

‘Hand stretcher’, someone who only need to stretch out one’s hand to get free things

Outline of interview questions

Basic Questions:

When and where (or under what circumstances) did you first know, and start to watch the series?

(Note: The two might be different. If so, what made you to start watching? Was there any social pressure?)

What are the main reasons you became a fan of BBC Sherlock?

(e.g. script,actors, portrayal of story...)

The series has been extremely popular in mainland China, and is said by many to be the beginning of the ‘British series fever’ (which, is in comparison to the American series fever, led by Prison Break and The Big Bang Theory.)

Apart from reasons you have mentioned earlier, would you consider new media platforms to have played a major part in promoting the series?

(e.g. microblogs like Weibo, film sites like Douban)

Channel-Related:

What is your main source for watching BBC Sherlock?

(e.g. downloading, streaming, buying official DVDs)

(If Download) From which sites do you usually download the series?

Do you have any preference for subtitles? (Which group? Why?)

Do you value the speed of subtitles more or the quality?

(Some people have better English skills and can watch the RAW version.)

(If Stream) What type of website do you use to stream the series?

The online broadcast license of Sherlock's season 3 was bought by Youku, and was played 2 hours after the series originally aired. Did you watch season 3 on Youku?
Relatively and considering not only Sherlock, has the overall status of downloading illegal copies v.s. streaming legal videos online changed for you?

Participation:

As a fan of Sherlock, how have you expressed your love for the series?

(This can be anything, from watching, discussing, creating fanworks, participating in conventions and activities, whether official or fan-held.)

On what online platforms do you usually participate? Are they Chinese platforms or global?

Can you tell me more about offline activities?

Digital Gap?

As a Chinese fan of BBC Sherlock and coming from a different culture, would you feel that there is a 'gap' between you and the 'official' side?

(e.g. Because of the language barrier, time difference, geographic difference etc, it may be hard to acquire certain first hand information, merchandise...)

How do you deal with this gap?

(Subtitles, resource sites, turning to global sites for more information etc.)

Do you consider there to be any difference in your experience in using Chinese and global platforms?

Would you feel that you are 'closer to the official/main fanbase' if you use global platforms instead of Chinese ones? (e.g. Tieba, Weibo v.s. Tumblr, Twitter)

Do you consider this gap important?

How has the situation changed for you over the past ten years or so?

Has it been shrinking? What caused the change? (e.g. platform, culture, technology...)

Interview transcript with Jufan (2014.6.26)

Interviewer:

When and where (or under what circumstances) did you first know BBC Sherlock, and start to watch the series?

(Note: The two might be different. If so, what made you to start watching? Was there any social pressure?)

Jufan:

I started to watch the series in the winter of 2011, because at that time I was struggling in a lot of final exams so I wanted to watch something for fun. Plus, I have been a fan of the Sherlock Holmes series acted by RDJ and Jude Law for a long time and I love the work very much. So I thought BBC Sherlock was a good choice. Meantime, when I saw several articles on "Douban", which focused on the shooting environment of the series, the relations

between Sherlock and John and so on. Those fantastic analyses made me very curious about the series. I wanted to know how BBC demonstrates the relationship between Sherlock and John and the series give me a memorable answer. In fact, I started to watch the series owing to many factors' mutual influence.

Interviewer:

So what are the main reasons you became a fan of BBC Sherlock? It could be the script, actors, portrayal of story... You also mentioned that you are a fan of the Sherlock Holmes series portrayed by Robert Downey Junior and Jude Law, can I take it that the Sherlock Holmes element has had great impact on your choice?

Jufan:

I was attracted by the series only due to the element "Sherlock Holmes". I have read the "Holmes" novels when I was a child, and the movie acted by RDJ and Jude Law is also one of my favorites. So I have already been a fan of Sherlock Holmes the work itself when I first click on the BBC Sherlock. But when I finished watching the series, I am amazed at the modern elements showed in the series. The story lines are awesome, which make me feel that I am contemporary with Holmes. But in the scenes of 21st Century, you always can get a glimpse of the shadow of that old, elegant era. Many subtle coincide with original work make the series a very exquisite one. So I think the story is the most important factor in the series, it's the soul of the whole series. Those outstanding actors also express the substance of the series perfectly.

It is worth watching many, many times.

Interviewer:

The series has been extremely popular in mainland China, and is said by many to be the beginning of the 'British series fever' (which, is in comparison to the American series fever, led by Prison Break and The Big Bang Theory.) Apart from reasons you have mentioned earlier, would you consider new media platforms to have played a major part in promoting the series? (e.g. microblogs like Weibo, film sites like Douban)

Jufan:

As far as I am concerned, I have not been influenced by the media platforms to a big extent. I have only been surfing Weibo and Tieba for more related information when I finished watching the series. Then I find the slash forums MTSlash and 221D.

Interviewer:

Considering the speed and width of information on the Internet, platforms like Weibo also made quite a big contribution as compared to before, for example you wouldn't have know the show if not for your friends sharing it on Douban.

Jufan:

Yes, at first I depended on Douban. But later I spend much time on Weibo because there are many fans of Sherlock and I can get much information without the trouble of "Crossing the firewall".

Interviewer:

Okay. The following questions are mainly about how you watch Sherlock. What is your main source for watching BBC Sherlock? (e.g. downloading, streaming, buying official DVDs)

Jufan:

What a shame, I watch pirated videos...I prefer the source from subtitle groups. In my opinion, the subtitles of

YYETS have the floating special effects but this group has a bad reputation. PLX(Ragbear) has a good reputation but no beautiful special effects.

Interviewer:

So do you personally value the speed of the subtitles more, or the quality?

Jufan:

Naturally, quality is what matters. I can watch the raw version first, and anxiety won't help.

Interviewer:

Then do you have any preference for a bilingual subtitle? Some people would want to know the original script at the same time. Maybe it's also because of your English level that you can watch the raw version. But different subtitle groups have different translations, would this affect your perception of the story itself, or do you consider this as not important?

Jufan:

Ah, I have never cared about the differences translations, can you show me some examples about that?

Interviewer:

For example slightly distorting the meanings, or using online slangs.

Jufan:

In fact subtitles of Sherlock don't ring any bells, but the X MenII: DOFP recently made a strong impression on me. When Wolverine was awake he said something like " blood shit"? The translation is "wolegequ(我勒个去)", a popular Chinese swear word on the Internet and the audience in the cinema burst into laughter. But I cannot accept the translations which are alluding to homoerotic issues too much.

Interviewer:

Yes, this is quite common in subtitles.

Jufan:

For example, recently I watched a cartoon about a volleyball team, and I don't like the subtitles there, which obviously tend to boys love.

Interviewer:

Let's talk about online streaming. The online broadcast license of Sherlock's season 3 was bought by Youku, and was played 2 hours after the series originally aired. Did you watch season 3 on Youku?

Jufan:

Yes! Also, I was very lucky to have a chance to attend the Youku Premiere of the 3rd season of Sherlock! The organizers obviously don't have much experience on this kind of activities, but the atmosphere in the cinema is very good, you know, a lot of fans sitting together, watching long-awaited TVplay, cheering and giggling together, that's a very valuable moment.

Interviewer:

So...relatively and considering not only Sherlock, has the overall status of downloading illegal copies v.s. streaming legal videos online changed for you?

Jufan: 18:13:58

In fact, I will watch the legitimate copies online only when I have to save space on my hard disk.

Interviewer:

So I assume you don't have a desire to collect high-quality versions?

Jufan:

If I have plenty of space, I will search for the high definition copies for my parents so they can kill time on that.

Interviewer:

Right, so you watch most shows online now.

Jufan:

Yes, but actually I prefer Bilibili (A Chinese video website similar to NicoNico in Japan) to Youku and Sohu.

Interviewer:

Bilibili's user experience is better? And it also has live commenting features.

Jufan:

Yes, those interesting floating comments give much more fun. Tudou also has the same features but owing to the ages of users on Tudou, comments there tend to be weird.

Interviewer:

I see. When season three aired a lot of fans watched the first episode through live online streaming and made a lot of comments on Weibo. There was quite a lot of interaction.

Jufan:

Yes, when we tsukkomi (吐槽, originated from Japanese '突っ込み' in , meaning to 'butt in', criticise in a violent way in humour shows. It mainly means to make seemingly negative comments in a funny way) on Weibo, we feel "watching the series with many people around the world", we can arouse sympathy in each other. Tsukkomi, may be the most important creation in the entertainment of this era, which is also one of the hot issues of popular culture. Tsukkomi nowadays is a kind of language art, interesting tsukkomi or the so-called high quality tsukkomi (神吐槽) needs rich knowledge and a great sense of humor.

Interviewer:

So as a fan of Sherlock, how else have you expressed your love for the series?

Jufan:

I didn't do any fan work about Sherlock because the two years when I indulged in BBC Sherlock is also the two years when I was busy studying. I just read a great deal of fanfic, and plan to do some translation for foreign fanfic the next year. Surprisingly I am mad about a novel about online games the next year...so nothing.

Interviewer:

So you have not made any fan creations.

Jufan:

Yes, no creations about Sherlock. Also because the busy student life, I haven't attend any slash only , and I am very careful to get to know peers (同好 ?) those who are not alumni. The only related activity is the Premiere of Youku when I am a senior student.

Interviewer:

So what are the main platforms you discuss on?

Jufan:

With regards to the discussion, because i was very busy back then and new to slash culture, I rarely presented my opinions on forum. But I read lots of posts about the story, the stars, and gossips and discuss with my classmates. Meantime, I also read fanfiction on ff and AO3.

Interviewer:

Do you consider there to be any difference in your experience in using Chinese and global platforms? Would you feel that you are 'closer to the official/main fanbase' if you use global platforms instead of Chinese ones?

Jufan:

I like to surf on tumblr and instagram to watch beautiful fan art by fan girls all over the world. Actually I don't feel imbalanced in this process, because it's just a way of recreation for me, but western fan girls have more courage to draw more mature themes.

Interviewer:

So this is mainly regarding cultural differeces.

Jufan:

Actually everyone has many things on his routine so he doesn't need to watch the series at first time. Because I cannot 'cross the firewall' , so I am really thankful to fan girls who repost the fanvids from YouTube .

Interviewer:

Subtitles, translators and these people who cross the wall to fetch information are really helping the local fans.

Jufan:

Yes, it is more convenient to get information.

Interviewer:

In this case you are not really aware of the 'gap', because you can find ways to narrow it.

Jufan:

Yes actually I can rarely feel the so-called gap, because everyone is equal on the internet. I don't feel that I am very remote from the "original base", actually I will only pay homage to 221B Baker Street. I read some foreign novels when I was a child, the translation has a strong feature of 'Translationese', which made me feel remote and strange. So reading and watching in the original language is a kind of enjoyment.

