Journey to the East. What is happening in the Chinese audio description (AD) world? An interview-based study

Viaje al Este. ¿Qué está pasando con la audiodescripción (AD) en China? Un estudio basado en entrevistas

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Abstract: Despite the existence of audio description (AD) in China from 2005, little is known about how AD is conducted in China due to the scarcity of studies on this subject. This article, based on semi-structured interviews with six Chinese AD providers from Shanghai, Wuxi, and Guangzhou, aims to narrow this knowledge gap and present how AD is performed in Mainland China, as seen by some of the key agents involved. The interviews were conducted between April 30 and July 13, 2020, through voice calls on WeChat. Results can be grouped under the following three topics: the current state of AD in China, how AD is conducted in China, and the feasibility of AD translation from Spanish into Chinese. This study has reached two main conclusions. First, AD in China is, now, full of opportunities and challenges, with the copyright issue as its main problem and the objectivity versus subjectivity dichotomy as one of the most debatable concerns in the scriptwriting process. Second, almost all the interviewees showed a positive attitude towards the proposal of AD translation to promote this service in China, in our particular case from Spanish into Chinese.
Keywords: Audio description; China; media accessibility; audio description translation; semi-structured interviews.
Resumen: A pesar de la existencia de la audiodescripción (AD) en China desde 2005, se sabe poco sobre cómo se lleva a cabo la AD en China debido a la escasez de estudios sobre este tema. Este artículo, basado en entrevistas semiestructuradas con seis proveedores chinos de AD de Shanghái, Wuxi y Guangzhou, tiene como objetivo reducir esta brecha de conocimiento y presentar cómo

se realiza la AD en la China continental, de acuerdo con la opinión de algunos de los agentes clave involucrados. Las entrevistas se realizaron entre el 30 de abril y el 13 de julio de 2020 a través de llamadas de voz por WeChat. Los resultados se pueden agrupar en las siguientes tres temáticas: el estado actual de la AD en China, cómo se lleva a cabo AD en China y la viabilidad de la traducción de la AD del español al chino. Este estudio ha llegado a dos conclusiones principales. Primero, la AD en China está, en este momento, llena de oportunidades y desafíos, con el tema de los derechos de autor como su principal problema y la dicotomía objetividad frente a subjetividad como una de las cuestiones más debatidas en la elaboración de los guiones. En segundo lugar, casi todos los entrevistados mostraron una actitud positiva hacia la propuesta de traducir la AD, en nuestro caso particular del español al chino, como forma alternativa de promover este servicio en China.

Palabras clave: Audiodescripción; China; accesibilidad a los medios; traducción de audiodescripción; entrevistas semiestructuradas.

INTRODUCTION

According to the World Report on Disability (WTO and the World Bank, 2011), 15.3% of the world population had "moderate or severe disability" based on the Global Burden of Disease, data from 2004. This report also indicates the influence of global ageing on disability trends: the increasing ageing population has a higher disability prevalence. Under these circumstances, a louder voice demanding human rights and the information revolution have led to an accessibility revolution (Greco, 2018, 2019). Some media accessibility (MA) services originated in the last century, such as subtitles for the deaf or hard-of-hearing (SDH) and audio description (AD), are developing with unprecedented speed in both the professional and the academic worlds in many Western countries. At first, SDH and AD were studied within audiovisual translation (AVT) as its

subareas for specific groups—persons with disability. However, recently there has been a call for a new research field—accessibility studies (AS)—that positions MA as a broader interdisciplinary area under AS that crosses many fields, including AVT and not limits MA to sensory and linguistic barriers (*ibid.*).

In contrast to the prosperity of AS in the West, China, with a substantial disabled population, seems to ignore their sociocultural needs and still mainly focuses on the prevention and rehabilitation of disability, unemployment and poverty for this group. Based on the Sixth National Population Census of the People's Republic of China (第六次全国人口普查, *Di-liu ci quanguo renkou pucha*) of 2010 and the Second Survey on National Sampling of People with Disabilities (第二次残疾人抽样调查, *Di-er ci canjiren chouyang diaocha*) of 2006, the China Disabled Persons' Federation (CDPF) (中国残疾人联合会, *Zhongguo Canjiren Lianhehui*) (2012) estimated that there were approximately 85 million people with disabilities at the end of 2010, who represented approximately 6.35% of the total Chinese population. Among them, about 13 million were blind or low vision people, representing 14.86% of the total number of people with disabilities (CDPF, 2012). At the same time, there are only 36 million people who had an official certificate of disability at the end of 2019.[1] This is due to several reasons: its use for the elderly is limited because of their difficulties in going out and understanding its advantages, the feeling of inferiority, the few benefits that come with it, and the lack of knowledge of the existence of the certificate, especially in rural areas, among others (Shi, 2014). Therefore, the number of potential AD users in China can be much larger than the official data suggests. Besides, it might also imply that the age, the education level, and the urban-rural gap of the persons with visual impairment could influence AD reception in China.

AD, which officially appeared in China on April 23, 2009 (Tor-Carroggio and Casas-Tost, 2020), has experienced rapid growth in the last ten years, mainly in some relatively advanced cities like Shanghai, Beijing, and Guangzhou. However, AD in China, along with Hong Kong and Taiwan, is still at its blooming stage. Unlike in the West, in China, AD, much dependent on volunteer work, is mainly restricted to films and is very diverse according to region, and even between AD groups from the

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[1] Data taken from the CDPF's national database of basic information on persons with disabilities in 2019. http://www.cdpf.org.cn/sjzx/tjgb/202004/t20200402_674393.shtml (accessed 30 November 2020) is the online source.

same city (*ibid.*). Some AD-related terms are not unified among the Chinese AD stakeholders, which also shows the immaturity of AD in China (Liu, under review). For example, at the beginning of this practice in China, AD was only referred to as *barrier-free movies* (无障碍电影, *wuzhang'ai dianying*) —limited to films and theoretically including SDH, sign language interpreting, and AD (Tor-Carroggio and Casas-Tost, 2020). With the beginning of SDH for films in China in 2021, AD was referred to by more people by its literal translation from English into Chinese, *koushu yingxiang* (口述影像) (Liu, under review). Some Chinese MA scholars from a focus group interview also agreed on this term as a more precise expression because it refers to AD practice as a whole, not only limited to films (*ibid.*). In the meantime, its incipient status is also echoed by the lack of academic research on this topic, which may partially explain why Western MA researchers have been oblivious to the Chinese initiatives launched so far (Liu and Tor-Carroggio, 2022). However, there is a recent wave of interest in Chinese AD (Tor-Carroggio and Vercauteren, 2020). Besides, the researchers found that the situation in China is very different from that in Europe when dealing with, for example, AD development stages and AD methodologies (*ibid.*). A recent study from Liu *et al*. (2022) also shows that Chinese and Spanish AD differ in several aspects and that more research on Chinese AD may be needed. In this context, two PhD studies should be mentioned. Leung (2018) conducted a reception study in Hong Kong to investigate the preferences of Chinese users there concerning some AD scriptwriting strategies. Tor-Carroggio (2020a) provided an overview of the history and current state of AD in Mainland China and tested the acceptance of text-to-speech AD with Chinese end-users in Shanghai.

This study is framed within the context of the author's PhD thesis aiming to test the feasibility of translating AD from Spanish into Chinese to promote this service in China, both quantitatively and qualitatively. We choose this particular language pair because, on the one hand, if AD translation from Spanish into Chinese could be validated as a viable way for AD creation, it might also apply to other language combinations; on the other hand, we hope that our research could contribute to reducing the ethnocentric bias caused by English as the most common pivot language in audiovisual translation (Liu *et al*., 2022). Before testing with end-users, it was considered necessary to gain an overview of AD practice in China, to understand the way to audio describe in Chinese, and to gather the

opinions of Chinese providers in the face of this proposal so as to better design the next stages of our research.[2]

This study has three objectives. Firstly, to offer an updated snapshot of the AD practice in China. Secondly, to give some general explanations about how AD is performed in Chinese from the point of view of its providers. Thirdly, to hear their views on our proposal of AD translation from Spanish into Chinese.

This article is divided into three sections. The first section explains the interview-based method used in our study for data gathering. The second presents the results obtained regarding an overview of AD practice in China, how AD is performed, and some AD providers' opinions about our proposal of AD translation from Spanish into Chinese. Finally, we summarise pertinent conclusions and delineate the limitations and potential future developments of our study.

1. Methodology

In order to introduce the situation of AD in China, six semi-structured interviews were conducted with some Chinese AD providers, considering that it is a useful way to gather in-depth information about this particular subject. An interview outline was first devised to help focus the discussion on our research interests and facilitate the final information extraction process.

The interview outline, based on some initial observations from a pilot study comparing Chinese AD and Spanish AD (Liu and Tor-Carroggio, 2022), revolved mainly around three topics: general opinions on the situation of AD in China, how AD is conducted, and the feasibility of AD translation into Chinese—in our case from Spanish. The study design was approved by our university's Ethics Committee (Reference Number: 5125) on 1 April 2020.

Purposive sampling was used in our selection of interviewees because AD shows different situations among regions in China and it is complicated to reach all the cities where AD is provided for many reasons—time limitation, for example. The six interviewees were selected

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[2] The focus of this article is not on our proposal of AD translation from Spanish into Chinese; rather, it serves as a foundational study for the broader PhD project. A more in-depth exploration of our proposal is presented in several other articles emanating from this comprehensive PhD project.

on the basis of their experience in AD from cities where AD is relatively advanced, such as Shanghai where four of our informants come from. The basic information of our interviewees is provided in Table 1:

Table 1. Basic information of our interviewees

Name	City	Profile	Interview date
Han Yin (韩颖)	Shanghai	Founder of Sound of Light Barrier-free Film & TV Culture Development Centre (SoL) (光影之声, *Guangying zhi Sheng*). She is a blind woman and responsible for AD revising and training.	30/04/2020
Qu Dapeng (曲大鹏)	Shanghai	Head of the volunteer team of audio describers from 990 News (990 新闻, *990 Xinwen*) and AD proofreader of his group.	01/05/2020
Jiang Hongyuan (蒋宏源)	Shanghai	First AD provider in Shanghai. He is a person with visual impairment and he has extensive experience in AD scriptwriting.	02/05/2020
Yao Weiming (姚伟明)	Wuxi	Head of Yangguang Volunteer Association (阳光志愿者协会, *Yangguang Zhiyuanzhe Xiehui*). He is an experienced	18/05/2020

		AD scriptwriter and proofreader.	
Li Shuying (李淑莹)	Guangzhou	Head of the "Feeling Images through your Heart" programme (心聆感影, *Xin ling gan ying*). She is an experienced AD scriptwriter and proofreader.	11/07/2020
Ma Wei (马卫)	Shanghai	Autor of the first book about AD in Mainland China. He is an experienced AD scriptwriter and proofreader.	13/07/2020

Another essential city not included in our study is Beijing. We contacted some providers from that area to make our data more representative, but none were willing to be interviewed.

The researcher conducted all the interviews through voice calls on WeChat, a Chinese social media application that permits instant messaging, between April 30 and July 13, 2020. Before each interview, the interviewee's consent for the recording of the interview and its latter use for research purposes was granted. Each interview lasted about one and a half hours. They were later transcribed by the researcher. The qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti was used to encode and analyze the six interviews. The researcher also suplemented these interviews with information subsequently obtained from the official social media accounts of these AD groups.

2. RESULTS

This section will present the situation of AD in China from three perspectives, based on the interview outline. First, an overview of AD practice in China will be given, divided into its history and the obstacles Chinese AD faces. Then we will explain how AD is conducted in China, focusing on AD creation procedures and how some specific elements are

dealt with in the scriptwriting process. This is followed by the interviewees' views on our proposal of AD translation. When quoted individually, the initials of each interviewee are used, as indicated in Table 1.

2.1.   An overview of AD in China

2.1.1.   History of AD in China

Although the interviewees are no strangers to the Chinese term *audio description* (口述影像, *koushu yingxiang*), used by the interviewer, it is used by only one of them, Li, while the remaining five use the expression *barrier-free films* (无障碍电影, *wuzhang'ai dianying*) to refer to films with AD in China. Li, influenced by AD studies in the West, employs the term *audio description*. The inconsistency of terms related to this service was also highlighted in the study of Tor-Carroggio and Casas-Tost (2020) and Liu (under review).

All the interviewees agree that AD in China is still at its initial stage and is facing a series of challenges and opportunities. The following section shall provide a brief history of AD in China and discuss the relevant information gathered from the interviews. Then the situation of Shanghai will be explained separately as we assume it can serve as a representative city for the best AD practice in China, together with Beijing, for which our information is insufficient due to the lack of participants. Here we shall complement the information provided by Li (2013) and Tor-Carroggio and Casas-Tost (2020), who also presented an overview of AD provision in China up to the time of their research.

AD started unofficially in Beijing in 2005 with the launch of a project called Cinema of Mind and Eyes (心目影院, *Xin mu yingyuan*) initiated by a volunteer couple in the courtyard of their house with very poor equipment. In 2018 the event venue was transferred to a real cinema. They gave live AD sessions every Saturday, screening the film while a volunteer audio described it for the audience, usually without relying on a prepared AD script. In 2009 a team from the Young Volunteers Association of Guangzhou (广州青年志愿者协会, *Guangzhou Qingnian Zhiyuanzhe Xiehui*) started the "Feeling Images through your Heart" project to provide live AD for films in a library, reaching a frequency of once or twice a month in the last two years up to the time of this study. Now, apart from

AD for films, sometimes they also provide AD for other cultural activities, such as visits to museums or parks.

The same year, a group in Wuxi, the Yangguang Volunteer Association, currently composed of 56 volunteers, also began to offer this service, providing live AD once a month. From 2015, they produced video files once having screening films with live AD and, subsequently, uploaded them online. At first, they uploaded them to Himalaya FM (喜马拉雅 FM, *Ximalaya FM*) —a commonly used online audio sharing platform—and Youku (优酷, *Youku*) —a popular online video platform. They were forced to remove them from both places for copyright reasons. Fortunately, Yao, the leader of this group in Wuxi, obtained the help of the Direct Aid Program, a small grants program funded by the Australian Embassy in China. With this help, his team designed a mobile application specifically for persons with vision impairment loss called «Listen to the world» (听世界, *Ting shijie*). This application provides AD for films in both video and audio forms, audiobooks and massage lessons as it is a career path for many persons suffering from visual impairment in China. The application has been in use since October 2019, and AD has also been recorded for some old and classic movies and uploaded to their application.

In 2010, the China Braille Library (中国盲文图书馆, *Zhongguo Mangwen Tushuguan*) began offering live AD sessions for films. In collaboration with the Shanghai Film Group (上影集团, *Shang Ying Jituan*) and the National Press and Publication Administration (国家新闻出版总署, *Guojia Xinwen Chuban Zongshu*), they also founded a project (2011-2015) that consisted in elaborating DVDs of described films. However, all the movies are rather old. In 2016 the He Lin Education Foundation Publications (贺麟教育基金会, *He Lin Jiaoyu Jijinhui*) funded the project Qingmang Cinema (青芒影院, *Qingmang yingyuan*) in Chengdu. They started by providing live AD for films in a special education school in Chengdu once a month and now they also organize sessions in cinemas. From 2018, Qingmang Cinema started to collaborate with other cities, like Xi'an, Haikou, and Lanzhou. In 2017, the Bright Cinema project (光明影院, *Guangming yingyuan*) was founded by the Communication University of China in Beijing (中国传媒大学, *Zhongguo Zhuanmei Daxue*), together with two media companies. They produce described films on DVDs and then distribute them among the nine residential quarters administered by their community committees in

Beijing, special education schools, libraries and associations of the persons with vision impairment around the country.

As regards Shanghai, a preeminent city in the Chinese AD world/scene, there are mainly four initiatives with a different focus. Firstly, AD officially started in 2009 with the screening of the first described film in China *Examination 1977* (高考 1977, *Gaokao* 1977) and the establishment of the Free-Barrier Movie Workshop (无障碍电影工作室, *Wuzhang'ai dianying gongzuoshi*) under the Shanghai Film Critics Society (上海电影评论学会, *Shanghai Dianying Pinglun Xuehui*), the Shanghai Library (上海图书馆, *Shanghai Tushuguan*), and the Shanghai Film Group (上海电影集团, *Shanghai Dianying Jituan*). As a member of this workshop, Jiang, who suffers from visual impairment himself, was one of the pioneers of AD in Shanghai. He began AD practices as early as 2006 and has extensive experience in AD scriptwriting. The Free-Barrier Movie Workshop produces described movies in DVD format with copyright permission in some cases. These are shared among residential quarters and libraries and then uploaded to Himalaya FM and Dragonfly FM (蜻蜓 FM, *Qingting FM*). They also organise some AD-related activities, such as touch tours where persons with vision loss can touch some movie props or their reproductions to enhance their understanding. Secondly, live AD was offered in the Cathay Theatre (国泰电影院, *Guotai Dianyingyuan*) for the first time in 2012 with the Shanghai Disabled Persons' Federation (上海市残疾人联合会, *Shanghai Shi Canjiren Lianhehui*) paying for the film tickets for the audience. From 2013 onwards, 17 cinemas in the 17 administrative districts of Shanghai offer a live AD session the last week of every month. The volunteer team undertaking this activity is composed of 360 radio presenters who take turns delivering AD scripts, while there is only one person, with a background in theater studies, in charge of AD scriptwriting. Thirdly, Sound of Light Barrier-free Film & TV Culture Development Centre (SoL) (光影之声, *Guangying zhi Sheng*) was created in 2016 by Han. It is a people-run, not-for-profit unit (民办非企业单位, *min ban fei-qiye danwei*), financially supported by the Shanghai Disabled Persons' Federation. They produce described films and distribute them among residential quarters through digital means. Finally, the Love Cinema project (至爱影院, *Zhi'ai yingyuan*) started in 2019 thanks to the cooperation between the Shanghai Film Distribution Association (上海电影发行放映协会, *Shanghai Dianying Faxing Fangying Xiehui*), Shanghai Film Association (上海电影家协会, *Shanghai Dianyingjia Xiehui*),

Shanghai Film Technology Factory (上海电影技术厂有限公司, *Shanghai Dianying Jishuchang Youxian Gongsi*), the Association of the Blind of Shanghai (上海市盲人协会, *Shanghai Shi Mangren Xiehui*), and the Shanghai Film Critics Society. In line with some Western countries its purpose is to insert an individual AD soundtrack to the original movie soundtrack so that persons with vision loss can enjoy a film with the sighted audience using earphones and a piece of receiving equipment to hear its AD. There are currently 50 cinemas ready to offer this service in Shanghai. The first described movie under this project—*The River in Me* (大河唱, *Da He Chang*)—was pre-screened on July 29, 2020. Movie viewers must pay for their tickets themselves.

Apart from the above cities, where AD is regularly provided, there are also AD practices in some other cities, such as Hangzhou, Suzhou, Heilongjiang, and Jilin, to name a few. According to Ma, AD has appeared in at least two-thirds of the capital cities of all the Chinese provinces, a total of approximately twenty cities. There is little cooperation between them, but three examples of successful interaction among cities should be mentioned. Firstly, the team led by Qu in Shanghai works in close collaboration with Chengdu, Hangzhou, Yangzhou, and Suzhou, where volunteers are also mostly radio presenters. Qu shares AD scripts with them from time to time. Secondly, an activity bringing described films into special education schools is held twice a year since May 2018 under the initiative of Qu's team. Four events have been held until the time of this interview, with the participation of 41 cities in the last event in 2019. Finally, the Entertainment Accessibility project (文娱无障碍, *Wenyu wuzhang'ai*) started in January 2020, initiated by Shanghai Yi'er Information Technology Co. (上海译迩信息科技有限公司, *Shanghai Yi'er Xinxi Keji Youxian Gongsi*), Accessibility Research Association (信息无障碍研究会, *Xinxi Wuzhang'ai Yanjiuhui*), and Shanghai Film Critics Society. Some AD groups in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Hong Kong have taken part in this project, and this is the first time these groups have cooperated. One output of this project is an accessible online platform in WeChat specifically designed for some target groups—persons with sensorial disabilities, the ageing population, and persons with environmental restrictions— so that they can enjoy audiovisual content. The first accessible film under this project with AD, SDH, and sign language interpretation is entitled *Mountains May Depart* (山河故人,

Shanghe Guren) (Jia, 2015), and was released on October 15, 2020, on the international White Cane Awareness Day.

2.1.2.   Obstacles for AD's development

As stated by Tor-Carroggio (2020b), AD in China has a volunteer-dependent nature. It is interesting to note that the researcher was corrected by Ma when using the word "work" during the interview to refer to the AD practice because it is not profitable, and he suggested to use "service" or "activity" instead, due to its charitable nature. Li (2013) highlighted that the social welfare system in China belongs to the residual welfare type according to the definition of Wilensky and Lebeaux (1965 as cited in Li 2013). Within the residual welfare, those people who receive help are viewed as vulnerable groups, and this is considered as charity. That may partially explain the significant obstacles for the development of AD indicated by our interviewees.

All the interviewees agree that the copyright issue is the most critical and urgent problem hindering the development of AD in China. This problem is paralleled by the absence of the legal guarantee, something all informants have commented upon. Both issues were also highlighted in Tor-Carroggio and Casas-Tost (2020). The few described films available in DVD format with copyright permission are mostly very old films. Another way to avoid copyright infringement is to deliver live AD without changing the content of the original movie—a solution adopted in most places. Yao believes that the films available online are already copyright free, so that adding AD does not constitute an infringement. However, all the content available to the Entertainment Accessibility project is copyrighted. Consequently, the copyright issue restricts the quantity and genres of films available for AD. The fundamental solution to this problem lies in legislation. In the recently amended Copyright Law of the People's Republic of China (2020 Amendment) (中华人民共和国著作权法, *Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo zhuzuo quanfa*), audiovisual products are listed among products under protection (article 3), and a new exemption is providing accessible formats of published works to people with reading difficulties (article 24). Together with the ratification of the MVT[3] on 23 October 2021—a treaty on copyright intending to facilitate access to works

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[3] This ratification decision applies to Mainland China and Hong Kong but not Macau.

to persons with sight loss or other print disabilities—, the two legislative initiatives may contribute to solving the copyright problem.

The second obstacle is the precarious situation of volunteers. Many volunteers are university students who tend to abandon this activity after graduating as they need to find employment. Two exceptions are the SoL and the Entertainment Accessibility projects, which are composed of both professionals and volunteers.

The third impediment is the lack of communication among different AD groups, especially from different cities. It is difficult to find somebody willing to take responsibility for initiating and maintaining constant communication between AD groups from different regions because it is quite energy-consuming and some providers also think that it is unnecessary, arguing that the disagreement on some aspects could cause conflicts and be a waste of time. Consequently, there are times when various ADs for the same movie co-exist, and there are no unified standards as each group works according to their own principles/guidelines.

All this leads to the fourth problem, which Ma gave particular emphasis to: AD quality. Despite the volunteer-dependent nature of AD in China, both viewers and providers of described films are very satisfied with the quality of current AD in China. The high degree of satisfaction among users could be due to them feeling neglected and, because of that, any initiative to help them is highly appreciated (Tor-Carroggio, 2020b). However, Ma thinks that it is high time to focus on AD quality since the number of available described films is increasing, and more attention is being paid to this activity. He believes that more effort is needed to enhance the quality of AD products, for which discussion between different groups and more research are essential.

The fifth obstacle is the lack of regular provision of AD products in many places, primarily due to the funding problem. Almost all the groups rely on non-governmental organizations, like local federations of people with disabilities. One advantage for those groups located in Shanghai is the support they receive from their local government. Since 2015, on 15 October, Shanghai is the first Chinese city that celebrates a Barrier-Free Movie Day, an initiative approved by the Shanghai Municipal People's Congress (上海人民代表大会, *Shanghai Renmin Daibiao Dahui*). One particular case is the group in Wuxi, which has created their mobile application with a grant from the Australian Embassy in China and whose

live AD sessions are financed by local foreign companies. However, it is difficult for described films to reach other less-developed areas, primarily rural areas, where the majority of persons with vision loss live.

Finally, the number of people benefitting from AD is small in comparison to the total population with vision loss within China. There is more demand than supply of AD products. On the one hand, the described movies available online are limited for copyright reasons. On the other hand, the number of people who are able to go to the cinema to see a live AD session is also very small. For example, a session in Guangzhou has at most 60 visually impaired viewers. Moreover, few cinemas are equipped with accessible facilities. In the case of Shanghai, although 17 sessions of the same movie are provided in its 17 administrative districts every month, only about 3,000 persons with visual loss can enjoy this service due to the limited capacity of the cinemas. Furthermore, most of those attending live sessions are persons with partial sight loss instead of total loss due to fewer mobility difficulties. Another thing worth mentioning is that viewers not only include persons with visual impairment but sometimes also the elderly.

Apart from the aforementioned difficulties faced by AD in China, some commonly raised issues by other scholars are: the inclusion of MA in university courses; a set of official AD guidelines used throughout the territory based on empirical data; and the increase of financial and technical support on the part of the government (Li 2013; Pan and Li, 2013; Wu and Xie 2015; Tor-Carroggio and Casas-Tost 2020; Ma, 2020).

2.2. How AD is performed in China

2.2.1. AD creation procedures

Generally speaking, the first step taken is the selection of the film to audio describe. All the interviewees agree that not all films are equally suitable for AD. This was also indicated in a study of AD in Hong Kong (Leung, 2018). On the one hand, due to time limitations, action movies like martial arts movies are usually avoided due to the high speed at which action occurs. On the other hand, because the audience of described films is mostly ageing persons with a relatively low level of education, they have a preference for feature films that are heavily story-oriented. Therefore, movies with complicated plots are also avoided, such as science fiction or art films, which are sometimes also challenging to understand for sighted

viewers. In the case of non-Chinese films, a dubbed version is required in order to prevent audio subtitling, therefore there are more Chinese films than foreign ones being audio described in China. In Shanghai, only four out of the twelve (33%) described movies delivered live by Qu's team are foreign. This is in line with a questionnaire-based study conducted by Tor-Carroggio (2020b). She found that some of the respondents wanted to have more foreign films with AD. Additionally, the favourite movie genres among the participants appeared to be closely associated with their advanced age, with historical films and comedies being particularly favored *(ibid.)*. At the same time, although AD is always done in Standard Chinese, Qu observed that viewers in Shanghai were very excited when a film was audio described in the dialect of their city.

After choosing the film, scriptwriters watch the movie several times taking notes and writing the AD script. Scriptwriters should have a good understanding of the film and always try to foresee the information needs of the audience. In Han and Li's teams, various members cooperate in the production of an AD script while in the teams of Qu and Yao, a scriptwriter finishes this job individually. In two cases, in Wuxi and Guangdong, the scriptwriter is also the voice talent. One reason for this, mentioned by Yao, is that some voicing problems can be avoided when the scriptwriter is familiar with both the film and their voice characteristics, thus avoiding some linguistic formulations which are difficult for them to pronounce. However, the voice talent may not accurately follow the AD scripts making a different degree of modifications that they think better or easier to voice. In SoL, AD scripts are revised by Han, who emphasizes the importance of persons with vision loss taking part in the elaboration of AD products. Another aspect that should be addressed is that a brief introduction of the described movie is often provided before the AD starts in all the AD groups. The aim of this introduction, usually shorter than 200 Chinese characters, is to give a general introduction of the storyline, to introduce the main characters and sometimes to provide personal comments. It only lasts about one minute, whereas audio introductions, also offered before ADs to enhance them, take up to 15 minutes and provide not only factual information, but also visual information like uncommon cinematic techniques used in the film (Remael *et al.*, 2014).

The finished AD script is then delivered live or recorded by a voice talent. There are far more voice talents than scriptwriters in China (Tor-Carroggio and Casas-Tost, 2020). For instance, the group offering live AD in Shanghai has currently around 360 volunteers delivering films with live

AD in turns and only one scriptwriter. The six AD providers are always in close contact with viewers, who are often asked for feedback after the film screening to improve the service.

It is not easy to calculate the actual time taken to produce an AD for a film because volunteers do it in their spare time, and different AD groups have their own methodologies. Nevertheless, according to Ma's reckoning, it takes about 80 hours to write an AD script, not counting the time for recording. The shortest script is about 9,000 Chinese characters, and the longest can be nearly 20,000. However, it should be considered that some original lines of dialogues and voicing suggestions are included in AD scripts as hints for when and how to voice.

2.2.2. General principles in AD scriptwriting

All of our interviewees highlight three golden principles of AD scriptwriting methodologies. First of all, AD should only be inserted when there are neither dialogues nor essential sounds. Owing to time limitations and the age and level of education of the audience, the language used to translate the visual information efficiently must be simple, precise, fluid, concise, and vivid. Some easy-to-understand *chengyu* (idiomatic expressions usually consisting of four Chinese characters) can be used to offer an accurate description in a short time. In order to save time, Jiang discourages the use of adjectives and function words.

In the second place, AD priority is given to relevant narratological elements that drive the development of the plot to help viewers follow the movie. Being conscious of the impossibility of transferring all the visual elements, the interviewees stress two types of information that should not be missing: scene changes and actions, which contribute to the understanding of what is happening on screen. When the available time for AD is long enough, descriptions can be devoted to particular details, such as the clothes of a character, secondary props or the landscape, amongst other aspects. The prerequisite for an appropriate information prioritization in AD is an accurate perception of the original film on the part of scriptwriters.

Finally, all the interviewees agree that descriptions should be as objective as possible and personal interpretations should be avoided. Notwithstanding, objectivity is always a very ambiguous concept, and contradictions were present even in their statements during the interviews.

The subjectivity versus objectivity dichotomy is one of the most controversial concerns in the Chinese AD world.

The ensuing sub-sections will address the following issues that are still under discussion among the interviewees: naming of characters, implicit information, psychology, scene changes across time and space, speaker identification, film language, and sensitive scenes.

2.2.2.1. Naming of characters

The narratological significance of characters is seen as a critical parameter when deciding when and how to name them, what is known as the final character fixation (CF) in terms of Benecke (2014). According to four of our interviewees, except for Han and Li, the main characters should be named in their first appearance on screen to save time, regardless of being identified or not at that moment, unless their identity should be kept unrevealed as part of the plot. The most important characters are already identified in the brief introduction before the film begins. Since the plots of films chosen for AD are usually quite straightforward, Qu argues that the scriptwriter can even reveal who the good or the bad guy is, since this is often quite obvious. In the case of interim CF—referring to characters by their attributes—, physical attributes and professions are often used to refer to a character. Han states that her group always prefers to give the final CF synchronized with the movie when the time allows for it and characters' identities will not confuse the audience. Han mentions a unique situation involving the nomenclature of some Chinese characters. In ancient times, people could have birth names (名, *ming*), courtesy names (字, *zi*), and sometimes artistic names (号, *hao*) —pen names used by artists, especially by the literati. In modern times, individuals may also adopt pseudonyms (笔名, *biming*). The co-existence of several names for the same person may confuse viewers and clarification is needed. For example, when mentioning Maodun (茅盾)—the pseudonym of a famous Chinese writer—, it can be followed by an explanation of Yanbing (雁冰) as his courtesy name.

Jiang comments on the naming of Western characters, who are often referred to by both their given names and surnames. When a Western name is translated into Chinese, it is usually longer than common Chinese names and difficult to pronounce. Given the time limitation, instead of full names, either the first name or the last name is adopted in AD scripts depending

on which one is used most in the film. When both are complicated, other strategies are adopted. One example is *The Legend of Hercules* (2014 Renny Harlin). Hercules is translated as *Helakelesi* (赫拉克勒斯), which is hard to utter. Alternatively, *Da Wangzi* (大王子, 'Elder Prince') is used to refer to him in the AD, which means that he is the eldest son of his father, Zeus. In any case, consistency in the naming of characters is required by all AD groups.

2.2.2.2. Implicit information

In many films there may be some implicit clues designed as suspense to be revealed later or not to be disclosed until the end of a film or even being left open to multiple interpretations. Another kind of implicit information is some cause-effect relationships that ask the audience to infer for themselves; for example, the reason why a character decides to do something. All of our interviewees discourage anticipating or uncovering such kind of information, especially the clues that create suspense throughout the film, in order not to deprive the audience of the pleasure of discovering it by themselves. However, hints can be given to help the audience understand. For example, if a knife appears several times, maybe in a close-up shot, and is indicated as the murder weapon the last time, the AD can suggest that it is the same knife that has appeared before. Although sometimes even sighted viewers cannot grasp certain implicit information, Jiang advocates making it explicit to ensure precise and complete understanding whenever time permits.

2.2.2.3. Psychology

Characters usually communicate their emotions through non-verbal language, such as facial expressions and postures. Considering time constraints, Jiang and Qu suggest naming the emotion transmitted directly using precise words. Conversely, Yao and Han are in favor of describing the non-verbal language without naming it. For example, when a character feels hesitant, it is better to say that they are frowning with sunken eyes than saying that they are indecisive, so the audience can interpret the character's emotion by themselves. Li believes that both describing and naming an emotion are reasonable depending on the time available. If there is very little time, and the facial expression is complicated, naming is

preferred to reduce cognitive load for the audience with visual impairment. Otherwise, either a description with more details or a combination of description and naming is considered to be adequate.

2.2.2.4. Scene changes across time and space

Some scene changes involve switches between different spatio-temporal settings, for instance, a flashback or a flash-forward. In some cases, such transition is pointed out with text on screen, while in others it is implied through changes of the physical appearance of characters, decorations, or landscapes, among others. Han and Li tend to describe those visual changes that help the audience to decipher the spatio-temporal changes, whereas Jiang, Qu and Yao advise mentioning them directly.

2.2.2.5. Speaker identification

When various characters are having a conversation, all the interviewees agree on specifying the speaker's identity to prevent confusion if the voice is difficult to recognize, even at the expense of overlapping with part of the dialogue. Two different approaches are mentioned: inserting speakers' names or describing an action of the speaker after or before they talk when there is enough time. Yao considers it redundant in the case of the main characters, whose voices the audience is already very familiar with.

2.2.2.6. Film language

All the interviewees discourage the use of too many cinematic terms, except for simple and commonly known ones, such as close-up, fast-forward, or flashback, to name just a few. Nonetheless, they all are conscious of film language's influence on information selection for AD, stating that descriptions should only be given to contents featured in a shot and special attention must be paid to shot changes, which are usually accompanied by scene changes.

2.2.2.7. Sensitive scenes

As for some sensitive scenes containing violent or erotic images, vague and short descriptions without going into details are provided. For

example, instead of saying that two people are making love, it is preferred to say that they have an intimate relationship, or that the bedsheets have fallen on the floor. However, the voice talents may still self-censor and avoid such descriptions when delivering the AD script. Another factor to be aware of is that all the films must be reviewed and approved by the National Radio and Television Administration (国家广播电视总局, *Guojia Guangbo Dianshi Zongju*) before their release. Therefore, most of the sensitive scenes—those containing elements of sex, violence, politically or religiously sensitive information—are already cut before elaborating the AD for a film, and those movies with many scenes of this type cannot even enter the Chinese market.

2.3.   Suggestions about AD translation from Spanish to Chinese

Before suggesting AD translation to promote this service by, for example, reducing elaboration time, all the interviewees except Jiang show a positive attitude towards this possibility. Jiang doubts that a translated AD script could cater to Chinese viewers owing to differences in audience's preferences and AD traditions across cultures. However, at first, those in favor of our proposal also showed a certain degree of suspicion upon knowing that our case is AD translation from Spanish into Chinese, because they thought that the audience of Spanish films was minimal in China and there were few Spanish films dubbed in Chinese. Actually, all of them are unfamiliar yet curious about our proposal, which is not strange considering that AD in China is usually not even associated with translation (Tor-Carroggio and Casas-Tost, 2020).

After the researcher's clarification that Spanish AD scripts to be translated can be of films from any country, three possible benefits are identified, although the interviewees are not sure such a practice would be timesaving. First, Yao and Han assume that if the film with AD to be translated is a Western one, the AD script in Spanish may provide a better understanding of the film, especially when the film is released already with AD produced in its original country. AD translation offering a better understanding was also confirmed by Jankowska *et al*. (2017) from an intercultural perspective. Borrowing their argument, the cultural gap between a film from a Western country different from Spain and the Spanish culture is narrower than that between the source culture and the Chinese culture. Therefore, the Spanish AD scriptwriter may have a better

comprehension of cultural references in the film and hence can enhance the quality of the Chinese AD script by better capturing cultural connotations. Second, many Western movies are released one month earlier in Western countries. So, Qu presumes that Chinese AD providers could take advantage of this temporal gap to translate into Chinese the already existing AD scripts in other languages and make some adjustments when the Chinese dubbed version is available so that a foreign movie with Chinese AD could be accessible simultaneously to the imported standard version dubbed into Chinese. Another advantage mentioned by Han and Li is that our proposal might help introduce some Western AD expertise, which can contribute to Chinese AD development in all respects.

Nevertheless, according to our interviewees, various aspects must be considered as for AD translation. To begin with, the described film chosen for the translation should be the type that the Chinese audience likes and a dubbed version in Chinese must be available to prevent audio subtitling. Next, it cannot be ignored that the Chinese version of the film may be different from the Spanish version in length as some parts may be cut in the censorship process. Following that, differences in AD traditions caused by linguistic and cultural distinctiveness should be examined, and localization is recommended. However, Han holds that AD basic principles, such as objectivity and inserting AD only between dialogue gaps, are shared in all languages. Finally, the translator of AD scripts plays a significant role in this process. However, apart from a good command of their mother tongue, no specific skills required are highlighted.

CONCLUSIONS

This article has presented the results of the semi-structured interviews completed with six Chinese AD providers from Shanghai, Wuxi, and Guangdong. To start off, an updated snapshot of the state of AD in China has been given to contextualize it historically and obstacles Chinese AD faces has also been explained. Moving on, AD creation procedures and some issues under debate related to AD scriptwriting in Chinese have been tackled, showing the common ground to several AD groups in China and what is different among them. It can be observed that the subjectivity versus objectivity issue is one of the most controversial topics in Chinese AD, which has also been highlighted by Tor-Carroggio and Vercauteren (2020). On the other hand, even though different AD groups carry out AD following their own criteria, many similarities have been observed.

Finally, suggestions about AD translation from Spanish into Chinese have been offered by the interviewees, which will be considered in our future work. Although not familiar with this concept, five of the six interviewees adopt a positive attitude towards our proposal.

Our study is not exempt from limitations, the main one being the small and not randomized sample of interviewees from just three Chinese cities. Therefore, the results obtained cannot be generalized to the whole of China, together with Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Macau, considering local diversities in such a geographically broad country. However, the results obtained provide us with some meaningful observations of AD in China, as the aim of studies based on interviews is rarely to generalize to broader populations but rather to provide rich and diverse qualitative information from key participants (Saldanha and O'Brien, 2014, p. 180). Meanwhile, the reasons behind the differences between AD in China and in the West are not explored. According to Tor-Carroggio and Vercauteren (2020), they are due to their different stages of development. A contrastive study based on AD scripts in Chinese and some Western languages is also needed to systematically detect differences and similarities between the AD in China and the West and to analyze the reasons causing such differences more thoroughly. Such kinds of comparison will also be useful to test the feasibility of AD translation in China as a solution to increase the AD offer. Nevertheless, it is hoped that our study can favor a mutual understanding between the Chinese AD world and the West to help bridge the knowledge gap regarding AD. The results attained can be considered as an ongoing study where the feasibility of AD translation from Spanish into Chinese will be investigated.

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