Strategies and Translation Practices of Anime Fansub Groups, and the Distribution of Fansubs in China

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Abstract: This paper examines the strategies and translation practices of anime fansub groups in China, situated within otaku culture. It compares fansubs with professional subtitling, highlighting key distinctions in workflow, linguistic style, visual presentation, and the use of explanatory notes. The analysis further explores the operational challenges these amateur collectives face, including staffing, competition, and copyright issues. While the rise of licensed streaming platforms poses existential questions, the study concludes that fansubs persist by fulfilling unmet demand for culturally nuanced translations of niche or unofficially licensed content, maintaining a distinctive role in cross-cultural media circulation.

Keywords: Fansubs; Subtitling; Otaku culture; Audiovisual Translation; Amateur translation.

1. Background

In the process of cross-cultural communication, as a group that is organized spontaneously by amateurs, the fansub group performs a role that voluntarily translates and distributes. These are collectives of amateur translators that distribute content not available in their territories through electronic channels. However, in the existing research of these days, many scholars usually conflate the fansub group with television works and online communication. In fact, the fansub group has its own characteristics and research values[1].

In the research of fansub, there are a number of studies that have been conducted. Díaz Cintas has given a detailed introduction[1] in his papers about subtitling. For example, in 'Fansubs: Audiovisual Translation in an Amateur Environment' [2], a paper that specifically describes aspects of a fansub group's work from the perspective of a fansubber – such as the division work, work chain, and what software will be used in different situations. In addition, this paper lists some examples of translations to illustrate what problems may arise when translating through a pivot language.

In 'Los Fansubs: el caso de traducciones (no tan) amateur' [3], the author not only meticulously summarized the differences between fansubs and professional subtitles, but also gave a number of examples to explain how fansub groups of Spanish speaking countries work.

As for the aspect of otaku culture, The term "otaku"(御宅), originating as a polite Japanese second-person pronoun meaning "your home," evolved in the early 1980s to denote avid fans, particularly within anime and sci-fi communities.

Its popularization is often traced to its use among creators and characters in the iconic series *Macross*. By 1983, the term entered sociological discourse through Nakamori Akio's critical article "Otaku Research", which framed otaku negatively, reflecting broader societal prejudices. In response, figures like Okada Toshio sought to redefine otaku positively, describing them as individuals with deep, analytical engagement in subcultures, standing at the forefront of cultural development[4]. While broadly applicable to various obsessive hobbies, otaku culture is most closely identified with manga and anime fandoms.

2. Brief introduction of fansub

"Fansub groups" refers to a group of fans who spontaneously create subtitles in order to spread film and television productions from another culture. With the continuous advancement of modern information technology, various types of popular cultural products from foreign countries have reached the audience through the Internet, which has prompted the birth of fansub. This type of translation made by fans has become a social phenomenon of Internet masses [2].

The appearance of fansubs of Japanese anime fully demonstrates that an audience's requirements play an important role in cross-cultural communication. The contradiction between demand and supply is the basic driving force for this communication between fans. In the 1960s, the transmission of Japanese anime in the United States was restricted due to its violent and sexual content. Some fans formed Japanese anime clubs, such as the Cartoon/Fantasy Organization (C/FO), and shared Japanese animations for free with each other. Members of the club obtained video sources by going to Japan to buy or exchange tapes with Japanese audiences. However, these resources are not translated, in the video there is no English subtitle, and the viewers can only understand the story through images. In the late 1980s, the application of time-synchronized and S-VHS video systems enabled the output of precise text and images to be taped onto videotape. In this way, the first subtitled Japanese anime appeared in the United States, but the cost was very high. Afterwards, the development of technology has made the cost much lower. The Internet has become the main vehicle to transmit videos.

Fansub has a strong self-entertainment feature. They circumvent censorship measures in the traditional distribution chain, disseminate foreign cultural products through self-mobilization and coordination of member's capabilities, and use unauthorized communication behaviors to deconstruct the control of information by media agencies. Unlike the simple sharing of finished products, the production and distribution of media subtitled by fans requires a lot of time and effort[5].

The activities of fansub groups exhibit several defining characteristics. First, fansubbing constitutes a collaborative endeavor within a virtual community. Participants are driven by non-commercial motives, coalescing spontaneously out of shared interest in specific works. Their primary aim is to broaden access to favored content by producing subtitles. Typically, members come from diverse geographic and professional backgrounds. They join through online recruitment, often remaining anonymous to one another, and maintain communication via instant messaging platforms such as MSN, QQ, and Line. Mutual trust serves as the fundamental bond sustaining the group's operations.

Furthermore, the quality and volume of available translations often fail to meet audience demand. While access to video sources has improved, the dissemination of cultural products across borders is primarily hindered by language barriers—a central challenge in cross-cultural communication. Indeed, not all viewers possess the capacity to comprehend content in its original language and cultural context. Prior to the emergence of fansub groups, audiences typically relied on two channels to overcome this barrier: officially sanctioned translations and pirated CDs. Official translations, often government-supported, generally ensure quality, yet their lengthy production cycles and limited output cannot keep pace with growing audience demand. On the other hand, pirated CDs, though quickly updated and widely accessible, suffer from poor translation quality, as producers prioritize speed and quantity over accuracy. Such translations are frequently generated directly through software without post-editing, resulting in texts that are incoherent and difficult to comprehend. As the educational and aesthetic expectations of viewers rise, such substandard translations become increasingly unacceptable. Consequently, with the expansion of the internet, capable fans began to translate their preferred films and television programs independently, sharing Chinese subtitles online to make content more accessible.

Fansub work demands certain foundational skills and knowledge, such as video editing, and translators are generally expected to possess at least Japanese-Language Proficiency Test N2 level. In practice, however, joining a fansub group does not require professional credentials. As collectives "composed of fans" and "serving fans", these groups prioritize dedication and enthusiasm over formal expertise. This emphasis stems from the fact that the effort invested in fansubbing is largely unpaid, making sustained participation difficult without genuine passion for anime. Many members join with limited understanding of the group's structure and workflow, acquiring necessary skills through hands-on involvement. Thus, subtitling in this context remains amateur in nature rather than professional.

Secondly, this activity represents a form of unpaid labor driven by emotional investment. As noted, fansubbers do not engage in subtitling for commercial gain; the time and effort expended are disproportionate to any tangible rewards. To provide audiences with timely access to newly released content, members often undertake extended, high-intensity work sessions—frequently through the night—to balance speed with translation quality. In some cases, subtitled versions of short TV anime episodes are made available within an hour of the original broadcast. Consequently, within this demanding and largely unrewarded process, a genuine passion for anime remains indispensable.

The relatively larger fansub groups on the Internet generally rent servers and build their own websites or BBS (bulletin board systems). This is not a small cost. According to insiders[6], the hosting fee of a professional server of a fansub forum is 1,000 yuan (about 150 USD dollars) per month, and purchasing a server hardware would amount to 20,000 yuan (about 3,000 USD dollars). The server that the team members use to deposit the source video is 9,000 yuan (about 1,350 USD dollars), and the annual custodian fee is nearly 20,000 yuan. There are other costs involved such as the fee of some parts. The total is about 50,000 yuan (about 7500 USD dollars) each year [6]. These costs are subsidized by some fansub members themselves. The only benefit for the fansubber is to have a VIP account for the forum where one can download more extensive video resources.

From the perspective of audience psychology, people are unwilling to pay too much for the cost of enjoying entertainment products[1]. The fansub group follows a non-profit and sharing operation method. Audiences can receive cross-cultural products for free. The activities of fansub group have allowed them to enjoy cross-cultural communication at a nearly zero cost.

The Japanese animes translated by well-organized fansub groups are of high quality. Some even have their own translation features. These fansub groups attract fans with their unique language style. There is online competition among the fansub groups and each of these groups has developed their own characteristics and styles. For example, the group POPG put forward the slogan of 'we would rather be slow than translate badly', emphasizing that translation should be as rigorous and accurate as possible; SOSG and Huameng emphasize the importance of knowledge of otaku culture. In their uploaded works, a large section of notes that explain background knowledge and neta can be seen. The fansub group Zhushen is specialized in bilingual subtitles which are in Chinese and Japanese. In the selection of what kind of anime to translate, different fansub groups also have their own preferences. For example, the group Pipaxing prefers works of detective fiction; Feng Xue prefers the works of Shueisha (集英社, a Japanese book and video game publisher); the group WOLF specializes in the works which characters are mostly young girls.

3. Characteristics of translations by fansubs

Based on Martínez's [3] comparative analysis of Spanish-language fansubs versus professional subtitling, key distinctions emerge in workflow, presentation, and linguistic approach. Unlike commercial translators who often work from dialogue lists, fansubbers typically work directly with audio or subtitle files, and always have the video reference, allowing for precise timing and context. They face fewer formal restrictions: character limits and standardized typography (e.g., Arial/Times New Roman, 12pt) bind professional studios, whereas fansubs may use multiple lines, varied fonts, colors for different characters, and explanatory notes. While commercial translation ideally includes adaptation and revision, Díaz [7] notes that revision is often omitted due to cost, and fansubs may lack consistent proofreading or quality control.

Distribution also differs fundamentally: fansubs circulate via peer-to-peer networks and file servers, while commercial translations are distributed officially.

Beyond these structural differences, several nuanced practices characterize fansubbing. First, language style is notably less constrained. Fansub translators, often non-professionals, may imitate the original's style but frequently inject personal or localized elements, such as dialects, online slang, or humorous alterations, aiming to enhance relatability and engagement[3]. This can make translations feel more colloquial and entertaining for fellow fans, though some viewers criticize excessive deviation from the source material. For instance, in Nichijō (2011), a prolonged exclamation was creatively adapted into varied Chinese sentences for comedic effect, showcasing a liberty rarely taken in professional subtitling.

Secondly, visual presentation diverges significantly. Professional standards mandate readability and non-intrusiveness, with centered, white, sans-serif text at the bottom of the screen [8]. Fansubs exercise greater freedom in typesetting, using distinct colors per character and embedding group logos into the video, both for stylistic flair and to deter unauthorized commercial reuse.

A third key feature is the use of translator's notes and explanations. Professionals must adapt or omit culturally specific content, but fansubbers frequently employ on-screen notes to bridge "rich points"—cultural or linguistic gaps[9]. This is common with puns, homophones, or culturally specific jokes, as seen in Nichijō where a note explains the wordplay between "centipede" (ムカデ) and "come towards" (むかってく). Notes may also alert viewers to post-credit scenes or, more subjectively, add commentators' asides, which can enhance engagement for some while distracting others.

Finally, inconsistencies arise between different fansub groups due to isolated workflows. This is particularly evident in translating names and titles from Japanese to Chinese. While kanji can often be retained, names written in hiragana require interpretation, leading to multiple valid renderings (e.g., Haruna as 春菜 , 陽菜 , etc.). Without coordination, a character's name may change across seasons, confusing audiences. Similarly, title translations can vary (e.g., Hidamari Sketch as 向阳庄 or 暖阳庄), reflecting different translator choices without affecting overall comprehension but challenging viewer adaptation.

In summary, fansubs distinguish themselves through technical flexibility, stylistic creativity, explanatory depth, and a decentralized approach that prioritizes community engagement over standardization, albeit at the risk of inconsistency and subjective intervention.

4. The current situation of fansub

As fansubbing is spontaneously organized by volunteers, collectives often operate with insufficient staff. They frequently manage multiple translation projects simultaneously while facing a shortage of translators and reviewers. Consequently, whenever a translated manga or video is released, it is common for fansub groups to include a recruitment notice, as exemplified in this section.

For many participants, the internet represents a space to build reputation and achieve recognition that may be unavailable elsewhere. In contrast, members of fansub groups typically view the online sphere as a channel for altruistic dedication—driven by passion and a spirit of sharing—rather than a path to fame. These volunteers invest considerable time, effort, and often personal funds into their work. Due to the voluntary and demanding nature of the tasks, membership turnover is high. Moreover, because workloads vary, individuals may simultaneously participate in multiple groups and projects.

In the current information era, translated anime remains in short supply relative to audience demand, as Japan's prolific animation industry consistently outpaces fansub capacity. New anime seasons are released quarterly, with series typically comprising 12–13 or around 25 episodes. As soon as one season is subtitled, a new wave begins. Fansub groups must not only keep up with newly broadcast works but also often undertake projects to subtitle older series, thereby preserving the historical development of Japanese animation for wider audiences. This constant pressure leads many larger

groups to maintain open recruitment indefinitely [10].

Competition among fansub groups exists, though it is not commercially motivated but rather centered on capability and reputation. Download counts often serve as an indicator of a group's translation quality, while release speed significantly affects those numbers. The first group to upload a subtitled version after broadcast typically attracts more downloads. This dynamic foster competition in both speed and quality, which can encourage higher standards in a condensed timeframe. However, the high turnover of members also leads to instability, and smaller groups may disband due to insufficient personnel. Operating funds, when needed, are often sustained through voluntary donations from members and community supporters.

Copyright infringement poses a significant and persistent challenge for fansub groups and the platforms hosting their work. A standard disclaimer embedded within fansubbed videos typically asserts: "This subtitle is intended only for learning and exchange among fans. Commercial use is strictly prohibited. Please delete the file within 24 hours after downloading and support the original by purchasing official releases." This formulation constitutes the most widely adopted strategy to mitigate potential legal liabilities. Furthermore, many groups incorporate watermarks or distinctive logos into video files to discourage unauthorized commercial redistribution.

The issue of copyright remains fundamentally unavoidable for fansub activities. On one hand, their operations inherently infringe upon the intellectual property rights of original creators. On the other hand, the translations they produce are themselves susceptible to unauthorized appropriation and misuse. In an era characterized by heightened enforcement of intellectual property norms, sustained operation within this legal gray area entails substantial risks. The gradual shutdown of numerous fansub forums following copyright claims underscores these consequences, compelling participants to critically reconsider the long-term viability of their endeavors. In practical terms, fansub groups face two choices: to continue subtitling or to disband. While video platforms such as Youku and Bilibili now emphasize copyright compliance and occasionally cooperate with established subtitling teams, such formalization often conflicts with the original "disinterested" ethos of fansubbing. Many volunteers joined to connect with like-minded enthusiasts and share beloved works—not for commercial gain. Transitioning into paid, professional localization work alters the fundamental nature of their engagement, a shift that numerous members find difficult to accept.

Nevertheless, fansub groups have persisted and developed in recent years, largely sustained by ongoing audience demand for foreign media. Although official platforms now license and subtitle a growing volume of content, a substantial number of foreign works—especially niche or older titles—remain without official localization. In this context, fansubs continue to serve viewers by providing accessible, culturally nuanced translations that cater to community-specific preferences, thereby retaining a distinctive role even as the media landscape evolves.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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