

Who has the final say? English translation of Online Writing *Wuhan Diary*

ABSTRACT

As a testimony to the lockdown life in Wuhan caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, Fang Fang's *Wuhan Diary* received worldwide attention while triggering extensive controversies in China. Drawing on the concepts of agent and voice in translation studies, this article explores the contextual, paratextual and textual voices of translation agents in the English translation of *Wuhan Diary* (2020) and their power negotiations, to reveal who has the final say in positioning and rendering the text for an Anglophone readership. In so doing, the article shows that the author rather than the publisher plays a decisive role in producing the paratextual materials for the translation, and that the translator tend to employ the translation technique of omission to protect the author and himself. Furthermore, it finds that the author's request for the revision of such paratexts as the title and blurb, in conjunction with the translator's technique of omission in the translated text, boil down to responses to the critical voices from Chinese readers. Therefore, this article argues that the critical voices from Chinese readers have had the final say in the production and presentation of the English translation of *Wuhan Diary*.

KEYWORDS

Online lockdown writing; *Wuhan Diary*; translation agents; readers' voice; paratext

1. Introduction

Translation is often embedded in a historical moment and results from power negotiations between agents involved in the translation activity. As a means of cultural communication, translation plays a significant role in the representation of others. However, it should be noted that the act of translation is a metonymic process and inevitably partial, due to its incapability of conveying all information in a source text (Tymoczko, 2014, p. 57). Consequently, the representation of others enacted by translation is never complete, but rather is contingent upon the decision, coordination and negotiation made by a myriad of translation agents such as authors, translators,

publishers and critics. While it is evident that translation agents can show their voices in the production and commercialisation of translation, their decisions are susceptible to the historical context, and the relations of power between the source culture and target culture and their underlying ideologies (Venuti, 2013, pp. 98–99; Baumgarten & Cornellà-Detrell, 2019, p. 2). In this sense, any translation is a social and ideological activity that needs to be addressed via a critical analysis of translation agents' voices in a specific historical context.

Drawing on the concepts of agent and voice in translation studies, this article explores the contextual, paratextual and textual voices of translation agents in the English translation of Fang Fang's *Wuhan Diary* (2020), as well as their interactions, to gain an insight into who has the final say in positioning and rendering the text for an Anglophone readership. Specifically, the article sketches out the contexts revolving around Fang Fang's *Wuhan Diary* and the publication of its English translation, to pave the way for its paratextual and textual investigations. By tracing the process of a shift from the initial title and blurb for presale to the revised title and blurb for formal release, this study explores the voices of Chinese readers, the author, the translator and the publisher, to show who plays a decisive role in shaping the interpretation of *Wuhan Diary* in the Anglophone world.¹ Based on a comparative textual analysis of examples from *Wuhan Diary*, the article further examined the translator's voice to demonstrate how he frames the original text for the target readers and how the contextual voices influence the translator's decision.

Why is Fang Fang's *Wuhan Diary* so intriguing? Fang Fang, a pen name of Wang Fang, is a prolific Chinese writer and the former chairman of the Hubei Writers Association who has experienced several political movements in China, such as the Great Leap Forward (1958–1962) and the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). Subsumed under the category of China's new realism literature, her works have received several literary awards, including the prestigious Lu Xun Literary Prize in China. Despite her extensive publications in different genres and prize-winning works, she is rarely considered as one of the most eminent living writers in China or overseas.

However, set against the backdrop of the lockdown in Wuhan which was first and most severely hit by COVID-19 in China in 2020 and written during her self-quarantine in this city, Fang Fang's *Wuhan Diary* was exceptionally successful, attracting millions of readers for each daily entry and receiving widespread coverage from mainstream

media in the West such as *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *The New Yorker* and *The Economist*. Meanwhile, it was also highly controversial, sparking off heated debates in Chinese mainland, which culminated with the appearance of its English translation for presale on Amazon.com with a provocative title and blurb on 8 April 2020, when the lockdown in Wuhan was lifted. It came as a surprise that its English translation was published by HarperCollins Publishers, a large commercial publishing house coveted by Chinese writers, and translated by Michael Berry who is a high-profile translator with a particular interest in contemporary Chinese literature. It is significant that, when its English translation was released on 15 May 2020, both the initial title and blurb for presale on Amazon.com had been changed. Given the fact that a change of title and blurb is exceedingly rare among the previous English translations of Chinese works, along with the controversies surrounding Fang Fang's diary that have evoked extensive responses from Chinese readers, the author and the translator, the English translation of *Wuhan Diary* provides a productive site for reflections on the voices of translation agents and their power negotiations in positioning and representing the translation in the target culture.

2. Agents and voices in translation studies

The concepts of agent and voice have received considerable attention in translation studies in recent years. In his article "Positioning translators: voices, views and values in translation," Hermans (2014) demonstrates how translators use paratextual devices to voice their attitudes towards the original authors and their works. Drawing on the concept of voice, Valdeón (2018) examines the paratexts of the English translation of *Don Quijote* and *Crónica del Perú (The Chronicles of Peru)* by John Stevens as well as that of the English translation of *Don Quijote* and *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias (A Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies)* by John Phillips, showing that the translators display their voices in their paratexts in line with their own translatorial identities and ideological stances. Similarly, Law and Ng (2020) probe into translators' prefaces to Chinese Christian translations in Hong Kong and Taiwan and reveal the translators' voices of guiding readers to read the target text, explaining their translation strategies and conveying their acknowledgements and wishes.

On the one hand, these studies exemplify the focus on translators and their voices

among scholars in translation studies, as translators are believed to play a crucial role in the translation process. However, many other agents also engage in the preparation, production and promotion of a translation product, agents such as publishers, commissioners, mediators, literary agents, text producers, revisers and editors (Milton & Bandia, 2009, p. 1; Munday, 2016, p. 240). From this perspective, rather than focusing on an individual agent, a cluster of studies concentrate on various agents and their interactions during translation process by delving into data from interviews and archives (Jones, 2011; Jansen & Wegener, 2013; Qi, 2016; Luo, 2020). They have explored agents such as translators, editors, publishers, printers and copyeditors, but have not yet considered the readers and the effects of their voices on translation process. Several studies have recently begun to address the readers as agents, demonstrating that they are not passive receivers but are rather active agents who propel the translators, distributors and publishers to respond to their voices (Kang & Kim, 2020; Lee, 2020). However, all the existing studies on translation agents' voices fall squarely in the category of target-oriented research, which reflects the idea of translation as "facts of target cultures" (Toury, 2012, p. 23). In other words, there is still a dearth of research on the voices of translation agents from the source culture and their impact on a translation project. Moreover, compared with other translation agents, readers, particularly readers from the source culture, are disproportionately underrepresented. To deal with this gap, the present study will examine the Chinese readers' voices, with an aim to explore if they affect the translation and presentation of *Wuhan Diary* in the Anglophone world.

On the other hand, Hermans (2014), Valdeón (2018) and Law and Ng (2020) point to paratexts as places of potential translation agents' voices and demonstrate a trend to use paratexts as a productive analytical tool in translation studies. Following their use of paratexts as a point of departure for analysing the voices of translation agents, the present study divides the voice into contextual voice, paratextual voice and textual voice, rather than using a more general division of "contextual voices and textual voices" (Alvstad & Assis Rosa, 2015, p. 3). In this respect, it should be well noted that the contextual voice in this study stems from contextual materials pertaining to the controversies over *Wuhan Diary* during the COVID-19 pandemic, while the paratextual voice derives from paratexts such as title, cover and blurb that have a threshold function. As for the textual voice, it is specifically referred to the translator's voice in the English

translation of *Wuhan Diary*.

In the following sections, we will identify the voices of Chinese readers, the author, the translator and the publisher through an analysis of the context, paratext and text of the English translation of *Wuhan Diary* in alliance with an examination of the author's responses online and our interview with the translator. Furthermore, we will interrelate the contextual voices with paratextual and textual voices to demonstrate whose voice exerts a decisive influence on the revision of the paratexts and the translator's choice of translation techniques.

3. *Wuhan Diary* in the context of COVID-19 pandemic: The Chinese readers' voice

During the lockdown of Wuhan caused by the outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020, Fang Fang's diary, posted and circulated on diverse online platforms, attracted numerous readers both in China and abroad. Keeping the diary for 60 days without interruption, she chronicled the daily lives of Wuhan inhabitants under quarantine primarily based on the information acquired from her friends, relatives, neighbours and the Internet, revealing the residents' fears, anger and hope in the beleaguered city. Moreover, her diary offered her own reflections on the coronavirus crisis, occasionally blaming the local government for its delayed response to the crisis at the early stage and consistently demanding accountability from officials on the one hand, and lauding the efforts made by the medical personnel in the front line fighting the virus and the central government's measures contributing to the increasingly improved situation of Wuhan and the whole of China on the other hand.

Having touched on some sensitive issues in China, Fang Fang's online diary was a controversy from the outset. With its wide dissemination online, it won many readers' hearts while it also became a target of criticism. When the COVID-19 pandemic was rampant in Wuhan during the period from late January to March in 2020, the supporters of her diary praised her as a truth-teller who opened a window for them to gain a glimpse of the real life in Wuhan under the lockdown (Su, 2020). In diametrically opposition to their view, the opponents considered her to be a liar, accusing her of providing readers with a biased depiction of the life in Wuhan with a tendency to expose its dark side based on unreliable sources (Wong, 2020). As a whole, the critical voice among Chinese readers was not as loud as the supportive voice before the news on 8 April 2020 that her diary would be translated into English and published in the US.

The appearance of the presale of the English translation of Fang Fang's diary on 8 April 2020, thrust Fang Fang and her diary back into the limelight, triggering heated debates on the Chinese social media platforms. To have a better understanding of these debates, it is necessary to map out a global overview of the COVID-19 pandemic at that time. It was a time when the pandemic in China was brought under control with only a few newly confirmed infection cases. As the lockdown caused by the pandemic was gradually lifted in Wuhan, Chinese people were encouraged to return to normal life step by step. By contrast, the world outside China, especially Europe and America, was at the height of coping with the pandemic. Their peoples were suffering from the lockdown enforced by governments following the exponential growth of infection numbers and death tolls. Confronted with such a difficult situation, the US government attempted to divert its people's attention away from its own ineffective policies for combating the outbreak of COVID-19 toward China's early cover-ups of the virus and failure to contain it in the first place, by labelling the virus as the "Wuhan virus," "Chinese virus" and "Kung Flu," to name but a few terms, and to further demand reparations from China for COVID-19 via legal means (Bandow, 2020; Marcus, 2020).

In light of the escalating tension between China and the US on the issue of the origin and spreading of COVID-19, the pending release of the English translation of Fang Fang's *Wuhan Diary* set in motion three distinct voices of Chinese readers on Weibo and WeChat, the two main social media platforms in China. A critical voice towards her decision to publish her diary in the US was overwhelming, at one end of the spectrum, which overshadowed the other two voices. For the opponents, the mere fact that her diary would be translated into English and published by a large US publisher proved that there was a conspiracy to deny China's efforts in combating the virus (Lu, 2020). They were also suspicious of the authenticity of her diary, claiming that it was based on the hearsay sources (Cao, 2020). They accused her of "seeking fame at the expense of the dead – eating 'buns made with human blood'" (*The Economist*, 2020). In addition, they argued that it was obviously not the right time to publish the diary in English, as this could provide "opponents of China with more ammunition" (Yang, 2020, p. 80). Consequently, it was considered, the English translation of her diary might bring fame to her, but it was bound to have a detrimental impact on the national image and interests of China. In sum, they project Fang Fang as a traitor who betrayed her homeland and empowered Western criticism of China's

response to the coronavirus crisis.

However, at the other end of the spectrum emerged a supportive voice, which was exemplified by some of the most influential contemporary Chinese writers such as Yan Lianke and Zhang Kangkang. They upheld the English translation of Fang Fang's diary with the contention that writers were endowed with the right to write and publish their own works. More importantly, they argued, writers were active agents who had the responsibility to keep record of the ongoing historical circumstances and write down their personal memories. As Yan (2020) observes, if Fang Fang "did not keep records or pen down her personal memories and feelings...What would we have heard? What would we have seen?" For these proponents, Fang Fang is a qualified writer who provided an alternative voice, unveiling personal and historical authenticity and truth by writing and publishing her diary.

There also existed a group of readers who adopted a relatively neutral line. Based on their analysis of both the critical and supportive voices with regard to the English translation of Fang Fang's diary in the US, they tended to support its translation into English with, however, the condition of a need to clarify and revise some of its contents to ensure its authenticity (Lau & Xie, 2020). They also contended, the English translation of the diary would serve as a channel to promote cultural exchanges and contribute to a better understanding of a multifaceted China, rather than providing weapons for the West to criticise China (Zhang, 2020). They associated some responses from the public with patriotism while warning against rising nationalism resulting from consistently pouring attacks on Fang Fang.

The Chinese readers' different and competing voices arising from the presale of the English translation of Fang Fang's *Wuhan Diary* raise questions about whether they had an influence on its production and promotion and how the other translation agents responded to them. To address these questions, the following sections will examine the paratexts and texts of the English translation of *Wuhan Diary*.

4. Packaging *Wuhan Diary* in English translation: The paratextual voice

As Tahir-Gürçağlar (2018, pp. 289–290) points out, paratexts of historical translations may provide "invaluable data about how translators, their patrons, publishers or editors conceptualised and positioned the works in question." From this perspective, the paratextual materials of translations can provide clues to the voices of translation agents

involved in constructing the meaning of translations. Following this critical line, this section will focus on the paratexts of the English translation of *Wuhan Diary* such as its cover, title and blurb released on Amazon.com, to explore the voices of Chinese readers, the author, the translator and the publisher, with the aim to illustrate whose voice plays a decisive role in positioning the translation.

When the English translation of Fang Fang's diary appeared for presale on Amazon.com on 8 April 2020, its cover featured a main title, subtitle, author (Fang Fang) and translator (Michael Berry). Its main title was "*WUHAN DIARY*" in large font, accompanied by a subtitle "DISPATCHES from the ORIGINAL EPICENTER" in much smaller font at the top of the cover. This title fulfilled the four functions identified by Genette, namely designating or identifying, description of the work, connotative value, and temptation (Genette, 1997, p. 93). The main title, "WUHAN DIARY," showed that the genre of the book was a diary which revolved around the Wuhan city. In combination with the main title, the subtitle further presented the diary as timely reports from Wuhan and made a reference to Wuhan as the original epicenter. By so doing, the title not only demonstrated its documentary value to readers and enticed them to be convinced of its authenticity, but also spurred the association between Wuhan and the origin of the novel coronavirus, with the concomitant potential of leading readers to a perception of Wuhan as the origin of the virus.

Moreover, following the tone set by the title, the blurb about *Wuhan Diary* on Amazon.com continued to highlight its documentary and unique value while providing a biased presentation of China. It summarised the content of *Wuhan Diary* as "a powerful first account of life in Wuhan COVID-19 outbreak and the toll of this deadly calamity on families and individual lives" (Amazon.com, 2020), promoting the authenticity of the diary and bringing the repercussions of the COVID-19 for the Wuhan residents to the fore for the Anglophone readership.² To accentuate the authenticity of the diary and its documentary value for what was happening in Wuhan during the pandemic, it further suggested that the diary was "personal and informative," a "fascinating eyewitness account of events" and "a unique look at life" of Wuhan residents under the lockdown (Amazon.com, 2020). In parallel, the blurb also showed a tendency to shape China as an authoritarian country where censorship and oppression were prevalent. For instance, it described China as "a nation where authorities use technology to closely monitor citizens and tightly control the media, writers often self-

“censor” and lauded the diary as “a unique look at life in confinement in an authoritarian nation” (Amazon.com, 2020). It also presented Fang Fang as an alternative voice in China, to “courageously speak out against social injustice, corruption, abuse, and the systemic political problems which impeded the response to the epidemic” to the point of almost becoming a “dissident” (Amazon.com, 2020).

By foregrounding the documentary value of the diary, constructing the image of China as a nation rife with censorship and oppression as well as associating Fang Fang with being a dissident, the blurb was instrumental in appealing to Anglophone readers, as this presentation accorded with their presumed expectations of Chinese literature. In fact, the Chinese literature selected for English translation by foreign publishers tends to be politically charged and to reveal a dark side of China. As an investigation of English translation of Chinese fiction between 1979 and 2009 reveals, the Chinese fiction selected by Hong Kong and the West explicitly explores “the darker aspects of life and human behavior” and is more concerned with “mocking the government and socialist society” in China (Yu, 2010, pp. 280–281). Moreover, it is not uncommon that the paratexts accompanying the English translations of Chinese literature put an emphasis on the themes of its documentary value, and exotic otherness of China, in conjunction with those of censorship, dissidence and communist despotism in China, to promote their reception in the English world (Liu & Baer, 2017; Marin-Lacarta, 2018). Consequently, as Lee argues, China is “unambiguously seen as a dystopia” in the West (Lee, 2015, p. 255); which argument resonates with the description of *Wuhan Diary* as a combination of “eerie and dystopian” in the blurb. From this perspective, the blurb reinforced the stereotypical understanding of Chinese literature and China in the West and highlighted these stereotypes as selling points to raise the interest of potential target readers.

As important paratextual elements, the title and blurb of the English translation of Fang Fang’s diary provided a very initial contact with potential readers, attracting immediate attention from Chinese readers and spawning a wave of criticism towards Fang Fang, her diary and the translator on social media platforms in China. In the view of many Chinese readers, the title and blurb of *Wuhan Diary* were produced by Fang Fang and the translator, which propelled them to blame the author and the translator for misguiding in presenting Wuhan as the origin of the novel coronavirus and jeopardising the image and interests of China.

Given the increasing critical voice from the Chinese readers, the subtitle was changed from “DISPATCHES from the ORIGINAL EPICENTER” to “DISPATCHES from a QUARANTINED CITY” on 10 April 2020, only two days after its first appearance. In this way, the revised subtitle addressed the Chinese readers’ main concerns at referring to Wuhan as the origin of the virus and turned the focus onto the quarantined situation of Wuhan during the height of the pandemic.

At the same time, in response to the attacks on the English translation of her diary, especially its title and blurb for the presale on Amazon.com, Fang Fang accepted to be interviewed by *Scholar*, an official account on WeChat. In the interview, Fang Fang revealed that her book title was “Wuhan Diary-Record of ? (days of) Lockdown,” with the question mark indicating that the length of the lockdown in Wuhan was unknown at that time.³ She also explained that although she was consulted on the English cover, her very low English proficiency prevented her from noticing the lexical nuances while the translator neglected to check the subtitle in small font. With regard to the blurb for presale that appeared on Amazon.com, she contended:

Booksellers may have biased remarks when promoting sales, but such issues can be corrected in a timely manner. Right now, it has been agreed that the text must be shown to the translators and then submitted for my sign-off. (Interview with Fang Fang by *Scholar*, 2020).

Moreover, with respect to the initial title and blurb on Amazon.com, Berry reveals that “the publisher’s sales department uploaded presale pages to Amazon and other online booksellers with that (initial) subtitle and a description of the book that no one had yet vetted.”⁴

With the observations from the author and the translator, it is clear that the title and the blurb of *Wuhan Diary* for presale were produced by the publisher, reflecting the latter’s voice in reaffirming the stereotypes of Chinese literature and giving prominence to the shedding of light on an oppressive and undemocratic side of China. It is also evident that the publisher had a decisive control over how *Wuhan Diary* was presented to the English readership which was in tune with the dominant ideology and market needs operating in the target culture. In this regard, the initial title and the blurb provide more evidence for the established notion that publishers often play a prominent and

decisive role when it comes to paratextual publishing decisions (Ying, 2013, p. 309; Lee, 2015, p. 256; Rovira-Esteva, 2016, p. 190; Batchelor, 2018, p. 39).

However, the case of the English translation of *Wuhan Diary* in fact runs counter to the role of publishers in deciding the paratextual materials. Instead, it highlights the power of the author and translator in intervening in the paratexts, as exemplified by the ultimate changes of its title and blurb. Following the replacement of its controversial subtitle, “DISPATCHES from the ORIGINAL EPICENTER” with “DISPATCHES from a QUARANTINED CITY,” the blurb about *Wuhan Diary* on the presale stage also underwent a major revision before finally being released on Amazon.com again. Compared to the initial blurb, the revised one removed much sensitive and controversial information that was related to the origin of the novel coronavirus and its devastating consequence for Wuhan and that highlighted censorship and oppressive measures implemented by the Chinese government. In addition to downplaying the criticism of China and Chinese government, the revised blurb turned to praise the concerted efforts of all walks of life in China to grapple with the virus and highlight the virus as the common enemy of humankind. In this way, it shifted its focus away from stigmatising China and the Chinese government to an emphasis on the universal values of *Wuhan Diary*. At a time when almost all countries around the world were occupied with combating the COVID-19, *Wuhan Diary* is considered in the revised blurb to provide universal insights into the plight of the residents under lockdown everywhere and to offer lessons for other countries on how to deal with the virus in an efficient way.

The salient discrepancy between the title and the blurb of *Wuhan Diary* for presale and formal release points to different strategies to promote the book. The change of promotion strategy, we argue, is a reflection of the voices of such translation agents as the publisher, the author and the translator involved in producing paratexts such as the title and the blurb. While the initial title and the blurb of *Wuhan Diary* formed a materialisation of the publisher’s voice, their revised version represents the mixed voices of the publisher, author and translator out of negotiations and compromises. In the process of negotiations, the fact that the revision of both the title and the blurb of *Wuhan Diary* goes hand in hand with a shift away from a reaffirmation of stereotypes of China and Chinese literature to an emphasis on the universal suffering from the common enemy of humankind, indicates that the publisher has compromised and acted in obedience to the requirements of the author and the translator. This finding is echoed

by Berry's own description of their negotiation with the publisher:

As soon as that early title and description were uploaded, the online controversy exploded almost overnight. I discussed everything with Fang Fang and we immediately asked the publisher to revise the title and the description. We kept pushing, and they agreed to change it.⁵

As such, we argue that the author's and the translator's voices have overshadowed the publisher's voice, having obtained a decisive control over the positioning of the dairy through the paratexts. Furthermore, the above analysis, together with Berry's words, suggests that the Chinese readers' critical voices have urged the author and the translator to negotiate with the publisher regarding the initial title and blurb for the translation. In this sense, it can be further argued that the Chinese readers' critical voices have exerted a decisive influence on shaping the revision of the paratexts of the English translation of *Wuhan Diary*.

5. Berry's voice in the translated text: The technique of omission

Translation is never a neutral act that is able to engender a complete and faithful reproduction of the source text. Rather than being invisible, translators can be inclined to show their voices in their translations by resorting to different techniques for various reasons. In the case of the English translation of *Wuhan Diary*, Berry shows his voice with recourse to a variety of translation techniques such as omission, explanation, explicitation and adjustment of tone in the translated text. Among these translation techniques, the technique of omission is often used by Berry to respond to the Chinese readers' criticism of Fang Fang's diary, while others are not. Consequently, in this section, we focus on examining Berry's voice in the translation by analysing his translation technique of omission.

With a careful comparative analysis of the Chinese and English versions, we have found 24 examples of omissions in total (Table 1). As the Table 1 shows, the translator tends to deploy omission concerning the contents of the "dark side of Chinese society," "unconfirmed messages" and "abuse of power," the examples of which amount to 17, accounting for 70.8% of all examples of omissions. These 17 omissions have all suggested the translator's effort and craft in addressing Chinese readers' criticism to protect Fang Fang and himself. By contrast, the other 7 omissions of political and cultural elements have catered to the needs of the English readership. For example, the

cultural elements “点对点” (“point-to-point,” a Chinese government’s strategy to contain the COVID-19 pandemic), and the political elements like the WHO’s gratitude towards Wuhan people have been omitted. The former omission has provided English readers’ an easier access to the diary and the latter has responded to the then US government’s accusation of the WHO’s failures to deal with China in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic (Applebaum, 2020). For the sake of demonstrating the translator’s voice in response to Chinese readers’ criticism of Fang Fang’s diary, we took 3 out of the 17 omissions that are related to their criticism as illustrative examples.

Table 1. Berry’s translation technique of omission

Types of omitted content	Number of examples	Percentage
Dark side of Chinese society	11	45.8%
Unconfirmed messages	5	20.8%
Political elements	4	16.7%
Cultural elements	3	12.5%
Abuse of privilege	1	4.2%
Total	24	100%

Example 1.

Source Text (ST): 这个任务就落到我的头上。大哥所在的华中科技大学所属洪山区，我向洪山交管局询问我的车是否可以通行。他们局有不少我的读者。于是说你还是在家写作吧，这个任务交给我们。于是昨晚派了肖警官将我侄女送到机场。

Back Translation (BT): This task fell on me. Huazhong University of Science and Technology, where my eldest brother lived, is located in the Hongshan District, so I asked Hongshan Department of Transportation whether my car was eligible to drive on the road. I had quite a number of readers there, so they said, “you’d better continue your writing at home and let us deal with this task.” As a result, Officer Xiao was sent to get my niece to the airport yesterday.

Target Text (TT): That's where I came in. I asked Officer Xiao to help get my niece to the airport.⁶

Example 2.

ST:高楼上有人在高声叫喊：假的！假的！传说领导视察到一半，就走了。

BT: In the high-rise apartment buildings, someone shouted loudly: "It's fake! It's fake!" It is said that the government leaders left halfway through their inspection.

TT: someone in one of the high-rise apartment buildings shouted from their window: "It's fake! It's all a sham!"

Example 3.

ST: 其实在武汉，比企业更等不起的还有另外一批人，这不是一小批，而是一大批：那就是儿女在外的空巢老人和独居老人。

BT: Actually, besides those enterprises, there is another group of people who can't wait; this is not a small group, but rather a large group: That is those elderly people whose children are working outside and the elderly people who are living alone.

TT: Actually, besides those industries, there is another group of people even more eager for the city to get back on track again: That is those elderly people who are living alone.

In Example 1, the ST describes the details of how Fang Fang's niece was sent to the airport when public transportation was shut down and private cars were banned from the roads during the lockdown in Wuhan. This shows that the Hongshan Department of Transportation had arranged for Officer Xiao to help her to send her niece to the airport. This incident of Officer Xiao's help to send her niece to the airport gave rise to controversies among the Chinese readers. Fang Fang was accused of abusing her

privilege to send her niece from Wuhan to Singapore and further asking a policeman to do her this favour.⁷

With a comparative analysis of the ST and TT, it is evident that the translator has omitted the details related to the process of sending Fang Fang's niece to the airport and only showed the result of her successful arrival at the airport with the help of Officer Xiao. In this way, the translator has eliminated the potential association of Officer Xiao's offer to help with her personal relations with the Hongshan Department of Transportation, thus preventing any accusations against Fang Fang from the outset. In this regard, juxtaposing the translator's omission of these details with the Chinese readers' accusation of Fang Fang's abuse of privilege, we argue that the translator has responded to the Chinese readers' criticism of Fang Fang and attempted to nip any such accusations in the bud by means of omission in his translation.

In Example 2, the ST contains the unconfirmed information that "the government leaders left halfway through their inspection." This unconfirmed message in Fang Fang's diary offers fodder for criticism of it having an unreliable source of information, among readers on social media platforms in China. Like Example 1, the translator has also chosen to filter the unverified information in his translation by omitting it. By displaying his voice through the practice of omission in his translation, the translator has been in sympathy with Fang Fang and presented her diary as an authentic source of information for Anglophone readerships, which reaffirms his praise of her words as "the city's heartbeat and its conscience" (Berry, 2020a).

In Example 3, the ST shows that the elderly people who are living alone are more eager for the Wuhan city to get back to normal life, and brings their large number to the fore by accentuating that "this is not a small group, but rather a large group." By contrast, by removing this accentuated sentence, the translator only reveals that there exists another group of elderly solitary people who are more eager for the Wuhan city to recover to normal life, but does not highlight it as a large group. By completely omitting Fang Fang's emphasis on the large group of elder solitary people in the ST, the translator has softened the author's exposition of the miserable life many Wuhan residents experienced during the lockdown of the city. To understand this technique by the translator, it should be stressed that the Chinese readers blamed Fang Fang for having a predilection for revealing the dark side of Chinese society and providing weapons for the West to criticise China. Meanwhile, the translator himself also received a myriad of

vicious and vile attacks on Weibo for translating the diary as well. He was accused of being “a CIA agent” and even faced “death threats” (Berry, 2020b). As Berry (2020b) observes, “[f]or the next several weeks, the insults and threats multiplied, and the message board that housed them would be viewed more than 3 million times.” In this context, resonating with Examples 1 and 2, Example 3 also demonstrates the translator’s efforts to soften Fang Fang’s critical tone on Chinese society, in response to the Chinese readers’ concerns, echoing this in his own confession in the translator’s afterword that, “‘weaponizing’ the book, or using it as a tool to criticize China, was surely the last thing on my mind” (Berry, 2020a).

As the above three illustrative examples suggest, the translator shows his voice in the translated text by employing the technique of omission to deal with information related to the Chinese readers’ concern about Fang Fang’s diary, although such information could actually be easily made accessible and intelligible to English readers. From this line of reasoning, these omissions made by the translator do not serve to facilitate understanding of the translation or to ensure its good reception among target readers. Rather, all these omissions of unfavorable information for Fang Fang in the translated text represent the translator’s conscious response to the critical voices from Chinese readers during his translation on the one hand, and demonstrate his efforts to protect Fang Fang and himself from further attacks on the other. This finding is in line with Berry’s own retrospection that he is “hype-sensitive and extremely careful in rendering each of every term” in *Wuhan Diary* in case of his choice having “real direct consequences on the writer and her safety.”⁸ Therefore, we argue that it is the critical voices from Chinese readers that exert a decisive influence on the translator’s choice in exercising his power of omission in his translation of *Wuhan Diary*.

6. Conclusion

With a combined analysis of the context, paratext and text of the English translation of Fang Fang’s *Wuhan Diary*, this article has identified multiple voices of translation agents and demonstrated their power negotiations in bringing about different constructions of the book. At the paratextual level, this study shows that the author and the translator have gained an upper hand in the negotiation with the publisher, contributing to the revision of the initial title and blurb of the English translation of *Wuhan Diary*. In this respect, the study has challenged the common notion that

publishers play a decisive role in preparing the paratextual materials of translations (Ying, 2013, p. 309; Lee, 2015, p. 256; Rovira-Esteva, 2016, p. 190; Batchelor, 2018, p. 39). At the textual level, the translator demonstrates a tendency to resort to the technique of omission in his translation to protect Fang Fang and himself from various criticisms, ranging from accusations of abuse of privilege and use of unreliable sources of information to a propensity for revealing the dark side of Chinese society.

Empowered by social media in the digital era, the Chinese readers have shown a passion for sharing their opinions and concerns about the English translation of *Wuhan Diary*. Apart from some supporting or neutral ones, most voices from Chinese readers were critical in the context of escalating Sino-US tensions which had been compounded by the outbreak of COVID-19. Alerted by the egregious stereotypes of Chinese society induced by its initial title and blurb, the critics viewed the English translation of *Wuhan Diary* as ammunition for the West to criticise China and cast doubts on the authenticity of its sources. These critical voices from Chinese readers urged the author and the translator to take corresponding actions, leading to the author's request for the revision of the title and the blurb, and to the translator's inclination toward a technique of omission in his translation to protect the author and himself. Therefore, we argue that it is neither the author nor the translator who had the final say in the production and representation of the English translation of *Wuhan Diary*, but in fact it is rather the critical voices from the Chinese readers that had the final say by exerting a decisive influence on the author and the translator.

Our findings have shown the influence of the readers' voices (specifically the readers from the source culture) on the production and presentation of the English translation of *Wuhan Diary*. Like readers from the target culture, readers from the source culture have also proved to be active agents who obtain the power to steer the formulation of the paratexts and the translation with the aid of social media. Going beyond the traditional focus on the voices of translation agents such as translators, editors and publishers, the present study highlights the voices of readers from the source culture and their impact on the translation process, which have not yet received adequate attention in translation studies. However, as the English translation of *Wuhan Diary* takes place in the context of an unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic, the findings from our case study may not be applicable to other historical and social settings. More studies with different contexts are needed to gain an insight into the voices of agents

both from the source and target culture and their interactions to demonstrate whose voice is decisive in shaping the production and consumption of translation.

Notes

1. Chinese readers refer specifically to the readers of the Chinese online version of *Wuhan Diary* in Chinese mainland.
2. All the quoted contents in this paragraph are from <https://www.amazon.com/Wuhan-Diary-Dispatches-Quarantined-City-ebook/dp/B086JXGZFB> (last accessed April 10, 2020), which has already been changed.
3. <https://www.caixinglobal.com/2020-04-12/blog-wuhan-diary-author-there-is-no-tension-between-me-and-the-country-101541748.html> (last accessed May 29, 2020).
4. It was from our online interview with Michael Berry via Zoom on November 28, 2020.
5. See Note 4.
6. The Chinese version of Fang Fang's diary has not been published in book form in Chinese mainland or anywhere else yet. The ST in the examples is drawn from Erxiang's Eleven Dimension Space, an official account in WeChat, where Fang Fang's diary was first posted in Chinese mainland. The TT is extracted from the Kindle edition of *Wuhan Diary: Dispatches from a Quarantined City* (2020).
7. https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/H_zlNT2Pra4vRzfeTjW5Iw (last accessed July 5, 2020).
8. It was from Michael Berry's talk in the China Forum on "Collective Memory and National Narrative in Fiction of Disaster" held by Washington University in St. Louis on September 22, 2020.

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