

# The Synergy Between Fan Translation and Podcast Storytelling in Disseminating Chinese Canonical Literature: A Case Study on *Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast*

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**Abstract:** The recent decade has witnessed a growing scholarly attention on fan translation due to its shaping force in community building and identity formation. Traditionally perceived as a sub-field of cultural studies, fan translation has been studied mostly inside popular culture as a kind of activism to combat conformity. However, despite aiming its products at non-elite recipients, fan translation does not merely focus on source texts from popular culture. Being remediated into podcast storytelling, fan translation is also facilitating the introduction of Chinese canonical literature into Anglophone world, a long-standing challenge faced by governmental efforts such as state-sponsored translation projects. Drawing insights from research on fandom, podcasting and oral storytelling, this article carries out a case study on *Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast*, an English retelling of a Chinese classical novel, to investigate how fan translation is integrated with podcast storytelling to improve the reception of canonical texts among the masses. The article argues that a successful mélange of adapted textual features, acoustic varieties, as well as the mediality of podcast in fan-translation-based podcast storytelling has helped to established a fandom of listening to classical literature and the cultural capital of its fans, a phenomenon rarely seen in traditional translation.

**Keywords:** Fan Translation, Podcast Storytelling, Chinese Canonical Literature, Reception Among the Masses, Fandom, Cultural Capital

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## 1. Introduction

Introducing translated literature into a stable and self-sufficient literary polysystem has long been a daunting task. This is evidenced by the conundrum faced by Chinese government's sustained efforts to translate Chinese literature to the English-speaking world. According to Itamar Even-Zohar, only when a literary system is being established, holding a peripheral position or facing a turning point does translated literature stand a chance to be received in that system [1]. Those conditions are, apparently, not presenting themselves in the current translation of Chinese literature into English. In the digital age, the predicament is even more complicated as canonical reading is becoming a waning desire, giving way to the massive consumption of audio-visual content.

However, just because the state-funded translation initiatives failed to produce desired outcomes it does not necessarily mean national literature is denied any chance of reaching foreign readership. As Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere claims, instead of ploughing through the original work or a full translation of *À la recherche du temps perdu*, people are inclined to know this work through its rewritings and adaptations [2]. Therefore, rather than unyieldingly launching more similar translation projects "until the imagined receivers come to realize their value" [3], a more practical and reasonable move might first be a shift in the expectation on what should be achieved in introducing Chinese literature abroad to the masses. According to Michael Emmerich, for instance, the overseas reception of Japanese classical work, *The Tale of Genji*, depends less on the canonization of the original text than the production and

dissemination of the replacements of the original work [4]. Similarly, Barbara Wall observes that the dissemination of Chinese classical novel, *Journey to the West*, in Korea is facilitated by its various multimodal adaptations, each of which taps into part of the key elements of the novel to form a “story universe” [5]. Although it is still debatable how far those replacements or adaptations should deviate from the source work, not least in the instance of spreading canonical literature, the arguments of those scholars all reveal that a more productive approach to increasing the accessibility of canonical texts for ordinary recipients is to create a dynamic and expanding network of the translations, adaptations as well as furtherings across media and modalities to provide more entry points. As Edwin Gentzler also claims, “In today’s world, viewers often see a production before they read the book. At some point, the two become indistinguishable” [6].

As far as translating Chinese literature is concerned, apart from those more researched formats such as adapted films, dramas, and comics, which prioritize visual experiences, podcast or podcast storytelling of classical literature, a much less noticed niche in academia, has gradually gained more popularity among the ordinary Western audiences. Interestingly, distinct from audible books, which are mainly recorded from an existing published book, those free podcasts are, in essence, fan-generated works as they are largely based on the literature enthusiasts’ own translations or adaptations. Less confined by factors such as patronage and professional ethics, their versions show more personal touch to the original. Moreover, since their translations are remediated into storytelling on podcast, the way the text is accessed has also been transformed by the new art form as well as the medium per se. By carrying out a case study on the podcast storytelling program, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast*, this article attempts to analyze how fan translation as the content, storytelling as the art form as well as podcast as the medium work together to provide a distinctive format that improves the reception of the canonical text among the Anglophone masses.

Below I first look into the lack of scholarly attention on more diverse types of fan translation other than fansubbing, fandubbing as well as scanlation, which are mainly embedded in the realm of popular culture. Then I analyze the compatibility of podcast, a medium contrary to industry-controlled radio, to fan generated-texts, which is evidenced by the emergence of fan-translation-based podcasts of retelling Chinese classical literature. This section serves to make clearer the interrelation between fan translation, canonical literature and podcast. The following section provides the case study to examine the effects achieved by this new format in promoting the classical novel to ordinary Western audiences. This is followed by a general discussion on the significance of fan translation and podcast storytelling to translating canonical Chinese literature into English. It is hoped that an investigation into this little researched area would bring some insights into how fan translation functions as more than a phenomenon of activism against elite culture,

but also as a kind of cultural mediator that integrates with new audio medium to facilitate the transnational flow of canonical texts into the masses.

## 2. Previous Research on Fan Translation

The increasingly heated discussion on the nature of translation ever since the “cultural turn” has largely inspired scholars to pay attention to intercultural activities traditionally dismissed as unorthodox or illegitimate research objects for translation studies [7-10]. Gentzler suggests that many texts that are marginalized in translation studies are better able to reveal the nature of translation than mainstream paradigms [6]. Contextualizing his thoughts in the digital age, Gentzler particularly calls for academic attention to rewritings produced by new media in the form of adapted music and films, blogs, fan fictions, as well as short video pastiches, to name just a few [6]. Noticeably, such an extension on the scope of translation has also inevitably placed a spotlight on the identity of translators, considering the bulk of rewritings appearing on digital media is done by non-professionals, particularly by fans.

With more studies being carried out in this burgeoning niche, fan translation has been included as a new entry in the third version of *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*. However, as an umbrella term, fan translation is less researched than several of its subcategories including scanlation, fandubbing, not least fansubbing. There are generally two waves of studies on fan translation, with most attention paid to fansubbing. While the first wave has mainly explored the translation strategies [11] and the workings of fansubbing group [12], later academics have delved into the socio-cultural aspects by, for instance, investigating the influence of fansubbing on the development of audio-visual translation industry [13], the dissemination of Asian popular culture globally [14], as well as the formation of “LGBTQ” community in China [15]. In other words, the latest trend has highlighted the role of fan translation in community construction as well as identity formation, a key feature distinguishing fan translation from conventional translation.

However, the relative outpouring of studies on fansubbing also further contrasts with the lack of research on other forms of fan translation. This trend might be attributed to the established concept that fan studies pertaining to cultural studies is largely representative of certain activism against elite culture [16], and thus is mainly treated as a cultural phenomenon within popular culture, where TV shows, films as well as popular magazines are arguably taking the lion’s share of the market, hence more attention on fan-generated texts in these areas.

Nevertheless, such a long-held convention can not cover up the fact that fan translation, in reality, is more than just a phenomenon inside popular culture. Admittedly, as a product, fan translation is primarily intended for fans or the masses. It is the source text fan translation is working on, however, that deserves more observation and reflection. There is little research into the results achieved by fan translation with

regard to introducing works from elite culture to the masses. In respect of translating Chinese literature for the international readership, there are bilingual enthusiasts of canonical literature who have already been involved in the non-profit projects of translating works for ordinary English readership. Their efforts have formed a kind of undercurrent in parallel with the official initiatives despite being largely ignored by both the industry and academia. Therefore, a closer look at the derivative works by those fans would allow a more holistic understanding of fan translation as a potentially much larger and important domain. As Jonathan Evans notes, existing studies have only dealt with a limited number of areas where fan translation is taking place, with many issues left unattended [17]. Possibly, one way to fill in the gaps in fan translation studies is to look beyond tradition and observe where else the translation might be taking place as a kind of everyday practice that has informed intercultural exchanges.

### 3. Listening to Canonical Literature: When Podcast Encounters Fan Translation

As a new concept first mentioned in 2004, podcast is thought to have represented amateurs' longing for creating their own versions of radio. Being a heavily industry-controlled medium, radio's linear pattern of dissemination results in limited program options and difficulties in retrieving and storing favored shows on audiences' side, making itself at odds with the demand for new digital media that feature autonomous, personal as well as participatory user experiences. In this regard, the emergence of podcast has reflected people's anticipation for audio content in the age of digital media. As Richard Berry observes, aside from being a converged medium, podcast is also a disruptive technology that defies traditional understanding about every aspect of broadcasting [18]. Podcasting has de-professionalized audio content making, enabling ordinary individuals to create their audio free from industry and legal constraints and to attract public attention with low-investment efforts [19-20]. In light of Marshall McLuhan's famous "the medium is the message" [21], podcast as a medium has actually brought about a revolution in the relationship between radio media conglomerates and ordinary listenership. In other words, if radio program is what the Frankfurt School refers to as the product of "cultural industry", the advent of podcast reflects the masses' critical response to the product. This kind of resistance, noticeably, echoes the essence of fandom, which advocates a participatory approach to "poaching" [22] the texts to create derivative works [23] as cultural capital of fans themselves.

As such, podcast itself, in a way, can be perceived as a derivative work, symbolizing the efforts of grassroots broadcasting enthusiasts to establish their own "new aural culture" [24]. Therefore, podcast as a medium actually has a natural bond with other fan generated derivative works

including fan translation. When fan translations are presented on podcast, it would make sense to assume the convergence would lead to a stronger sense of fan community among the audiences.

Among the varieties of podcast programs, podcast storytelling has turned out a common form where fan fictions and fan translations are being remediated. Compared with fan translators working on other media, who mainly focus on texts from popular culture, fan translators as podcasters are also translating from canonical literature for their storytelling. With reference to Chinese literature, there are English podcasts for the four most renowned classical novels as well as other renowned ancient or modern works (see Figure 1), though different podcasts vary in terms of how faithful they are to the source text. It is noteworthy that fan-translated texts for podcasting have been adapted for listeners, thus showing many discrepancies compared to a text produced only for reading. Those textual characteristics, along with the specificity of podcast storytelling have turned a rather tedious and challenging reading process into a more laid-back, dynamic, and multimodal experience.



Figure 1. Podcasts of Chinese literature.

### 4. The Case of Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast

*Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast* (hereafter *RoTKP*) is a passion project by Chinese American John Zhu, who works in higher education institution as his daytime career. The podcast retells the Chinese classical novel, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, which mainly depicts how the ancient Chinese dynasty, the Han dynasty, was on a downward spiral to collapse, and warlords swarmed up, intending to take the throne themselves, with three most powerful forces establishing their kingdoms in the end and holding each other in check. Zhu retold the stories from his own translation of the original, which is a hefty volume with 120 chapters and more than 600 thousand Chinese characters.

The podcast, which could be accessed on its website and other mainstream podcast applications was first released in 2014. It took Zhu more than four years to finish this project, which consists of 153 episodes corresponding to the content of the original work and 20 additional episodes to elaborate the cultural references in the novel.

The podcast has witnessed a steady rise in its popularity since it was first released. Taking Apple Podcast as an example, the rating of this podcast reaches 4.9 out of 5 based on close to 500 listener reviews (see Figure 2). According to statistics from Podbean, a well-established podcast service provider, the downloading times of *RoTKP* has surpassed 1.8 million (see Figure 3). The podcast has also been held in high regard and promoted by other cross-cultural podcast and broadcast programs including *Sinica Podcast*, *Ink and Quill*, *Journey to the West Podcast*, *Podcasting Smarter* and *The Translated Chinese Fiction Podcast*. This section will explore in detail how this amateur project has retranslated and remediated the classical text, achieving a much more satisfying reception among the ordinary Westerners.

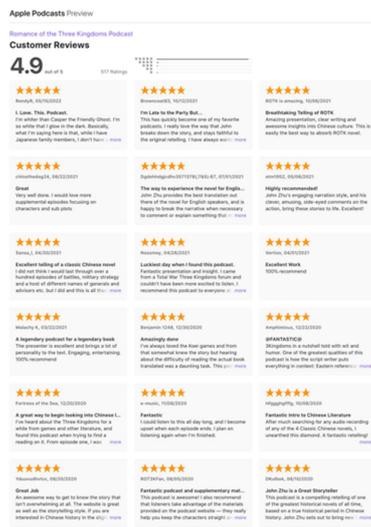


Figure 2. Rating on Apple Podcast.

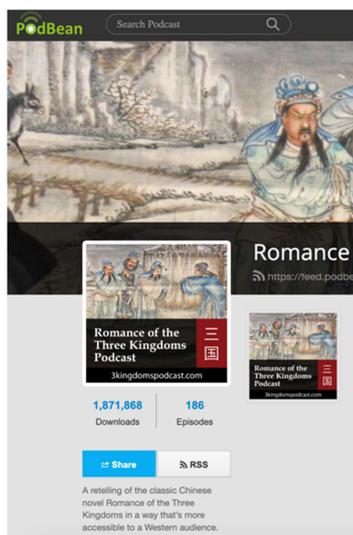


Figure 3. Downloading times of *RoTKP*.

## 4.1. Interlingual Rewriting for Storytelling

Unlike professional translators, who are primarily concerned with translating the text, fan translators, especially those working in a small group or as individual, are more likely to engage in other dimensions of the production and circulation of texts. In Zhu's case, he takes care of almost every link of his project, including examining the demands of potential audiences, applying media technologies, translating and editing the text, telling stories, as well as responding to feedback. He is, therefore, more knowledgeable about the larger ecology of translation as a cross-cultural activity, which, in turn, might provide him with a different perspective on how translation should be done. Also, as Karin Littau argues in her "medial turn" in translation studies, the medium where the translation is presented tends to influence how the translation is done [25]. In Zhu's case, his translation is characterized with many rewritings for the tastes of ordinary Western audiences, thus laying a linguistic foundation for constructing the storytelling fandom.

### 4.1.1. Applying Western Humor and Sarcasm

Source text:

这一阵杀得江南人人害怕；闻张辽大名，小儿也不敢夜啼 [26].

Literal version:

This battle struck fear into the heart of people of the Southlands, and even infants had to hold back their tears at night at the mention of the General's name, Zhang Liao.

Zhu's version:

It is said that this one battle left the people of the Southlands so fearful of Zhang Liao that when someone mentioned his name, even little babies were so frightened that they ceased to cry at night. *So now Zhang Liao was on a par with the boogyman. Of course, if he was indeed so effective in silencing wailing babies, it would go a long way toward endearing him to all the new parents of the Southlands.* [27].

In this example, the translator's comments on the warrior, Zhang Liao, has been presented in a light-hearted manner (words highlighted in bold). There is already an element of exaggeration (babies were so frightened that they ceased to cry at night) in the source text to emphasize the valor of the warrior. Therefore, Zhu takes the chance, inserting his more imaginative remarks for an enhanced entertaining effect. In the original work, before the extract shown here is a lengthy depiction of a gradually repetitive battle scene. After translating the source text in a relatively faithful manner, Zhu spices up the narrative with some dry humor, typical of Western stand-up comedy. Throughout his translation, similar humorous elements abound, making it one of the signatures of Zhu's version. In so doing, Zhu has actually injected a familiar sense of Western humor and sarcasm into a Chinese classical novel to make it more relevant and accessible to modern Western audiences.

#### 4.1.2. Omitting Names of Insignificant Characters

Original text:

孙策大怒，自提大军，竟奔牛渚。刘繇背后一人，挺枪出马，乃部将于糜也[26]。

Literal version:

Sun Ce was furious, leading the army towards his enemy. There was a general behind Liu Yao riding out with his spear to take up the challenge. He was the military officer Yu Mi.

Zhu's version:

Sun Ce rode out himself, and one of Liu Yao's officers, let's just call him *Redshirt 1* because he's not going to stick around that long, went out to fight him. [28].

One of the main hurdles deterring interested Western readers from picking up a Chinese classical novel is the Chinese names numbering in thousands. However, many of the characters carry less weight to the unfolding of the main plot as they will not survive long. Western readers have to struggle with numerous foreign names and might end up losing their interest just a few chapters or even pages into the novel. Zhu, therefore, has cut out a large portion of trivial names to maximize listeners' enjoyment in the main narrative. In this example, the name of a subordinate general (highlighted in bold) who will be slain after three sentences is simply replaced by "Redshirt 1" with explanation. Besides the pattern of "Redshirt" plus number, Zhu has also applied "victim", "archer" and other substitutes to achieve the same purpose throughout his translation.

#### 4.1.3. Adding Annotation for Cultural References

Original text:

庶曰：“此人不可屈致，使君可亲往求之。若得此人，无异周得吕望、汉得张良[26]。

Literal version:

Xu Shu said: "This man should not be summoned without proper etiquette shown. My lord, you had better visit him in person. If you have this man, it is like Zhou Dynasty having Jiang Ziya or Han Dynasty having Zhang Liang.

Zhu's version:

"You cannot ask this man to come meet you; you must go seek him in person," Xu Shu said. "If you can get him to help you, it would be no less than the Zhou getting *Jiang Ziya* or the Han getting *Zhang Liang*."

Now both of those guys that Xu Shu just referenced were legendary strategists who helped found the two greatest dynasties in Chinese history up till this point in time. So this was an eyebrow-raising comparison. [29].

As a classical work, cultural references abound in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. Readers have to either search for the explanations by themselves or reluctantly flip to the back of the translated volume for annotations. Noticeably, instead of adopting a similar strategy as he has done for the less important characters whose names are omitted or replaced, Zhu has kept all the names of people, places and things that have cultural connotations. However, following those cultural references is Zhu's meticulous explanation. The discrepancies between reading and listening to annotation is that the latter is less likely to cause a sense of

being interrupted as the annotation more naturally fits into the narrative. Making good use of this advantage of audio medium, Zhu has provided many supporting materials in his retelling. In this example, a concise introduction to the two respected historical figures is inserted (highlighted in bold), allowing the audiences to immediately makes sense of the cultural reference without leaving the text for clues.

#### 4.2. Intersemiotic Representation for Multimodal Effects

In light of Roman Jakobson's classification of translation, converting a Chinese written text into an English auditory text encompasses both interlingual and intersemiotic translation. In addition to the narrative of the novel, the use of background music as well as the speaker's vocal features has introduced multiple meaning making systems to enrich the listening experience.

In each episode of *RoTKP*, there is a ten-second long prelude leading to the storytelling as well as a similar long postlude wrapping up the narration in a more unhurried way. The music is traditional Chinese-style, played by Guzheng and Pipa (both are traditional Chinese musical instruments). A change of pace and mood could be found in the prelude as it becomes quicker and tenser towards the end, setting up listeners' expectation for the narrative. The postlude generally reverses the pattern for a smooth transition to the end, leaving some time for the audiences' emotion to fade from the engrossing narrative. Also, the exotic and antique style of the music goes well with the nature of the ancient classical novel, helping the audiences to form a mental image of the story setting. In fact, in his second ongoing project, *Water Margin Podcast*, this element is also widely applied in the middle of the storytelling to enhance the narrative effects of various scenes such as duels, battles, assassinations and crime investigations. In this sense, in his later podcast, music has been taped into not only for its syntactic function to organize the storytelling but also for its semantic function to resonate with or arouse the emotions of audiences as the plot unfolds, thus creating a more immersive and relatable story listening experience.

Another more important and prominent attraction of *RoTKP* lies in Zhu's demonstration of a wide spectrum of vocal qualities, which helps to bring stories to life. This is well reflected in the numerous character impressions he has done as well as the tantalizing narration of various battle scenes, which are less intriguing and even a bit repetitive in the original work. For instance, in order to help the audiences land on a better understanding of character traits, intrigues and scheming in the novel, Zhu has gone all out to represent a series of emotions and moods such as anxiety, doubt, anger, melancholy, sarcasm and joy, and so forth in characters' speeches and conversations.

According to Keir Elam and Klaus Müller, there are mainly six aspects of vocal attributes including pitch, pace, volume, tone, inflection and pause that deserve observation and analysis [30-31]. For the sake of displaying the vocal features of Zhu's storytelling in print, some of the transcription conventions used by previous scholars [32-34]

studying oral storytelling and multimodal interaction would be helpful. Drawing some insights from their studies, I make my own version as below (see Table 1) to analyze a sample from *RoTKP*. Nevertheless, it should be noticed that not all the six features would be reflected in this sample.

The plot of the sample is that the warrior Zhao Yun, who is in charge of taking care of his master's families, single-handedly went to search for the master's wife and infant son in the chaos of battle. The wounded lady, however, refused to go with Zhao Yun in fear of slowing down their escape, and

committed suicide in the end. This is a very tense and dramatic scene in this novel, where emotions of fear, anxiety, relief, desperation, anger are quickly alternated or mixed together. In order to have a clearer view of the vocal qualities displayed, I divide the selected text into smaller units based on semantic coherence (see Table 2). The sample just reveals the tip of the iceberg. Throughout his retelling, a wide spectrum of vocal attributes have been applied to help audiences understand and appreciate the novel with ease, pleasure as well as accuracy.

Table 1. Transcription conventions.

Descriptions	Demonstrations	Meanings
Word(s) in all capitals	STORY	high volume
Word(s) in italics	<i>story</i>	low volume
Word(s) in brackets with an upward arrow on the left	↑(story)	high pitch
Word(s) in brackets with a downward arrow on the left	↓(story)	low pitch
Word(s) in brackets with "1" on the up right	(story) <sup>1</sup>	fast pace
Word(s) in brackets with "-1" on the up right	(story) <sup>-1</sup>	slow pace
Three dots between words	a...story	pause
Word(s) in bold	<b>story</b>	change of tone
Word(s) with wavy line below	<u>story</u>	change of inflection

Table 2. An extract from *RoTKP* [35].

No.	Content	Vocal qualities used
1	“↑ ( <i>I really cannot move. Do not let me bring us all down!</i> )”	high pitch low volume change of tone
2	Lady Mi said as she tried to hand the baby to Zhao Yun.	none
3	↑ (“This child's life is all in your hands, general.”)	high pitch
4	Zhao Yun pleaded time and again for Lady Mi to take his horse, but she STEADFASTLY refused.	change of tone
5	At that moment, the enemy's cries were all around them. Zhao Yun raised his voice and said sternly,	none
6	“MY LADY, IF YOU DO NOT LISTEN TO ME AND THE ENEMY GETS HERE, WHAT WOULD WE DO THEN?!”	loud volume change of tone
7	Upon hearing this, Lady Mi made it simple for Zhao Yun. She tossed the baby on the ground and (threw herself into) <sup>1</sup> the dry well, (plunging to her death) <sup>-1</sup> .	fast pace slow pace

### 4.3. Podcast Remediation for Self-governing and Intimate Listening Experience

The source text being such a huge volume, listeners are inclined to miss some bits of the storytelling over the course of broadcasting if, for instance, it were aired on radio. For a novel as long as 120 chapters, there are many links to be broken to hinder listeners' understanding. Moreover, even if all the episodes are readily available, keeping listeners motivated to tune in throughout the long run of the project is itself an enormous task.

Fortunately, with an easy access to retrieving all the existing episodes through downloading or streaming, *RoTKP* listeners have total control over when, where and how they listen to the story. As a companion medium, podcast has served as “an auditory escort that entangles itself within our daily routines” [36]. Some listeners of *RoTKP* have mentioned their habit of tuning in the storytelling while driving, commuting or working out. Others said they prefer to stock the episodes for binge listening. Another commonly mentioned preference is listening to the podcast twice or multiple times either for fun or for a better understanding of the novel. Indeed, as one of the most renowned Chinese

classical works, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* is far from a mere recorder of historical events. The literary value of this novel is fully embodied by its narrative structure, character building, as well as thematic meaning. Thus, a second-time or multiple-time listening is advised for a fuller and more nuanced understanding.

Noticeably, podcast is also thought to be able to generate a greater sense of intimacy between the listener and the podcaster as it separates listeners from their immediate surroundings and connects them to a different public asynchronously [37]. Podcast is conceived of as “the medium of the earbud” [20]. The majority of podcast listeners, according to Martin Spinelli and Lance Dann, choose to listen with their headphones or earbuds on mobile devices instead of on speakers as most radio listeners do [38]. A sense of intimacy could be further enhanced by how authentic the storytelling feels like for listeners. Besides the more apparent factors that affect the authenticity of the story, such as plots and storytelling techniques, Jillian Demair observes that podcast listeners tend to forget that podcast is a meticulously crafted presentation since the medium constructedness of podcast is less visually obvious than other visual media such as TV and film [39]. The

intimacy created by the specificity of podcast is particularly significant to such long-term podcast as *RoTKP*, because it establishes a kind of spiritual companionship, which could be felt by the act of listening to podcast. As Spinelli and Dann notes, “a podcast is more than a mere audio text, it is a relationship invited through an audio text between people involved in making and listening to that text and beyond” [38]. In this regard, instead of being taken for granted as the carrier of the content and form, there should also be a highlight on the role of podcast as a medium in improving the accessibility of the storytelling and maintaining the audiences’ enthusiasm.

## 5. Discussion and Implications

Being more than a way adopted by activists to challenge dominant ideologies in class, race and gender, fan translation, as can be seen from this study, can also play a role in

connecting elite and mass culture by introducing classical texts to non-elite recipients. The similarity between fan translation discussed in this study and those related to activism is that they all lead to the formation of a certain community through the “textual productivity” [40] and “enunciative productivity” [40] of passionate amateurs. In the case of *RoTKP*, while John Zhu provides “a variety of interesting and perhaps unexpected readings of the original” [41] through his distinctive reinterpretation and rewriting of the source text, his audience are also posing questions, delving into more specific discussions on characters and plots, and even promoting their own works of fan fictions of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (see Figure 4) on the website of *RoTKP*. All of these discussions and creations by audiences and fans generate a kind of cultural capital that converts a more isolated and linear reading into a more dynamic and open-ended activity of collective appreciation and interpretation.

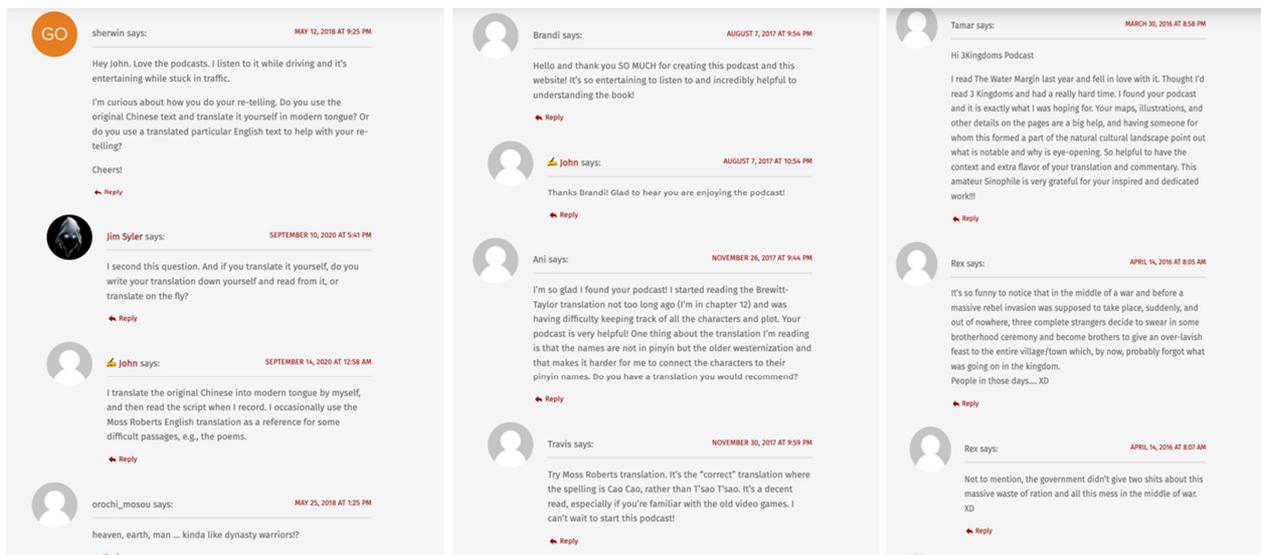


Figure 4. Fans interactions.

Also, more than just an interlingual transformation, fan translation could serve as a starting point for the convergence of new digital media and traditional art forms. A major advantage of this remediating process is that it combines strengths from individual text, art form and medium to create a whole that is better than the sum of its parts. The integrated format also assembles people initially belonging to its constitutive elements to form a larger community. In the case of this study, people fond of Chinese classical literature, storytelling, and podcast listening respectively might all end up checking out Zhu’s project by chance or by recommendation, thus increasing the odds of the program being received by a larger audience. For a work as dense and complex as *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, the existence of audience community could not only provide actual mutual assistances but also spiritual strength for any individual who desires to make a journey through this great novel.

With regard to translating Chinese literature, although official institutions have realized the inefficiency in their

previous translation projects and strived to formulate new paradigms such as “joint patronage” [42], there still will be a long transitional period before this cooperation at official level becomes mainstream because joint patronage also means more time-consuming negotiations and censorship. More essentially, cultural exchange should not only be a top-down practice. As Qiang Geng notes, the current state-sponsored translation programs of Chinese literature are largely based on a kind of gift-giving mentality, presupposing that the receiver will necessarily accept the gifts since they are highly valued by the giver [3]. However, this kind of unilateral governmental effort tends to be associated with political propaganda under the pretense of disseminating literature [42]. Therefore, “free, creative and pluralistic cultural resources adopted by multiple agents” [43] should be a significant supplement to the state-promoted attempts in disseminating culture and literature. In this sense, fan translation would be one of the reliable alternatives because it not only seeks to cut red tape for higher productivity and wider accessibility but also is more flexible to

merge with digital media for a more effective reception and audience community building.

However, the popularization and decanonization of classical texts on various digital media also inevitably raise some eyebrows as the process runs the risk of undermining the artistic and thematic value of the original. There is legitimacy in this concern, because some formats, especially certain classical-novel-adapted video games, have failed to do justice to the original work as they overemphasize the entertaining effects at the cost of ignoring or distorting some of the most fundamental elements of the work. With that regard, podcast storytelling, relatively speaking, provides a middle ground between faithful interlingual translation and other technologically mediated adaptations. Despite focusing on listening experience, podcast storytelling is still largely based on verbal resources, namely oral language, and therefore does not go as far as other multimodal formats where vivid visual images of characters and environments are dominating and thus cause listeners more sensory distractions from the narrative itself. In this regard, podcasts allow audiences both a relatively easier understanding of the work and still enough space for personal imagination and interpretation to bring the story to life in their own mind.

## 6. Conclusion

This study has investigated how fan translation of Chinese canonical literature has been done and remediated into podcast storytelling, and why this new format has been well received by ordinary Anglophone audiences. Based on the case study, the article shows that John Zhu has first meticulously retranslated the original work into a more English-reader-friendly text while remaining faithful to the original's core narrative for the most part. When the written text is being remediated into oral storytelling, Zhu's demonstration of vocal variations along with the use of background music turn the traditional reading into a more intriguing and multimodal experience. Meanwhile, Podcast, as a burgeoning auditory digital media, should also be credited for having created a more autonomous and intimate way to access the text. Because of the above efforts, the program has given rise to the fandom of listening to *Romance of the three kingdoms*.

As this study indicates, fan translation is actively contributing to bridging the gap between the creations of elite culture and the taste of the masses. It is playing a growingly important role in translating canonical literature into a self-sufficient literary polysystem. This role, however, tends to go unnoticed as sometimes the transcultural activities involves more than interlingual translation. Nevertheless, it is the translation by fans that provides a point of departure for the following convergence of text, artistic form and medium. More systematic research into how fan translation is being remediated on different digital media might help us have a more holistic understanding about how fan translation is actually working and adapting in this postmodern digitalism to achieve its greater influence.

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