

## **From Western TV sets to Chinese online streaming services: English-language TV series in mainland China**

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### **Abstract:**

In the age of multiple screens, online streaming has in the 2010s become the most significant way of consuming overseas television programs in Mainland China. Due to rather strict government policy and censorship, foreign television series are presently only legally distributed and circulated on licensed online streaming services. Focusing on the streaming of US/UK TV series, this paper examines online streaming services' distribution activities in order to understand both streaming websites' business practices surrounding transnational TV and the features they employ to cater to online audiences for these series. To grasp how the online distribution of English-language TV series operates in China, I begin by looking at China's five major video streaming services, analyzing the design of their interfaces, scheduling of programs, and accessibility for different tiers of users. I then examine how streaming services use social media as a major tool to promote their US and UK TV series. Through this analysis, I argue that transnational TV flow has had to be localized to achieve distribution and marketing goals in a Chinese context, resulting in the uniqueness of these streaming practices. This article concludes that, with the development of online streaming technologies, distinctive modes of audience consumption in China have informed the localization of this specific transnational TV content.

**Keywords:** Online streaming, streaming consumption, television distribution, transnational TV, Tencent Video, HBO, *Game of Thrones*

### **Introduction**

As one of HBO's most successful high-end shows, *Game of Thrones* (2011-) has earned a worldwide reputation that includes the fandom of Chinese viewers. Tencent Video, one of China's major video streaming services and HBO's only official distribution partner in

Mainland China, has been fully exploiting the series as its major campaign object. On July 31, 2017, Tencent Video released the first three episodes of the seventh season of *Game of Thrones* two weeks after the season's premiere in the United States; thereafter, the service started to update one episode every week simultaneously with its original US airdate. However, the series was initially only available for VIP subscribers and then became free to stream for all viewers after its first round of releasing. On China's best-known question-and-answer website, Zhihu, the discussion regarding this simultaneous transnational broadcast involved almost 500,000 users. Tencent Video's official Zhihu account also participated in this discussion and explained the company's intention and determination to discourage piracy, which can be seen as part of Tencent Video's campaign for its branding agenda. The simultaneous transnational broadcast is one example of the current distribution activities regarding imported TV content in Mainland China, content that itself is being used as a promotional text on social media by the streaming service.

In the age of multiple screens, online video streaming has in the 2010s become the most significant way of consuming overseas television programs in Mainland China. Due to rather strict government policy and censorship, foreign television series are presently only legally distributed and circulated on licensed Chinese online streaming services, since foreign streaming services, such as Netflix, have not penetrated the Chinese market. Traveling to China as transnational televisual content, overseas TV series now achieve distribution chiefly through online platforms, on which a series of alterations and creations of transmedia storytelling emerge. Chinese viewers achieve legal consumption of this content via online streaming services, a practice leading, as we shall see, to specific audience activities, such as using so-called 'bullet screens' and nicknaming characters on social media.

This article examines online streaming services' distribution activities for US and UK TV series in order to understand their websites' business practices surrounding transnational TV and to illustrate the features streaming services use to cater to online audiences based on the local streaming consumption habits. As the second largest TV market in the world and, more specifically, as a market with a total of 609 million video streaming service users, China has entered an era where the interaction between users and operators is vital to Internet media (BigData-Research 2019). Based on existing research on transnational TV theories, paratextual analysis, and fan theories, this article analyzes the design of the services' interfaces, scheduling of programs, and accessibility for different tiers of viewers, as well as promotional materials, to grasp how the online distribution of English-language TV series operates in Mainland China. I argue that the localized online distribution of English-language television series in Mainland China is the result of the interplay between the distributors' business practices and Chinese viewers' consumption habits. In the hopes of contributing to transnational television studies and online television studies, my article ultimately contends that the development of online streaming technologies has created distinctive forms of audience consumption in this country, leading to the localized distribution of transnational television content.

## **Online Streaming and Localized Distribution**

Due to the influence of new media technologies, the way Chinese audiences consume media content has seen tremendous change, with television viewing experiencing an unprecedented transformation. The scene of a Chinese family watching TV together can rarely be observed, as it has been replaced by fragmented and individual viewing patterns. According to the *2018 China TV Rating Yearbook*, the average daily television viewing time of one viewer has decreased from 169 minutes since 2012 to 132 minutes (Xu 2018, 21). With the decline of traditional TV viewing, it seems that more and more audiences are moving to online platforms to consume televisual content. Since China's online streaming industry has emerged, the streaming market has been growing rather rapidly. In late 2018, BigData-Research presented a report on China's online streaming video services. According to the report, the online video streaming industry has developed into a market that is worth 110.46 billion China yuan, with a growth rate of 26.6 percent. The number of users who have been involved in watching online streaming videos at least once in a six-month period has reached 609 million (BigData-Research 2019). This has changed the status television has in the overall Chinese media ecology, a change that coincidentally echoes what Michael Z. Newman describes as the current situation American television faces,

The new technological ensembles for television distribution and consumption have been seen as sources of liberation and legitimation. This is framed against television's network-era history as a mass medium characterized by limited choices of 'least objectionable programming.' By contrast with its earlier status, TV in the convergence era had seen significant improvement in its place on the cultural hierarchy (2014, 93).

As audiences are moving from television sets to online streaming services, TV content finds itself in an inevitable transfer to a more autonomous platform: the Internet. JP Kelly argues that, 'online TV is an amalgamation of both old and new media logics, extending established practices of broadcast flow while capitalising upon the new promotional, economic and textual possibilities inherent in digital media' (2011, 123). Traditionally, Chinese viewers have been used to receiving televisual 'flow' passively from television stations, which are mostly controlled by the government. As Derek Kompare explains, flow refers to 'the programmed sequences of texts characteristic of broadcast media' (2006, 340). When the TV is turned on, the content will flow until the TV is turned off. However, with the digitalization of media and penetration of the Internet, audiences have obtained new means to consume television in a new form – a 'file' – which is explained as 'a discrete, user-controlled and increasingly popular unit of contemporary media culture' (Kompare 2006, 340). To the viewers, accessing televisual files through streaming is not entirely different from watching television, as Ramon Lobato defines streaming as a 'hybrid phenomenon' which brings together two historically distinct but now interrelated technological systems:

Streaming uses the infrastructure of telecommunications and the Internet, yet from the audience perspective, streaming is very much an extension of the television experience, and in terms of its commercial operations it relies upon the existing networks and relationships of TV production and distribution (2017, 178).

With the development of television, the traditional televisual flow, such as TV series, has created large contemporaneous audiences in China over long periods of time. Today the televisual file is available online and usually free. Hence, this new economic logic of watching TV is replacing the old one. In other words, with the decline of television viewing and the rise of online streaming, the latter has had a ‘cannibalistic’ effect on television (Cha and Chan-Olmsted 2012, 261). In fact, traditional TV channels are willing to distribute their content to online video services, which indicates that traditional television media executives believe that Chinese audiences have nurtured a new habit of accessing televisual content on a platform that is not television.

Online streaming technology emerged in China not long after the beginning of the new millennium, when China’s online population was increasing at an extraordinary rate. Historically, it was also the time when the first generation of individuals produced by the one-child policy started to engage in online activities as the major players. A large proportion of these young people became the audience of overseas TV series and Hollywood blockbuster films. More highly educated, used to dabbling in Western culture, and having access to advanced technology, this group of ‘urban elites’ sought more culturally diverse audiovisual products such as US/UK TV. As a result, these ‘urban elites’ are considered as English-language TV series’ main audience.

Young Chinese urban viewers’ media consumption had drawn attention from the world’s leading media companies even before online streaming began. As one of the only two legal foreign-owned music channels in China, MTV entered the Chinese market in the late 1990s. Owned by Viacom, MTV has adopted a localization model in many territories, including China, which requires MTV China to indigenize its programs and produce materials with Chinese characteristics. Apart from importing Western and other Asian music videos, the channel features local celebrities and music in its locally produced programs, including forming its own Chinese host teams (Fung 2006, 72-73). These programs helped to generate revenues by inserting advertising between the program slots. The localization of these programs seems to have worked well, as MTV is able to sell their made-in-China syndicated programs to provincial or municipal television stations in Mainland China.

Localization has also become a necessary resort that online streaming services use to penetrate local markets with global television products, which means the products are usually subtitled in the local language and presented to audiences in a localized way with which they are familiar. As Timothy Havens discusses, in order to brand its service in India, Netflix featured a number of vignettes with famous Indian actors talking about Netflix shows (2018, 329). This kind of localized promotional campaign was largely used for imported

American television series around the world, which often employ local talent, local references and local channel brands to indigenize imported programs. Meanwhile, Netflix is purchasing local productions for online streaming and cooperating with local production crews to produce original programs in local languages with local cultural values.

In the context of present-day China, the localization is involved in not only the marketing campaign, but also in distribution activities. From localized interfaces and scheduling to local user-generated content, streaming services are trying to cater to local audiences' consumption habits and to encourage viewer engagement in order to retain viewers and generate revenue. To understand video streaming consumption in the Chinese context, the following section examines the localized distribution activities of English-language television series.

### **Content Library and Exhibition**

The content library of a video streaming service is measured by the available programs it possesses. Scholarly work has mentioned the importance of the volume of a video service's library. As Elissa Nelson argues in *Windows into the Digital World*, 'one challenge a digital viewing service could face is that if enough titles aren't available, consumers can always access content elsewhere' (2014, 69), especially if this elsewhere is an informal platform where numerous TV series can be found and viewed for free. In previous decades, the lack of enforcement in China of intellectual-property rights allowed the proliferation of informal means of accessing foreign audiovisual content, such as pirated VCDs (a unique and widely adopted home video format in East Asia) in the 1990s, pirated DVDs in the 2000s, and unlicensed video streaming websites and illegal file-sharing websites in the 2000s and early 2010s. In present-day China, pirated DVDs and illegal file-sharing websites are still available to viewers who are unwilling to pay licensed streaming services for legal content.

As a matter of fact, competing with legal streaming services, file-sharing platforms still provide viewers with 'unlimited' content. Especially in 2014, after the policy on limiting the number of available foreign television series on streaming services to thirty percent of its total programs was implemented, streaming services have faced the challenging task of competing with informal platforms in terms of accessing the content library of US/UK TV series (Entertainment China 2017). Only when legal streaming services are able to satisfy viewers' needs will this kind of informal platform falter in stealing audiences from them. By purchasing more popular series and maintaining an ample library, legal streaming services can more effectively combat illegal downloading. Since nowadays it is somewhat easier for viewers to go on streaming services than to locate and download content by unapproved means, legal platforms still hold the advantage of attracting more audiences.

Yet, in the ecology of online video streaming, there is also competition among formal platforms. The actual size of the content library one service holds can be vital for its competitiveness, while also indicating how much it foregrounds certain types of content. Hence, we need a full view of each of China's five major streaming services – Tencent Video, Sohu Video, LeTV, iQiyi and Sohu Video – in terms of their content libraries of English-

language TV series. Difficulties in collecting statistics for streaming platforms are notorious, including the exact number of the programs present on the platform. For instance, one can find it almost impossible to count the number of series that Netflix possesses by scrolling down on its home page. However, with their limits on foreign programs, Chinese streaming services have only a relatively small number of US/UK TV series, so it is feasible to obtain the statistics manually. This is especially true because each service shows search results by the region of the content, meaning one can filter findings for US/UK TV series and count the number of English-language TV programs each service has. Table 1 produces the results of this method. Here, the number of American and British TV series varies substantially on the five sites.

	<b>Total</b>	<b>US</b>	<b>UK</b>
<b>Tencent Video</b>	232	187	45
<b>Sohu Video</b>	58	54	4
<b>LeTV</b>	96	79	17
<b>iQiyi</b>	21	16	5
<b>Youku Tudou</b>	17	16	1

**Table 1:** The quantity of US/UK TV series and trailers each service provides.

As of November 2018, Tencent Video had a total of 232 English-language TV programs available for viewing, including 187 American series and forty-five British series, making it the only service with more than 100 US/UK TV programs available among the five. LeTV was second with a collection of seventy-nine American series and seventeen British series, ninety-six in total. Despite the fact that LeTV is undergoing a process of reorganization, it still holds a substantial number of programs. As the service was the first copyright-compliant online video streaming platform in Mainland China, it has been devoted to serving viewers with an enormous collection of various viewing options. Sohu Video has the third largest library in terms of English-language TV series, with fifty-four American series and four British series. The other two services, Youku Tudou and iQiyi, own the same number of American TV series – sixteen. As for British series, Youku Tudou has five and iQiyi only has one. Thus, Tencent Video is the streaming service that holds the largest content library of English-language TV series.

Even though these five services provide a number of English-language TV series, not all of them dedicate equal space to the exhibition of this specific content. By exhibition, I refer to the interface of these services, including the first-tier home page and the second-tier display page of US/UK TV series. Scholars suggest that the design of the streaming service’s interface has effects on motivating audiences’ viewing behaviour. Amanda D. Lotz investigates how effectively on-demand services work in the US market, arguing that ‘the poor and cumbersome interface of the service could deter viewers from attempting to use

them' (2007, 149). A well-designed interface motivates viewers to explore the service and then stream content that might interest them. Taking a close look at these Chinese streaming services' interfaces can help us understand how much they have invested in exhibiting English-language TV series and how vigorously they encourage viewers to watch them.

Even though a streaming service is not in the form of a traditional television set, we can regard its interface as a televisual interface, especially when the content being shown is TV programs. As Daniel Chamberlain argues, 'televisual interfaces are productive spaces that reframe the programming we watch, introduce new metadata-based aesthetics, alter the rhythms of the time we spend with television and reveal the struggles among media corporations established and emergent' (2011, 230). Streaming services present their content library by designing different forms of interfaces with different features, which is similar to navigating interfaces on a television set.

Catherine Johnson's work on online TV, specifically British ITV Hub's interface, brings the discussion of the interface to bear more particularly on the transformations involved:

Interfaces, as the frames that structure access to this range of online content, provide an opportunity to examine how broadcasters are repositioning what online TV is as a service and an experience beyond catch-up in a changing media market ... we can understand the video-on-demand interface as a site whereby TV is adapted to the interactive environment of online media. This is a space in which the logics of broadcasting meet the possibilities of programming, software and algorithms in ways that shape and construct the experience of TV online (2017, 121).

Lobato also addresses the interfaces of streaming services, emphasizing their unique organization as they use 'various kinds of motifs and elements designed as navigational aids and these design features invite particular kinds of movement around the site and particular modes of searching, discovery and access' (2017, 241). He argues, 'the resulting "platform spaces" require analysis because they have agency of their own. No media-space is neutral. It is therefore important to consider how today's streaming platforms are spatially structured and to what effect' (2017, 241).

With these different perspectives on the interface in mind, Lobato's characterization most closely supports my study of streaming services' interfaces: how a service presents its content library to its users through design is significant because it reveals the degree to which the service encourages its users to consume this content. An interface is also a website, where viewers practice online viewing by clicking different options. Schneider and Foot argue, 'when conceptualizing a "web sphere," we consider it as not simply a collection of services, but as a hyperlinked set of "dynamically-defined digital resources" that span multiple services and are deemed relevant, or related, to a central theme or "object"' (2014, 114). In this context, the theme is 'a platform to stream US/UK TV.' By looking at these

interfaces, this section scrutinizes their visible surfaces in an attempt to find out how they are designed to structure and organize English-language programs in ways that might offer viewers certain affordances and experiences.

First, the location of the hyperlink to US/UK TV series on the first-tier home page of each of the five services shows that Tencent Video, Sohu Video and iQiyi showcase the content in a more expansive way. Each of the three services includes a specific second-tier display page for US/UK TV content, which is designed to present a panoramic view of the library's contents (**Figs. 1-3**). One can easily click on the hyperlink and be guided to the display page. On the display page, rolling banners of TV series' posters are shown on the top. The information that a viewer can learn from these banners includes the Chinese name of the show, the scheduling, the promotional slogan and sometimes the award-winning history. The rest of the page is usually divided into different sections, which each service manages differently.

Tencent Video usually displays current hit series' direct links below rolling banners and changes these selections frequently. The section that follows displays trailers, clips and fan-made content. Viewers can then scroll down to browse all the site's content. As for categorizing these series, Tencent Video labels them by describing their features in a short catchy phrase, such as '颜值即是正义' ('beauty is justice') for series starring relatively good-looking actors and '重口慎入' ('beware: hardcore') for series with explicit content. As one means of localizing these TV series for local audiences, instead of using traditional genres, this kind of labeling is assumed to be more legible to viewers because these terms are either trendy cyber slang or borrowed from contemporary Chinese pop culture. Considering the major target audiences are young Chinese who might be attracted to these elements, this is a market-savvy way to categorize the content. Similarly, Sohu Video classifies series with key words, such as '青春' ('youth') for coming-of-age series and '烧脑' ('brain burning') for thriller and mystery series. However, iQiyi only presents its content library by genre, which makes its second-tier display page look much more concise than the other two and less trendy. We might speculate that, compared to other services, iQiyi has a relatively smaller library of English-language TV content; it thus does not rely much on this region's fare in terms of attracting viewers, resulting in less effort to fully develop this second-tier display page.

In contrast to these three services' dedication to the exhibition of English-language content, Youku Tudou and LeTV's interfaces show less investment in promoting it. Neither has a designated display page for US/UK TV series. Only a small space on their first-tier homepage is used to recommend this content with posters of series and brief one-sentence plot summaries. The limited space for the display of this content, in turn, limits viewers' ease in locating or identifying English-language content. To put this case in a television context, if an online streaming service can be seen as a TV set, a second-tier display page is equal to a TV channel. Audiences are hardly inclined to search for specific content when they do not have a strong intention of accessing it. If the service puts more effort into exhibiting US/UK TV, the viewers are more likely to click to play the program. Hence, considering the

comparatively poor concentration on the exhibition of US/UK TV, one might assume that Youku Tudou and LeTV are less competitive than Tencent Video or Sohu Video in terms of attracting English-language program viewers.



Fig. 1: iQiyi's US/UK TV display page



Fig. 2: Tencent Video's US/UK TV display page

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绝命毒师 5季 4季  
少狼 5季 4季

喜剧·青春  
· 美眉校探  
· 凯莉日记  
· 疯人疯语  
· 家有喜旺  
· 单身毒妈 8季  
· kelly 1季

悬疑·烧脑  
· 越狱 4季 3季  
· 终极审判  
· 杀手信徒 2季 1季  
· 铁杉树丛 1季  
· 戏中迷局  
· 重案组 3季 更多

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科幻·动作  
· 陨落星辰  
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生活大爆炸 The Big Bang Theory 更新至第9集  
吸血鬼日记 第6季  
摩登家庭 第6季  
老妈 第3季 Mom S03  
劳拉的秘密 第1季  
初代吸血鬼 第2季  
老友记 Friends 10季全  
金色年代 第2季 Göldberrgs

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谍网 第1季 Quantico S01  
跟踪者 第1季 Stalker S01 10月2日开播  
犯罪心理 第10季 10月2日开播  
哥谭镇 第1季 Gotham S01 22集全  
丑闻 第4季 Scandal S04 9月26日开播  
国土安全 第4季 Homeland 10月6日开播  
越狱 Prison Break 4季全  
边桥谜案 第2季  
疑犯追踪 第4季

Fig. 3: Sohu Video's US/UK TV display page.

However, the above results show that the number of one service's available programs does not always accord with its presentation and exhibition of this content. LeTV has the second biggest collection of US/UK TV series, but its lack of a designated display page makes it hard for viewers to actually locate this content. By contrast, Sohu Video tries to make the best use of its library's limited content in order to achieve its goal of being the so-called 'No. 1 US/UK TV content platform' (Sohu 2017). What's more, it is worth mentioning that Sohu Video purchased the copyrights of *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* (2003-) and *Saturday Night Live* (1975-) – a rather rare action for an online streaming service. With highly culturally specific scripts, these series are not as appealing to Chinese viewers as other soap or drama content, such as Korean drama, which shares many cultural elements in common with Chinese drama.

This state of affairs invokes Joseph D. Straubhaar's concept of 'proximity' in which he conceives of transnational cultural trade in terms of the proximity between different cultures, including such factors as shared histories, similar values, and congruence of dominant narrative forms. The lack of cultural proximity reduces the appeal of variety and talk shows to a larger or more global audience (Straubhaar 2009). Also, when the lack of cultural proximity is significant in this market, the revenue-generating potential will be decreased, which in turn hinders the trade of this genre. In fact, except for Sohu Video, none of the other four streaming services provides viewers with English-language talk shows or variety shows. However, Sohu Video still imports these programs and presents them on a well-designed second-tier display page, which suggests that the company regards this content as a significant element of its overall marketing strategy and brand image.

As a matter of fact, cultural proximity does not affect English-language TV series of different genres equally. English-language talk shows, variety shows and sitcoms seem to share fewer cultural values with Chinese domestic productions, but, as we shall see, fantasy dramas that are set in a fictional world can potentially draw more Chinese viewers' interests.

## **Accessibility**

Before on-demand services and other portable video formats had emerged, the traditional TV set was the only means of watching TV programs. Linear TV required audiences to wait in front of their TV sets at scheduled air times. The popularization of VHS and DVD or VCD followed, which has gradually nurtured a new habit of consuming serialized content for audiences, often called 'binge-watching.' Scholarly works indicate that the concept of binge-watching is linked to a rise in DVD sales of serialized content (Lotz 2007, 149). In the late 2010s, as on-demand service and streaming platforms have been rapidly developing and DVD markets have been shrinking, viewers find it even easier and cheaper to binge-watch online, where they are able to choose almost whatever content they want to watch, wherever and whenever. This is what Mareike Jenner calls *autonomous scheduling*, which enables viewers to set aside time for the 'focused and planned' watching of their favorite content. She also argues that, 'the VoD industry takes advantage of the autonomy and agency implied in binge-watching by using publication models and interfaces that encourage

bingeing, attempts to predict and manipulate viewer behaviour and marketing (original) serialized drama over other content' (2017, 305, 317). In the case of Chinese streaming services, the design of their interfaces, which provides an enormous library of content and is easy to navigate, is an example of their intention to keep the viewers on their platforms for as long as possible.

However, for viewers of imported content, binge-watching is not always possible. In Mainland China, where traditional linear TV scheduling is impossible to arrange for foreign TV programs, the accessibility to the content on streaming services decides whether viewers are actually able to binge-watch. In other words, the kind of accessibility pattern each service exploits implies the kind of viewing behaviour they expect viewers to have. Furthermore, the possibility of binge-watching a specific English-language TV series can be used to promote the service.

In 2013, the year when US/UK TV programs flourished on China's streaming platforms, Chinese viewers were able to watch the newest episode of a hit show for free on a streaming service only a few hours after its airing in the original country. Viewers could also stream it anytime they wanted to, paying very little in the way of fees. However, after the '先审后播' ('censored, licensed, then aired') policy was launched in March 2014, all streaming services had to take down their unlicensed programs before they could apply for licenses to stream them again – a process that took approximately a year (Entertainment China 2017). As a result, no foreign TV series were able to reach Chinese viewers on these services without a lengthy time delay. This policy change affected the entire streaming industry, especially as it attempted to retain the numerous viewers who had recently ceased accessing illegal downloading websites and were developing a habit of consuming US/UK TV content legally. Despite the complexity of the situation, however, no platform has completely forsaken the market of English-language TV series. Consequently, they have come up with strategies to cope with this time-delay issue. As of November 2018, based on a show's supposed value, streaming services have employed different scheduling strategies for different shows. In this section, I examine several representative series' scheduling by Sohu Video and Tencent Video to illustrate the different accessibility patterns of US/UK TV content.

First of all, as opposed to their Western counterparts, such as Netflix and Amazon Prime Video, but similar to Hulu, Chinese streaming services operate on a hybrid subscription/advertising-based model, where subscribers can skip pop-up adverts. In terms of accessibility to streaming content, subscription allows viewers to watch all of the available series on these services while those who are not willing to pay for subscriptions can only access series without the tag of '会员' ('members only'). On some occasions, there is a way for non-subscribers to watch subscription-only content. Every week, one episode of a specific series might become free to watch for a limited time period. In the meantime, subscribers are privileged in being able to stream a series' whole season whenever they want, such as Sohu Video's *The Big Bang Theory* (CBS, 2007-) and *Legends of Tomorrow* (The CW, 2016-). Hence, accessibility to a specific series is different for viewers with different

subscription contributions.

As a matter of fact, due to the ‘先审后播’ (‘censored, licensed, then aired’) policy, most available imported series were actually aired in their original countries at least a year before their streaming in China, which means there is always a time delay for both subscribers and non-subscribers. Nonetheless, some streaming services still try to attract viewers by creating a linear ‘American’ viewing experience. Taking *The Big Bang Theory* as an example, one episode of the series aired Thursdays in the United States, whilst in China TV series usually air consecutively every weekday through the entire week. Hence, weekly scheduling is rather an ‘American’ thing for Chinese audiences and streaming services. As an instance of such special scheduling, Sohu Video releases a new episode of *The Big Bang Theory* weekly on Wednesdays, even though the content is actually from a previous season that was aired a year ago in America. After the whole season becomes available on Sohu Video, viewers can then binge-watch all the episodes, if they pay to be a VIP subscriber.

Services encourage VIP subscribers to binge-watch the series they like or even download the episodes on their smartphones. As Jenner argues, ‘binge-watching reaches beyond assumed or actual viewing behaviour, but has implications for how VoD providers like Netflix or Amazon position themselves as an alternative to scheduled, synchronized and “traditional’ television”’ (Jenner 2017, 304). More flexible than traditional television channels, Chinese streaming services provide different plans of accessibility for viewers who have different demands for the autonomy of the viewing experience.

As an extraordinary case, Tencent Video managed to accomplish real linear scheduling for season seven of *Game of Thrones*. In 2017, Tencent Video released the series in Mainland China simultaneously with HBO in the United States. A series of promotions about this release were launched on social media, which was a crucial part of Tencent Video’s implementation of its premium subscription service. As of November 2018, the service has obtained the first seven seasons of the series, but only subscribers are allowed to binge-watch all the episodes; otherwise, only the first episode of each season is free for non-subscribers. This restricted accessibility becomes a motivation for non-subscribers to subscribe to Tencent Video.

The fact that Chinese streaming services attract viewers with different types of accessibility to *Game of Thrones* and *The Big Bang Theory* indicates that viewers might have different degrees of demand for them. As a matter of fact, considering the genres and market values of these two series, distributors choose to import and release them accordingly. Here I use the terms *high-end TV* and *routine TV* proposed by Roberta Pearson, to better understand the different distribution activities of different imported TV programs. High-end TV generates ‘critical acclaim and intense media coverage or a vast and avid fandom that breathlessly awaits the next series’ (Pearson 2019, 111), whilst routine TV does not. Pearson argues that these types of television content can have distinct temporal signatures in transnational distribution. High-end television can attract ‘simultaneous distribution [that] results in a temporal premium; for the broadcasters it decreases illegal downloading and for the viewers it increases their pleasure in engaging in global fan forums.’

By contrast, routine content 'is temporally neutral since it does not engage viewers to the extent that they employ illegal downloading or participate in global fan forums' (2019, 125).

In a worldwide context, then, high-end television series should ideally be imported and released in a country with little or no time delay so that the series can benefit from this temporal premium and then perform optimally on the platform. Basically, because of the severe restriction on foreign TV content in Mainland China, US/UK TV series are usually scheduled to stream with a temporal discount, in other words, far behind their original airdate in their original regions, which gives illegal file-sharing and downloading space to survive. Hence, for a high-end TV series, such as *Game of Thrones*, Tencent Video has been determined to overcome any hurdles to achieve the simultaneous release in China of season seven and then provide access to the series only as bait so that more viewers will sign up for its VIP subscription. At the same time, services also try to retain the streaming flow of US/UK TV series by providing free viewing for most routine series in their content libraries, such as *The Big Bang Theory*, which has already gained a large audience and hardly suffers from temporal discount. Although this show has been a big hit in the US, it is a routine series in China, insofar as it is a long-running network sitcom that is one of Chinese viewers' most familiar American TV programs. Usually viewers who watch these kinds of routine series are not overly concerned with time delay nor do they bother to locate illegal file-sharing websites and download. Chinese online streaming services create a special accessibility model specifically for *some* US/UK TV series, the type of content that faces trouble in achieving circulation in this transnational context.

By contrast, most domestic productions are scheduled to stream for free in a linear order along with their broadcast on traditional television stations, where foreign TV programs are not allowed to appear. As Johnson argues, online TV could offer 'a prime locus to explore the ways in which traditional linear broadcast TV is being reconceptualised for an on-demand environment' (2017, 121). In the context of China, traditional linear TV still exists, but only in domestic productions. The above analysis shows that foreign TV content is the one being tailored and localized for the online streaming environment.

### **Interactive Practices**

In Mainland China, online streaming services and Chinese viewers have a dynamic relationship with each other, as streaming services include user-generated content to encourage viewer engagement. In particular, those streaming services providing foreign TV content attempt to maintain an engaging and friendly environment as well as ample content for viewers to engage, due to the complexity of this specific content in the overall Chinese streaming ecology. On the one hand, as a result of the authorities' tightened censorship and strict regulation on media content, foreign TV content is only allowed to be licensed and distributed on streaming services. On the other hand, in the earlier 21<sup>st</sup> century, via P2P platforms, foreign TV content originally obtained extensive circulation by unauthorized fan-subbing groups and individuals, indicating that fans have been active agents in the circulation of this content since the outset.

In *Spreadable Media*, Henry Jenkins et al. describe a key change in contemporary U.S. television viewing practice as ‘a shift from an appointment-based model of television viewing toward an engagement-based paradigm’ (Jenkins, Ford and Green 2013, 116). The appointment-based model requires audiences to be at a certain place at a certain time to watch their favorite TV content on a TV set, where viewership can be predicted and later measured and sold to advertisers for profit. By contrast, the engagement-based model sees the audience as ‘a collective of active agents whose labor may generate alternative forms of market value’ (Jenkins, Ford and Green 2013, 116). Bringing this model into the Chinese context, I consider how online streaming services in China are more engagement-based than appointment-based.

As video content providers, Chinese streaming services enable their viewers to engage the streaming process through various affordances. For instance, on the display page of a series, viewers can add comments in the designated comment section, similar to what YouTube provides on its display page. Moreover, Chinese streaming services have adopted a unique commenting function that is not seen on major Western streaming services: the bullet screen. Viewers produce comments in a different designated area than the one just mentioned, and then the comments flow from the left to the right on the screen, overlaying the actual streaming video, which makes it look like the screen is covered by flying bullets (**Fig. 4**). These comments are kept within the video and remain available for viewing when the video is played the next time. This special form of engagement allows viewers to communicate with each other while watching the video. In this sense, the bullet screen functions as a social platform, where interactive activities materialize between viewers and the actual viewing content being played. For instance, viewers bring up previous plotlines to discuss with others or just simply state the date and time when they watch the content to form a sense of group-watching.

Apart from embedding a social media function into the viewing practice, these streaming services also use different kinds of external social media platforms to generate publicity for marketing purposes. Of such platforms, Chuck Tryon argues that Twitter serves as ‘a means of shaping new forms of collective, distributed television and movie watching, a cultural phenomenon that has only widened with the rise of social media software’ (2013, 117). Fans communicate with each other on Twitter with hashtags of a certain show’s name or catch phrase. They not only discuss the plots of the newest episode, but also create memes and character-pairing narratives for their own entertainment interests. Viewers reproduce new texts from the texts a show can provide and then some texts become very popular or even viral on the Internet, such as a character’s famous line or a specific storyline. This kind of fan engagement on the platforms is also very widely employed by Chinese streaming services. Due to the fact that Tencent Video is HBO’s only official partner in Mainland China, *Game of Thrones* has become Tencent Video’s major campaign object. Here I present an analysis of this campaign in terms of the exploitation of social media.



Fig. 4: Bullet screen of *Game of Thrones*

On Twitter’s Chinese equivalent, Weibo, Tencent Video has an official account that posts the relevant information of the streaming content on this service, a large proportion of which is follow-up reports on the production process of *Game of Thrones*. As Tencent Video’s central attraction to viewers, the series is often mentioned in posts that actually refer to other programs. Apart from Weibo, Tencent Video also launched a series of promotions of the series on its public WeChat account, with a designated section for *Game of Thrones* on its home page. WeChat is a multi-purpose social media app, which can be seen as a mixture of Facebook and WhatsApp. It provides subscribers with different kinds of posts, including articles, reviews, and news reports.

The profile pictures of both Tencent Video’s Weibo and WeChat are images of Jon Snow (Kit Harington), one of *Game of Thrones*’ main characters. Tencent Video’s Weibo and WeChat accounts usually refer to the characters with their Chinese nicknames created by fans, such as 雪诺 (xueuo) for Jon Snow. Its Weibo account often reposts other users’ fan-made content with a reminder to watch legally licensed series on Tencent Video. Also, Tencent Video always invites viewers to repost trivia quizzes related to the series and to give their own opinions or answers to win a prize. Moreover, Tencent Video plans and organizes ‘offline’ activities with fans – for example, they held a theme exhibition of the series in a major shopping mall in Beijing. Additionally, Tencent Video once invited actor Nikolaj Coster-Waldau, who plays Jaime Lannister on the series, to Shanghai for a fan meeting, which was

considered as an important activity during its marketing campaign. Three lucky fans received free tickets to the meeting by reposting Tencent Video's posts. The fan meeting was live broadcast on Tencent's own live streaming app: Tencent Live.

Such examples show that Tencent Video uses the materials that are generated from the series itself to produce localized social media promotional campaigns. As a label, 'The HBO production' is thus localized to accord with its Chinese partner's business model. Tryon argues that, because social media are typically associated with liveness, they can be effective in creating such cultures of participation (2013, 117). At the same time, by encouraging fans to participate in these online or offline activities, Tencent Video generates substantial publicity on social media.

As indicated above, Tencent Video has registered its official account on most of these popular social media platforms in order to communicate face-to-face with Chinese netizens, to spread texts as well as to collect user-generated discourse such as bullet screen comments. Not only has Tencent Video exploited the already existing fan base on social media, Youku Tudou has also practiced a similar marketing strategy. As one of the most influential British TV series, BBC's *Sherlock* was initially circulated by file-sharing websites in Mainland China. After having successfully gained very positive feedback from Chinese viewers with its first two seasons, the show's exclusive streaming rights were obtained by Youku Tudou. A series of promotional activities were launched on Youku Tudou's own website as well as other major social media forums. As I mentioned, addressing characters with their fan-made nicknames in promotional texts is a very common strategy. For example, Youku Tudou's official Weibo account often refers to the character Sherlock Holmes as 卷福 (juanfu), rather than how his actual name would be translated into Chinese. Using nicknames that have been created by fans and widely spread on the internet shows an intimacy between the characters and the viewers, which is another form of localization, since most viewers, in their daily life and in their online social activities, prefer to use the nicknames rather than the characters' English names. These forms of interactivity are thus also forms of localization.

### **Marketing Discourse**

According to numerous journalistic reports and its own promotional material, in the 2010s Sohu Video has sought to identify itself as 'the No. 1 English-language TV content streaming platform' (Sohu 2017). This can easily be seen as part of its branding strategy as an 'upscale' video streaming service. As I have mentioned, since English-language TV series' target audience is well-educated urban elites, they are the ideal demographic that a 'high-end' streaming service seeks. Similarly, Tencent Video has exploited its exclusive partnership with HBO, presenting itself to viewers as a quality streaming service with quality HBO productions. Both of these services tend to offer their viewers a brand that fits with their overall identity. In Andrew Bottomley's definition of TV branding, 'a brand is the identity of a television program or network and branding the process through which that identity is

developed and communicated to the viewing public' (2015, 482). Both 'upscale' and 'high-end' are labels that streaming services claim, revealing their branding agenda. In this sense, for Chinese streaming services, marketing discourses for US/UK TV series not only serve to draw niche audiences, but also help to identify the services themselves.

This section examines online streaming services' marketing discourses for US/UK TV series, once again looking at Tencent Video's campaign for *Game of Thrones* season seven. Because China's streaming market distinguishes itself from Western markets in terms of viewing behaviours, marketing strategies are designed to cater to the Chinese audience's consuming habits of audio-visual products, which also require distributors to follow the viewers' steps onto other social media. As Johnson argues, the value of brands in the digital era is not just to be where the viewer is, but also where the viewer wants to be (2012, 3). Considering the popularization of social media in the digital era, Tencent Video exploits several social media to achieve its agenda rather than promoting it only on its streaming platform.

To pursue this point, I analyze texts stemming from the marketing material for *Game of Thrones*. Jonathan Gray argues that 'paratexts' create texts, 'they manage them, and they fill them with many of the meanings that we associate with them' (2010, 6). Often before audiences actually encounter the show, they get to know it through expectations and interpretations created by paratexts that are part of the service's marketing materials. At the same time, examining these paratexts helps us to understand the streaming website's branding features. Bottomley argues that:

Particularly with regards to branding, paratexts serve to assign value and hail target audiences, informing viewers that a television series is a comedy or a drama, intended for teens or families or gay men, and so on. Therefore, any discussion of television branding must discuss paratexts because it is through them that channels and networks brand their programs, their schedules, and themselves (2015, 484).

Tencent Video obtained the broadcast license for season seven before its premiere in the United States. Accordingly, beginning in July 2017, the company developed a series of marketing activities, including the simultaneous transnational transmission of the series. It launched official trailers made by HBO before every episode was released, providing subtitles in the Chinese language. Viewers were also given options to watch trailers and clips from future episodes and comment during watching with the use of the bullet screen function, which kept the 'heat' stoked among fans during the season's two-month long broadcast. Additionally, a list of related videos featured interviews with the cast and crew. In these ways, Tencent Video attempted to keep the viewers on the website, even after they had just finished watching the newest episode. As further evidence of the importance of social media, after the broadcast of season five, the death of Jon Snow was a trending topic on social media globally. In Mainland China, fans also expressed their sorrow about his death

as well as doubt about its authenticity. The character's fate even drew attention from viewers who were not fans of the series. Tencent Video used #雪诺到底死没死('Is Snow dead or not') to motivate viewers to continue the discussion of this plot line.

Amplifying this identification between streaming service and show, the show's banners and posters are on the service's home page often as headline pictures. During the campaign, when a viewer browsed the service's TV series page, *Game of Thrones* was always the first recommendation in the 'hit shows' section. Daily and weekly push-notifications often presented news about the series to viewers, while Tencent Video often provided updates on the show. Even after season seven's broadcast was finished, the series still stayed as one of the top three of all recommended content.

Along with the four other major online video services, Tencent Video focuses on fostering its own subscribers. VIP subscription enables viewers to access all episodes of *Game of Thrones* with the website clearly indicating that watching the series is a privilege only for subscribers. Among the VIP programs, *Game of Thrones* is considered as the biggest attraction to viewers. As Johnson writes, 'in an era of media conglomeration, successful programs can be used to develop and promote new services' (Johnson 2012, 52). In this sense, *Game of Thrones* not only attracts streaming flow, but also helps drive subscriptions.

Hence, Tencent Video repeatedly promotes the VIP privilege of watching *Game of Thrones* on its platform as well as on other social media. Once again, as a high-end TV series, *Game of Thrones*, along with its temporal premium and paratexts, are being used as promotional material in localized online marketing activities.

## **Conclusion**

This essay explored Chinese online streaming services in terms of their distribution of and marketing activities involved in English-language TV series. Presently, due to strict government policy, foreign TV series can only be broadcast on online streaming services, which requires these services to create a series of interactive platform features, such as localized exhibition interfaces and different accessibilities for different tiered users. Meanwhile, they also brand their platforms with this content. These facts show that the localization of distribution is significant for imported TV series to attract local audiences. Subscription policies, the feature of bullet screens, the exploitation of fan-made content and the design of interfaces are the localization tactics that I have discussed. These practices, in turn, suggest that the study of transnational TV requires more attention to its distribution and circulation.

In the age of multi-screens, China, as the second largest TV market in the world, is witnessing how streaming – the newly emergent means of accessing both traditional and innovative television content – reconstructs a country's audience consumption habits (Broadband TV News 2018). In order to understand Chinese audiences' consumption of online streaming, this article closely examined one of Chinese streaming services' most favored content – US/UK TV series. Imported television content traveled from overseas to

Mainland China and arrived on streaming platforms, where numerous hurdles needed to be overcome in terms of distribution and circulation. The localized Chinese streaming features, such as bullet screens and optional subscriptions, have been applied to this non-local streaming content to form a localized audience experience. While streaming services' distribution practices are based on their business models, I have argued that these practices rely heavily on local audiences' consumption practices as well. By analyzing the already developed streaming system, this article aimed to understand the dynamic relationship between the distributors and a large contingent of consumers in Mainland China, where HBO is only available on Tencent Video and Netflix has not yet penetrated.

I have also argued that this dynamic relationship has generated a series of localized features of the streaming services as well as some alterations of marketing strategies. In the Chinese market, the lack of the cultural proximity of English-language TV series is obvious, but the demand for this content is significant, whilst the state policies on imported television content constantly change. To what extent will the streaming services further indigenize this content to stock their libraries and nurture a growing number of subscribers in the foreseeable future? Apart from cultural and temporal proximity issues, how much impact do authorities have on these distribution activities? What other roles does the audience play in the online streaming environment? These questions suggest how we might continue to study China's streaming services in the context of the changing transnational TV market and the fast developing online streaming world.

### **Biographical Note:**

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### **Acknowledgements:**

Thanks to my supervisors Roberta Pearson and Mark Gallagher for everything, also to my friend Heshen Xie for his contribution to this article.

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