The World According to Subtitlers: Sharing and Viewing Foreign Media in China

An MIP Workshop

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Zimuzu (字幕組) refers to Chinese netizens who provide subtitled versions of American movies and television dramas, often within hours after the official broadcast in the United States. Although unauthorized and unlicensed, the programs are streamed and downloaded on tablets and smart phones, free of charge. Via Zimuzu, hundreds of thousands of Chinese young people devour the latest American fare (e.g., Prison Break, Desperate Housewives, Big Bang Theory) sidestepping official channels of distribution and control.

Although members and viewers acknowledge language learning as one motivation, the online volunteerism of Zimuzu subtitlers is remarkable and distinctive. Why do they do it? Who do they reach? And why is China the world’s leader in online subtitling? Our workshop assesses various explanations that range from a neo-liberal work ethic to “serious leisure” pursuits, from networked communication to grey market media. Yet we contend it is best to understand Zimuzu within the context of media marketization in China, where Zimuzu activity exemplifies the contradiction and cracks between state regulation and market-driven media consumption.

Darrell Davis is author of Picturing Japaneseness: Monumental Style, National Identity, Japanese Film (Columbia University Press, 1996), co-author of Taiwan Film Directors: a Treasure Island (Columbia University Press, 2005), East Asian Screen Industries (British Film Institute, 2008) and co-editor of Cinema Taiwan: Politics, Popularity and State of the Arts (Routledge, 2007). Presently he is conducting research on China’s film industry and is composing an essay on Ang Lee.

Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh is Professor at the Academy of Film, and Director of the Centre for Media and Communication Research at Hong Kong Baptist University. Her publications include: Taiwan Film Directors: A Treasure Island (Columbia University Press, 2005, Co-author), Chinese-Language Film: Historiography, Poetics, Politics (University of Hawaii Press, 2005, Co-editor) and East Asian Screen Industries (British Film Institute, 2008, Co-author). She also edited Rethinking the Chinese Film Industry: New Histories, New Methods for Beijing University Press (in Chinese, 2011).

Drs. Davis and Yeh are visiting fellows at the Carsey-Wolf Center’s Media Industries Project where both are participating in this year’s Connected Viewing Initiative. Their visit is co-sponsored by the Mellichamp Endowment for Global Studies.