Editorial

Xiaochun Zhang

Introduction to the Special Section: Film Accessibility for Blind and Low Vision Viewers in China

The term 'accessibility' refers to the 'ability to access', which has traditionally been associated with designing for people with disabilities. In recent years, research and development on accessibility have shifted the focus from 'disabilities' to 'diverse abilities', emphasising the criticality of equal access for everyone to social, cultural, political, and economic life. This includes physical and digital access to the same tools, services, organisations and facilities. Access is a fundamental necessity for respecting the human dignity of all (World Health Organization 2021). Film accessibility addresses the essential process of making a film fully accessible and inclusive. The conventional methods to achieve film accessibility include audio description (AD) for the blind and visually impaired audience, subtitling for the deaf and hard of hearing (SDH) and sign language interpreting (SLI) for the audience with hearing impairments. This special section addresses film accessibility by focusing exclusively on the audio description practice and research in the context of China.

The history of AD in mainland China can be traced back to the early 2000s, when two volunteers established *Xinmu Cinema (*心目影院*, Xinmu Yingyuan)*, a dedicated cinema for the blind and visually impaired audience in Beijing (Ma 2020, 18). In a mere 20 years, multiple audio description volunteer groups and service providers have been established in several cities. Among them, *Bright Cinema (*光明影院*, Guangming Yingyuan)*, for example, has produced AD for more than four-hundred films, involving more than five-hundred volunteers in the past 5 years.[1] AD has been perceived as more than just a means of accessing entertainment but also valuable tool for learning and socialising (Tor-Carroggio 2021). Thanks to the rapid

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[1] For more information, please see https://weibo.com/5503968735/L4Cwuk08c?type=repost (last accessed on 20 May 2023).

Xiaochun Zhang, Centre for Translation Studies (CenTras), University College London, Gower Street, London, WC1E 6BT, UK, E-mail: xiaochun.zhang@ucl.ac.uk. https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6334-6525

development, the cultural life of people with visual impairments in China has improved considerably in the past decade.

In academia, audio description in China has drawn growing scholarly attention. The publications in Chinese, according to CNKI,[2] demonstrate a snowballing trend, covering discussions on a variety of topics, including audio description strategies (e.g. Sheng and Xu 2022), multimodal AD corpora building (e.g. Wang and Liu 2022), auteur description in AD (e.g. Luo and Yan 2021), AD practice and reflection (e.g. Gao and Chen 2019; Lu 2020), and the reception of text-to-speech AD (e.g. Xiao and Tor-Carroggio 2020).

Publications in English regarding AD in China include the demographic profile mapping of AD users and their experience and opinions on AD (e.g. Tor-Carroggio 2021), audio describers' profiles (e.g. Tor-Carroggio and Casas-Tost 2020), AD and interpreting training (e.g. Yan and Luo 2022, 2023), corpus-driven studies comparing AD in Chinese and Spanish (e.g. Liu et al. 2022), comparison of AD guidelines in China and Europe (e.g. Tor-Carroggio and Vercauteren 2020).

Research methods used in the existing studies incorporate questionnaires (e.g. Tor-Carroggio 2021; Yan and Luo 2022, 2023), comparative studies (e.g. Tor-Carroggio and Vercauteren 2020), corpus-driven studies (e.g. Liu et al. 2022; Wang and Liu 2022), and reception studies (e.g. Xiao and Tor-Carroggio 2020). More comprehensive reviews can be found in both Liu and Ye's articles in this special section.

Despite the fast advancement in research and practice, the past, current, and future development of AD in China has yet to be fully explored, reviewed, and documented. In the hope of addressing the gap, this special section brings together three articles, primarily giving a voice to practitioners in the field and early career researchers working on their PhD projects on topics in accessibility.

Yuchen Liu provides an overview of the audio description practice in China, Spain, and the UK, highlighting each country's traditions and current situations. By comparing data on target users of audio description services, the historical developments, scriptwriting methods and guidelines, training and research, she concludes that the shared challenges in the three countries include the improvement of social awareness, the advancement of the physical or digital environment for the end users to access audio described products, and the enhancement of AD quality. Liu's contribution to this section suggests that the close involvement of blind and visually impaired users in AD production in China is a good practice. At the same time, European legislation is the backbone of the progress made in film accessibility and beyond.

Liu's paper is followed by an interview with Wei Ma, a veteran audio describer and a fervent activist who has been promoting film accessibility for years. In

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2 CNKI (www.cnki.net), is a multidisciplinary full text database of journals published in China.

dialogue with Yunke Deng, Mr Ma shares his experience of audio description scriptwriting for films, emphasising the essentialness of being passionate about AD scriptwriting and the benefits of understanding film languages and cinematic techniques when describing visual elements to the audience with real-life examples. His interview showcases the current practice of AD scriptwriting from the perspective of an active accessibility specialist on the frontline.

Last but not least, Zi Ye and Huamei Jie provide an overview of film accessibility in China from the perspective of charity and NGOs, focusing on development in Shenzhen. While acknowledging the achievement in film accessibility in China, their critical review of the situation highlights the challenges and areas for future improvement. They suggest closer collaborations among all shareholders in the field, more and stronger policy support, and commercialisation as the way forward.

The three articles in this special section shed some light on film accessibility for blind and low vision viewers in China. However, further research is required to theorise the AD practice and deepen the understanding of film accessibility.

The most urgent issue seems to lie in the complexity of copyright, which has been considered one of the most significant challenges in making films accessible in China. Recent amendments of national regulations may clear up some of the obstacles and improve the current circumstances. The latest Copyright Law states that:[3]

> Article 24 Under the following circumstances, the work may be used without the permission of the copyright owner, and no remuneration shall be paid, but the name of the author and the title of the work shall be specified, and the regular use of the work shall not be affected, and the legal rights of the copyright owner shall not be damaged:
> (12) Provide published works to persons with reading disabilities in an accessible way that they can comprehend.[4]

In addition, the National Copyright Administration issued the *Interim Provisions on Providing Works to Print-Disabled Persons in an Accessible Manner on 1 August 2022,* which provides further regulations on offering accessible services to persons with reading disabilities. Legal support from policymakers is crucial in promoting and implementing film accessibility. It is evident that the Chinese government has provided strong policy support in recent years. Implementing these new regulations

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3 On November 11, 2020, the 23rd meeting of the Standing Committee of the Thirteenth National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China passed the "Decision of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress on Amending the Copyright Law of the People's Republic of China", effective from June 1, 2021. The Chinese version is available at http://www.npc.gov.cn/npc/c30834/202011/848e73f58d4e4c5b82f69d25d46048c6.shtml (last accessed on 20 May 2023).
4 The Chinese original is "在下列情况下使用作品, 可以不经著作权人许可, 不向其支付报酬, 但应当指明作者姓名或者名称、作品名称, 并且不得影响该作品的正常使用, 也不得不合理地损害著作权人的合法权益:(十二)以阅读障碍者能够感知的无障碍方式向其提供已经发表的作品   (Author's translation).

and evaluating their impact on film accessibility requires regular review and discussion. In addition, considering the current volunteer-centric situation in China, future research and legal debates should perhaps focus not only on the copyrights of filmmakers but also on the copyright ownership of accessibility features produced by specialists, such as audio describers and volunteer groups.

Moreover, Romero-Fresco's concept of 'accessible filmmaking' (2019) offers a different approach to making films accessible, which involves collaboration between translators, accessibility specialists, and filmmakers to integrate translation and accessibility into the filmmaking process. This method has been promoted and practised by film professionals worldwide. However, its application in the Chinese context has not been reported and discussed. In recent years, Chinese filmmakers like Zhangke Jia and Hantang Zhao have been promoting the concept of barrier-free films, demonstrating some initiatives within the film industry. Further research and practical efforts from the filmmakers' perspective could significantly benefit the future advancement of film accessibility.

Furthermore, there appear to be several research topics that have not received sufficient attention in the Chinese context. These topics include but are not limited to:
– The application of artificial intelligence in AD
– Sound design and editing in AD
– AD on mobile screens
– The translation of AD

Lastly, facilitating more opportunities for policymakers, practitioners, users, film-makers, and researchers to engage in dialogue with each other would be highly beneficial. Holding conferences and events that unite all stakeholders could contribute significantly to the advancement of AD and film accessibility.

In summary, this dedicated section aims to kickstart academic conversations on enhancing film accessibility for individuals with vision impairments in China. Ideally, all viewers will have the opportunity to enjoy and comprehend films in the not-too-distant future.

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Bionote

Xiaochun Zhang
Centre for Translation Studies (CenTras), University College London, Gower Street, London, WC1E 6BT, UK
xiaochun.zhang@ucl.ac.uk
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6334-6525

Dr. Xiaochun Zhang is Lecturer in Translation Studies at the University College London, United Kingdom. Her research interests lie primarily in audiovisual translation, focusing on film and video game localisation, and accessibility. Other interests include fan audiovisual translation, translation pedagogy, and language technology.