WHO IS CURRENTLY AUDIO DESCRIBING IN CHINA? A STUDY OF CHINESE AUDIO DESCRIBER PROFILES[1]

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Resumen

El acceso a la cultura y la información está reconocido por la Convención sobre los Derechos de las Personas con Discapacidad de las Naciones Unidas, ratificada por China en 2008. Los servicios de accesibilidad sensorial, tales como la audiodescripción, facilitan el consumo de productos audiovisuales a las personas con pérdida de visión. Este artículo contextualiza dicho servicio en China y se centra en aquellas personas a cargo de su preparación: los audiodescriptores. Para conocer su perfil, se distribuyó un cuestionario en Shanghái, Beijing y Guangzhou. Los resultados muestran que prácticamente todos los informantes son voluntarios de entre 20 y 50 años, con formación universitaria variada no relacionada con la Traducción Audiovisual. Ejercen profesiones muy diversas y apenas han recibido formación en audiodescripción, ámbito en el que tampoco tienen una trayectoria dilatada. Siempre

audiodescriben en chino estándar y el cine constituye el producto audiodescrito por excelencia.

Palabras clave: Accesibilidad a los Medios; Servicios de Accesibilidad; Audiodescripción; Audiodescriptores chinos; Voluntarios.

Abstract

Access to culture and information is recognized by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, ratified by China in 2008. Access services like audio description facilitate the consumption of audio-visual products such as films by those who suffer from sight loss. This paper attempts to contextualize this access service in China and focuses on those in charge of preparing it – audio describers. In order to provide a profile of these audio describers, a questionnaire was distributed in Shanghai, Beijing and Guangzhou. The results show that an overwhelming majority of those audio describing are volunteers aged 20-50, and most have a university education background which is not related to Audiovisual Translation. They come from a varied professional background, most have only been audio describing for a few years, they lack formal training in audio description and mainly audio describe films in Standard Chinese.

Keywords: Media Accessibility; Access Services; Audio Description; Chinese Audio Describers; Volunteers.

1. Introduction

According to the United Nations, China is the country with the highest number of citizens with disabilities in the world (cf. Qiu 1998; Wu & Xie 2015: 21). The most recent survey, the Second National Sample Survey on Disability (2006), revealed that there are almost 83 million persons with disabilities in China, 6.34% of the country's population. In more specific functionally diverse terms, 29.07% have a physical disability, 24.16% suffer from hearing loss, 14.86% have sight loss, 7.40% are mentally disabled, 6.68% are intellectually challenged, and 1.53% have a speech disability, while 16.30% suffer from multiple disabilities. The survey also pointed out that more than half of the respondents (53.24%) are at least 60 years old and that the vast majority of them (75.04%) live in rural areas, where residents frequently lack adequate access to healthcare, let alone to culture or information. The

data from 2006 showed an increase in the number of persons with disabilities compared to the results of the first official survey in 1987, which can be attributed to, among other reasons, China being one of the societies with the highest population age, which, in turn, is closely associated with disability (cf. Peng *et al*. 2010).

Although China signed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2007 and ratified it one year later, it still has a long way to go before it can guarantee and implement the rights of the functionally diverse. Access to culture is one of the rights the UNCRPD recognizes, and it includes "access to television programmes, films, theatre and other cultural activities." This can be accomplished, though not exclusively, through sensorial accessibility services such as audio description (AD), subtitling for persons with hearing loss and sign language interpreting. Of these, the focus of this article is AD, which has been defined by Jankowska (2015: 9) as "an additional verbal description of the most important elements of a picture, i.e. a technique that provides persons with sight loss with information that other viewers perceive only visually." It has also been described as "a verbal commentary providing visual information for those unable to perceive it themselves" (cf. Fryer 2016: 1), or simply as "the visual made verbal" (cf. Snyder 2014). Although mainly targeted at persons with sight loss, many studies underline its potential for immigrants or language students, so in fact the actual scope of AD is quite wide-ranging and not just restricted to those with disabilities (cf. Gambier 2003; Snyder 2014; Walczak 2017; Di Giovanni 2018).

The academic study of AD has been embraced by Translation Studies, more specifically Audiovisual Translation (AVT) (Gambier 2003), alongside the study of, for instance, subtitles for persons with hearing loss. In fact, a new subfield has emerged within AVT, called "media accessibility", which specializes in the study of sensorial accessibility services. The reason for including AD under the Translation Studies umbrella lies in "AD implying a semiotic rendering of images into words" (cf. Hernández-Bartolomé & Mendiluce-Cabrera 2009: 5). This intersemiotic translation involves any kind of non-verbal information, for example, costumes, gestures, colors, body language and sounds, which have to be transmitted by means of words.

Officially born in the US in the 1980s (cf. Fryer 2016: 15), AD is an accessibility service currently available in different parts of the world, albeit to differing degrees, which include not only many Western countries, but also those in Asia, such as Japan and Thailand.[2] In countries like Spain, Poland and the United Kingdom, there is even specific legislation that requires broadcasters to offer a particular amount of accessible content on TV, part of which has be to audio described. In the same vein, some countries such as Spain, France, Belgium, Greece, Italy and Poland have drafted their own AD standards or guidelines to "describe the best practices that should be applied for quality AD services" (Reviers 2016: 236). China has numbered among countries where AD is a reality since the early 2000s – however, as Wu and Xie (2015: 21) revealed, the general public are largely unaware of it. AD is still in its infancy in China for various reasons: its dependence on volunteers at grassroots level, the fact that movies are the only field where it is used and the lack of official standards and supporting legislation in the country. Another fact which illustrates its early stage of development as a service in China is the array of terms used to refer to it: "barrier-free movies" (*wuzhang'ai dianying* 无障碍电影), in which theoretically subtitles for persons with hearing loss and sign language interpretation are also added, "commentary" (*jieshuo* 解说) and "image description" (*koushu yingxiang* 口述影像). The latter has already been taken up by some researchers who have already started using this term in academic publications, including Leung (personal communication), who advocates its use for the purposes of consistency in the academic world.

Similarly, unlike Europe, where the study of AD has already come of age (Reviers 2016), academic AD-related research in China is still in its infancy as illustrated by the dearth of references to it in bibliographies (cf. Gambier & Jin 2018). Research into the development of AD in Hong Kong has been carried out by Yeung (2007), and later Leung (2015), who describes its history and lists the domains where it is used nowadays (museum exhibitions, films, outdoor activities, etc.), noting that it is more widespread than in Mainland China. Nevertheless, both researchers admit that Hong Kong is lagging behind

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2. See the Media Accessibility Platform's Accessometer for a world map of the legislation, standards and guidelines on media accessibility organized by countries: https://mapaccess.uab.cat/accessometer, accessed on 9 January 2019.

some Western countries because it still lacks a regulatory framework for providing AD that would make it comparable. Regarding Taiwan, the leading figure in research into AD is Chao Ya-li (赵雅丽), the first researcher to carry out empirical studies on AD in Greater China. However, in recent years academic research into AD in Taiwan has received very little attention. In the case of Mainland China, one of the first studies into AD was Li (2013) and later Leung (2015), both of whom pointed out that it was restricted to films, though not always available. Li and Pan (2013) reported on the early years of AD in Mainland China, especially in Shanghai, and enumerated some of the challenges the service still has to face, such as the lack of financial resources and audio-visual material, the poor technical level and its uneven provision across the country. Although Feng (2018) set out the various fields in which AD can be used, AD still continues to be relegated to films only on the Mainland.

While the trend in the West is to carry out reception studies that attempt to delve into user preferences, needs and characteristics (cf. Chmiel & Mazur 2012; Fresno 2014; Matamala *et al.* 2018), Chinese AD is a few steps behind since it still lacks a well-defined descriptive framework that contextualizes the service and provides a clear picture of how it is offered. Given the scarcity of literature on AD in China, especially in Mainland China, the objective of this study is twofold. First, to investigate the history and the state of the art of this accessibility service in China, including the corresponding legislation. Second, to provide an accurate profile of audio describers in Mainland China, i.e. the characteristics of the key agents currently working on ensuring that Chinese with sight loss have access to culture as a human right.

This article is divided into four sections. The first describes the methodology, while the second contextualizes AD within the Chinese context by examining the legislation on media accessibility, its history and current state. The third analyzes the profile of Chinese audio describers based on the results obtained from a survey distributed among the main agents in the most active AD centers in Mainland China, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Beijing. The final section offers conclusions and proposals for future improvements.

2. Methodology

The first part of this research is based on a thorough and extensive review of the literature published on this subject and is complemented with interviews with key AD agents who helped us to map out a more precise picture of the current state of AD as well as of the profile of audio describers in particular. These include the following interviewees:

a) Qu Dapeng (曲大鹏): Head of the volunteer team of audio describers from 990 News, interviewed at Cathay Cinema (Shanghai) on June 29, 2017.

b) Han Ying (韩颖): Founder of Sound of Light Barrier-free Film & TV Culture Development Center, interviewed in her office in Shanghai on July 10, 2017.

c) Jiang Hongyuan (蒋鸿源): first audio describer in Shanghai, interviewed at Cathay Cinema (Shanghai) on September 28, 2017.

d) Huang Yiqing (黄一庆): General Secretary of the Shanghai Film Critics Society, interviewed in his office on July 3, 2017.

e) Dawning Leung (梁凯程): Founder and CEO of the Audio Description Association Hong Kong, interviewed in her office in Hong Kong on August 10, 2018.

f) Luo Yisheng (罗逸生): AD sessions manager at the Guangzhou Library, interviewed through Wechat on December 11, 2018.

g) Yao Weiming (姚伟明): Head of Yangguang Volunteer Association in Wuxi (Jiangsu Province), interviewed through Wechat on December 11, 2018.

h) Qin Xiaojie (秦晓婕): Head of AD activities in the Sun Yat-sen Library of Guangdong Province, interviewed through Wechat on January 29, 2018.

The profile of Chinese audio describers was drawn from the information gathered through a survey, which was taken from the EU-funded project ADLAB PRO.[3] Although the project was circumscribed to Western countries, the questions were also appropriate to illustrate Chinese audio describers' profiles

3. See https://www.adlabpro.eu/, last accessed in May 2017.

and their experience with AD. As one could have predicted, the questionnaire did not completely fit the Chinese profile and, with the survey creators' consent, had to be adapted. The following are the seven major changes that were applied. First, the original version asked respondents what country they were from, but, since our informants would all be Chinese, we asked from which province instead. Second, rather than maintaining the original question of what their mother tongue was, only two options were finally given: "Standard Chinese" and "Chinese dialects" (for which respondents could specify). Third, if the respondents answered "no" to the question asking if they had ever collaborated with anyone who has sight loss when preparing audio descriptions, it was deemed necessary to add whether they thought cooperating with them would have a positive influence on their work. Fourth, the option "I am a student" was added to the question about the job audio describers had, since in China many of them are still university students. Fifth, due to the lack of official standards or even national guidelines on AD, a question was added to find out the opinion of those currently audio describing in China on the need to have such standards in their country.[4] Sixth, the option "I do not have a specialization" was added to the question aimed at finding out whether respondents always accepted all AD jobs, even if they fell outside their area of specialization. The reason for this is that, to the best of our knowledge, you only find AD applied to movies, so it would be difficult to come across any other field of AD specialization. Finally, the original version of the questionnaire often uses the collocation "write audio descriptions", which was considered inaccurate here as Chinese audio describers usually either write or voice AD scripts, but the profession given is the same in both cases. Therefore, the verb "prepare" in Chinese was preferred in most of the questions.

Before administering the questionnaire, and given the growing need to apply for ethical approval in AVT research (cf. Orero *et al*. 2018), the questionnaire was first submitted to our university's Ethics Committee for approval.

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4. There is an international standard on AD issued by the International Organisation for Standardisation (TS 20071-21 "Information Technology — User interface component accessibility — Part 21: Guidance on audio description"), but to the best of our knowledge, it is still not a reference in China.

It was first piloted with two audio describers and then distributed with the help of cooperating associations. The survey was administered through Web Survey Creator and was open from July 2017 to December 2018. We obtained valid responses from 53 informants, who stated they were part of Shanghai, Beijing and Guangzhou audio describers' teams. The results were analyzed statistically using IBM SPSS (version 22) and are presented in the results section.

3. Audio description in China

This section describes AD in China from two perspectives. First, a brief overview of legislation setting out current media accessibility both within the Chinese and international legal frameworks. Second, a summary of the early stages of AD in Mainland China since the first audio described movie, as well as the state of the art of AD in four major Chinese cities.

3.1. Chinese legislation on media accessibility

A country's legislation reflects its priorities and the importance it attaches to different issues, and China is no exception. Their legislation addressing the rights of citizens with disabilities has been developed in both quantitative and qualitative terms, illustrating China's concern to guarantee the equal rights of all its citizens.

Article 45 of the Chinese Constitution (1982, last amended in 2018) mentions persons with disabilities whose rights to material assistance "from the state and society" are recognized on par with the elderly and the ill. The Constitution is also committed to helping "make arrangements for the work, livelihood and education of the blind, deaf-mutes and other handicapped citizens." Yet, the legal document that has resulted in the most significant changes in China is the aforementioned UNCRPD, which was approved in 2006. Its aim is "to promote, protect and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities, and to promote respect for their inherent dignity." Article 30 of the UNCRPD serves as a legal framework for AD, as well as for other sensorial accessibility services, since it recognizes the right of persons with disabilities to take part on an equal basis with others in cultural life. It also requires member states

to take appropriate measures to ensure that persons with disabilities enjoy access to:

a) cultural materials in accessible formats;
b) television programs, films, theatre and other cultural activities, in accessible formats;
c) places for cultural performances or services, such as theatres, museums, cinemas, libraries and tourism services, and, as far as possible, monuments and sites of national cultural importance.

China, and subsequently Hong Kong and Macao, signed it in 2007 and ratified it one year later.[5] This ratification brought about several changes in the Chinese legislation, such as the revision of the Law of Protection of Persons with Disabilities (*Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Canjiren Baozhangfa*中华人民共和国残疾人保障法), which had been passed in 1990, because it conflicted with the UNCRPD. Petersen (2008: 620) reminds us that the first version of this law was much more patronizing and clearly framed within the medical model of disability.[6] In the first article of the current version, the objective of the Law of Protection of Persons with Disabilities is to protect the rights and interests of persons with disabilities by ensuring their "equal and full participation in social life and their share of the material and cultural wealth of society." It covers several areas, one of which is cultural life, which has to be enriched by "offering TV programs in sign language and radio programs specially designed for disabled persons and providing subtitles or narrations for more TV programs and movies." This is the first mention of AD in a legal document in Chinese history, albeit a somewhat vague reference. To date, both Taiwan and Hong Kong lack legislation that explicitly mentions AD or any aural narrations at all, although it must be stated that in actual practice AD can be found in more fields than on Mainland China, especially in Hong Kong.

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5. Taiwan has not been given the chance to sign the UNCRPD but, as Rovira-Esteva and Zheng (2017) pointed out, it has drafted its own legislation allowing this territory to be at the level of other developed countries in accessibility matters, such as the Act to Implement the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (*Shenxin Zhang'aizhe Quanli Gongyue Shixingfa* 身心障碍者权利公约施行法) in 2014.
6. According to this model, disability is a pathological and permanent issue that exclusively belongs to the disabled person, and that needs to be addressed.

There is national – and rather limited – legislation that defends the provision of sensorial accessibility services; however each province applies them (or not) depending on its socioeconomic possibilities. For example, Shanghai drafted its Measures for the Implementation of the Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Disabled Persons (*Shanghai shi Shishi Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Canjiren Baozhangfa Banfa*上海市实施中华人民共和国残疾人保障法办法) in 2013, which stipulates that the cinemas with the necessary means shall offer the so-called "barrier-free movies". Likewise, the Shanghainese government is committed to offering a wide range of accessible cultural services for free or with special discounts, embodied in the 13th Five-Year Plan Development Plan for the City of Shanghai (*Shanghai shi Canjiren Shiye Shisan Wu Fazhan Guihua*上海市残疾人事业十三五发展规划). It is also committed to setting up a venue in each district where those with sight loss can watch audio described movies. Beijing also drafted its own measures to guarantee the enforcement of the aforementioned law in 2011, but it does not specifically mention "barrier-free movies". Instead, it sticks to the "narrations" on TV the national law briefly touches on, without giving any further details.

In sum, the Chinese national legislation already incorporates a term that can be related to AD ("narrations"), although it is only conceived of in the domain of TV and its definition proves elusive or vague: many of the AD providers interviewed did not seem to know what this term means exactly. This lack of definition can also be seen in some implementation measures that have been drafted in each administrative region, such as in the case of Beijing. Shanghai has shown more commitment but, surprisingly, it does not offer it on TV and along with the cities at the forefront of providing AD in China, the service is limited to films shown in cinemas. Finally, other provinces such as Guangdong have omitted the term "narrations" and only encourage the progressive inclusion of subtitles and sign language interpreting in TV content.[7] So it can be seen that the legislative context for AD is quite diverse across the country, underlining how far China still has to go.

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7. "广东省实施《中华人民共和国残疾人保障法》办法(2018修订)"（*Guangdong shen Shishi "Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Canjiren Baozhangfa Banfa" 2018 xiuding*, Guangdong's Measures to Implement the Law on the Protection of Persons' with

3.2. History and the state of the art of AD in Mainland China

Following on from this review of AD legislation in China, this section presents a brief history of the actual provision of this service around the country and the current state of AD in some cities which have succeeded in offering it on a regular basis. These are not the only cases, but they do constitute a representative sample of different associations or entities that share a common goal: to guarantee one of the rights of Chinese citizens with sight loss as granted them by the Chinese government when it ratified the UNCRPD, namely, their right to culture and information.

AD officially appeared in Mainland China on 23 April 2009 with Jiang Haiyang's movie *Examination 1977* (*Gaokao* 高考1977), which was screened with live AD at the Shanghai Library (*Shanghai Tushuguan*上海图书馆) to an audience of 400. The film's AD was even voiced by a famous actor and the event gave birth to the Free-Barrier Movie Workshop (*Wuzhang'ai Dianying Gongzuoshi*无障碍电影工作室), made possible thanks to the cooperation between the Shanghai Association of Persons with Disabilities (*Shanghai shi Canlian*上海市残联), the Shanghai Film Critics Society (*Shanghai Dianying Pinlin Xuehui*上海电影评论学会) and the Shanghai Library. The workshop focused on the production of CDs of audio described movies that were later distributed among the associations for persons with disabilities, the libraries of each district and even donated to other provinces. The workshop did not have its own facilities, and it still does not; instead it relies on other companies allowing them to use their equipment for free.

Examination 1977 was not the first movie to be audio described, but it can be regarded as the culminating point in the first stage of AD in China, since one of its pioneers in China, Jiang Hongyuan, had devised this accessibility service in 2006. Jiang Hongyuan, who suffers from sight loss himself and used to work in the Chinese film industry from which he is now retired, claims to have come up with the idea from scratch after realizing how interested those with sight loss were in watching movies. His idea was conceived as early as 2002 but the initial reticence by associations hindered the provision of the service. He later managed to gather volunteers – some of whom also suffered

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Disabilities, amended in 2018), http://www.csrcare.com/Law/Show?id=223823 (accessed on 4 February 2019).

from sight loss – and started recording AD for movies in CD format. From 2011 onwards, the service spread around China alongside the free-barrier movies being included in the 12th five-year plan (2011-2015) of the General Administration of Press and Publication (*Zhongguo Renmin Gongheguo Xinwen Chuban Zongshu*中华人民共和国新闻出版总署) as a key project. As of 2012, on the last Thursday of every month a movie is audio described in a live session in one cinema of each district of the city of Shanghai. This is possible thanks to Jiang Hongyuan's monthly AD script and also to the collaboration of professional radio presenters from the 990 News (*990 Xinwen 990*新闻) who volunteer to voice the scripts in the 17 cinemas that offer this service. This monthly activity is funded by the Shanghai Association of Persons with Disabilities, which covers the expenses for the tickets of all the movie-goers. As mentioned earlier, the Chinese audio describer comprises two different figures: the scriptwriter and the voicer. The voicers are all enrolled in a voluntary project that started with only eight volunteers and which now includes more than 300 radio presenters who share the work every month among themselves according to their availability through a Wechat group. Jiang Hongyuan also records movies with AD on CDs, which are then distributed among cultural centers for the elderly. Although the challenges to be tackled are still plentiful, there is one that stands out above the rest: how to deal with film copyright protection. Some AD providers who record CDs without purchasing the film's copyright turn to their own interpretation of the law to justify what they do. They argue that there is no need to buy the rights of any movie that is to be audio described because they extrapolate to films what article 22 of the Copyright Law of the People's Republic of China states:

> In the following cases, a work may be used without permission from, and without payment or remuneration to, the copyright owner, provided that the name of the author and the title of the work are mentioned and the other rights enjoyed by the copyright owner in accordance with this Law are not prejudiced:
> […]
> (12) transliteration of a published work into braille for publication (People's Republic of China, 2001).

Still in Shanghai, Sound of Light (*Guanying zhi Sheng*光影之声) is an association led by Han Ying and set up in 2016, and it receives material and financial

assistance from the Shanghai Association of Persons with Disabilities. They produce about 50 audio described movies every year, which are recorded in their facilities and distributed, unlike Jiang Hongyuan's team, through digital means for ecological and copyright reasons. These movies can be accessed at specific facilities, which are all located in Shanghai. The movies are likewise audio described by volunteers, including the same radio presenters that voice the monthly AD live sessions in cinemas. Scriptwriters, who tend to be Sinology or Communication university students, need to sign a copyright protection agreement that prohibits them from posting their scripts on the Internet. After passing a test before being accepted in the association, they are also offered a couple of training sessions and when they start their first project they are always guided and supervised personally by Han Ying, who is also an AD consumer herself.

Although Shanghai is the city in which AD has developed the fastest, Li (2013: 145) states that there were already movies with AD in Beijing as early as 2005, which were shown in rather poorly equipped screening rooms thanks, again, to the help of volunteers (cf. Li 2013: 145). Beijing is also the city where the China Braille Library is located, which started screening films with AD in 2011, the first of which was Han Sanping and Huang Jianxin's *The Founding of a Republic* (建国大业) (cf. Xu 2018). This library is also the setting for the Kangyi Barrier-Free Movies Development Center (*Kanyi Wuzhang'ai Dianying Yingshi Fazhan Zhongxin*康艺无障碍影视发展中心). This center is the only one selling CDs of audio described movies to the whole country, which retail for around RMB10 each. Yet, their annual production is rather low and the movies are also quite dated because only CDs with purchased copyright are marketed.

Another of the major Chinese cities offering AD is Guangzhou. The Sun Yat-sen Library of Guangdong Province (*Guangdong Shengli Zhongshan Tushuguan*广东省立中山图书馆) has been offering live AD sessions every month since 2007. It also lets users borrow movies that already incorporate AD and are bought from the China Braille Library. Nonetheless, and according to some of our interviewees, users prefer to attend live sessions because the movies screened are newer and more appealing to them. Most of the audio describers are, again, volunteers recruited through announcements in the Library. The Sun Yat-sen Library of Guangdong Province even offers AD

training and assists other AD providers inside and outside their province, such as the Guangdong Library (*Guangdong Tushuguan*广东图书馆).

Apart from first-tier cities, other places like Wuxi also offer AD. The Wuxi Yangguang Volunteer Association (*Wuxi Xinwuqu Yangguang Zhiyuanzhe Xiehui*无锡新吴区阳光志愿者协会) uploads audio described movies to Youku and other audio sharing platforms such as Ximalaya FM (喜马拉雅 FM), which provides audiobooks, music, a variety of entertainment programs, news, and other audio contents. In many cases, they upload the AD track and the movie sound track, but not the images. Ximalaya FM is also home to other audio described movies posted by the Shanghai Film Critics Society and is one of the few channels AD users can access from home.

Apart from these examples, and according to Wu and Xie (2015), in recent years the government has supported AD and movie-related initiatives in the provinces of Heilongjiang, Chongqing, Liaoning, Jilin, Hunan, Henan and Ningxia, to name but a few. In other words, there is a short history for providing AD in China, it has been focused on a handful of big cities, but it has recently expanded to other areas.

4. Profiling audio describers: Results of the questionnaires

In order to properly profile Chinese audio describers, they were sent a survey to obtain first-hand data that would complement the historical and legislative dimensions presented so far.

This questionnaire had four sections: first, demographic information; second, details about the informants' activity as audio describers; third, information about the status of AD and their professional circle and, finally, information about their educational background and training specific to AD. The original version of the questionnaire also included a fifth section focusing on the competences and skills of audio describers, the results of which were finally discarded for this paper, since the objective was to have a general picture of those audio describing rather than details of their day-to-day activity.

Section one of the questionnaire focused on the demographic profile of the respondents. Most of the 53 participants in the survey prepared AD in Shanghai, although some of them also audio described in Beijing (12 respondents), and Guangzhou (five respondents). Yet, their place of origin is more

varied: although half of them are from Shanghai (52.8%), many come from other provinces, such as Guangdong (11.3%), Jilin (5.7%), Anhui (5.7%), Hebei (3.8%), Heilongjiang (3.8%), the municipality of Beijing (3.8%), Inner Mongolia (1.9%), Shandong (1.9%), Xinjiang (1.9%), Henan (1.9%), Liaoning (1.9%), Hubei (1.8%) and Zhejiang (1.9%). Most of the audio describers were women (75.5%), almost all the respondents were between 20 and 50 years old (96.2%) and almost half between 31 and 40 years old. More than 80% of the audio describers stated Standard Chinese was their mother tongue, 20% specified other dialects, but almost all of them prepared AD in Standard Chinese (98.1%). As for their educational background, all the informants had at least a bachelor's degree, except two: one had attended a vocational school while the other had only completed secondary education. Allowing for one exception, the informants stated they did not suffer from sight loss (98.1%).

Section two of the questionnaire included a battery of questions regarding the informants' activity as audio describers. With the exception of two, who stated they had been audio describing for more than ten years, 80% of the audio describers had been offering this accessibility service for five years at most, with 34% of them having done so for less than a year. The survey also confirmed that the vast majority audio describing (almost 71.7%) were volunteers who would not charge any fee for their services. Yet, it cannot be stated that all audio describers in China do it on a voluntary basis since 17% of the respondents admitted to being paid for their work. The same percentage stated AD was a semi-professional job for them and, instead of money, they received a token payment or payment in kind. For this question choosing more than one answer was permitted.

64.2% of the respondents admitted to not having had any AD-related training, while 35.8% had been taught how to audio describe. Half of those who had been trained had attended training lessons conducted by a company or an association. Unfortunately, out of all the audio describers who received training, as many as 77.6% had not obtained a certificate and 95.9% of all surveyed acknowledged that they had never been required to present any form of certificate to work as audio describers.

When asked about the fields in which they had received training (a question which permitted multiple answers), it is a cause for concern that almost 40% answered not having received any training at all, as shown in figure 1.

Despite the fact that almost all the respondents (94.3%) admitted the product they audio described was mostly films, those cases where they had received some training were courses which did not specialize in this particular field: 24.5%, as figure 1 shows.
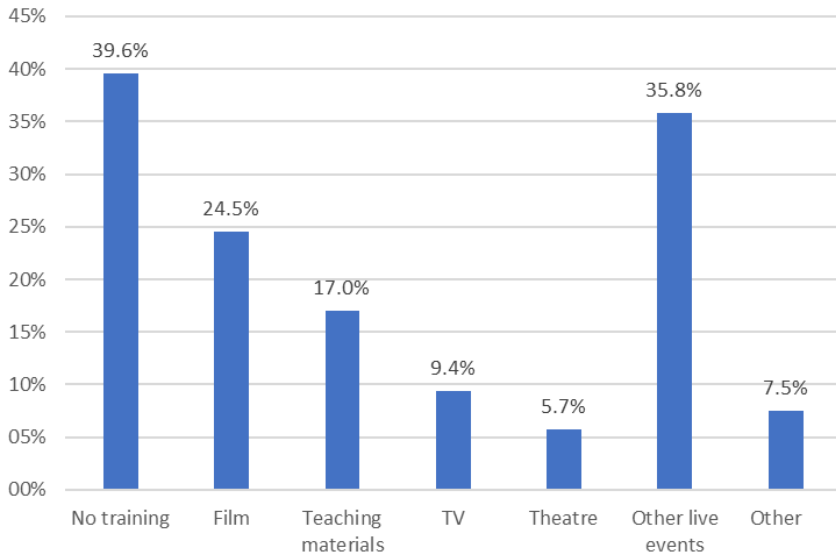

Figure 1. Fields in which audio describers have been trained

Another relevant conclusion is that audio describers in China do not have wide experience in audio describing. Taking into account how much material the respondents had produced in their career as audio describers, and that many of them were volunteers that had been preparing AD for a relatively short period of time, it comes as no surprise that 62.3% of them had audio described for less than 50 hours (figure 2).
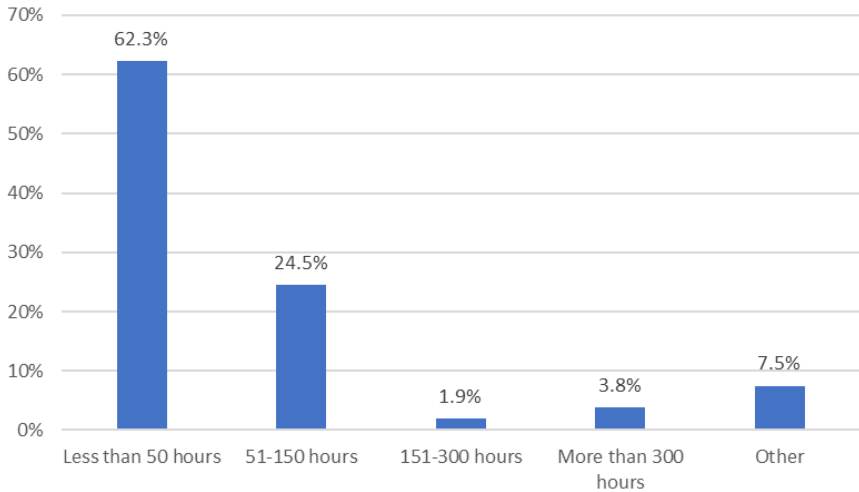
Figure 2. Audio describers' experience in hours

When asked about the specific tasks they performed, one can conclude that Chinese audio describers are assigned different tasks, voicing the AD scripts (67.9%) written by the scriptwriters (41.5%) being the most popular one in our sample. More than a quarter of those surveyed (34%) applied their voice talents to help record AD; 17% mixed the AD with the original soundtrack; 11.3% supervised the quality of the product and 3.8% were in charge of other AD-related tasks.

As for their working habits, figure 3 shows that there is no clear pattern about whether they work alone or within a team, although the two options of always doing it in a specific way ranked lowest.
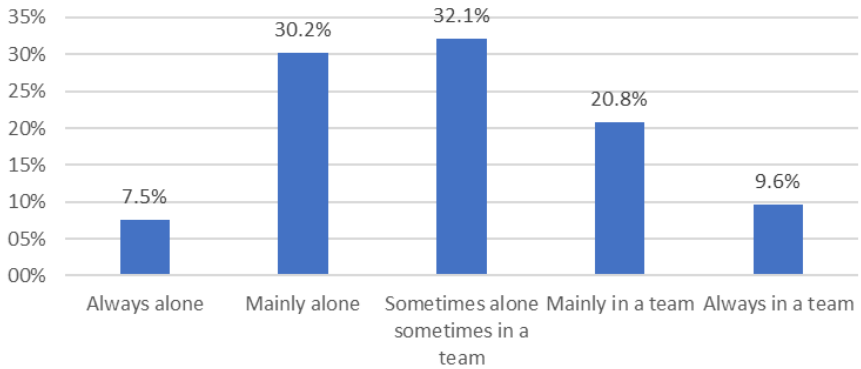
Figure 3. Frequency of collaborative work

Speaking of collaboration, almost half of the respondents either always or often cooperated with persons with sight loss during the creation of AD (fig. 4).
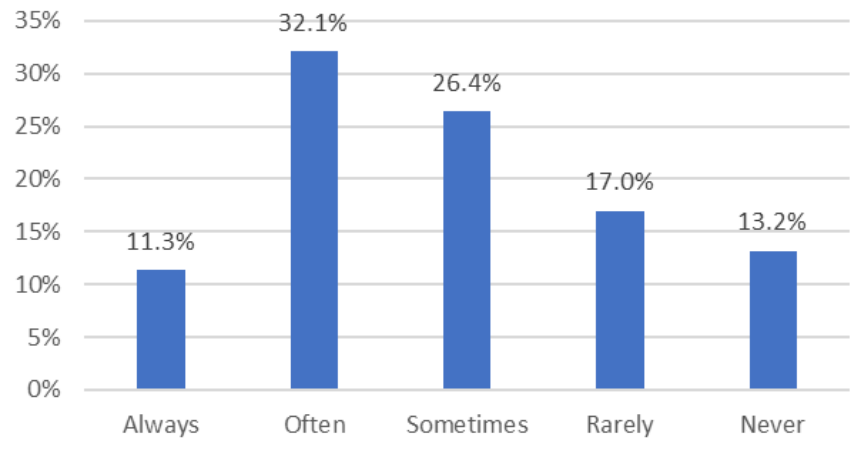

Figure 4. Frequency of collaboration with persons with sight loss

When asked about whether they thought they could benefit from working with persons with sight loss if they had never done so, 69.8% said yes, while 11.3% did not agree. 18.9% did not answer the question, probably because they did not have – or had little – experience. Thus, it can be seen that more than half of the respondents who have never worked with a person with sight loss when preparing an AD thought it would be helpful to do so. This is a very positive fact because it shows that audio describers are aware of the importance of working with end users, even if they have never done so before.

Section three of the questionnaire evaluated the status of AD and the professional circle. Almost all the informants (94.3%) had previous working experience, many of them being presenters (42.0%), teachers (18.0%), journalists (14.0%), radio/TV commentators (4.0%), actors (4.0%), TV producers (4.0%), writers (2.0%) and others (38.0%). It is worth highlighting that nobody had ever worked as a translator before, let alone as an audio-visual translator, which is the field where Western audio describers are trained in. This finding is not surprising taking into account that media accessibility is not a university subject in China yet, not even in Translation Studies. Only 15.1% of the respondents worked in the AD field full-time, which is in line with the percentage of respondents working professionally, i.e. making a living, in the field (17%).

Those participating in this study were also asked about their gateway into AD and more than half of them got to know about it thanks to an acquaintance who was already working in the field (fig. 5). This result makes sense taking into account that no specialized courses can be found at university level and those that exist are exclusively available to those who are already committed to offering this accessibility service. Even though AD has already appeared on the news and there are events organized from time to time to recruit volunteers, it is understandable that the most common way to get to know about this service is through somebody who is already involved in it. Also, one's CV is not what matters the most, and in many cases it is not even necessary to present it because it is generally assumed that the candidate has no previous experience in the field. It also needs to be highlighted that if audio describers keep being recruited through word of mouth, this could result in the perpetuation of AD being in the hands of volunteers, and not becoming a professional job profile.
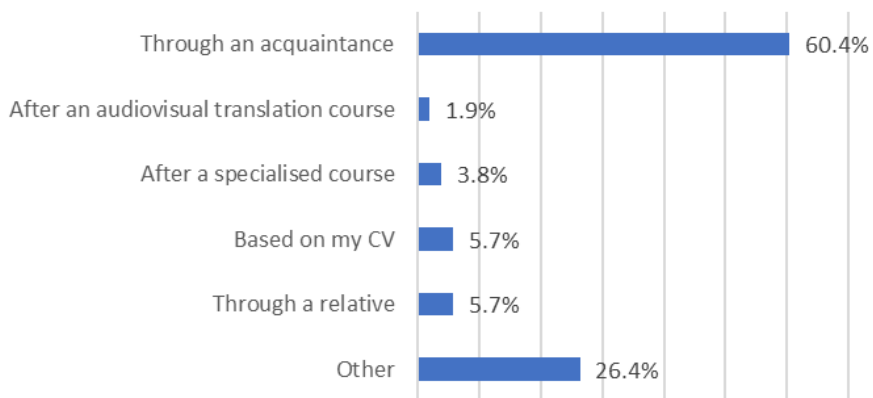
Figure 5. Gateway to AD

Three quarters of audio describers claimed to often (30.2%) or sometimes (43.4%) ask other audio describers their opinion on how to overcome certain AD issues they need to tackle. No respondent stated that they had never asked other audio describers questions. As for reasonable deadlines to submit their work, 35.8% of the informants had always had enough time to finish the AD; 39.6% often had enough time; 18.9% sometimes had a deadline they felt comfortable with to satisfactorily audio describe, while only 5.7% of the participants rarely had sufficient time to finish the task adequately. This is not surprising as most work is on a voluntary basis.

Only 30.2% of those surveyed knew about existing AD guidelines, whereas 69.8% were completely unaware of it. From another angle, 83% thought guidelines were important; 9.4% did not think so and 7.5% thought that they were important to a certain extent. Likewise, we wanted to know if there was any link between knowing about guidelines and the importance attached to them. We realized that all respondents who stated they knew about guidelines (16 out of 53) considered them to be important. The association was evaluated and was found to be statistically significant at the alpha level of 0.1 but not at the 0.05 level, χ^2 (2, N = 53) = 4.68, p < .05.

When it comes to the audio describers' opinion on AD, and more precisely on whether it is an art or a craft, figure 6 demonstrates that opinions are diverse, which does not allow us to draw any clear conclusions.
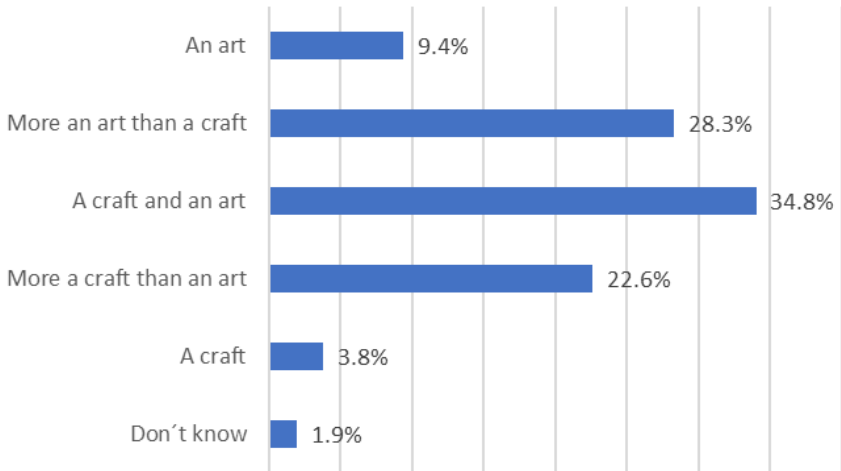

Figure 6. Notion of AD

The respondents' view on some statements related to AD is presented in figure 7, for which they had to score on a one to five scale. On the one hand, it can be seen that the statement on which informants agree the most is the one that underlines the social impact of what they do. On the other hand, the statement that they disagree on the most is the one related to AD being a well-paid job. This makes sense taking into account that, as we have seen, in most cases financial compensation is non-existent. Also, and as expected, AD is not a well-known service in general, and this is probably why it is not considered a prestigious job.
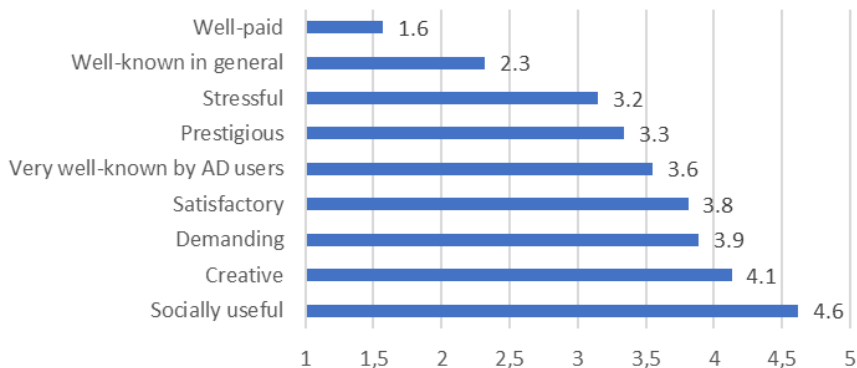
Figure 7. Perception of the qualities of being an audio describer

Section three ends by asking what figure an audio describer most resembled. As expected, and since many of our informants were radio commentators themselves, the most popular option was "presenter or commentator" (54.7%). It is not surprising that, unlike what happens in the West, where they see audio describers as audiovisual translators,[8] only 15.1% saw some kind of association between what audio-visual translators and audio describers do. This is probably due to the fact that China still does not include media accessibility in the Translation Studies curricula. According to our informants, other figures that had some points in common with audio describers were scriptwriters (18.9%), actors (7.5%) and writers (3.8%). Respondents could choose as many answers as they liked.

Section four focused on respondents' educational background and AD training. It starts by asking what field of knowledge they come from, which proved to be rather diverse. Figure 8 shows that more than 50% of the respondents had a Language/Linguistics or Journalism/Media Studies background. Only one informant had studied Translation.
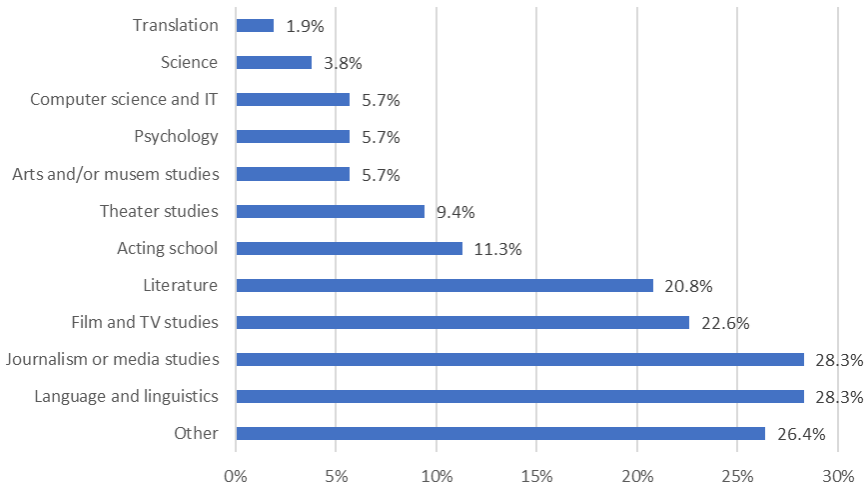
Figure 8. Audio describers' educational background

Since training is not the main gateway to AD, acquiring experience in the field is regarded as the main means by which audio describers have to continue to improve their skills and competences (84.9%); followed by attending conferences and workshops or analyzing existing ADs focusing on the solutions adopted by colleagues (both with 54.7%); studying existing material such as guidelines, academic articles, books on AD, etc. (39.6%); doing research by gathering information on the product or by discussing with film directors or producers is also an option (34%); and receiving in-house training (30.2%), while only 9.4% admitted not considering how to improve their skills at the moment.

5. Conclusions and proposals for the future

This article has shown that AD in Mainland China is still in its infancy, especially when compared to some countries in the West. Yet, cities such as Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou have launched some AD-related initiatives, all of which are related to films. This clearly manifests their interest in guaranteeing persons with sight loss access to information and culture and some

of these initiatives have even been shared with other less developed regions in the country.

The situation is similar from an academic perspective: AD as an object of study is almost non-existent in China to date, with the exception of a handful of Chinese scholars who have elaborated some descriptive studies. Hong Kong and Taiwan must be considered separately because empirical research has already begun in these two regions, although the researchers doing so are extremely scarce. Of the many challenges that AD must face in China, and as Feng (2018) had already pointed out, copyright is the one that cries out for attention the most and the one which all AD providers coincide in mentioning and complaining about. The reason for this is that the current situation does not allow AD providers to use new films, unless they purchase the film copyright. The alternative involves audio describing them live, which ends up being the most widespread practice.

Audio describers are crucial to providing this accessibility service, but China lacks unified training and standards that ensure the quality of their work. Nevertheless, cities such as Guangzhou have already consulted foreign guidelines and AD books and have shown interest in learning how AD issues have been tackled in the West. It can be seen that, according to the sample, an overwhelming majority of those audio describing are volunteers, aged 20-50, and most of them have a university education background, although not related to Translation. Their professional work experience is also diverse: most of them have only been audio describing for a few years and always in Standard Chinese. They do not usually receive training on how to audio describe and almost all of them audio describe the same product: films.

During our research we have identified six issues that could be improved and would contribute to ensuring AD a long life in China. First, the Chinese government should define and require the presence of media accessibility in more fields and even quantify it whenever possible. Wu and Xie (2015) also consider the national law to be inadequate and lacking in clarity. They also believe that one law mentioning "narrations" is far from enough and that legislation should also specify who is responsible for the provision of this service and how it is going to be made available.

Second, the copyright issue should be addressed through legislation so that persons with sight loss can have access to newer films without having

to attend live sessions. In addition, for those unable to leave their homes, recorded CDs that can be borrowed from associations are a good way to give them more independence.

Third, as is already happening in Hong Kong thanks to the courses taught by Dr. Leung, Chinese Translation faculties should start including media accessibility in their Audiovisual Translation courses. This would raise social awareness and would prepare future audio describers better, since they would have a more solid basis.

Fourth, if AD were considered a business, this would ensure continuity and provide those who have been trained with job prospects. An example can be found in Hong Kong, where Dr. Leung has implemented an AD business model and makes her customers pay for her services. According to her, this helps to create a market for professional audio describers and, therefore, ensure that there are professionals that offer this accessibility service.

Fifth, a Chinese official standard on how to create AD should be drafted. It should be based on empirical research that caters to users' needs and preferences. This would facilitate training sessions enormously and ensure homogeneity across the country. Leung's (2018) proposal could be a starting point but would also need to be tested in Mainland China.

Finally, since there are many different AD-related initiatives in Mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong, establishing some official channels of communication would also be advisable. A national conference on Chinese AD could be organized on a regular basis so that all stakeholders involved can exchange their views on the present situation and work together on a better future. All these recommendations should be added to those made by Wu and Xie (2015), who found that their informants thought the government should be the body responsible for extending the service in the country. These researchers also suggested that the Chinese government should invest more money in the service, offer more professional training and develop more AD-related technology.

While this study clearly spells out the situation, it is not without its limitations. The size of our sample is not big enough to draw conclusions about the whole of Mainland China. It is also not a random sample: Shanghai audio describers have greater presence in the study because this is the city where the researchers are based and where they normally conduct their research;

however there are some cities offering AD that have not been included. The proportion of AD voicers is far from equal to that of AD scriptwriters in the sample, which obviously has an impact on the results. Nevertheless, it is hoped that this first attempt to investigate who is currently audio describing in Mainland China will pave the way for further studies which contribute to both the creation of a new academic field in the country and an improved and more professional service. It is also hoped that our findings will be useful to better serve those in China with sight loss, raise social awareness of the needs of this collective, and train audio describers who can ensure a quality service based on academic research.

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