

# How Chinese Fansubbers Handle Swearing: The Chinese Non-professional Subtitling of the First Season of *Gomorra – La serie*

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## 1. Introduction

*Gomorra – La serie* (2014 – ongoing) is an Italian TV series that takes place in the suburbs of Naples and recounts the story of the bloody war between two mafia clans, the Savastanos and Contes. Enthusiastically compared by international critics to the best contemporary crime TV series (e.g. *The Wire* and *The Sopranos*) and auteur films (Tarantino and Scorsese), the first season of *Gomorra - La serie* (hereinafter *Gomorra*) is the best-selling Italian TV product abroad (Napoli and Tirino 2015; Napoli and Tirino 2016).

Despite a magazine like *Variety* having no difficulty in defining *Gomorra* as “an authentic, non sensationalist narrative” (Vimercati 2014), the People’s Republic of China (PRC) does not appear among the countries that have obtained its broadcasting rights. Nonetheless, this absence in the Chinese television market is not very surprising given the regulations recently issued by the Chinese State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT), which is the agency in charge of managing and supervising the exchange activities between Chinese and foreign television broadcasters<sup>1</sup>. Disapproving

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<sup>1</sup> From its establishment in 1986 as Film and Television Bureau to its merger with the General Administration of Press and Publication in 2013, SAPPRFT has always communicated its goals through continuous press releases. Of these, the most incisive, as far as the television industry is concerned, are those published in 2001, the day after the accession of China to the WTO

of crime TV due to its violent and bloody content (Zhu *et al.* 2008), in recent years SAPPRT has banned the broadcast of *Gomorra* within television programming, denying the Chinese audience the opportunity to watch it.

Consequently, considering SAPPRT's recent regulations regarding TV crime products, it is reasonable to assume that *Gomorra* is unlikely to be purchased by Chinese broadcasters<sup>2</sup>. However, the online growth of non-professional subtitling, a phenomenon today internationally known as fansubbing<sup>3</sup>, has enabled Chinese audiences to watch *Gomorra*, and to understand its contents by using the subtitles provided by the *Shenyng* group (*Shenyng zimuzu* 深影字幕组), a Chinese fansub community. We analysed the Chinese fansub version of the first season of *Gomorra* for three reasons: 1) It seems to be one of the very few Italian television products to attract the interest of Chinese audiences<sup>4</sup>;

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system, concerning the import of foreign programs and the creation of Sino-foreign partnerships for the production of TV series and films.

<sup>2</sup> In a declaration issued in 2014, the year of *Gomorra*'s debut, SAPPRT imposed a ban on broadcasting (online or through more traditional media channels) foreign television programs that dealt with topics that the Chinese government normally rejects: pornographic content or violent scenes that could encourage crimes and offences, humiliating or damaging the interests of others and compromising social morality or traditional Chinese culture. These regulations led to the prohibition of well-known American TV series in some cases, in others to incisive censorship, with the cancellation of entire scenes and the manipulation of the original dialogues with radical changes in dubbing or subtitling. (Wang and Zhang 2016: 4). SAPPRT's decision, which however was limited only to Chinese programs, to eliminate crime films or series from prime-time programming, and stemming from the propensity of television producers and directors to make excessively violent scenes, makes it even more unlikely that *Gomorra* will be broadcast on official television networks. This ban, at the time of its enactment in 2004, aroused much criticism and protest, forcing SAPPRT to adopt a more conciliatory approach, and to restrict the broadcast ban 'only' to those series with violent and bloody content and with explicit references to sex, which applies to *Gomorra*, although it is not a Chinese product. (Zhu *et al.* 2008: 8).

<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this article, the origins and development of fansubbing in Western countries and in China will not be investigated. For further information and details, see, among many others: Díaz Cintas and Muñoz Sanchez (2006); Massidda (2015); Wang (2017); Zhang (2013); Zhang and Miao (2013).

<sup>4</sup> Besides *Gomorra* (*Gemola* 格莫拉), the Italian series that seems to have aroused some interest in Chinese audiences are *The Veiled Lady* (*Dai miansha de meiren* 戴面纱的美人) (2015), *The Thirteenth Apostle* (*Di shisan wei shitu* 第十三位使徒), *Suburra - The series* (*Zui cheng Subula* 罪城苏布拉) (2017 – ongoing) and the web series *LSB - Girls do not sleep* (*Ji you*

2) the Chinese translation was carried out without using existing translations into other languages; 3) swearing, offensive and insulting epithets are hallmarks of the language spoken in it.

*Gomorra* is, in fact, linguistically characterized by considerable use of jargon, coarseness and swearing, which Chinese fansubbers, directly translating from Italian, have tried to accurately reproduce using equivalents in their mother tongue, or bowdlerizing them by subjecting some of the most vulgar and irreverent expressions to linguistic interdiction.

Inspired by the studies conducted by Galli de' Paratesi (1969), Cardona (1976/2006), Li Junhua (2010), and Ljung (2011), and by the analysis of their methodologies, this work presents a preliminary linguistic analysis of the Chinese subtitles of the first season of *Gomorra*. The paper focuses on the ways Chinese fansubbers handled the translation of swear words included in this TV series. In particular it shows the excerpts in which the linguistic taboo is used, identifying not only the non-professional translating strategies on the signifier or on the signified, but also the functions that swearing can perform in the target language.

## **2. The linguistic aspects of swearing in the Chinese fansub translation of *Gomorra***

In many languages swearing and other forms of bad language are regarded as not acceptable but are quite common in everyday speech. Although the definition of swearing is difficult<sup>5</sup>, it is clear that if we intentionally use

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*dangdao* 姬友当道) (2015). A detailed comparison between non-professional and professional subtitles available in English for *Gomorra* has shown that *Gomorra*, as well as *The Thirteenth Apostle*, were translated into Chinese directly from Italian. *Suburra – The series* was instead translated from English. A comparative analysis of the subtitles of *The Veiled Lady* and the web series *LSB - Girls do not sleep* has not yet been carried out. In addition, there is no similar research in progress on the series mentioned here, i.e. there has been no focus on the Italian-Chinese language combination.

<sup>5</sup> The linguistic study of swearing was ignored for a long period. It started in the 1960s, with Sagarin's (1962) and Montagu's (1967) publications which increased the interest in this

swearwords, we are expressing anger, annoyance, surprise in order to shock or offend, be aggressive or to draw attention to ourselves. As Stapleton suggests “swearing fulfils some particular communicative functions, which are not easily accomplished through other linguistic means” (2010: 290). Hence, swearing denotes a wide range of emotions, and as such, when we use expletives, we are transgressing a linguistic taboo.

As a linguistic and pragmatic practice, swearing is a “type of language use in which the expression”: a) refers to something that is taboo and/or culturally stigmatizing; b) should not be interpreted literally; c) expresses strong emotions and attitudes (Andersson and Trudgill 1990: 53). Since the use of vulgar and embarrassing words is closely related to topics that are considered as being prohibited in a particular culture and a reflection of “a social construct determined by the views of polite society concerning what can and cannot be said” (Ljung 2011: 7), we can assume that swearing is also culture-specific. All these defining features make the translation of swearing a tricky task<sup>6</sup>.

Generally speaking, swearing is subjected to linguistic interdiction regarding specific semantic fields, such as sexuality, scatology, death and diseases, religion, and social status. Certain terms or expressions are thus avoided or replaced to prevent any discomfort for the listener<sup>7</sup>. To overcome linguistic

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research area, generating a range of studies focused on psycholinguistic, neurolinguistic, sociolinguistic, and historical aspects of swearing. For further details see, among many others: Jay 1977, 2000; Jay and Janschewitz 2008; van Lancker and Cummings 1999; Andersson and Trudgill 1990, 2007; Hughes 1991; McEnery and Xiao 2004; Ljung 2011; Stapleton 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Several scholars (Chen 2004; Fernández Fernández 2009; Hjort 2009) point out that there are two main tendencies in the subtitling of swearing: 1) the attenuation of swearwords for many reasons: because an expletive may have no equivalent in the target language; or if it is used as a slot filler in the source text, it may be omitted in the target text due to strict time and space constraints in subtitling; or also a term or an expression considered to be bad language in a certain culture might be translated using words that are acceptable in the target language; 2) the preservation of bad language: not altering the expletive could give the target language audience an authentic experience of an audiovisual product. This last approach seems to reflect the intentions behind the creation of fansub communities.

<sup>7</sup> Regarding the use of euphemistic replacements in China, Li Junhua (2010: 35-44) states that the correlation between euphemism and linguistic interdiction relates to: religious beliefs; spiritual symbols and objects; privileges given by one's social status; superstitions; illness,

interdiction, we resort to euphemistic replacements, i.e. we use milder words and phrases to replace swearing. Cardona (1976/2006: 122-128) identifies two macro-strategies that the speaker can use to overcome linguistic interdiction:

1) we act on the signified by replacing the prohibited term with linguistic means belonging to the same language through rhetorical devices or periphrasis, or belonging to another language or another variety of language;

2) we act on the signifier by altering or suppressing the banned term.

According to Galli de' Paratesi (1969) the substitution models that can be traced back to these two strategies include: ineffability, phonetic alteration, grammatical alteration (acting on the signifier); and the use of foreign or erudite terms and the use of circumlocutions (acting on the signified). Similarly, Lin (1994) identifies four models: ineffability (*huibifa* 回避法); attenuated forms that mitigate the expression or refine it (*weiwānfā* 委婉法); substitute models that use rhetoric strategy or the nature of Chinese characters (*duidaifa* 对代法); and the use of alternative expressions of the banned term (*bianjiefa* 辩解法).

Since swearing is consistently used in *Gomorra*, in this section we will look at how the *Shenyīng* group approached this task.

The team in charge of the non-professional subtitling of the first season of *Gomorra* belongs to the *Shenyīng* fansub community. As explained in its websites, this community serves as a basis for sharing original bilingual subtitles. The objectives are to translate the best film and television programs and to share the world cinema and television classics with registered users <sup>8</sup>. A post in 2014, entitled “Application to join the community” <sup>9</sup> reads: “The community recruits translators for these four languages: English, French, Spanish and Italian. Anyone who loves cinema and television can register. You

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death and natural disasters; manifestations or objects considered obscene and vulgar; personal dissatisfaction or social problems that tend to be hidden.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.shinybbs.info/forum.php>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.shinybbs.info/forum.php?mod=forumdisplay&fid=408>

only need to pass our test to join the group (It's a free activity. If you want to get paid, forget it)"<sup>10</sup>. Although English is the language with the highest number of applications, the *Shenyng* community also includes translators from Italian among its team. As far as the translation of the first season of *Gomorra* is concerned, the members of the *Shenyng* community who translated the entire first season are: Nainiu 奶牛, Chameleon, Fei Luo 非洛, Tiaochong 跳虫, An'an 安安, Feng 风, and Stefania<sup>11</sup>.

In the first season of *Gomorra* the offensive epithets that recur with a certain frequency are “cazzo” (generally used in the sense of *fuck*), “stronzo” (generally used in the sense of asshole/dickhead) and their derived forms. “Cazzo” recurs 136 times, while “stronzo” recurs 64 times. Regarding the fansub translation of the first season of *Gomorra*, for both terms translation strategies were used for the signifier, the signified, together with isolated cases of intensification of the obscene language. Specifically, 25 cases of omission, 94 cases of attenuated circumlocutions, and 80 cases of swearing preservation were identified for both terms. Since the term “cazzo” recurs more times than the term “stronzo”, in this paper we focus only on “cazzo” and its derived forms.

Regarding the frequency in the first season of *Gomorra*, we identified 22 cases of ineffability, 52 cases of attenuated circumlocutions, and 62 cases of preservation of the term. With specific regard to *Gomorra*'s first season, we identified three particular situations<sup>12</sup>:

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<sup>10</sup> Further requirements for applicants are: 1) listening skills that enable applicants to understand the movies and TV programs they will translate; 2) appropriate level of Chinese language for the work required; 3) past experience in other fansub communities; 4) patience to enable applicants to watch movies or TV programs from the beginning to the end and to work on the translation conscientiously; 5) sufficient time to connect and convenient Internet access conditions.

<sup>11</sup> Since fansubbing is still considered an illegal activity, the use of nicknames to protect personal identities is one of the many analogies that the *Shenyng* group shares with other international fansub communities.

<sup>12</sup> We decided for convenience to shorten the three cases in C1, C2 and C3 when used in the tables. In order to facilitate the comprehension of the samples given, in the column on the left, we have added an English translation (our own translation, not the one used in the official

- Case 1 (C1): swearing in the source text is used as a slot-filler that could be omitted because it does not change the sense nor the structure of the sentence;
- Case 2 (C2): swearing is used as the subject, or object or verb of the sentence: it cannot be omitted, but can be attenuated;
- Case 3 (C3): swearing is used as a stand-alone occurrence that could be omitted because it is not the main part of an utterance.

Source text	Target text
1 Ma io che cazzo ne sapevo? (C1) [What the fuck did I know?]	但我怎么会知道 [How could I know?]
2 Quante cazzo di guardie ci sono! (C1) [There are so many fucking cops!]	那么多警察在那里 [There are so many policemen there]
4 Che cazzo fai, eh? (C1) [What the fuck are you doing, huh?]	干什么 嗯 [What are you doing, huh?]
5 Ci scrive i cazzi suoi (C2) [She writes what the fuck she wants]	写她自己想写的东西 [She writes whatever she wants to]
7 Bravo. Stasera si deve lavorare, cazzo (C3) [Good. Tonight we have to fucking work]	太好了 今晚可以开工了 [Great, Tonight we can start working]

Table 1. Examples of ineffability

As highlighted in the examples of ineffability in Table 1, when there are many cases of “cazzo” used as a slot filler, it is very easy to omit it without changing the sense of the original sentence.

Source text	Target text
1 Che cazzo vuoi?	啥事儿

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subtitling) of the source text, while in the column on the right is a back translation of the Chinese version.

[What the fuck do you want?]	[What's the matter?]
2 Ma che cazzo ti prende?	你脑子进水了吗
[What the fuck is wrong with you?]	[Did water get into your brain?]
3 Quel cazzo di computer	那该死的电脑
[That fucking computer]	[That damned computer]
4 Come cazzo facciamo a entrare là dentro?	该死的 我们到底怎么进去
[How the fuck do we get in there?]	[Damn it, how do we get in there?]
5 Quindi pigliati sti cazzo di soldi e fai quello che devi fare	所以接受这该死的钱然后赶紧去做事
[So just take this fucking money and do what you have to do]	[So take this damn money and go to work]
7 Fammi capire una cosa, Tonino, che cazzo vi siete messi in testa, eh?	告诉我 托尼诺 你脑子里是不是都装浆糊了
[Let me understand one thing, Tonino, what the fuck do you want to do?]	[Tell me, Tonino, did your brain get filled with paste?]

Table 2. Examples of attenuated circumlocutions in case 1

Table 2 shows a certain similarity with the examples in Italian given in Table 1: they are examples that can be traced back to case 1, where in the Chinese translation, we would have expected the use of ineffability. However, the use of popular expressions to indicate foolishness, as in the second example “Did water get into your brain” (*Ni naozi jinshui le ma* 你脑子进水了吗) or in the last one “Did your brain get filled with paste” (*Ni naozi li shi bu shi dou zhuang jianghu le* 你脑子里是不是都装浆糊了), are certainly used to adhere more to the original context, but also to maintain a register in the target language that is as colloquial and slangy as possible. This is demonstrated, for instance, by the use of the colloquial term *gaisi* 该死 (damn) in the third and fifth examples, and by the use of the interrogative pronoun *sha* 啥 (what), which has the same meaning as the standard interrogative pronoun *shenme* 什么 (what), but it is of dialectal origin.

Swearing is always subjective and personal, because it stems from a psychological dissatisfaction felt by those using or listening to it, but it is also contextual, as translating can be. In the specific case of *Gomorra*, the question we should ask ourselves is whether it is possible or not possible to find linguistic constants in its Chinese fansub translation. The aspects of speech that reflect the emotional state of the speaker are what some scholars have referred to as “emotional speech” (Caffi and Janney 1994; Caffi 2002). For our analysis, we decided to use lexical resources among the communicative resources available in emotional speech<sup>13</sup>. Since *Gomorra* is mainly characterized by emotions such as anger and restlessness, and speech in which social emotions<sup>14</sup>, expressed through various forms of swearing, are dominant, the main resource of this emotional speech is therefore lexical.

Source text	Target text
Primo perché ero incazzato  [First because I was pissed off]	首先因为当时我很窝火  [First because I was furious]
No, tu c'entri, perché ora i russi sono davvero incazzati	当然和你有关因为现在老毛子们都气疯了

<sup>13</sup> We generally recognized four types of resources in the emotional speech: lexical resources, such as emotional words (names, verbs, adjectives, adverbs) that express emotions or an emotional meaning without specifying its quality (interjections); syntactic resources, such as emphatic structures that use left dislocation; morphological resources characterized by the use of terms of endearment, pejoratives and diminutives; contextual resources (physical, linguistic or cognitive), not explicit but retrievable in the encyclopaedic knowledge of the listener and that the speaker takes as shared assumptions.

<sup>14</sup> The primary emotions (anger and fear; sadness and joy; surprise and expectation; disgust and acceptance), as presented by Plutchik (2001), are innate reactions, which can be expressed with greater or lesser intensity, which are generated by the social, cultural and intellectual environment in which we live. Usually we feel positive emotions when we reach a goal, and negative emotions if the goal is compromised. It is on the basis of these outcomes that we identify four main families of emotions: 1) cognitive emotions, when we feel interest, surprise, curiosity, suspense, boredom with something or someone; 2) image or self-image emotions, when we feel embarrassment, shame, guilt, humiliation, satisfaction and pride about the image we may have of ourselves or the image we give of ourselves externally to others; 3) social emotions, when we interact with another person in a cooperative or aggressive way and that we feel when we love or hate someone; 4) emotions about the other's image, when we stigmatize a person by appreciating and admiring him or her or, on the contrary, by despising him or her.

[You are involved because now the Russians are really pissed off]	[Of course it has to do with you, because now the Russians are mad]
Ma ora Gennaro si è incazzato, ha detto basta [But now Gennaro is pissed off, he said that's enough]	现在杰纳罗生气了 他说不能再这样下去了 [Now Gennaro is angry, he said he can't go on this way]
Oh! Io mi sono rotto il cazzo, hai capito? [Hey, I am fucking sick of it, you hear me?]	嘿 我受够了 听到没 [Hey, I am sick of it, you hear me?]
E invece Gennarino si è rotto il cazzo di te [And Gennarino is fucking sick of you]	杰纳罗已经受够你的指手画脚了 [Gennaro has had enough of your advice]

Table 3. Examples of attenuated circumlocutions in case 2 for the derived forms “incazzare” and “rompere il cazzo”

Source text	Target text
E allora non dire un cazzo [Don't fucking say anything]	那就别啰嗦 [Don't be annoying]
Per voi che non contate un cazzo, sì [For you who ain't worth a shit, yes]	对于你们这些人没头没脸的人来说 当然是 [For people like you who are worth nothing, of course yes]
Dice che non pagano più un cazzo [He says they won't pay a fucking penny anymore]	他说他一个子儿都不掏了 [He says he won't pay a penny anymore]
Siete voi che non capite un cazzo [It's you who don't understand a fucking thing]	是你们脑子不清楚吧 [It's you who don't have a clear mind]

Table 4. Examples of attenuated circumlocutions in cases of double negative constructions

The examples shown in Table 3 are attenuated circumlocutions of case 2 for the derived forms “incazzare” (to be or to get pissed off) and “rompere il cazzo”

(to be fucking sick of someone or something). These are clear examples of an emotional lexicon, which in one case shows anger, and in another expresses annoyance with others. Nevertheless, as shown in the right-hand column, the Chinese version of both derived forms is always an attenuated translation of the source text.

Table 4 shows a similar situation when in Italian, there are double negative constructions, as in the second example “non contare un cazzo” (ain’t worth a shit), where we have “non” (not) that is an adverb of negation, and we also have “un cazzo” which after the verb “contare” (to count) works as a second negation, meaning “nothing”. These examples demonstrate that swearing is the object of the verb, and thus it cannot be omitted, but it is always attenuated in Chinese.

Source text	Target text
Tutto a posto un cazzo! [Fine, my ass!]	好个屁 [Fine my ass]
Maestro un cazzo! [Master, my ass!]	大师个屁 [Master my ass]
Equamente un cazzo! [Fairly, my ass!]	公正个屁 [Fair my ass]

Table 5. Examples of swearing preservation in case 2

Source text	Target text
Ma che cazzo fai? [What the fuck are you doing?]	你他妈的在做什么 [What the fuck are you doing?]
E io che cazzo devo fare? [What the fuck am I supposed to do?]	那我他妈的要做什么 [What the fuck am I going to do?]
E tu dove cazzo eri? [And where the fuck were you?]	你他妈刚刚在哪儿 [Where the fuck were you?]

Ma chi cazzo se ne frega con chi voleva fare affari? [Who gives a fuck who he wanted to do business with?]	谁他妈在意他和谁做生意 [Who gives a fuck who he does business with?]
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Table 6. Examples of swearing preservation in case 1

If we look at the swearing preservation cases (Tables 5 and 6), the constants are different. In those cases where “cazzo” appears as a main part of a nominal sentence meaning “nothing” (Table 5), the swearing is preserved through a similar syntactic structure in the target language to the structure of the source text.

Other interesting examples come from the translation of sentences belonging to Case 1, when swearing has a slot-filler function. As previously mentioned, the strategy used should be ineffability. But when in the source text, swearing works as an intensifier of interrogative pronouns (Table 6), then it seems that it was simpler for the Chinese fansubbers to preserve it, since the source text and the target text share a similar syntactic structure.

### 3. Preliminary conclusions

There are two main conclusions derived from this preliminary and partial analysis.

On the one hand, the *Shenyng* group prefers to avoid swearing mainly by using attenuated circumlocutions, and to a lesser extent by omitting it. In fact, for the 136 times in which the term “cazzo” recurs, we identified 22 cases of omission, 52 cases of attenuated circumlocutions, and 62 cases of swearing preservation. These results might depend on the internal group rules related to the translation of obscene language. With reference to the translation of Anglo-American TV series, in fact, in the *Shenyng* norms published online in 2011, it was expressly requested to opt for a free or non-literal translation of slang expressions, avoiding the use of meaningless or not completely comprehensible expressions, and to respect as much as possible the three criteria formulated by Yan Fu 严复

(1853-1921) in 1883<sup>15</sup> that a translation should meet in order to be considered of value, faithfulness (*xin* 信), comprehensibility (*da* 达), and elegance (*ya* 雅).

Another possible reason is that fansubbing is a team activity. Team activities involve the participation of three or more translators for each episode, thus the presence of three or more “thinking heads” with different subjectivities and translation approaches. This later issue could be a very interesting aspect to investigate, however it clashes with the reluctance of fansubbers to be interviewed even if only for scientific purposes<sup>16</sup>.

A less predictable observation, on the other hand, is that although the *Shenyang* group prefers to avoid the use of swearing, if in the source text, the syntactic structure is easily transferable to the target text, then the group’s choice is to preserve the swearing. In particular, what we found is that there is a syntactic structure of Italian, in which swearing is used as an intensifier of interrogative pronouns, which in Chinese is translated with three different strategies:

- Omission:

Che cazzo fai, eh? 干什么 嗯 (*Gan shenme en*), What are you doing huh?

- Circumlocution:

Che cazzo vuoi? 你脑子进水了吗 (*Ni naozi jin shui le ma*), Did water get into your brain?

- Preservation:

Ma che cazzo fai? 你他妈的在做什么 (*Ni tama de zai zuo shenme*), What the fuck are you doing?)

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<sup>15</sup> At the end of the 19th century, Yan Fu was one of the first Chinese intellectuals of the time to go abroad to study and to translate the classics of Western culture.

<sup>16</sup> We tried to contact one of the *Shenyang* community's fansubbers for a possible interview. We were told that the community has never accepted to be interviewed and prefers to keep a low profile. (Personal communication)

To confirm our findings, it will be necessary to analyse the subtitles of the complete four seasons of *Gomorra*. With a wider range of cases, in fact, it would be possible to determine whether the group's choices are maintained only for a certain type of swearword or also for other types. We will also be able to determine whether or not the percentage of linguistic disqualification in the target text can be confirmed.

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