

CELEBRATING AND DISCUSSING THE QUEERLY MASCULINE:  
HOLLYWOOD SUPERHEROES REIMAGINED IN FAN VIDEOS ON CHINESE  
BARRAGE VIDEO WEBSITES

A Thesis  
submitted to the Faculty of the  
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences  
of Georgetown University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree of  
Master of Arts  
in Communication, Culture and Technology

By

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Washington, DC  
April 23, 2017

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ABSTRACT

The field of fan culture has burgeoned in recent years in China - particularly under the influence of Japanese and American pop culture. Within the fan practices performed by the Chinese fans of Hollywood superhero films, there is one approach especially emphasizes queer interpretations. This fan approach is, moreover, important within a new technological form known as barrage video, which involves the streaming of fan comments across the screen, superimposed on with the original video content. Fan video, as a major form of fan creations in the post-Web 2.0 era, is also widely utilized within the Chinese fandom of superhero films. Fan vidders actively upload fan videos to barrage video websites in order to share their queer readings and achieve interaction with other fans. In this thesis, taking two fan videos, *“It’s Definitely Not the Avengers”* and *“[Stucky/Evanstan] Fifty Shades of Grey Official Trailer (Humor)”*, as examples, I first examine the content and other cinematic elements of these two videos. I focus on how Chinese consumers interpret ambiguous gender roles and queer relationships between Hollywood superhero characters. In the second part, I approach the massive barrage comments attached to these two videos from a qualitative textual analysis perspective to study the reasons and motivations for fans’ participating in the barrage video viewing experience. The major conclusion of this

research is that non-traditional gender implications are incubated in these fan-made barrage videos - because this video genre allows fans to join a female-dominant practice which provides both anonymity and safe community, both of which enable fans to question mainstream gender stereotypes.

*Fantasy is a place where it rains.*

*—Italo Calvino*

To all my professors, family, friends, and fellow fans who have supported and helped me  
in the writing of this thesis, many thanks and love.

You are my inspiration and motivation.

Sincerely,  
Jingyi Gu

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## NOTE ON TRANSLATION AND TRANSLITERATION

The translation of foreign language terminology in this thesis is directly quoted from the fan vidder's translation or provided by the author.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

The Chinese entertainment industry has been deeply influenced by more developed entertainment industries in Japan, Korea, and America. From importing media products like Hollywood movies and Japanese comics to adapting them into Chinese versions, the popularity of these cultural products among Chinese consumers has inspired the fandom of both original foreign popular culture and their localized forms. This trend in media industries stimulates the development of many fan activities, mainly on online platforms, which in turn allows participatory consumption, interactive communication, and re-creation of media contents.

Dissatisfied with enjoying these popular movies and TV shows through online video sharing websites and then sharing comments and thoughts through SNSs and online fans communities as separate experience, Chinese fans started to look for more compound experience. The fans of Japanese animations in China first imitated the famous Japanese video sharing website Niconico to combine the experience of watching and commenting together at the same time by establishing the websites Acfun and Bilibili. These video sharing websites differ from the traditional online video websites because they visually depict with the overlaying comments on videos. Users can add comments about a specific playback, at a specific position in the video, which provides users with the sense of sharing a viewing experience virtually with other audiences and fans (Hamasaki, et al. 223). The overlaid comments look very much like the shooting barrage in digital military games, thus inspiring Chinese users name these video-sharing websites, “barrage video websites”. The videos on these barrage video websites are uploaded by users spontaneously, originally focusing on Japanese comic cartoons and now involving all kinds of popular videos. Most

users were attracted to these barrage video websites to enjoy the social visual culture consumption experience. Among people who have experienced watching videos on barrage video websites, there are existing complaints about the overlaid comments on videos occupying the whole screen and covering the original images of the videos thus making watching videos less comfortable. However, advocates of barrage video watching insist that the overlaid comments themselves add extra value to the media content and are essential components of the preferable barrage videos.

The ability to access both foreign media and high-quality media has motivated many Chinese people to look for alternative choices, outside of their own cultural industry productions, using non-official channels and platforms. Among all these global cultural franchises that attract Chinese audiences' attention, Hollywood-produced superhero films have achieved some of the most prominent global successes, to which Chinese fans have contributed heavily. One particularly popular practice of Chinese superhero fans is the creation and consumption of fan videos uploaded to barrage video platforms, in which Chinese fans interpret ambiguous gender roles and queer relationships between Hollywood superhero characters. Most of these videos are created under the influence of what is known as "Boys' Love" culture, which derives from Japanese Yaoi culture and has been in the practice of Chinese cultural consumers for decades. Boys' Love culture has become a massive subculture in which young women create, distribute, and appreciate stories depicting male-male relationships in various media - ranging from fiction, comics, music, videos, and cosplays, to computer games (Liu 1; Wei 2). These videos become widely popular on barrage video websites, with several video uploaders dedicating themselves to

making these videos and sharing them with other superhero fans who are also barrage video lovers.

Hence, my thesis aims to analyze how fan videos depict queer intimacy between Hollywood superheroes and why fans circulate and watch these videos on barrage video websites. The theoretical framework of this thesis includes theory of participatory culture and queer theory. Through these theoretical lenses, I analyze primarily two components of these videos: first, the original, cinematic elements; and, secondly, the fans' literal and pictorial comments attached to the videos. In order to understand how Chinese fans create queer interpretations in these videos and react to these interpretations in the form of barrage comments, I approach both the video content and barrage comments from a qualitative textual analysis perspective.

For the data sample of this thesis, I have selected two data sets - two fan videos remixing Marvel superhero films from Bilibili, one of the major barrage video website in China. These two videos have each received hundreds of thousands of views and over 10,000 comments (till April, 2017) on this barrage video platform. From the perspective of participatory culture, the second data sample will thus include both the anonymous streaming comments and fans' interactive comments, which are documented in the conventional commentary section associated with each video. The two selected videos both take characters from the Marvel Cinematic Universe as subjects. The first fan video, entitled "*It's Definitely Not the Avengers*" features three duos or pairs: Captain America and Winter Soldier, Thor and Loki, as well as Iron Man and Hulk. The other video, entitled "[Stukcky/Evanstan] *Fifty Shades of Grey Official Trailer (Humor)*", features Captain

America and Winter Soldier and mimics the cinematographic style of the original *Fifty Shades of Grey* film trailer.

My specific research method thus involves a close analysis of the footage, the music, and other elements of two fan videos that demonstrate Chinese fans' interpretations of Marvel-produced superhero films. Taking these two videos as representatives, I single out the shared characteristics of these fanvids, while also differentiating the techniques, the intended themes, and the visual coloring of eroticism. I then specifically examine how these non-traditional gender implications have been created in the remix of the original cinematic content.

To understand the motivations behind the creation and consumption of these fan videos on barrage video websites with queer interpretations, my thesis analyzes and compares fans' personal rationales, explanations, and interpretations of these videos—as manifested in two structural parts of barrage video websites: 1) The barrage comments streaming across the screen; 2) The separate section that appears at the bottom of the screen, which contains more conversational comments. I look at these comments for their contents, manifestations on the screen, and the way they are organized and structured by the comment makers, this research also analyzes how participating in the barrage video community reflects as well as influences these fans' identities and their community. By analyzing these comments, I focus on capturing and categorizing the expressions and implications that are embedded in these comments and interactions.

## CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Participatory Culture and Video Sharing Websites

Participatory culture is a concept developed by Henry Jenkin, being defined as seeing the media producers and consumers as participants who interact with each other according to a new set of roles (3). It contrasts with the consumer culture and passive media spectatorship that divided producers and consumers into different and separate groups. Because of technological development, the Internet has already become the active platform of consumer participation by enabling people to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content. The booming grassroots convergence in cyberspace represents the folk process accelerated and expanded for the digital age (Jenkins 136).

Video sharing websites are popular forms of new media, sharing the same characteristic as other new media platforms in cyberspace, basing themselves on online technology and offering the users opportunities to interactively communicate with not only the media content but also other users. YouTube is the representative of most online video sharing websites as having most users and worldwide coverage. Jean Burgess and Joshua Green claim in their book *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture* that YouTube has been a co-created cultural system by users and traditional media producers all together. They also make the argument that it is more meaningful to think about YouTube in terms of a continuum of cultural participation rather than thinking about the media production, distribution and consumption by highlighting the traditional distinction between professional and amateur or commercial and community practices (57).

Realizing the popularity of YouTube especially among youths, Clement Chau lays emphasis on studying youths' engagement in YouTube and points out that new media

platforms like YouTube offer a participatory culture for the youth to develop, interact and learn by merging the technical aspects of users as media creators with the social aspects of users as social networks (65). Chau also defines YouTube as a participatory culture among youth with five characteristics as “relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement”, “strong support for creating and sharing one’s projects”, “informal mentorship”, “a belief that contributions matter” and “a sense of social connection” (67-72). While Japanese Scholars, who emphasize their study on Niconico, assert that one of the features of these videos sharing websites is massively collaborative creation of digital contents (Hamasaki, Takeda, and Nishimura 1).

## **2.2 Chinese Fans of Foreign Pop Culture and Their Unique Practices**

As Chinese people’s eagerness to consume more cultural products growing and the ‘Reform and opening-up’ allowing more consumer-oriented cultural products be produced and imported, the fandom of different kinds of popular culture and fans communities in China entered the fast-developing era. Being able to connect with external world by the Internet makes more people especially young students aware that there are fandom activities for them to participate if they are interested in. However, even though the fandom is more and more widespread and observable in Chinese society, fan culture still belongs to a small audience and remains a comparatively marginal community (Jenkins & Zheng Online). Except for normal reasons that motivate the fans gather together as fans community, there are also particular reasons for Chinese fans to form the online fans communities. For example, fans of foreign cultural products like American Idol and Prison Break which are not officially broadcast in Chinese mass media channels established some

online translation community to upload the video on internet, collaborate to translate the subtitles from the original language to Chinese, and share with their fellow fans (Zhang and Mao 52).

Chinese fans often prefer overseas media productions because, as several scholars point out, they can identify with these protagonists and thereby confirm and strengthen their personal values. As a highly-influential article elucidates, Chinese audiences are attracted to American films and TV dramas because they advocate the expression of “an ideal of personal authenticity” (Gao 1214). By consuming foreign media contents, particularly those produced by America, Chinese youths embrace the Western lifestyles and Western values, which also evoke them to think about whether certain established values and norms, duties and responsibilities, roles and expectations, and rules and regulations in contemporary urban China are up for negotiation (Li, Chen and Nakazawa 72; Gao 1203).

### **2.3 Barrage Video Websites’ Origination and Development in China**

Barrage video websites, as other new media platforms like microblogs, SNSs and video sharing websites, are not originally created in Chinese cyberspace but as localized versions of popular foreign new media platforms. The important reasons behind the introduction of barrage video websites into Chinese cultural consuming market are generalized as the development of broadband technology allowing and motivating more people to search videos online and the netizens’ eagerness to embrace a brand new audio-visual experience to connect the isolated individuals to the broader external world (Jiang 45).



The initial founders and users of Chinese barrage video websites used to be users of Niconico and fans of Japanese ACGs (Animations, Comics and Games). These people all belong to the “Otaku” sub-culture group which is also originated in Japan. The Chinese translation for “Otaku” is “Yuzhai” which literally refers to people who are fans of these ACG cultural products and usually prefer to stay at home consuming the ACG products alone or enjoy the virtual socialization with the cartoon characters and other fans. Sending the comments in the overlaid form when watching videos can be regarded as these “Otaku” people’s parasocial interactions with the virtual characters and social interaction with other fans (Ma and Ge 125-127). Though now the active user group on barrage video websites are larger than the original Chinese “Otaku” group, with also fans of other types of video culture participating in, this group of people may still be defined as the youth sub-culture group. Their preference for watching and participating in barrage videos deviate from the mainstream video consumption habit, thus making this group of people being regarded as “others” among mass media consumers. The barrage videos’ “otherness” can also be reflexively proved by the function of “turning off the barrage” set up in barrage video players (Ma and Xu 61). It is also pointed out that many active users and advocators of barrage video websites are students and the organization of this sub-culture group is incompact. Students may leave the sub-culture group and no longer participate in barrage video websites when they graduate from schools to enter the labor market (Chen, et al. 23-24).

International scholars studying the original Japanese version of barrage video websites characterize this special form of video-sharing website by pointing out that it provides the spectators with a strong sense of anonymity and “pseudo-synchronicity.” That

is, the animated comments that stream across the original video content offer a remarkable degree of both anonymity and communal “pseudo-synchronicity” (Johnson 301). Chinese scholars who examine Chinese barrage video websites suggest that, because of its origin in Japanese popular culture, barrage websites provide an alternative space for gender exploration and subcultural identification (Ma and Ge 118; Chen, et al. 22). It is suggested that barrage video websites offer instant interactions and multidimensional experience because the comments from the users can be instantly displayed directly on the specific scene in different size, font and animation effects (Jiang 22-27). Especially for those ACG lovers, barrage video websites become their barrier-free community to share the watching experience and their appreciation or for the cultural objects in a fragmented and anonymous way with others who also belong to the sub-culture group.

The cultural value of these overlaid comments is defined as the rewrite and recreate of the original media contents. For example, there exist a lot of overlaid comments as the lyrics of many songs in foreign languages played in the video being translated into Chinese directly by finding the similarly pronounced words. These “unauthorized” translations create new meanings of the songs despite of the original lyrics and are regarded as the grassroots creativity (Jiang 34-39). Many catchwords later gain popularity in audiences outside of the barrage video communities also initially manifested in these interactive comments. Therefore, scholars argue that the entertainment effects of barrage videos are completely produced by the consumers themselves, since they autonomously appropriate the mass media productions and assign new interpretations to the original with remixing footage and engaging with comments (Xie, He, and Feng 39).

## CHAPTER 3 FAN VIDEOS WITH QUEER INTERPRETATIONS

### 3.1 Fan Video: Challenging the Cultural Hierarchy and Empowering Female Fans

Fan video is a powerful tool that fans use to express their enthusiastic consumption of certain cultural products, as well as their ability to produce new and creative content. This production transforms them from passive spectators to proactive producers. These fan producers could be called “poachers”, as media scholar Henry Jenkins defines in his book that opens the field of fan studies (27). Fan video, or fan vid, is a form of fan practice utilizing “montages of visual material culled from mass media source texts and set to music” (Russo 126). The inauguration of fan video can be traced back to the 1970s and into the late 2000s with the popularization of digital video circulated widely through the Internet. Though the technologies utilized by fan vidders changed and evolved with time, the “poached” footage and the music as two fundamental components of remain essential to this practice.

Throughout the years of developments and contributions made by fans across the world, fan video became more diversified in terms of its different approaches into the original media content and various themes presented. Many fan videos are derived from popular films or television shows, in which fictional characters are created and played either by human performers or animated ones. Thus, one of the most common intentions of fan video is to highlight, reverse, or create the storyline involving these fictional characters according to fans’ own wills. These fan videos, generally emphasizing the depiction of interactions and relationships between characters, differentiate themselves from those only shedding light on one character. To make this kind of videos, the vidders first look for either canonical scenes where the characters they want to see interact are

already interacting or footage involves at least one character they center their videos on. After clipping out the visual material, fan-vidders utilize video-editing software that are more accessible now than ever before to arrange and combine the moving images with sound and other components that are necessary to making a polished end-product. This final product signatures either their personal interest in the original text or an alternative interpretation of the storyline. The fan videos that portray an alternative narrative interpretation exemplify the empowerment of fan creativity.

Fans' active participation in producing contents are exemplified by numerous high-quality fan videos along with other forms of fan creations such as fan fiction circulated on the Internet. While some of these videos are beyond the level of amateur production because of their sophisticated storytelling skills and video-making techniques, the identity of being a fan vidder still lacks acknowledgement and respect from the traditional content producers and other popular culture producers. Transforming their affection into creativity, fan vidders cannot avoid the struggle to be accepted as well as the biased stereotypes that regard them as overly enthusiastic outliers. Fans are never able to reside at the top of the cultural hierarchy, often being denigrated as "social misfits who have become so obsessed with the show that it forecloses other types of social experience...[they are]feminized and/or desexualized through their intimate engagement with mass culture...[and] are infantile, emotionally and intellectually immature" (Jenkins 10).

The identity of a fan already requires enduring the burden of being marginalized by normative cultural consumers. Yet, when taking a closer look at the cultural hierarchy formed around popular culture, we can see that female fans are inevitably at the bottom of this hierarchy, especially in a fandom shaped by male-dominated cultural consumption,

such as the superhero one that is the subject of this research. However, fan creators, no matter which form of creation they are dedicated to, are primarily female. Scholars in the fan studies field argue that the enthusiasm that female fans have for creating their own content is a demonstrates how they challenge the “male gaze” and objectification that women experience through various forms of media, such as film (Busse 106). Since the film industry itself also perpetuates a tradition of having males take powerful and creative roles, female fan vidders’ getting into the creation and circulation of visual culture not only deconstructs the “symbolic characterization of women sawing and men cutting”, but also blurs the binary classification of producers and consumers (Coppa 107). Fandom becomes a space where many fans, regardless of their gender and social identities, venture to invert subject-object relationships. Especially in the case of female fan fiction writers or other fannish content creators, such fans complicate the established binary relation between producer and consumer particularly when they return the gaze as they manipulate representations of (and by) men, and actively edit in their own desires (Busse 106). It is also worth mentioning that the “gift economy” initiated by fans’ proactive production and fellow fans’ spontaneous consumption challenges the capitalist mode of cultural industries.

### **3.2 The Marginalization of Females in the Superhero Genre**

In today’s popular culture domain, superhero fiction, which originated as a comic genre, is now a more popular film genre, promoted by Hollywood on a global scale. Thus, the constitution of the fan base of superhero fiction is more complicated now than ever before, in terms of people who participate in this community at different levels. Indeed,

people in this community encounter superhero cultural products at different times and through different platforms. They develop their fanish perceptions and fan identities according to their own cultural backgrounds and social identities. As far as gender identity is concerned, it is clear that male fans dominate the superhero fandom. Most of the most well-known superhero characters, including all DC and Marvel creations, are males with a comparatively masculine appearance. The storylines of most superheroes are similar to those of the legendary male heroes, gods, and warriors in ancient Western mythologies. Another characteristic of superhero stories, especially those that have been adapted into films, is that females who appear in these stories are either always “relegated to the role of girlfriend” with a purpose of being rescued by the hero, or “merely sidekicks of the more important male hero” (Hatfield, Heer, and Worcester 54). These roles are exemplified by the Peggy Carter character in *Captain America: The First Avenger*, the Pepper Potts character in *Iron Man* film series, the Jane Foster character in *Thor*, and the Black Widow character in *The Avengers*. On one hand, these female characters have already developed beyond the misogynistic characterizations of women who are unfit to fill any significant role in early science fiction films and TV shows such as *Star Trek* (Penley 183). On the other hand, although they are strong and capable but still cannot escape being subordinates to male heroes and are sometimes overshadowed as pure romantic bonuses in these films so that the superhero characters can play the roles of female saviors. In addition, historically, there has been superhero films featuring female superheroes as protagonists including *Catwoman* and *Elektra*, but they did not achieve as much box office value as the most popular male-led counterparts.

### 3.3 How Chinese Fans Approach Superhero Films and Create Queer Interpretations in Fan Videos

The two fan videos studied in this thesis are created and uploaded by the same vidder, known as “of Resave”. Hereafter, I will refer to “of Resave” using the female pronoun because even though the vidder claims to be a male on Bilibili, she mentions on another Chinese social media platform (Weibo, a Chinese online platform which is functionally similar to Twitter) that her gender identity in real life is female. When browsing the portfolio page of “of Resave”’s on Bilibili, I find that as a prolific vidder, she is dedicated to making same-sex couple oriented fan videos. The couples that she features in her videos come from various popular culture franchises, including superhero films, Japanese animations, and other Hollywood stars and films. On Bilibili, she is followed by 67,000 fans, and all her videos together have been viewed nearly 7.6 million times. It is worth mentioning that as a vidder, “of Resave” not only keeps an active presence on barrage video platforms, where she uploads all her videos, but also owns a YouTube channel where she synchronously shows all her works to a larger audience. Besides participating on video platform, she also shares her works and reaches out to other fellow fans through Weibo, one of the most popular Chinese social media platforms, functionally equivalent to Twitter and Tumblr, on which a dynamic global fan community creates and witnesses an enthusiastic dissemination of all kinds of fan works. “[*Stucky/Evanstan*] *Fifty Shades of Grey Official Trailer (Humor)*”, one of her works featuring Captain America and Winter Soldier even attracted BuzzFeed, a famous American-based internet media outlet, to introduce this video in one of its articles (Mallikarjuna, *Buzzfeed Online*).

The fan videos created for Marvel superheroes by “of Resave” are also among the most popular ones in this category. When Bilibili viewers comment on "of Resaves"

videos, they note her marvelous video-editing and storytelling capabilities. They even give her a nick name “奥夫大大”, which literally means “of Resave the master” in Chinese. Among the comments that fans made for these videos, they commonly use lines like “I want to marry you, of Resave the master” or “I want to give birth to a baby together with you”. The two most common types of fan videos that “of Resave” makes are more conventional, music-video-like fan videos, which coordinate a piece of music with cinematic footage, and trailer-like videos, in which she borrows thematic ideas and eventually create new storylines. As for the two videos examined in this thesis, “*It’s Definitely Not the Avengers*” belongs to the first type while “[*Stukcky /Evanstan*] *Fifty Shades of Grey Official Trailer (Humor)*” pertains to the second type. “*It’s Definitely Not the Avengers*” is a mash-up video of three superhero couples “of Resave” selects from the Marvel cinematic universe, i.e. Stucky (Captain America and Winter Soldier), Thorki (Thor and Loki), and Tony x Banner (Iron Man and Hulk). The video itself, however, does not have a cohesive storyline that links these three couples with each other. It is just a remix of visual footage and music soundtracks. In contrast, in “[*Stukcky/Evanstan*] *Fifty Shades of Grey Official Trailer (Humor)*”, “of Resave” clearly concentrates on presenting a love-related story between Captain America and The Winter Soldier. She borrows the idea of sadist-masochism from another film, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, and uses clips from Marvel films as well as other films and television shows, which cast either Chris Evans or Sebastian Stan.

In terms of the length of the video, “*It’s Definitely Not the Avengers*” lasts much longer than “[*Stukcky/Evanstan*] *Fifty Shades of Grey Official Trailer (Humor)*” for having 6 minute and 47 seconds in total. On YouTube, the vidder also tags “*It’s Definitely Not the*



*Avengers*” as a “crack video”, which according to Fanlore (a wiki-like multi-authored website that records fan works, fan activities, fan terminology, individual fans, and fan-related events) refers to “fiction (canon or fanwork) with a fundamentally ludicrous premise, or otherwise including a plethora of unbelievable, incredible, or just plain silly elements” (Fanlore Online). A crack video is usually a pop culture mash-up, designed not in a logical storytelling way, but only to make other fans resonate with the content and find it entertaining. The juxtaposition of light-hearted pop songs with scenes of intense action or violence take the crack video to the level of the absurd. Relying on aligning the lyrics with cinematic images, as well as some pointless repetitions to compound the humor, the vidders, in many cases, also draw on lines, images, or sounds from other popular Internet slangs, tropes, and viral videos.

In “*It’s Definitely Not the Avengers*”, most music pieces used are love songs, which embody the imagined love relationship between these the superhero couples. Both Chinese pop songs and English pop songs are among the vidder’s selections, yet some of the music uses not the original song but a covered or adapted version. For the three Chinese pop songs, the vidder also provides a translation of the lyrics and embeds subtitles including both the lyrics in Chinese and the English translation. For example, the first song that “of Resave” uses is “*Hongchen Kezhan*”, from Jay Chou (one of the most influential Chinese pop musicians), which thematically utilizes some “Wuxia” elements. Wuxia is a genre of Chinese fiction concerning the adventures of martial art masters. Not only do “Wuxia” and superhero films share some characteristics in regard to their narratives of stories, such as pitting heroic protagonists against evil rivals, but “Hongchen” is also itself a concept in the “Wuxia” genre, one that specifically refers to the mundane world filled with love and other

complicated sentiments. In order to imply the relationship between superheroes that is beyond friendship or the align relationship that is assigned to them in original films, the vidder creates a compound of moving images and music by selecting footages from Marvel superhero films that can work in concert with the lyrics of this song, such as having the line “The sword is unsheathed” accompanying the scene of Iron Man initiating an attack against Hulk and aligning the montage of Thor holding Loki in his arms after their fight with another line: “All I seek at present is to hold you in my arms” (see figure 3.1& 3.2).

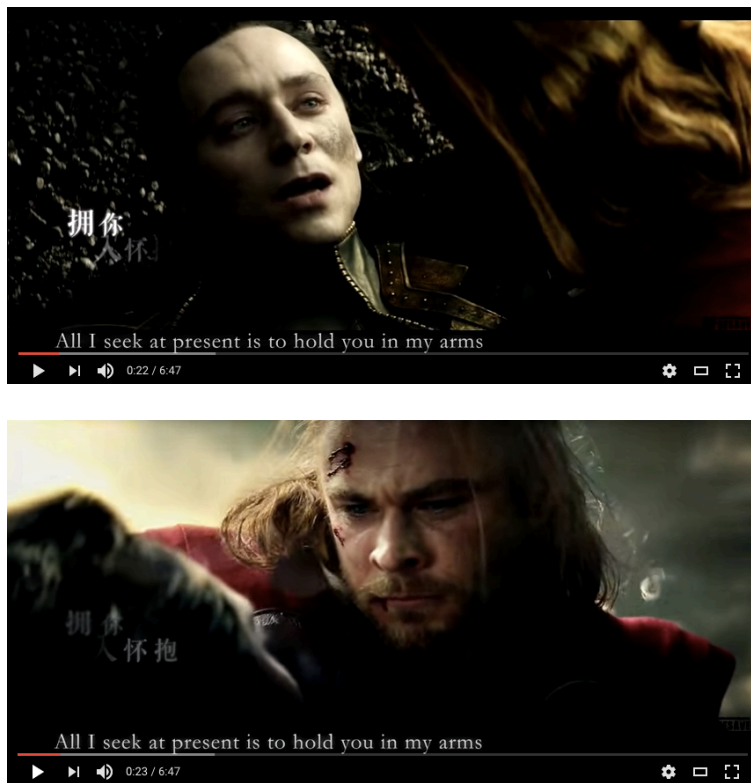


Figure 3.1-3.2 Thor holds Loki after their battle. This scene accompanies the lyric “All I seek at present is to hold you in my arms” (YouTube, 2017).

This kind of practice exemplifies Chinese fan vidders’ intercultural knowledge-collecting and meaning-making competences, which require not only a command of different languages but also advanced knowledge about different source texts and genres

in both traditional and popular, Western and Chinese cultures. Scholars who study Chinese fans of foreign popular culture content point out that most avid fans, especially those who participate in fan fiction writing or fan video making, are normally those who have a comparatively high level of education and live in major cities in China, where the environment is relatively open, and this kind of foreign is more accessible (Gao 1201). Because the content is itself already foreign, and sometimes unavailable for streaming, becoming a fan means dedicating a considerable amount of time to finding channels to consume these foreign cultural products, acquiring overall knowledge about the genre or a specific series, and creating new content in different forms. In the case of fan videos made by “of Resave”, she not only uploads all her videos to Bilibili, but also opens an individual Tumblr page and again, a YouTube channel to make the content she creates accessible to a global audience. In order to share these videos containing both English and Chinese songs, and make the content fully comprehensible for people from different cultural and language backgrounds, “of Resave” voluntarily creates two versions of this video, with either English or Chinese subtitles. Other viewers of the video also provide additional annotation for some culture-specific information in their comments (as I shall discuss in chapter four).

In order to present the homosexual tension between the superheroes who, in the original films, are clearly heterosexual, the vidder uses the montage technique to rearrange film shots. With this technique, she is able to keep some of the lines while replacing or adding others, using diegetic sound appropriated from other audio or video. In one particular scene (see figure 3.3 & 3.4), from the original *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* film, Captain America is in a vehicle with Black Widow and Falcon and expresses

his sadness upon discovering that Bucky, his former best friend, was captured by the evil organization, Hydra, and transformed into the assassin known as The Winter Soldier. By adding one line for the character of Black Widow, the vidder changes the implication of this scene from cherishing the friendship between Captain America and Winter Soldier to highlighting the queer love relationship between the two. She does this by assigning a line containing the word “gay” to another character.



Figure 3.3 Captain America expresses his sorrow for losing his friend Bucky, who turns into the Winter Soldier after was reported dead (YouTube, 2017).

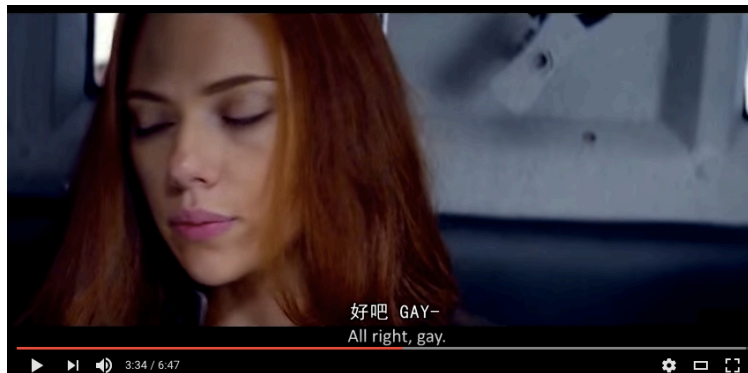


Figure 3.4 The vidder adds one line “All right, gay” for Black Widow as she responds to Captain America (YouTube, 2017).

In another scene, the vidder uses the same technique to assign a line to another protagonist, Captain America. During a physical confrontation, Captain America initiates a conversation with the Winter Soldier by calling the brainwashed amnesiac by his

nickname “Bucky”. The vidder then inserts a line for the character which does not exist in the original script, “You are as beautiful as the day I lost you”. Although the adjective “beautiful” can be a gender-neutral word, the audio of this line is recognized as coming from a famous scene of an animated fantasy film *How to Train Your Dragon 2*, in which this line is designed to be spoken by a male character to his wife whom he unites with after a longtime separation. This kind of practice demonstrates that fan vidders desire for direct linguistic proof of Stucky’s homosexual relationship beyond the subtle evidence they can glean from the films. Therefore, they look for lines from other film productions that can fit the scenes they appropriate from superhero films, and help to elaborate the narrative according to their own homosexual fantasy. During this process, both the vidders and the barrage video consumers reach a consensus on the meaning added to the narrative. Though the vidders may consider whether it is technically possible to use sound editing software to make the inserted lines sound similar to the authentic voice of the original character, both they and fan-vid viewers treasure the homosexual meaning added to the narrative in any case. This consensus allows fans to excuse the oddity of having the same character speak in different voices, by keep the viewer’s focus on appreciating the vidder’s reinterpretation of the superheroes’ relationships. Since many of the fan vidders whose videos are most widely circulated on barrage video websites possess high-level video-editing techniques and storytelling skills, their acts of embedding these outsourced sound-effects and lines are applauded as a demonstration of their creativity by those who later watch the video.

In her selection of songs with lyrics containing gender-specific words or gendered pronouns, the vidder demonstrates an ambiguous attitude towards gendering the superhero

characters. Her own translations of the lyrics of the English pop songs that she uses in the video clearly exemplify this attitude. Quoting a short section from a male-voice-covered version of Avril Lavigne's 2007 hit song *Girlfriend*, the vidder compiles footage featuring direct eye contact or physical contact between the three couples that she is "shipping" (a term used by fans to refer to pairing up and fantasizing about) in this video. She clips out all the footage from different movies in the Phase One and Phase Two of Marvel's Cinematic Universe film series (according to the content of the lyrics), in order to indicate the emotional bonding between superhero characters. In the Chinese subtitles of this song specifically made for the barrage video spectators, "of Resave" changes the word "she" in one line of the original lyrics ("she is like so whatever") into "he" in her own Chinese translation. When translating a line of the lyrics ("This girl is on fire") from Alicia Keys' *Girl On Fire*, which features a shot in which the Winter Soldier triggers a hand-held weapon and ignites a fire, she switches the word from "girl" to "boy" in the Chinese subtitle. Following that, she collects another montage showing a physical interaction happening between Tony Stark (Iron Man) and Bruce Banner (Hulk), in which the former pokes the latter in his waist, which can be read as an intimate act between these two. With this scene, "of Resave" combines a soundtrack of a male-covered version of *Girl On Fire*, in which the original lyrics are rewritten to become "This boy is a bottom" ("bottom" refers to those who play the receptive role in a homosexual relationship).

However, the vidder does not seem to intentionally keep the gender of these superheroes intact as males by changing those female-related pronouns and words into the male-related ones in her Chinese translation of the lyrics. For example, in the same snippet that the vidder replaces "she" with "he" in the Chinese subtitle, she still makes her

translation align with the original lyrics that for another gendered word “girlfriend” in multiple lines. In another song featuring footage of Bucky (the Winter Soldier), a few lines are excerpted such as, “Sexy, sexy, sexy. Naughty, naughty, naughty. Bitchy, bitchy, bitchy. Me.” This song is not only performed by a female singer, and the lyrics also introduce a few adjectives that in the original context are specifically used to depict a female figure. The usage and meanings for other gendered words from other songs, such as “princess”, also remain the same in the vidder’s translation.

The inconsistency manifested in the employment of gendered words and gender-specific pronouns indicates that the vidder is part of a tradition in the Boys’ Love subculture, one that feminizes male characters by describing them with words that are traditionally associated with femininity (McLelland, et al. 15). Yet what separates these fan videos from Boys’ Love manga or fiction is that all these superhero characters, in the primary cinematic portrayals, do not fit the conventional image of feminized males, either in their physiques or their personalities. In his book *The Modern Superhero in Film and Television*, cultural studies scholar Jeffery Brown points out that the heroes’ strong and muscular bodies, signifying the idealized forms of masculinity, are a fundamental fantasy offered to the audience (Brown 41). These fan videos do not provide a subversive redesign of the superheroes in terms of their physiological characteristics and personality traits. Instead, by letting the camera still focuses on “the bulging biceps, sculpted pectorals, and ripped abdomens”, the vidder lets the contrastive lyrics of the songs help divert the narrative from showcasing the triumph of the masculine superpower over evil to presenting same-sex romance. That said, as demonstrated in “*It’s Definitely Not the Avengers*”, the inconsistent using of male- or female- specific words among fan vidders indicates female

fans' attempt to de-masculinize the superheroes, or to challenge the binary way of distinguishing masculinity from femininity.

In contrast the “mash-up” form that “*It’s Definitely Not the Avengers*” takes, the other fan video, “[*Stukcky/Evanstan*] *Fifty Shades of Grey Official Trailer (Humor)*”, uses another pervasive fan video form: namely the imitative and fan-created film trailers. This form of video usually shows fans’ manipulation of original trailers, either by rearranging the cinematic content according to their own anticipation or by merely borrowing thematic elements from one franchise and substituting some of these elements with those they appropriate from other franchises. In “[*Stukcky/Evanstan*] *Fifty Shades of Grey Official Trailer (Humor)*”, “of Resave” takes the second approach and creates an imitative film trailer within the thematic framework of *Fifty Shades of Grey*’s official trailer; however, she replaces the original protagonists, Anastasia Steele and Christian Grey, with Captain America and the Winter Soldier. Since *Fifty Shades of Grey* itself is a highly erotic text, in which the not usually hidden BDSM culture creeps into the popular culture, the vidder exploits the subject and re-envisions Captain America and the Winter Soldier in a homoerotic relationship. In order to achieve this queer portrayal of, she rearranges footage clipped out from the original *Fifty Shades of Grey* trailer, the Captain America film series, *London* (a romance film Chris Evans stars in), and *Kings*, a TV show in which the actor Sebastian Stan, cast as the Winter Soldier by Marvel, plays a gay character. A handful of elements from the original trailer are kept intact, including the theme song *Crazy in Love*, and the use of bridging shots with text which provide information including the film title, the main cast, and the time for the film release. The vidder does not keep the characterizations from either the Marvel film series or *Fifty Shades of Grey*; instead, she



assigns completely new character backgrounds and traits to these two protagonists still under the name of Captain America and Winter Soldier. By doing so, the vidder tries to create her own “Alternate Universe”, in which these superhero characters that people are familiar with are still there, but live their lives somehow differently.

In this fan trailer, Captain America’s character remains a military figure who is not only a national hero but also saves the Winter Soldier’s life twice. The trailer does not give a clear explanation of the character of the Winter Soldier, but viewers get a general impression of him as someone of high social status. As the plot of this fan trailer reveals, Captain America and the Winter Soldier are destined to be in love from the very beginning but their relationship is full of twists and turns because of the intervention of other people, conflicted interests, and other factors (such as secrets). The full script of the trailer is in some sense original considering that even though all the lines are cut from different snippets of different preexisting scripts of *London* and *Kings*, the vidder incorporates and compiles these lines in her own way to generate new contextual monologues and dialogues by using the collage technique.

Winter Soldier: Focused, Concerned, we all heard the stories. He saved my life once. Twice. He saved nation saved me. We all wanted to believe in him.

Woman: He’s not that virtuous. No one is.

Winter Soldier: I answer to you, sir.

Captain America: You look beautiful

Winter Soldier: Sir?

Woman: He aims to drag you down.

Captain America: What do you want?

Winter Soldier: I was...I was trying to.

Captain America: You don’t know who I am and what I want.

Captain America: Please. What else can I do?

Winter Soldier: Do you want to leave?

Captain America: Whatever we had when we were together, when we were in love...that feeling...is gone

Winter Soldier: I know

Captain America: Whatever it is, you don't want him to see or hear, you can bury it. But you will wish you hadn't.

Captain America: I love you.

Winter Soldier: Lair.

Winter Soldier: He loved me, I loved him.

Hence, the fan vidder demonstrates a high level of video editing and transmedia storytelling skills by reconstructing the relationship between Captain America and Winter Soldier. In contrast with fan fiction genres, the original media content offers only limited footage for vidders to employ in rewriting the story. As a result, they sometimes need to spend extra time looking into other films and television shows to collect available shots, narrations, and dialogues. In this sense, the creative process of fan vidding involves many constraints and challenges. Overcoming all these difficulties, “of Resave” is nonetheless able to provide her fellow fans with depictions of an intense love relationship between two hyper-masculine characters.

Besides the romantic aspects, another unique selling point of this remixed film trailer made by “of Resave” is that it contains some sexually explicit content, including several nude scenes and other erotic scenes suggesting a sado-masochism relationship between the two characters. However, most of the depictions of the sexual plots are constructed by the montage technique, without showing explicit same-sex sexual intercourse between characters. Yet the fan vidder's lens, fans who have a kinky fantasy about the relationship between superhero characters can still fulfill their voyeuristic desires

and achieve pleasurable sensory gratification. For these people, the muscular male bodies become aesthetics objects. The imagined romance between two men challenges the traditional hyper-masculine portrayal of the superhero characters, while the erotic fantasy undermines the conservative social norms.

### **3.4 Embracing Queerness and Finding a Haven**

In examining these two videos, including captions of written by the vidder, and the viewer's comments left on the website, I found no fan-created text in which fans directly associate the depiction of homosexuality with their own sexual identities. Indeed, according to previous research, the majority of female fans who enjoy reading slash fan fiction or watching fan videos with homosexual implications, are straight women who do not intention to project themselves into homosexual relationships but are instead attracted to the texts for the romance narratives contained in stereotypical feminine readings (Behr 25; Kinsella 117; Mizoguchi 56; Martin 369). However, superhero fan communities who practice queer interpretation of original film content do demonstrate a supportive attitude toward the disruption of binary gender normality. Also influenced by the Boys' Love culture (derived from Japanese popular culture), this community embraces media presentations of sexual minorities, by exploring superhero characters in a homosexual setting with a high level of tolerance toward LGBTQ identities, especially when we compare this community to the average fans of the superhero franchise.

The gender of these fan communities is also important. In both China and America, the superhero genre is always associated with male audiences and fans. This genre features males as leading characters who embody the hyper masculinity and the trope of the savior,

which makes it easier for male audiences to project themselves onto the characters. Indeed, Superhero films normally involve brutal and violent fighting scenes, which are supposed to appeal to male audiences. But when female fans immerse themselves in watching these films, the mechanism for them to feel empathy for these heroic figures or their female counterparts is very different from that of male audiences. Nevertheless, the community which practices superhero fan vidding on barrage video website is primarily of females. In fact, the appreciation of this kind of queer readings of original superhero stories and radical fan recreations is almost exclusively to female. In China, where the pressure of mainstream mass media culture perpetuates heteronormativity, where gendered social norms influence people's media consumption, and where the regulation of foreign media content follows a political agenda, this group of people are constantly aware of the queerness of their fannish activities.

The following example suggests the prejudice toward this particular fan community from more mainstream fan community. In the Captain America fan club residing in Baidu Tieba, a mainstream Chinese online community, someone with the user ID “Bai Cao You Xiang” addresses the negative feelings toward those “fujoshi girls” (females who prefer male-male romance narratives) and denounces their fandom based on pairing up superheroes as same-sex couples (Figure 3.5).



Figure 3.5 A post in Captain America fan community on Baidu Tieba claims negative feeling toward fans who pair Captain America with the Winter Soldier (Baidu Tieba, 2017).

This comment represents the common prejudice from some mainstream superhero fans toward those female fans celebrating queer readings and rewritings. In response, the latter group withdraws from the public media sphere and finds Bilibili, a site which rooted in the celebration of alternative cultures, as their habitat, where they can safely upload, circulate, celebrate, and discuss those fan videos. Bilibili and other barrage video websites are generally friendly to this kind of queer approach because these websites, similar to Boys' Love culture, originate from Japanese popular culture. These alternative and fan-initiated online spaces also create a grey area for keeping fan-created sensitive content beyond the reach of government's censorship, whose purpose is to eradicate officially published media content involving homosexuality and eroticism.

## CHAPTER 4 BARRAGE COMMENTS: CELEBRATION, SHARING, AND PARTICIPATION

### 4.1 Customizing the Form of Barrage Comments: The Anonymous Celebration for Personality

One of the biggest features of barrage comments compared with other comments existing in the conventional comments area inserted under videos is its anonymity. By sending barrage videos, the users are not having their IDs attached to the comments they make. By using online user IDs, the users have already disguised their offline identities, including names, ages and gender. Yet making barrage comments without having their web IDs exposed helps to further secure their feeling of privacy and freedom by offering them a platform to express their sentiments or opinions without worrying about being directly targeted by other users when conflicting views exist. Moreover, when their comments are addressing sensitive topics, such as cheering for the homosexual implications created in the fan-videos, barrage comments become their temporary safe harbor, in which exposure of both their online and offline identities are avoided.

During watching barrage videos, whenever these fans feel themselves resonate with the video content or pre-existing barrage comments representing other users' sentimental expressions, they can type in their own comments and they will instantly appear on the same frame in which the video is playing. For a user who participates in barrage video websites, all these animated comments embedded in the video stream will influence his/her perception of the original fan video content. Meanwhile, the users of barrage video websites are not entitled to pinpoint which user makes which comments, thus limiting their capabilities to specifically establish a person-to-person communication with another user. Nonetheless, this experience more or less resembles participation in an offline real-time

group discussion, in which people hear many people talking simultaneously and respond instantly to other participants in the conversation, in order to create synchronous interactions. The frame in which both the original video content and comments are displayed becomes a virtual room where people can enter at any moment and still enjoying and contributing to this pseudo-synchronous group conversation even though the actual time differences, regarding when one specific user comes to watch the video and make comments, do exist. The digital environment is more accessible and inclusive to a wider range of users than the analogue context for people to interact with each other. Considering the geographical distance between each barrage video audience, having a similar collective experience in a non-virtual space can be extremely difficult. Meanwhile, having the group conversations reside on the anonymous barrage video platforms, without their virtual identities being exposed during this process, eases the tension of different people holding different ideas.

Besides taking advantage of the anonymity of barrage comments, fans can still express their personality by utilizing different font size, color, and symbols in their comments, which can distinguish them from other comments in the feed. The barrage comment setting menu bar is installed under the embedded video-player on each video-viewing webpage. (Figure 4.1 & Figure 4.2)



Figure 4.1 The menu bar for adjusting the font and animation effect of barrage comments (Bilibili, 2017).



Figure 4.2 The menu bar for adjusting the color of barrage comments (Bilibili, 2017).

According to the rules set up by the barrage video platform administrators, only people who have registered for member accounts of barrage sites are entitled to make barrage comments. From the barrage comment menu bar, there is a page where the



administrators specify certain “barrage comment manners” that they suggest users to follow when making barrage comments. They also point out that users should adopt an in-site mutual supervision mechanism which means users can report other users’ improper manner to the administrators. Not only can the font and color of the comment be modified, but also its animation effect and position on the screen are all open for customization. The website provides several default choices to the users while users with some knowledge of web-editing language can make their own special effects through coding.

The default settings for barrage comments are in white color, medium size font, and scrolling form. Users can, however, specifically designate color, font size (small or medium) and the way in which their comments will appear on the screen (scrolling from right to left, pop up in the top area of the video player, and pop up in the bottom area of the video player) their comments will appear in the screen. Nevertheless, changing the color of the comment is the most common way to personalize the comments. In order to gain extra attention from other viewers of the video, users usually employ bright colors so that one single line of comment can stand out from other white-colored comments. Many users also tend to stay with using one color for all their comments in one video. By doing this, they can identify other fans while identifying themselves at the same time, and even create some conversational interaction. In the comment feed of most barrage videos, comments such as “blue-color don’t go” or “yellow-color, I’m also on your side supporting Captain America to be paired with Bucky” commonly appear.

Audiences of fan videos also establish some “common knowledge” in using particular colors for different types of barrage comments. For example, in the comment feed of both videos in which Marvel male superheroes are paired up with each other, users

usually make pink color comments (Figure 4.3) to indicating the romance when there are scenes containing direct physical contact between two superhero characters.

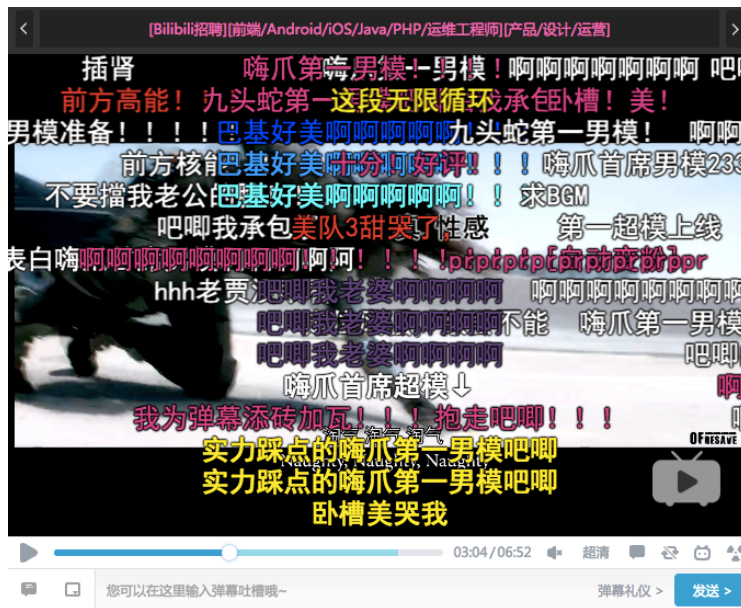


Figure 4.3 Several barrage comments in pink color commenting on the homo-romantic scenes (Bilibili, 2017).

Colored comments are also employed when a user wants to contribute to the video with some kind of annotation. As exemplified in Figure 4.4, the blue comment appearing in the upper section of the frame points out the name of the song that the vidder uses for this specific snippet. These annotations often include the name of the background music or the name of the original movie from which the footage is selected, especially when there exist a large number of remix practices. Since these comments are more informational rather than emotional, other users who later benefit from these annotating barrage comments tend to give credit to annotators by calling out the color they have used for their comments, such as making comments like “Thanks, blue-color!” in the same frame where the annotation appears. This practice become a widely-accepted tradition among barrage video websites, thus users who want to create annotating comments normally adopt a

particularly bright color to make themselves recognizable. In the video entitled “*It’s Definitely Not the Avengers*”, the vidder applied different songs as background music to different snippets, including both Western pop music and Chinese pop music, with each excerpt only lasts for a few seconds. In the barrage comment feed, there exist several comments asking the name of the specific song when the song playing during a particular snippet. To answer these questions, one annotator (who is identified with the blue color) makes his/her effort to provide prompt notes, including information about the song name and the artist, for every single song the vidder has added to the footage. As shown in Figure 4.5, a comment pops up in the upper area of this scene, pointing out the background song of this snippet by again using blue to color the comment, which is identical to the comment in Figure 4.4. The color, in this case, makes the user achieve a sense of satisfaction from being regarded as the authority and respected by fellow fans.



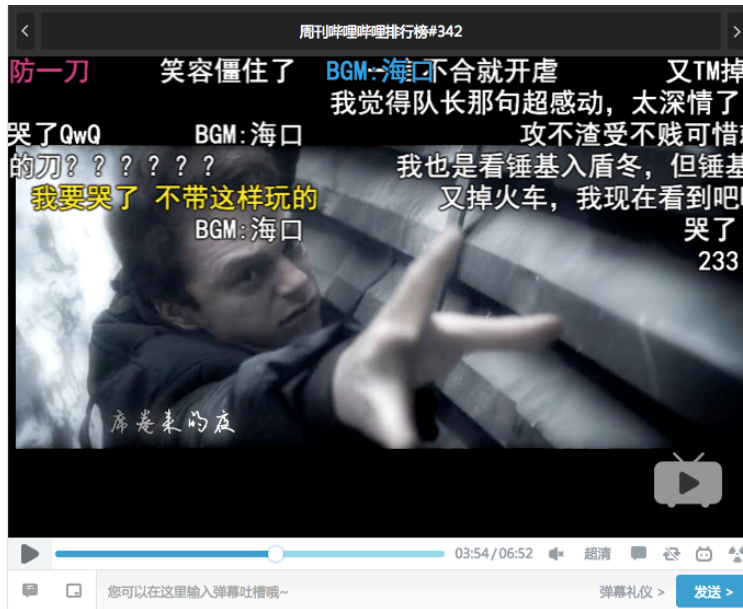


Figure 4.4-4.5 Comments using the same blue color to provide information about the background music that the vidder uses in different scenes (Bilibili, 2017)

In addition to using colors, another way to make barrage comments become distinguishable and individualized is to position the comments differently, instead of using the normal scrolling form. Other choices available to users include laying out their comments directly at the top of the screen, like a headline, or at the bottom of the screen where subtitles are normally embedded. In order to maximize the expression of personality and boost attention from other users, some users deliberately design their own commenting styles by combining both font and animation adjustments. One of the most popular forms of this practice, intending to represent strong affections for either the superhero characters or pay tribute to the creativity of the fan vidders, is to send several lines of very colorful comments of the same content to a particular frame of the video. (Figure 4.6)



Figure 4.6 Several lines of colorful comments of the same content (Bilibili, 2017).

This kind of comment sometimes overlays the screen completely and shows personality in a flamboyant and comparatively aggressive way, because the overlaying comments make it almost impossible for any others who later watch this video to clearly see the original video contents. By using these colorful but repetitive comments to cover the screen, the comment maker enjoys the freedom of declaring his/her ownership of a scene that he/she especially adores. At the same time, such a fan can visually represent and even exaggerate of his/her emotional expression.

In the suggestions for maintaining “barrage comment manners” made by the administrators of the website, this kind of comment is identified as “interrupting other people’s viewing experience”. Nonetheless, most barrage video users seem to be tolerant of this kind of practice, since it has almost become one of reasons that they choose barrage video websites: namely, a sense of freedom of expression that they might not be able to gain either in offline, everyday life or on other popular video-sharing and streaming platforms. For most users of barrage video websites, the anonymity guaranteed in the

online environment ensures that they do not need to sacrifice their personality and cater to other people's judgments. Such users can boldly dare to demonstrate their affection for the fictional characters because they see other members of the barrage video community as people with whom they share the fan identity and with whom they can celebrate their fandom together in an unconventional, fannish way. In this regard, barrage video websites participants accept and embrace other people's practicing of barrage comments to reaffirm their own individuality and sense of belonging to this cultural group. Thus, the participatory experience on barrage video websites is valued not only because of the accessibility to creative fan-videos, but also because these sites are open to cultural minorities whose fan activities are sometimes considered as bizarre or overly-enthusiastic by mass cultural consumers.

#### **4.2 Sharing Emotions and Opinions: The Crowd-watching and –Commenting Experience**

One of the most distinguishable features of barrage comments, when compared with normal comments appearing in the comment sections on video sharing websites, is that they are comparatively short and fragmented as expression and information. Because of the special layout of barrage comments allows the commentary content coming through the screen in only a single line, users adjust their commenting style to short sentences or expressions companied by emoticons.

For the two fan-vids taken as examples in this research, the 1 minute 30 seconds “[Stukcky/Evanstan] *Fifty Shades of Grey Official Trailer (Humor)*” receives 2,279 barrage comments and 383 normal comments, while the 7-minute-long “*It’s Definitely Not the Avengers*” attracts 12,000 barrage comments and 1,095 normal comments. In general,

barrage comments, as attached to a specific frame, reflect viewers' instantaneous emotion, either love or hate, and opinions addressing the remixed content or the characters. Yet if we compare the conventional comments and the barrage comments, we find that many conventional comments are more informative or elaborate. Because when taken out from the video context and listed in a separate section, conventional comments require their makers to make clear reference to the original content directly. In contrast, barrage comments are embedded in the video streaming and attached to a certain frame from the moment they are created, so that they are already contextualized messages, which makes it easier for later viewers to understand and echo, even though these comments are not particularly explanatory. Also, because barrage comments can be made and read while the video content is consumed and do not require users to get to another separate section for comments, there exist more barrage comments than conventional comments for most videos circulated on barrage video websites.

Comparing conventional comments with barrage comments generated for the two fan-vids under consideration, I find that the majority of conventional comments pay tribute to the video maker's creative work or express generally affectionate feelings for these fan-vids with queer interpretations of the original Marvel movies. These kinds of queer readings and interpretation are highly praised and categorized by barrage video community members as "brain hole" ("脑洞" in Chinese), which refers to unrealistic imagination and fantasy. The barrage comments, however, are more diverse in terms of their contents. Some of the most common barrage comments are just a string of onomatopoeia, such as "Hahahahaha" ("哈哈哈哈哈" in Chinese), or emoticons and internet slang, such as "2333333333", which has no literal meaning yet is extremely popular among Chinese

netizens for indicating “bursting into laughter”. Since barrage comments and normal comments coexist on barrage video websites, their respective general functions seem to diverge, while still overlapping in a lot of cases. The abundant use of onomatopoeia words in barrage comment exemplifies that barrage comments are more or less like instantaneous reactions to other users’ comments and pseudo-real-time reflections of the video content. The action of making these comments sometimes is sometimes driven by people’s subconscious without deliberation, thus demonstrating some degree of homogeneity and repetitiveness.

In the barrage comments of “[*Stukcky/Evanstan*] *Fifty Shades of Grey Official Trailer (Humor)*” and “*It’s Definitely Not the Avengers*”, fans tend to express their support for a certain “couple” within a superhero fandom. Coupling a pair of superhero means fans fantasize two superheroes having some form of queer relationship, instead of picturing them as a hero and his sidekick. Chinese fans often use “CP” as the abbreviation for the word “couple” in their comments. The most popular CPs among the Marvel superheroes include Captain America paired with Winter Soldier, and Thor with Loki. Although the “coupling” ideas are shared among most of the fans watching these videos, there are still different opinions within the fan group about which two superheroes should be paired up. For example, Captain America can be coupled either with Winter Soldier (because of their old friendship and later dramatic confrontations) or with Iron Man (in consideration of their opposed personality and shared experience of cooperating for the Avengers). Chinese fans of Marvel superheroes also create names for a certain couple, for instance the “CP” name for Captain America and Winter Soldier is “Shield and Winter” (“盾冬” in Chinese) while for Captain America and Iron Man is “Shield and Iron” (“盾铁” in Chinese). The



knowledge of different CPs, and the abbreviations for each CP, becomes common knowledge within the fan community. By using these slang terms, which normally absent from conversations between fans and those who are not member of this community, people who actively engage in their fandom on barrage video websites accomplish an identity re-affirming process.

Since fans have diverse interpretations of Captain America's possible pairing with different superheroes, they tend to enthusiastically advocate a certain "CP" in the barrage comments, to stimulate responses from other avid fans. Users usually use the same exclamatory form, as an indication of their fierce love, to format their comments, and embed the name of the couple in these sentences to voice their strong support for one particular couple. For "[*Stukcky/Evanstan*] *Fifty Shades of Grey Official Trailer (Humor)*", the creator whose user ID is "of Resave" ("奥夫" in Chinese) adopts "Stucky" and "Evanstan" (the CP name for Captain America and the Winter Soldier that the creator borrows from Western Marvel superhero fan community) as hashtags of this video. Therefore, most of the barrage comment makers of this video are all supporters of the CP "Shield and Winter". In the barrage comment feed, how this CP's interactions are portrayed erotically keeps being appreciated, with different fans cheering "Shield and Winter should be together forever!" one after another.

The creator also notes in the caption that this video depicts a "BDSM" (Referring to a variety of often erotic practices or roleplaying involving bondage, discipline, dominance and submission, sadomasochism, and other related interpersonal dynamics) - inclined and abnormal homosexual love relationship between these two superheroes. This video also contains more sexually implied content, thus different fans constantly repeat

such comments, appreciating the erotic plots of this video, writing “Bucky is so beautiful” or “If I were a man, I would want to be with Bucky”. In the Chinese social and cultural context, fans can access this kind of media content (employing homosexual interpretation, both fan-made or mass-produced), almost exclusively on barrage video websites. Western scholars like Henry Jenkins view “Slash” fiction, a popular fan fiction genre that focuses on interpersonal attraction and sexual relationships between fictional characters of the same sex, as offering its readers voyeuristic pleasure, while also establishing “a homosocial-homoerotic continuum as an alternative to repressive and hierarchical male sexuality” (Jenkins 219). Similarly, for Chinese audiences of these fan-videos, whose interests in this field cannot always be announced loudly in public or understood by mainstream fans, barrage comments become their outlet for safely pouring out their feelings and gaining endorsement from their fellow fans.

As a unique outlet, the barrage comment feed provides users with a feeling of being surrounded by a crowd of people who are with them watching this video together simultaneously due to its “pseudo-synchronicity”. At the same time, they are entitled to see and respond to other people’s comments, thus stimulating their desire to chime in with conversations or echo other people’s opinion. In the case of fan-videos, in which fan commentary is always being divergent from the film content, those who appreciate this kind of unconventional reading will not usually share their thoughts in more mainstream fan communities. Similarly, even though they tend to share their unique ways of viewing and reading, not much response will be generated in other fans. Especially in the case of superhero fandom, the mainstream fan community is normally male-dominated which might also lead to some disputes among different commenters because of the intolerance

towards the homosexual interpretations. In contrast, on the barrage video websites, these queer interpretations become, in a sense, the more “mainstream” voice. Thus, in sharing emotions and opinions through the barrage comment feed, these fans achieve gratification not only from feeling accepted and free to express their unconventional pleasure, but also from socializing with other fans and validating their fan identities.

### **4.3 Authorizing and Blocking the Accessibility: The Hierarchy in Barrage Video Websites**

Most scholars who study participatory culture assert that online platforms, such as video sharing websites, have nurtured an environment in which the barrier for people to participate in media consumption, circulation, and creation is comparatively low, for example on YouTube platform only an email address is required to make public comments (Chau 67). Yet there are some features on the barrage video sites and in the barrage comment feed, that suggest that even though the barrier for entering is low, some major functions still pose some restrictions to barrage video audiences in terms of different levels of accessibility to the content and the ability to make individualized comments. The unique experience offered by these platforms, including participating in the collective creative process and socializing with other users by establishing interaction using barrage comments, is therefore discounted for users who don't have the membership.

Different users are granted access to different amount of videos depending on whether or not they are registered members of the site or not. For anyone who browses these barrage video websites, most video content, and the barrage comments attached to it, is available for viewing. However, the website administrator (the company running the website) of a barrage site like Bilibili, on which the two videos considered here circulate,

has set up a filter mechanism in the search system, which gives its registered members access rights to some more sensitive or copyright-concerned content. Before registering as a member, a “visitor” on Bilibili who searches for some controversial videos such as those contain direct sexual or violent depictions or relate to sensitive topics including homosexuality, cannot be directed to the actual videos even though they appear in one’s search result. Only after users register for the membership on the site can they have full access to all content circulated on barrage video websites. Also, the authorization to upload videos and make barrage comments comes with the membership activation. In other words, visitors cannot completely embrace the participatory experience provided by these platforms, since they are permitted to browse only some pre-existing content, and are not be able to contribute to this community in the form of artistic expression, emotion sharing, and commentary making.

The membership registration process itself for barrage video website also involves some kind of exclusiveness in terms of knowledge of certain popular culture is required for becoming the member. Barrage video platforms in China initially were created and dominated by Chinese fans of Japanese animation, comics and video games (hereafter ACG). As a result, ever since Bilibili adopted a similar membership administration mechanism as their Japanese precedent (Niconico). People who want to be registered as official members of this site need to pass a test on their knowledge of the Japanese ACG culture to acquire access. Though barrage video sites, including Bilibili, now involve diverse content, addressing popular culture topics not solely restricted to Japan-related subjects, the test for membership registration remains and so do the questions in the test. As a result, the barrage comments emerging on this platform are predominately made by a

group of people who are selected by the administrator of the site using the membership test and are most likely to be avid ACG fans.

Although superhero fan videos are no longer derived from Japanese media content, fans' ways of queerly interpreting and appreciating the stories of these superhero characters still share an important branch of ACG culture, namely Boys' Love. People belonging to the ACG community, or more specifically the Boys' Love community, are those who initially started the tradition of making fan videos with unconventional sexual interpretations. So often that these two groups, one for ACG lovers and the other for superhero fan barrage video audiences, largely overlap on barrage video websites. In this regard, when comparing the accessibility and rights that visitors and members have on barrage video websites, I find an underlying hierarchy in users, at the top of which are those who are familiar with the ACG culture and more experienced with using the barrage form of comments. Normally, the higher-level users are people not only equipped with knowledge of Japanese ACG culture but who also demonstrate capabilities in media production. Thus, other users will regard active uploaders of fan videos as high-level users because of their capability of re-product the media content.

Differences also exist among users considering the comment blocking function that is available to them. Ordinary users and even visitors, during their viewing experience, can block barrage comments using different parameters, including keywords, user ID, font size, position on the screen, animation type, and so on. (Figure 4.7) Administrators of the barrage website keep this function available to everyone, because they are aware that not everyone will behave in an appropriate barrage comment manner, and people have different levels of acceptance in regard of what kind of text can appear on the screen with the video

feed. But blocking comments does not mean those comments are no longer documented in the server; in fact, the setting for blocking is temporary, and only applied to a specific video for each individual user. It is the uploaders, those who can claim the ownership of the video they make, are the only people entitled to delete any specific barrage comment from other users, which are then omitted from his/her videos permanently.

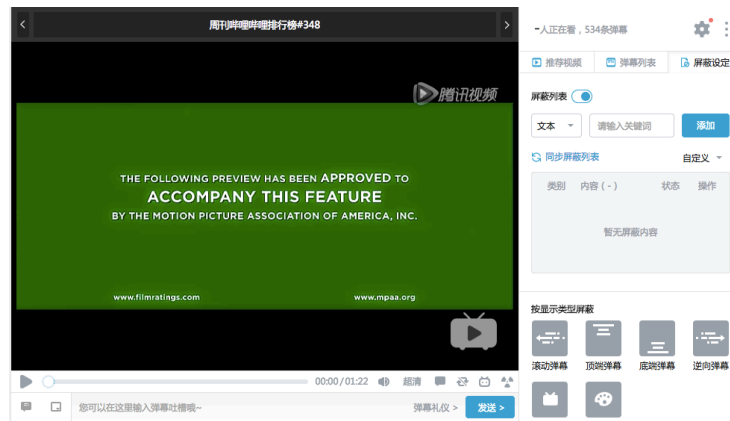


Figure 4.7 Blocking preferences menu bar embedded in the barrage video player (Bilibili, 2017).

In the realm of superhero fan videos, sometimes uploaders are cautious about pairing up only fictional superhero characters (Captain America and the Winter Soldier) instead of the actors who play superhero roles in Marvel movies (Chris Evans and Sebastian Stan). They follow this rule to draw a distinction between the fictional world in which they can develop their fantasy and the real world in order to avoid entangling the actors into the controversial discussion about sexual orientation. So, they will eliminate any comment suggesting a fantasy of two actors having a queer relationship. Some uploaders tend to have peculiar personal preferences for one couple of superheroes. In addition to tagging their videos with the name of CP, they can also employ their rights to delete any comments that do not address the advocacy for the same CP that they are keen on. For example, “of Resave” tags his/her video “*It’s Definitely Not the Avengers*” and

“*[Stukcky/Evanstan] Fifty Shades of Grey Official Trailer (Humor)*” with all the CPs she depicts in these two videos in case people who support other CPs will dislike the video or leave unfriendly comments.

Likewise, differentiations among various users exist in their choices of barrage commenting styles. Basically, users need to be authorized and approved by the uploaders to utilize advanced techniques, such as animation effects, in their barrage comments. Every time users want to create a highly-individualized barrage comment, they also need to pay a certain amount of “member coin”, a virtual currency that accumulates as users participate more actively in the barrage video community.

## CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION

In these fan videos circulated on barrage video websites, Chinese fan vidders mix up the superhero's imagery, annotative lyrics, and remixed scripts to provide gender representations. They also exploit the montage technique to illustrate their imagination about romance and sexuality. One characteristic of this practice that, at the very heart of queer interpretation, is that these fans break down the patterned and structured content provided by the dominant media industry. They do so by appropriating pre-made material, interpreting it in their own discursive way, writing "fanonical" stories that counter the canonical ones.

Queer, as an umbrella concept, has many different facets besides the identity of being gay and homosexuality. Renowned queer studies scholar Eve Sedgwick argues in her book *Tendencies* that "queer" involves the "open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excess of meaning [that occur] when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically" (8). That said, the superhero characters that Chinese fans rewrite in their fan videos are not queerly masculine simply because their heterosexuality is reversed by fans who pair these male characters up and there are homoerotic depictions of same-sex romance stories in the fan-generated content. More importantly, these queerly masculine portrayals attempt to undermine the normatively gendered superhero characters in order to reject conventional, monolithic, and binary understandings of gender and sexuality. Considering the voyeuristic pleasure provided by the subtle portrayals of same-sex eroticism, and the opportunity to imaginarily explore unconventional erotic practices such as BDSM, I would also argue that such collective fan activities challenge (or "queer")



people's common perceptions about how heterosexual-identified women, that is most fans explore their own sexuality and fulfill their sexual fantasies.

This fan practice is also heavily influenced by Japanese Yaoi culture, which according to Japanese scholar Mizoguchi (164), is “an unprecedented, effective political arena for women with the potential for activism.” In discussing these Yaoi texts, scholars also propose that the reason behind the portrayal of male characters with traditionally “feminine” characteristics, that are created for heterosexual-identified girls and women to consume, is that these male characters actually symbolize the female readers themselves. By depicting the ostensibly male bodies in these texts, female creators and readers disguise themselves in male bodies, and are accordingly finding themselves be able “to pursue otherwise off-limits social status and power and to distance themselves from the troublesome, sometimes fearful, associations of female sexuality” (Martin 366). However, such fan videos, featuring superheroes in queer love relationships, share both similarities and differences with fictions and videos influenced by Boys' Love culture. One of the biggest differences manifested here is that, since the vidders are using footage only from pre-existing films, they refrain the hyper-masculine appearance and muscular looks, whereas the BL content, whether visual or textual, sometimes depicts the “bottom” characters (those who receive penetration in a homosexual intercourse) with feminine physiological features. These characters also tend to perform more submissive or subordinate roles in the romantic relationship, especially when contrasted with the “top” characters (those who give penetration in a homosexual intercourse). In contrast, within the superhero fan videos, when fans assign “top” and “bottom” roles to different superheroes to pair them up, the “top” roles and the “bottom” roles are always

physiologically equally strong. Also, superheroes' personality traits cannot be dramatically modified because of the constraints set by the limited amount of cinematic material that is available. Hence, because the superhero films generally emphasize fighting scenes, the portrayals of chemistry between protagonists are always accomplished more by fighting scenes or ambiguous narratives instead of actual romantic scenes. This feature also differs most superhero fan videos from their counterparts generated from fandoms surrounding TV shows or films that contain more romance-related narratives. Thus, the literacy of these fan videos requires certain knowledge about the superhero genre. And since the mainstream online community usually hold hostility against these queer readings and creations, the devotees of these alternative narratives need to endure being marginalized by those who do share the knowledge base of this film genre, however, wouldn't recognize the value of their works.

In the Chinese media ecology, this kind of fannish activity still hasn't become influential enough to ensure that mainstream media consumers will develop a more open and inclusive attitude toward it. Although some of the fannish vocabularies created by fans who are part of this community, such as "CP", and the idea of pairing up superheroes, made their way into mainstream media outlets or influenced the way that Marvel promotes its films, the immersive environment for appreciating and discussing these videos is still accessible only through barrage video websites. The role that this kind of practice plays in Chinese popular culture still has a long way to go before it reaches a state similar to how Yaoi culture weighs in Japanese popular culture. Although Chinese fans may think participating in these fan activities is an outlet for expressing themselves more freely, the potential for this activity to become the cornerstone of some kind of female and queer

activism is restricted in the Chinese social and cultural context primarily because of more tangible social control and a stricter censorship system. In China, this activist subculture becomes a counterpublic, which according to literary critic Michael Warner is “formed by their conflict with the norms and contexts of their cultural environment” (63).

Within this counterpublic, fans find entertaining ways to explore non-straight sexualities and the queer perspectives in order to understand and reimagine superhero films. In fact, gender and sexuality are now being hashed out more publicly within the realm of Chinese popular culture and mass media. China now has transgender and openly gay celebrities (Xing Jin and Kangyong Cai) hosting mainstream TV programs, television dramas dedicated to depicting women seeking the balance between career and family, and internet-published program debates about whether homosexual people should openly come out in the society or not (the episode on homosexuality-related topic of the program *Qi Pa Shuo* was later banned and became inaccessible). Though the mainstream discourse on gender and sexuality is still not completely open and progressive or radical enough in China, people’s awareness of this kind of discussion has, in any case, been heightened. Producing and commenting on fan videos that fantasize about homosexual relationships and use gendered words ambiguously echoes, to some extent, the developing discussion of gender and sexuality issues that used to be regarded as socially taboo and forbidden. There are undoubtedly differences between the symbolic and imaginary same-sex relationships portrayed in these fan videos and gay (or queer) experiences in real lives. Recognizing these differences, I would define this fan counterpublic as one that provides providing an alternative arena for a small group of people to reexamine the ongoing agenda of queerness

and non-binary gender roles, rather than drawing the conclusion that these videos widely disseminate the anti-homophobic appeal.

At the same time, the agency of this subculture also enables women who nurture and animate this kind of practice to achieve some form of gender autonomy and sexual liberation. As I have suggested, this sense of gender autonomy is generated partially through the objectification of superheroes' hyper masculine bodies. Because of the ongoing objectification of women within patriarchal culture as manifested in media content, the gaze directed at the muscular bodies and the homoerotic scenes embodies a 'payback' created by female vidders and viewers. No matter what these women's actual sexual orientations are, and how different fans' takeaways from these videos might be, these fans, as a group, embrace the homosexual-themed materials in a relatively tolerant and receptive way. This tolerance can also be read as a sign that some of the Chinese younger generation, especially females, now have more liberal attitudes towards male homosexuality and other queer categories, as well as their knowing that they have relatively more freedom to semi-openly discuss these topics. Beyond the appreciation of homosexuality, female fans' engagement with these videos and their emotional investment in appreciating the queerly masculine, which is effectively a counter mainstream gender stereotype manifesto, also demonstrates their determination to question the normatively binary representations of genders, and explore more diverse and fluid sexual identities.

In this regard, I also want to address the importance of both superhero films and barrage video as nationally foreign, in terms of how that influences Chinese fans' ways of interacting with them. Superhero films, as a western genre, do not share much cultural identification with Chinese audiences. Indeed, as the product of Hollywood, they not only

present heroic masculine characters but are also closely associated with the American culture and individual heroism. Such heroic elements are not only foreign to Chinese superhero fans while but also offer them an idealized image of America. In this regard, much as how scholar Irvine describes Taiwanese Boys' Love fans' experience with Japanese BL manga, Chinese fan vidders and barrage video viewers not only “engage imaginatively with what is ostensibly a sex-gender ‘other’”, but also engage with “a cultural-national other”: America (Martin 375). Indeed, considering that most superhero characters are mostly white, male, and strong, I want to propose that this characteristic of superhero films secures Chinese fans first a sense of safety by providing ways to avoid accusations of infringing Chinese gender norms. This avoidance is because when they remix this foreign content, these fans are not directly imposing queer readings on Chinese male characters.

In fact, Chinese understandings of gender roles and sexuality are generally different from their American counterparts, and Chinese culture's own media content also presents masculinity in a different way. For instance, in Hollywood films, white masculinity itself also embodies racial and gender supremacy. Yet on barrage video websites, there also exist fan videos remixing Chinese TV shows and films with queer interpretations of the original characters. Hence, in future studies, it would be worthwhile to explore whether there are differences between the queer masculinity portrayed in fan videos, remixing source texts produced by different cultures, as well as how problematic racial presentations influence Chinese fans' understanding of superhero films.

As I have noted, moreover, barrage video website, the platform that hosts these videos and fan activities, also originates from Japan. This feature caters to Chinese fans'

need to either seek a haven (and not integrate themselves into the mainstream) or to find alternative cultural participation experience, one not available in the Chinese media outlets. Accordingly, barrage video websites have now become extremely popular among Chinese people who identify themselves as avid fans of popular culture or subcultures, appreciate a non-mainstream way of watching videos with pseudo-synchronous commentaries, and are eager to share their own remixes of original media content. It is on these barrage video websites that videos catering to fans' imagination of queer and unconventional romance relationship between two male superheroes are actively created, widely circulated, and highly praised.

By making barrage comments and having their offline identities secured by the online platform's anonymity, fans who share similar interests in queerly reading and remixing superhero movie content enjoy the virtual company of each other and cheer together freely for their fandom. In addition, their fondness for barrage comments also results from the possibility of expressing their personalities through customizing color, font size and animation of their comments, which is achievable only by barrage comments (compared with traditional form of comments which appears on most mainstream online video platforms).

Though the overlaid barrage comments diminish the quality of the original video content in some ways, they offer users of barrage video websites a unique kind of experience. It is an experience treasured especially by those who do not receive much acknowledgment in the mainstream fan community, because of their peculiar love for these homosexual-homoerotic interpretations. Watching and making barrage comments creates

a feeling of immersion in a crowd, constituted by people who share similar fan identities and understand each other's language and emotions.

In comparison with traditional media content outlets, online platforms such as barrage video websites have given more freedom to fans who used to be in a rather passive consumer's position. Though the original dynamic between fans and media producers has been challenged by the emergence of these online communities, the division of fans' roles, according to who is the content creator and who is the commenter/viewer, still reveals a differentiation of accessibility and rights. Under the overall category of fans, a hierarchy persists in many forms. Yet fans who rewrite and enjoy superhero stories with queer interpretations find barrage video website a place that is more inclusive and open for them to circulate and discuss queer texts, and free of the marginalization forced by those who are at higher level of the cultural consumption hierarchy. As I discuss in this thesis, however, within the barrage video community, hierarchy still manifests itself in terms of different styles of barrage comments that can be used by fans at different levels, as well as by the authorizing and authorized power of their discourse, and the privilege to access exclusive content.

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