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Translational queer fandom under “*han-xu*” politics in China: A case study of the Wanwan subtitling group

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Abstract

Building on previous studies about “non-confrontational” activism among Chinese queer translation groups, this article explores the subtitling and social media practices of Wanwan, a Chinese lesbian-oriented fansubbing group, from a cultural–ideological perspective. It argues that Wanwan’s practices can be better understood in the context of *han-xu* (含蓄, reticent) politics, shaping a non-confrontational activist approach to fansubbing. This approach is manifested through diversified content that involves both queer and non-queer media resources, recontextualised translated subtitles, the creation of spaces for interactions, and the production of reflexive paratexts that refrain from overt criticism of cis-heteronormativity. The article contributes to an understanding of translational queer fandom in China by arguing that groups such as Wanwan not only foster a dedicated fan community and a “by queers for queers” world, but also bridge the communication gap between queer communities and cis-heteronormative groups without exacerbating the cultural and ideological tensions that might otherwise set them apart.

Keywords: translational queer fandom; Wanwan; queer activism; *han-xu* politics; fansubbing

1. Introduction

In the wake of burgeoning digital innovations such as Web 2.0, BitTorrent, and algorithmic tools, individuals connect across territories by means of technological systems, and in so doing (re-)manufacture decentralised networks of content (Tymoczko, 2005). This socio-technological phenomenon has drawn the attention of a growing number of scholars in translation studies who are faced with the challenges of elucidating the increasingly complex fan translation practices emerging in this context and what that may entail for the concept of translation. One particular dimension of this phenomenon is transcultural fandom and, more specifically, “translational fandom” that “focuses on the translation of texts as part of the fan

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community” (Guo & Evans, 2020, p. 519). This includes fansubbing (fan subtitling), where fans volunteer to create non-official subtitles of texts such as comics, anime, video games, TV shows, and films, which they share with their community because the texts are significant to it (Evans, 2019).

As a “by fans for fans” practice (Díaz-Cintas & Muñoz Sánchez, 2006; Leonard, 2005; Nornes, 1999), fansubbing constitutes a “disruptive force” (Orrego-Carmona & Lee, 2017, p. 5). Self-appointing themselves as producers and self-representing themselves as part of the target audience (Cronin, 2012), fansubbers – the core agents of fansubbing – select and translate content independently, often for themselves and like-minded individuals. In order to share cross-cultural knowledge, they freely circulate content that may be under copyright, non-licensed, or outside of licensing agreements in order to avoid potential legal consequences. As a result, various fansubbed products represent a “cultural resistance against global capitalist structures” (Pérez-González, 2012, p. 6), ushering in a power shift from elites to the grassroots, as fansubbers actively intervene in and disrupt the dominant media apparatus (Hartley, 2004).

The disruptive force of fansubbing is even more apparent in subtitling activism (Baker, 2016, 2018; Pérez-González, 2016), which goes beyond “fun for fun” (Wang & Zhang, 2017, p. 314). A case in point is queer fansubbing, which both offers queer media fans a space to access, interact with and interpret texts and creates a queer world via fansubbers’ interpretations of texts and subtitling practices. In doing so, it renders queer fansubbing a “translational queer fandom”, where “[queer] translation can be a significant fan activity that serves the fan community” (see Guo & Evans, 2020, p. 525). Queer fansubbing groups collect materials about queerⁱ to disrupt the established structure of knowledge and power (Baer & Kaindl, 2018). They include localised explanations or culturally specific annotations in subtitling (Guo, 2021) to bring queer knowledge and culture to the target audience. They may also employ social media and other online platforms to publicise queer content and discussions about queer rights and visibility, in this way contributing to a transnational dialogue on queer issues (Guo & Evans, 2020).

In China specifically, queer fansubbing groups challenge the perpetuation of societal norms centred on heterosexuality by both introducing non-Chinese queer media and creating an “extended and expansive repertoire” of the works (Lee, 2021, p. 9). This practice often stands in contrast to official subtitling, which usually omits or reframes queer elements for public screening (Baer, 2011; Jin & Ye, 2023). The subtitling strategies controlled by the authorities are rooted in conservative and overwhelming structural social–familial biases towards cis-heteronormative groups. These biases are usually attributed to Confucian values that emphasise familial harmony, filial piety, and social stability – often at the expense of diversity and the expression of individual identity (Whyke, 2023). Such values are also sustained through legal and policy frameworks that limit the visibility and rights of queer communities (Liu, 2013). In mainland China, where the English-language news media are regulated by the Chinese

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Communist Party (CCP) (Wang & Ma, 2021), queer communities’ discursive space and representation are largely constrained. They are often portrayed as elements of the West’s cultural invasion, which overshadows their historical presence and legitimacy as part of the local landscape.

In this context, audiovisual products are subjected to vetting before streaming, a censorship process involving multiple layers of review and leading to editing or outright bans if any content is flagged as being potentially controversial (Lagerkvist, 2011). Entertainment genres such as *danmei* dramas (耽美, yaoi, a genre of literature and other fictional media featuring romantic relationships between male characters) are banned because they are considered unhealthy and contrary to the mainstream values that youngsters are expected to embrace. Owing to censorship and societal taboos regarding queer content in China, Chinese fans made *danmei* much more implicit, using bromance to mask male–male romance (Hu & Wang, 2021); they also developed the codeword “socialist brotherhood” to refer to it. In spite of this, in *danmei* TV adaptations such as *The Guardian* (Zhou & Xie, 2018), *The Untamed* (Zheng & Chen, 2019), and *Word of Honor* (Chen et al., 2021), the genre has been labelled as “deformed aesthetics” and could not easily circumvent censorship (Ng & Li, 2020). Even after its release, if a media product raises social concern and debates among the public, the state can intervene and ban it from being broadcast (Zhang, 2023). In January 2022, for instance, the National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA) issued a comprehensive ban on *danmei* TV adaptations (Zhang, 2023), which extended to even subtler same-sex romance scenes on CCP-sanctioned media platforms.

Despite the increasingly harsh and inimical top-down restriction of queer media, grassroots fansubbing groups keep challenging the entrenched cis-heteronormativity in Chinese society. Championing what I call a “by queer for queer” spirit, they self-select and self-subtitle non-Chinese audiovisual products. Their practices seem to feature non-confrontational activism through subtitling and media discourse. To explore the non-confrontational practices of Chinese queer fansubbing groups further, this article focuses on the subtitling and social media practices and strategies of Wanwan, a Chinese lesbian fansubbing group. This case study attempts to cast light on translational queer fandom in China from a cultural–ideological perspective. The article argues that “*han-xu*” politics, an aesthetic–ethical value system in China, can provide an appropriate framework with which to understand and account for queer fansubbing groups’ non-confrontational activist practices in the Chinese context. It shows that Wanwan’s non-confrontational approach has the potential both to create a queer world for queers and to bridge the communication gap between queer communities and cis-heteronormative groups without exacerbating cultural and ideological tensions that may set them apart.

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2. Non-confrontational fansubbing activism in China: *han-xu* politics

Research into Chinese queer fansubbing groups reveals the existence of activist translational and discursive practices. In a case study on the translation of *Carol* (Haynes, 2015), Guo and Evans (2020) found that Jihua, a Chinese lesbian fansubbing group now defunct because of a company’s commercial infringement, strategically employed techniques such as the reformulation of subtitles to negotiate queer discourse and the use of paratextual apparatus such as introductions, discussion forums, and viewers’ comments to render knowledge of homosexuality more accessible to the Chinese public.

Another important aspect highlighted in this strand of research is the socio-political commitment of activist fansubbers towards their communities. For instance, Xiaoxin, a Chinese queer fansubber, shares that he had to continue subtitling despite his shrinking availability for and interest in films, out of concern that “if we don’t, no one will” (Yang & Tobin, 2020, para. 18). In the wake of an increasingly strict “China model of Internet censorship” (Wang & Tan, 2023, p. 2555) of homo/lesbo/transphobia, bilingual or multilingual fansubbers such as Xiaoxin tend to prioritise queer rights advocacy over fan entertainment. By selecting, translating, and providing access to queer media from various cultures, they collaborate in the dissemination of narratives that often challenge mainstream portrayals of queers, contribute to a fairer representation of diverse identities (Yang & Tobin, 2020), and nurture and sustain queer activism in the sense that they resist patriarchy and cis-heteronormativity (Guo, 2021).

This advocacy work can take the shape of creating a queer world without mentioning political issues. In her study of JoinFeminism’s and Zhihe Society’sⁱⁱ translations of queer-related media materials, Jiang (2022, p. 374) found that the two groups adopt “a non-confrontational approach” (Cao & Guo, 2016, p. 507) to resist the repression of heteronormative sexuality in Chinese mainstream social media, in line with the advocacy work of many civil rights organizations in China. Similarly, Guo and Evans (2023) argue that many informal queer film screenings in mainland China uphold a “low profile” (2023, p. 230). Last but not least, Jiang (2022) underlines the fact that this non-confrontational approach may constitute an “ideal” compromise for queer activist translation groups to “survive, cooperate and grow amidst these ideological tensions” (2022, p. 13).

Han-xu politics provides a useful framework with which to account for this non-confrontational approach in a Chinese queer fansubbing context. In Chinese, *han-xu* (含蓄, reticence) refers to implicitness, reserve, or conservation, which has been upheld in Confucian aesthetics (Liu & Ding, 2005). This aesthetic–ethical value heavily influences the communication of sexuality in China, where expressions often go beyond literal meanings (Liu & Ding, 2005). *Han-xu* functions as a speech act in the Chinese context (Liu & Ding, 2005), reinforcing the power of heteronormativity and leaving the often unspeakable and unsaid LGBTQ+ individuals in the shadows. For example, in their analysis of Du Xioulan’s fiction *The Unfilial Daughter*, Liu and

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Ding (2005) argue that the tragic fate of the lesbian protagonist, Angel, and the suicide of her former lover, Qing-qing, stem from homophobia. Homophobia serves as a prevailing norm in both speech and behaviour across various social contexts, including work, home, and society at large. It perpetuates the idea of an untainted, unsullied, and harmonious social order within the Chinese structure. Through the rhetoric of *han-xu*, homophobia has been perpetuated in the Chinese socio-familial continuum and the cultural–ideological system. Those who conform to the conventional socio-familial order are expected to maintain reticence in self-discipline, whereas those who do not benefit from their role in that order are pressurised into a self-discipline of reticence (Song, 2021). Recent studies suggest that *han-xu* is pervasive in various domains, including but not limited to family discourse (Huang, 2023; Huang & Brouwer, 2018), corporate activism (Jung, 2022), queer documentary (Cheng, 2020; Liu, 2023), and queer entertainment (Hu et al., 2023; Nunes, 2018). These studies demonstrate that queerness is culturally suppressed and politically controlled in mainland China. For example, when an individual feels inclined to come out, Chinese family members tend to drop hints to the parents about the impending event or the sexual identity of the individual. This is in contrast to other countries, such as the United States, where queer identities are often explicitly verbalised (Huang & Brouwer, 2018).

Han-xu encompasses *han* (holding back) and *xu* (storing up). Hu et al. (2023) illustrate the way in which the twofold strategy is employed by the Chinese party-state power: *xu*, as a default strategy of the invisibilisation and marginalisation of queer elements, and *han*, a crackdown strategy on an overheated queer culture. The two strategies are evident in the CCP’s regulatory system, which emphasises the party’s leadership in all respects (Xi, 2017). These include strict control over online narratives to combat the dissemination of views that are seen as contrary to CCP ideology (Qiushi, 2021; Wang & Zhang, 2017). To “ensure the stability of a regime that remains unchanged in fundamental ways” (Bandurski, 2018, p. 384) with advanced censorship technologies and mechanisms in place (e.g., a public opinion monitoring system, 輿情监测系统), *han* and *xu* are interchangeably employed to detect, track down, and eliminate viral content and non-normative groups that might engender social instability (Hu et al., 2023; Liu & Zhao, 2021; Wang, 2019).

Specifically for queer communities, *xu*, a synergetic invisibilisation and marginalisation strategy, has long been pursued. The invisibilisation strategy was evident in the state’s earlier attitude towards homosexuality: “no encouraging, no discouraging, and no promoting” (Zhao et al., 2017, p. xvi). For a long time, the state regulations issued by Chinese official departments had intentionally adopted an ambiguous tone, criticising *danmei* for its vulgarity, obscenity, and distorted aesthetics without explicitly mentioning homosexuality (Hu et al., 2023). When Jinjiang, one of China’s largest online *danmei* literature platforms, was fined in 2018, the authorities only claimed Jinjiang’s violation of the “Internet information communication order” without explicitly stating the censorship of male homo-eroticism (Hu et al., 2023, p. 285).

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In response to the *xu* strategy, media agents self-invisibilise and self-marginalise queer content to bypass censorship. For instance, romantic scenes between male protagonists in *The Guardian* (Zhou & Xie, 2018) were edited out by its producer when streamed by Youku, a Chinese video platform (Zhang, 2018). Similarly, CCP-regulated news media often adopt a marginalisation strategy to represent queer groups and reframe stories and their characters. A case in point is Xinhua’s (a CCP-led news agency) reprint of *Wenhui Daily*’s review of *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (Kwan & Scheinert, 2022). Indeed, instead of stating that the Chinese-American protagonist (Xiulian) had a lesbian relationship, the reprint of the review courted controversy within queer circles because it highlighted that “a daughter with a westernised lifestyle, a father with Alzheimer’s, etc. caused her (Xiulian, the protagonist) a lot of headaches” (Feng, 2023, para. 3). Such disregard of homosexuality marginalises lesbians and recategorises them into a Western cultural and ideological outgroup.

Han, in contrast, has become a major and sterner approach since 2021, when *danmei* TV adaptations were banned by the authorities (Hu et al., 2023; Hu et al., 2024). This shift indicates that the state no longer accepts the subtle bromance-as-masquerade strategy previously employed in *danmei* TV adaptations. The *han* approach, characterised by overt state media criticism of these adaptations followed by top-down restrictions, has prompted extensive self-censorship in the industry. Consequently, producers actively seek to remove associations with the original *danmei* texts from which they have adapted their content.

Liu and Ding’s theorization of *han-xu* sheds light on the power dynamics that regulate gender and sexuality by way of either granting or withholding visibility and speakability (Song, 2021). As distinct from English terms of censorship and control, *han-xu* encompasses a cultural aesthetic that is deeply rooted in Confucian values, stressing moderation, self-restraint, and harmony, and therefore influencing the communication and societal behaviour of queerness (Liu & Ding, 2005). Going beyond mere censorship or suppression, *han-xu* politics provides an appropriate theoretical framework to account for the link between the specific measures taken by queer fansubbing groups and the broader cultural–ideological arena within which they are situated. It equips scholars to explore translational queer fandom and examine queer fansubbing groups’ tactics from a cultural–ideological perspective. As we shall see, *han-xu* functions as an apparatus for holding back and storing up that prompts non-confrontational activism and for self-limitation in queer worldmaking among queer fansubbing communities.

3. Wanwan subtitling group: by queers for queers

On 20 March 2018, Wanwan started translating and subtitling lesbian-related content in China. Different from Jihua, which openly challenges the Chinese cultural–ideological system by asserting its role in the production of queer ideas (Guo & Evans, 2020), Wanwan responds to its fans’ and members’ preferences for lesbian content and Chinese lesbians’ need for pleasure. The WeChat official account of the group (suspended since 7 November 2023) makes explicit

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their lesbian-oriented fandom and activism, as Wanwan “tend[s] to benefit the well-being of lesbians in our country (China) due to the preferences of the group members” (由于本组成员的喜好，特别倾向于造福本国百合的幸福生活) (Wanwan, 2024). This mission is twofold, as Wanwan fans import lesbian media resources from overseas in an attempt to cater to the Chinese lesbians’ entertainment needs and to fansub them to effect change.

As stated in its WeChat account, Wanwan has a longstanding commitment to the non-profit dissemination of foreign cultures and the creation of “a clear and inclusive cultural environment with an open mind” (兼听则明), ultimately benefitting not only lesbians but all queer individuals in China. Through its subtitling efforts, Wanwan has been introducing a wide array of LGBTQ+ films, TV series, documentaries, and programmes to the Chinese online media landscape. These subtitled media resources are accessed by a large audience on social media platformsⁱⁱⁱ such as WeChat,^{iv} Weibo (microblog, Chinese equivalent of Twitter), and Bilibili (a popular bullet-screen video website in China). With about 186,000 followers on Bilibili, Wanwan has been exerting its profound influence via 696 videos (61% of them are queer-related) with more than 13 million plays and 292,000 likes since its inception. Meanwhile, its top 50 most-viewed videos on Bilibili are lesbian-related, with two exceptions of non-queer documentaries (data valid as of 1 May 2024). In addition, Wanwan has two million followers and more than 100,000 viewers watching daily on Weibo, where they frequently post introductions of lesbian-related dramas (data valid as of 1 May 2024). Wanwan’s practices, therefore, have contributed to the circulation of queer knowledge by and for a dedicated fan community.

To date, Wanwan has translated from 18 languages, including English, French, German, Polish, Japanese, Korean, and Thai. Each language is supported by a sub-group that is managed by an experienced team leader, who guides a variety of volunteers proficient in at least one of the listed languages. These volunteer fansubbers have undergone rigorous résumé screening and an evaluation of linguistic and translation competence. As emphasised in Wanwan’s guidelines (Wanwan, 2024), their subtitlers are expected to be the “fighter aircraft” of all subtitlers (“the best of the best”), which conforms to their principle of striving for excellence. Apart from submitting a résumé that highlights their linguistic competence, prospective volunteers are required to submit a brief introduction, including information on their current occupation or student status, weekly time commitment, previous subtitling experience, willingness to engage in long-term work, specific interests in film or TV genres or stars, and their knowledge of Wanwan. Although not made explicit in the application criteria, Wanwan’s “by queers for queers” ethos may well serve as an important selection factor and may be appraised qualitatively through the applicants’ brief introductions. It is very likely that an ideal volunteer would resonate with the ethos and demonstrate a deep commitment to this long-term volunteer work. Wanwan is currently expanding its reach by welcoming more bilingual or multilingual volunteers who are willing and able to dedicate 6–12 hours weekly to subtitling (Wanwan, 2024).

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Notably, the name “Wanwan” signifies multiple socio-cultural and activism-related meanings. At the sight of Wanwan (弯弯, bent), a queer-identified Chinese individual will easily find it denoting non-heterosexual people, as *wan* (弯) is an informal designate for homosexuality while *zhi* (直, straight) refers to heterosexuality. The conceptual meaning of Wanwan therefore underscores the group’s “intrinsically motivated pursuit” (Mattar, 2008, p. 354) of queer rights and a more inclusive society. In addition, Wanwan explains on its website that the name reflects the detours (弯路) and repeated setbacks one experiences in one’s youth. This is visually represented in Wanwan’s logo, where the W is metaphorically designed as a winding road:



Figure 1

Logo of Wanwan subtitling group

Although the connotations of these detours and setbacks are too ambiguous to infer their specific designata, they may incorporate an associative meaning that evokes the association of two major challenges for Chinese queer fansubbing groups: (1) the surveillance of copyrights; (2) the authorities’ stringent regulation of queer media content. Since 2009, the fansubbing network in China has encountered crackdowns from the SAPPRT and other censorship institutions whose mission is to protect copyright (Wang & Zhang, 2017). In response to escalating official scrutiny, numerous fansubbing groups have opted to provide hyperlinks to file-sharing platforms instead of direct video download links on their own sites. For instance, Wanwan offers links to Quark (a Chinese file-sharing platform similar to Dropbox and Google Drive), where their translated media resources are available for download.

Despite the authorities’ copyright surveillance and ideological concerns, Wanwan (2023a) still upholds an activist spirit, as its recruiting post reveals:

如果你有充沛的表达欲，想把自己喜欢的影片和观点传达给更多人，我们想建一个很多人可以听到的喇叭郑重的交给你。网络的世界里，声音会迅速湮灭，也会传的又快又远。但是正如上野千鹤子老师说的：“不要放弃任何一个发声的机会，不说话就不会改变。”我们想邀请你加入我们，一起做一点呼喊世界的事情。(para. 15)

If you have a strong desire to express yourself and to share your favourite films and viewpoints with more people, we would like to make a loudspeaker that many people can hear and

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solemnly entrust you with it. In the Internet world, voices can quickly vanish, yet they can also travel fast and far. However, as Chizuko Ueno said, “Don’t give up any chance to speak up; silence won’t bring about change.” We’d like to invite you to join us. Let’s make our voice heard by the world together. (My translation)

Chizuko Ueno is a renowned Japanese sociologist and leading feminist scholar whose works have facilitated China’s feminist thought (Sullivan, 2023). She is recognised for the insightful, sometimes polarizing, and widely accessible nature of scholarship in feminism and gender studies. By echoing Chizuko Ueno’s call for social change, Wanwan underscores the urgency of hearing activist voices and considers it its mission to speak up so as to change the social world. Wanwan’s translated queer media resources and reflexive posts, as I elaborate below, are compared to loudspeakers, as they allow voices in favour of a society inclusive of queers to reach a wider audience. Although these voices may be neglected or even suppressed, fansubbing practices persist in provoking thought among their fans and the broader queer communities in a non-confrontational way.

4. Non-confrontational activism: exploring Wanwan through the lenses of *han-xu* politics

Situated in a society marked by twofold *han-xu* politics and its censorship mechanism imposed on queer content, Wanwan develops a non-confrontational (implicit and restrained) form of activism. This is attested to by its selection of content and its fansubbing practices. Among the 655 subtitled films, series, short videos, and programmes displayed on its website, only 179 (approx. 27%) feature LGBTQ+-related content, indicating that it is an inclusive and diversified presence of audiovisual resources (cf. Table 1, data collected by 16 October 2023). In addition, Wanwan collaborates with major non-queer-motivated fansubbing groups (e.g., VisionWanda) in providing self-translated blockbusters such as *Captain America: Civil War* (Russo & Russo, 2016), *Doctor Strange* (Derrickson, 2016), and *Avengers: Endgame* (Russo & Russo, 2019). The factors contributing to such diversified content are complex and may include boosting Wanwan’s influence and attracting capital for commercialisation, an aspect that is beyond the focus of this article.

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Table 1

Types of media resource selected and subtitled by Wanwan

Source language	Non-LGBTQ+-related		LGBTQ+-related		SUM
	N	%	N	%	
English	150	68	71	32	221
Japanese	123	87	19	13	142
Korean	41	82	9	18	50
Portuguese	26	84	5	16	31
Spanish	6	40	9	60	15
French	52	84	10	16	62
Italian	42	89	5	11	47
German	5	45	6	55	11
Thai	14	44	18	56	32
Others	17	39	27	61	44
TOTAL	476	73	179	27	655

However, including a large amount of non-LGBTQ+ content does not negate Wanwan as a queer fansubbing group, yet this practice inevitably downplays to some extent Wanwan’s distinctness as a lesbian-serving or a more broadly queer-serving group. This strategy avoids confronting the ideological and cultural apparatus of *han-xu* politics and epitomises an on-the-surface queer-fansubbing low profile, while at the same time it opens up opportunities for reaching a broader audience through collaborative networking. Indeed, Wanwan’s advocacy for undistorted queer representations in translated audiovisual resources may not go unnoticed by this larger heterogeneous audience.

Wanwan’s non-confrontational queer activism is visible not only in its selection of content, but also in its fansubbing practices. A case in point is *Happiest Season* (DuVall, 2020), which focuses on the coming-out issue many queers encounter. Specifically, the film centres on how Abby and Harper, a lesbian couple, confront the coming-out challenge when they visit Harper’s conservative family for Christmas. While Abby plans to propose to Harper during Christmas in front of Harper’s family, Harper confesses two major secrets before their trip: she has not come out to her family and she told them Abby is just her roommate. The trailer merits particular attention not only because it hit the highest number of views compared to other Wanwan’s Chinese subtitled queer-themed media sources on Bilibili (more than 220,000 views as of October 2023), but also because it received a significant number of ideology-laden comments from audiences. Engaging with the broader cultural and societal environment for queers in mainland China, these comments are indicative of audiences’ emotional responses to Wanwan’s cultural reinterpretation and recontextualisation of the trailer in China.

Let’s take the example of a scene when Abby feels deeply hurt by Harper’s inability to come out to her family, right when Abby was planning to propose. Harper’s best friend, John, who

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serves as a voice of reason and empathy, consoles Abby by sharing his own understanding of the complexities of coming out, acknowledging that it is a deeply personal and challenging journey:

Example 1

ST: Everybody’s story is different just because Harper isn’t ready

doesn’t mean she doesn’t love you

TT: 家家有本难念的经 哈珀还没准备好

并不意味着她不爱你

Gloss: Every family has an unreadable scripture. Harper isn’t ready

doesn’t mean she doesn’t love you

By saying “everybody’s story is different ...”, John reassures Abby that Harper’s hesitancy is not a reflection of her love but an indication of the extent to which she struggles to reveal her true self to a family that values traditional norms. By using the Chinese old saying “家家有本难念的经” (every family has its problems; literally, every family has an unreadable scripture), Wanwan relates the imagination and experience of coming out to family cultures and traditions in the Chinese context, in line with its solicitude for local lesbians’ happy lives (see section 3). By integrating queer narratives into a Chinese socio-cultural context, Wanwan fosters an awareness of the issues queers may face without explicitly questioning the heteronormative structure entrenched in Chinese society.

Nevertheless, this strategic mixture of transnational story and locally contextualised concern (Bao, 2018) can indeed direct the audiences’ attention to the dilemma individuals experience when faced with non-normative sexualities or relationships and the conservative socio-familial structure in China. For the Chinese people, it is crucial to be “normal” or behave “normally” in the cis-hetero majority because they have been disciplined by the Confucianist culture that centres on harmony and compliance with a hierarchical social order (Ho et al., 2018). Conventional values such as maintaining family lineage through the male line (传宗接代) are adhered to as a socio-cultural dogma for individuals to fit into the mainstream. In contrast, queer identities may threaten this ingrained socio-familial “harmony” and order, and for this reason queer people are often positioned as an outgroup minority. Ideologically, the promotion of a heteronormative family format is central to the New Trend of Socialist Family Civilization (社会主义家庭文明新风尚)^v (Cao, 2019), which associates family tradition (家风) with the Chinese Dream.^{vi} This is because family stability “lies at the heart of the ... concern of China’s elites with the issue of social stability” (Sigley, 2006, p. 49). The “integration of family with country” (家国一体) and “devotion to the family and country” (家国情怀) have long been cultivated in order to maintain the Chinese socialist regime. Through this cultural,

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ideological, and discursive *xu* (invisibilisation or marginalisation) approach, non-normative sexualities and relationships are excluded from the narrative of a socialist family and country.

Instead of posting explicit content that challenges cis-heteronormativity, Wanwan creates a space for viewers to interact and reflect on society at large. This is evidenced in the audience engagement elicited by the subtitled trailer of *Happiest Season*, which has sparked considerable commentary. The “like” metric being indicative of community endorsement, it is worth paying attention to the comments that garnered the most likes as they point to collective user engagement and sentiment. The two top-liked comments subtly reference China’s queer-sensitive environment and have elicited both extensive and numerous responses, enacting a translational and transcultural queer fandom. The most-liked comment states, “The same-sex theme is finally not tragic. Every time I watch a (same-sex) tragedy I get a big headache” (同性题材终于没有悲剧色彩了, 每次看悲剧看的都头大) (Yuzhongdemaotouying, 2020). The second most-liked comment, with 1,838 likes, complains, “When will (we) be able to watch it in China’s cinemas 🙄🙄🙄🙄” (什么时候中国也可以

直接在电影院看 🙄🙄🙄🙄) (Aiyuou, 2020). Several viewers joined the discussion on queer media representation and people’s attitudes towards queer communities. One replied that “Chinese people are much more understanding and inclusive of homosexuality than in the past” (现在大家对同性恋的理解和包容要比那时候好很多) (Zhanghaoyizhuxiao, 2020) while another argued that “... it is impossible to see homosexuality in Chinese cinemas in decades. China is much more conservative than imagined” (后十几年电影院根本不可能上映, 现在的中国其实真的比你想象得要保守多) (Jifei, 2020), referring to the blockage of the word “homosexuality” in the majority of games. The conversation included comments that reported on the banning of queer media resources uploaded online or others that correlate China’s negative stance to homosexuality with social issues such as population ageing and the low birth rate.^{vii} Arising from the subtitled trailer, these thought-provoking comments and replies form a culturally and ideologically meaningful discursive community. Through this engagement, Wanwan indirectly enacts queer activism by creating a space for viewer interactions, while avoiding direct confrontation with ideological issues. By linking their lived experiences with the subtitled trailer, the viewers transcend the role of passive audience members. Instead, they become embodiments of grassroots reflections and critiques, challenging the perpetuation of the cis-heteronormative culture and social order in China.

Another important practice that enacts a non-confrontational activism is that of Wanwan’s social media editors and illustrators, who produce reflexive textual and visual paratexts on WeChat, Bilibili, Sina Weibo, Douban (an online database and social networking platform for sharing and reviewing films, books, etc.), Douyin (Chinese TikTok), and Red (a lifestyle-sharing platform). The website does not disclose their identities but establishes explicit responsibilities, including the curation of fansubbed and other queer-related materials on Wanwan’s social

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media accounts (in the case of editors) and creating visual content to increase audiences’ engagement with the fansubbed content (in the case of the illustrators) (see Wanwan, 2024). As such, their roles are as important as those of fansubbers in making their group more accessible to the public. A typical paratext is the introductions to (translated) queer media content on the Wanwan WeChat public account. Rather than posting activist articles that seek to rethink and challenge patriarchy and cis-hetero-normativity, those introductory posts often provide a short reflexive section that invites the readers to appreciate further the original work and prompt them to contemplate queer-related issues. The introduction of *La Vie devant toi* (Veysset, 2022)^{viii} is a case in point. It narrates the love story and coming-out experiences of two adolescent lesbians and foregrounds the biases and discrimination against queers. In its introduction, Wanwan suggests that the troubles encountered by the protagonists “exist in any time and space” (存在于任何一个时空) and are worth pondering over. Although discrimination against queers in Chinese society is not specifically mentioned, the post targets Chinese fans on the Chinese WeChat platform and naturally includes China. Without delving into the local context of discrimination, Wanwan (2023b) makes specific use of deixis (i.e., relating the spoken word to the personal, spatial, or temporal context of an utterance) at the end of the post to involve the Chinese audience:

我们很多人的初恋年纪并不大，也做不到初恋就是一辈子，但是我们认真对待感情的态度，我们被感情加持下的坚强和勇敢，会伴随我们的余生，会陪着我们度过一些艰难困难的岁月，会成为回忆里的糖。(para. 11)

Many of us experience first love at a young age, and it may not last a lifetime. However, our earnest attitude towards love and the strength and courage we gain from love will accompany us throughout our lives. They will help us navigate through difficult times and become sweet memories. (My translation)

The repeated pronouns “us” and “we” associate this film with the Chinese audiences’ experiences and enjoin them to have courage and bravery in love. By shaping a shared ingroup community (van Dijk, 2006; Wang, 2021), Wanwan invites them to recall romantic memories and demonstrates how they can learn from love experiences and what attitude they should have in a relationship. The concluding lines strategically upstage the social issues queers have been facing, while eschewing apparent and excessive reference to ideologically sensitive points.

Introductory and reflexive paratexts across media accounts make Wanwan’s queer activism tangible, that is, they objectify Wanwan’s cultural capital, guiding readers towards their subtitled works and providing an interpretation grid for their consumption (Tymoczko, 2010). In the context of *han-xu* politics and in stark contrast to queer cultural representations in the Global North (Hanckel, 2016; Magrath, 2020), queer activism is championed without resorting to ideological messages criticizing queer-invisibilised and queer-targeted policies. Fansubbing groups such as Wanwan are well aware of this. In an interview I conducted with a social media

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editor,^{ix} they mentioned that editors had to be very cautious about their posts in order to avoid sensitive information and also the risk of a ban by the WeChat platform on anything that (1) is politically sensitive or erotic, (2) refers to state leaders’ names, (3) talks about policies, (4) is superstitious, illegal, or rumoured, (5) mentions blocked celebrities or works. Some of these rules are ambiguous: what is considered politically sensitive, for instance, remains open to interpretation.

This revelation about WeChat is in line with Jiang’s (2016) report, according to which this platform does not constitute an ideal communicative channel for fansubbing groups and audiences because of its obligation to monitor and eliminate any information that violates official regulations. Whereas WeChat and many other Chinese major media platforms never declare bans on queer content, they serve as silent agents, operating under the pressure of the authorities to monitor and erase content. For instance, on 6 July 2021, LGBTQ+ accounts run by university students on WeChat and Sina Weibo were closed with a simple notice stating their violations of internet regulations (Jiang, 2022). Owing to the fuzziness of those platforms’ censorship mechanisms, Wanwan and other queer fansubbing groups tend to self-censor and produce their posts through a constant appraisal of the politically sensitive information they may convey. They are therefore placed in a precarious and perilous “grey zone”, as the ultimate right to interpret political sensitivity belongs to the authorities, not to the fansubbing groups themselves. Wanwan therefore continues to post introductory and reflexive content in a self-restrained manner, in a permanent assessment of the risks involved. This is a very important practice that is acknowledged by readers for sparking thought and encouraging changes: “We need these audiovisual works to provoke thoughts. We need your posts to bring about changes” (我们需要这些影视带来思考 也需要你的文章带来改变) (Anonymous, 2023).

All in all, the Wanwan fansubbing group’s indirect, implicit, restrained, and non-confrontational approach to change and social justice is instantiated in the selection of a diversity of media content, in the recontextualisation of subtitles in the Chinese cultural and political environment, and in the paratextual spaces made available for comments and reflections across social media accounts.

5. Concluding remarks: extending non-confrontational activism to world-making and bridge-building in translational queer fandom

As Guo and Evans (2020) aptly put it, translational queer fandom in China provides queer media fans with “a space to engage with and interpret texts through subtitling practice” and “the construction of a fan community and queer world through that subtitling and those texts” (p. 520). As we have seen, Wanwan caters to the pleasure and well-being of local queer, specifically lesbian people in China, through fansubbing practices and social media curation. Wanwan fansubbers interact in community with the work they have selected to translate: they

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recontextualise subtitles, create a discursive space for discussions and debates, and post reflexive paratexts.

While one may argue that queer fansubbing groups would be relatively safe and not a primary target because of their ancillary status compared to producers of queer media content, they nevertheless draw the attention of the Chinese authorities, given that in essence they process and circulate queer media products and in so doing may influence the Chinese mainstream.

In this context, Wanwan’s measured and controlled response to CCP entities’ censorship apparatus serves queer justice agendas well, as it allows queer fansubbing groups to monitor content, to survive as a queer activist group, and to uphold their activities by queers for queers. Indeed, the transcultural and translational queer fandom that shapes and is shaped by Wanwan practices does not openly confront cis-heteronormativity as Jihua does (Guo & Evans, 2020), but it enacts a non-confrontational, restrained, and implicit queer activism to resist subtly the silencing and suppression of queers under China’s *han-xu* politics.

Wanwan’s non-confrontational activism resonates with two typical phenomena in translational queer fandom, namely, world-making and bridge-building. These may well constitute a new phenomenon in queer fansubbing in China at large and point to the need for further research that includes a larger number of queer fansubbing communities. Through world-making (Berlant & Warner, 1998; Guo & Evans, 2020), fansubbing communities gather like-minded volunteers to empower queer communities by subtitling and disseminating queer media products. Through bridge-building, they appeal to more potential volunteers beyond Chinese LGBTQ+ communities to join queer fansubbing groups (Guo & Evans, 2020). The relationship between non-confrontational activism and world-making and bridge-building deserves further scholarly attention, both in and beyond Wanwan.

Wanwan creates a queer world that is accessible not only to queer fans but also to a wider audience by including diversified content. In turn, this helps expose Wanwan to more social members, giving wider visibility to their queer world and the empowerment of queers in it. In addition to this important function, Wanwan’s non-confrontational activism builds a bridge between queer communities and cis-heteronormative groups to promote mutual understanding and harmony instead of polarizing the cis-hetero and queer communities, and pursues “co-existence and co-development of the mainstream and LGBT” (大众与 LGBT 并存发展) (Wanwan, 2024). Such a non-confrontational approach is a pragmatic adaptation which may help to sustain Wanwan’s impact and enable it to create a meaningful and culturally resonant community for queers in China.

The fansubbing group Yiwantongren (亿万同人; literally, hundreds of millions of homosexuals) (2024) introduces itself as follows:

我们愿意融入大众群体，与之共同成长并努力获取主流意识的认可。我们希望看到在

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lgbtq [sic]文化的基础上兼容并包，彼此尊重，而不是仅仅局限于性别上的平等。(para. 2)

We are willing to integrate into the mainstream society, grow together with it, and strive for its recognition. We hope to see inclusivity and mutual respect built on the foundation of LGBTQ culture, rather than just limited to gender equality. (My translation)

In this way, the “by queers for queers” activism does not necessarily mean a confrontation with the authorities and the broader cis-hetero mainstream society. Queer and cis-heteronormative communities need cultural products that can act as a bridge between them to enhance mutual respect and facilitate social harmony instead of intensifying cultural and ideological tensions. While world-making and bridge-building may seem paradoxical, their complementarity may constitute a sustainable activist strategy for advancing queer justice.

Such a non-confrontational activism also suggests a new perspective on “Chineseness”, originally coined by Zhao and Wong’s (2020) emphasis on traditional cultural elements and alignment with state narratives; but that perspective is negotiated through the portrayal of queer identities and experiences (Zhao & Bao, 2024). While Zhao and Bao focus mainly on the filmmakers’ visual representations, they also introduce a tension between maintaining traditional values and offering visibility to queer communities. Chineseness is shaped not only by filmmakers’ or video producers’ visual representations of queer elements (Zhao & Bao, 2024; Zhao & Wong, 2020), but also by fansubbing groups’ glocalization and circulation of queer elements through subtitling and media discourses on screens. In the case of Wanwan, for instance, Chineseness emerges from the ways in which the group adapts and reinterprets global queer content to fit the local cultural and societal context. Through subtitling and discursive interventions, their fansubbing practices infuse foreign queer content with a cultural relevance that resonates with Chinese audiences and in so doing contribute to shaping Chineseness.

Admittedly, Wanwan’s non-confrontational queer fansubbing practices cannot be generalised to all queer fansubbing activities. Further research could be extended to include other groups so as to explore whether and how they engage with queerness and Chineseness, world-making and bridge-building in the context of *han-xu* politics. Further research could also extend beyond China to other contexts in which ideological and cultural apparatuses may invite low-profile, non-confrontational social justice endeavours.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr Ting Guo and two anonymous reviewers for their valuable feedback on earlier drafts of this article. My thanks also go to the guest editor of this special issue, Dr Julie Boéri, for her editorial support and guidance. Special thanks are extended to the proofreader for his meticulous work on the article. This article would not have been possible without their help. Any errors and omissions are my own responsibility.

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- i “Queer” is used as an umbrella term in this article to represent non-heteronormative and nonbinary groups.
- ii JoinFeminism is a Chinese grassroots group which focuses on promoting female rights and queer knowledge through media translation. Zhihe Society is a Chinese LGBTQ+ rights advocacy group which includes translation in its public awareness activities on non-heteronormative sexualities.
- iii The information about Wanwan was retrieved from its website on 10 March 2024 <https://wanwansub.com/>; its Bilibili account is <https://space.bilibili.com/102735130?from=search&seid=4256713765331140991>, and its Weibo account is <https://weibo.com/u/3674655357>.
- iv On 6 March 2024, the Wanwan’s WeChat official account was found to be suspended with a notice stating that the account had violated the legitimate rights and interests of others. Its last article was released on 7 November 2023.
- v The New Trend of Socialist Family Civilization is a concept promoted by the CCP which emphasises the cultivation of socialist moral values in the family unit. This initiative aligns family traditions with broader national goals, such as the Chinese Dream, which envisages a rejuvenated, harmonious Chinese society.
- vi “The Chinese Dream” has been a central tenet of the ideology promoted by the CCP under the leadership of President Xi. This nationalistic vision emphasises the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation and its people’s prosperity. It heralds a new era aimed at achieving greater economic strength, cultural richness, societal fairness, and a beautiful environment.
- vii In an effort to encourage fertility, the Chinese authorities uphold the traditional conceptualization of “family” with cis-heteronormativity at its centre (Yu et al., 2023).
- viii *La Vie devant toi* is a film that centres on Violette, a 16-year-old promising young swimmer. Violette decides to live openly as a homosexual and embarks on a journey of self-discovery and acceptance. With the support of her loving parents, she blossoms both personally and in her relationship with Lisa. The film delves into themes of acceptance, adolescence, and the struggles and joys of coming out.
- ix Interview on 20 September 2023.