Identity and Cultural Resistance: A Case Study of Fansubbing from a Cross-cultural Communication Perspective

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Abstract: In this study, a Chinese fansub group - QAF was selected as the research object, and the online observation method was adopted to establish a long-term trusting relationship with the fansub group members. The researcher observed the activities of members in the group, and conducted in-depth interviews with group members to study how they construct their own identity in a virtual community, and how the textual reproduction behavior in fan culture context reflects the characteristics of "affective play". The research shows that the concept of "affective play" is embodied in the textual reproduction process of the members of the fansub group, and the emotional factor is an important factor that affects the textual reproduction behavior of the members.

Keywords: fansub group, affective play, identity

1. Introduction

A fansub group is a community group that adds subtitles in their native language to audio-visual works and publishes them on file-sharing websites free of charge. As a new phenomenon of the subculture, the fansub group provides its members with a lifestyle different from the dominant culture and orthodox culture. As an intellectual group, the fansub group reconstructs its understanding and criticism of the world through deconstructing the video clip. They try to reconcile the contradictions between social life and media environment through their strength. Their appearance has become an opportunity for the audience to reject the strong discourse symbols of mainstream media and establish self-identity to some extent. The fansub group embodies the most fundamental characteristics of the Internet, bearing the selfless and volunteering mentality, promoting a spirit of freedom, openness and sharing, and bringing a new style of sub-culture. This research explores the concepts of identity and affective play through a case study of the Chinese gay fansub group QAF.

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2. An interview with the group leader

"Queer as Folk Fansub Group" (QAF) is a Chinese fansub group specializing in gay-themed film and television translation. In recent years, the group has translated nearly 1,000 gay films and TV series. In 2011, Danlan.org, a famous gay website, interviewed Xiao P, one of the leaders of the group and the interview transcription was published on QAF's website (Danlan, 2011). This research analyzed the transcription and the relevant data about the group. The group QAF is named after the American TV show Queer as Folk. The original intention of the group was to provide a communication and video exchange platform for Chinese fans of the show. After the TV show ended, the group's enthusiasm about the show did not decrease. The group hoped to gain access to additional similar shows, so they started to collect and subtitle film and television works, either gay-themed or containing a gay sub-plot.

Due to censorship in China, no gay film and television works have been officially introduced. With the official channels being blocked, the QAF group acts as a bridge: QAF selects a batch of excellent foreign gay movies and TV shows, translates them, adds relevant background annotations, and then presents them to the gay communities in China through the Internet. Though it is now China's largest gay film and television production and publishing website, QAF did not intend to become so. QAF still hopes the Chinese radio and television censorship system can be more lenient and tolerant, and can provide an official channel for the import of gay-themed audio-visual works.

From September 2004 when the group was established to 2011, the QAF fansub group has established a library with more than 400 films and television programs. Currently, they translate 2 ~ 3 new films or videos every week. The weekly workload was set, in consideration of group members' Internet bandwidth, energy, time, as well as the fansub quality. From planning a subtitling project to the final product, the subtitling processes include the first translation draft, proofreading, second proofreading, timing check and quick double-check, then finally video-subtitles merging. By regulating the weekly work quota, QAF can make good use of time and fully guarantee the production quality, which is a key factor in QAF's success of becoming a large film and television fansub group in China. Around 2011, QAF started translating and transmitting Chinese gay films online. According to Xiao P, some Chinese directors entrusted QAF to translate their films for export. QAF stated they would implement any decisions made by the film director. Moreover, QAF hopes to refine and retranslate the rushed translations of the classic old films they completed so fans could add the works to their collection.

QAF started its operation translating *Queer as Folk*, one of the many popular American dramas available for Chinese online audiences. Nevertheless, according to Xiao P, QAF will not blindly follow or translate every popular drama. Rather, they plan to concentrate on gay-themed TV shows and films. According to QAF's observation, mainstream American TV channels control and reduce the gay elements in their shows to ensure drama ratings. Also, Cable TV channels lack financial support, which makes it difficult for them to guarantee the quality of gay-themed dramas, so some QAF members turn to dramas containing gay sub-plots. Many popular American dramas with gay sub-plots,

such as *Glee* and *Modern Family*, are not "pure" gay dramas in their eyes. QAF believes that a fansub production team's energy and time are always limited, and complementary division of labor improves efficiency. They think that there is no need to re-translate completed works since many other fansub groups have already subtitled popular American drama, so QAF tends to devote their energy to the production of pure gay or gay-themed dramas.

3. *Meaning-giving text reconstruction and cultural communication*

Fans of popular culture generally only stay on the level of appreciating and commenting on texts, while these fanatical cultural fans are active, enthusiastic and participatory in their input to texts. They reconstruct the text, delve deep into the meaning behind the text, and then disseminate to larger audiences.

The Internet provides a broad platform for the general public to obtain information and share resources, and the class attribute of the general public became blurred in the virtual Internet community. People's participation in the cultural industry and their choice of cultural products are mostly determined by their cultural interests, spiritual satisfaction and the need to realize self-worth, rather than by their regarding the cultural products as unique cultural resources of a particular class (Gauntlett, 2000). That contributes to the borderless nature of cultural communication in the online world. Abandoning class essentialism, the participants of mass culture, especially the fanatical fans, will devote more time and energy to text reconstruction and cultural communication, which is a process that transcends the dualistic opposition of suppression and resistance, elitism and populism simplification. Most members of the online fansub group have received higher education. Take the QAF fansub group as an example. This fansub group, with a history of nearly 20 years, is mainly engaged in the translation of gay film and television dramas. At present, it has more than 100 members, covering people born between the 1960s and 1980s, including Chinese students from high schools and universities inside and outside China, white-collar workers, and overseas Chinese. They have plenty of time for computer use, and their foreign language proficiency is very high. Such a group, with different social identities and backgrounds, has an idealistic spirit of sharing and dedication, which can be regarded as the spiritual satisfaction and self-worth realization of the fan group.

4. *Affective play embodied in the textual reproduction*

Chinese internet users joined the group out of their interests and work voluntarily under high pressure. These fansub group members do subtitle translation as their part-time work, but they gained self-identity in that online Internet space. The audience's recognition of fansub groups is an affirmation of their values or beliefs. There is competition among different fansub groups, and subtitles updated earlier can get more downloads. The return of voluntary labor has nothing to do with the profits, but it can strengthen the self-identity of fansub group members.

The fansub group members are first the audience of film and television dramas, but the Chinese and English subtitles they produce are products viewed by Chinese audiences. Therefore, when they watch film and television dramas as audience members, they begin to develop narcissism and regard themselves as performers. Their process of multiple decoding and encoding, recoding and decoding of subtitles, shows the attitude of the fansub group as the audience interpreting the text. The interaction of dual identities has helped fansub groups transmit information effectively in small groups.

Through the observation of activities of fans in the gay fansub group, and in-depth interviews with the group members, the study discovered that the fansub members constructed their own identity in the virtual community, and their textual reproduction behavior in fan culture context reflects the characteristics of "affective play". The notion of affective play, according to Hills (2002), is that space where the fan fiction writers can experience, feel and live playfully within the texts that are the subjects of their fandom. This research shows that the concept of "affective play" is embodied in the textual reproduction process of the members of the gay fansub group, and the emotional factor is important because it affects the textual reproduction behavior of the members. It is because of the emotional attachment of gay fansub group volunteers who joined the fansub group to reproduce the text. In the reproduction process, the original meaning expression of the TV or film text was eliminated, and a new set of texts with emotional identity were created by attaching to the original text with imaginative means. Besides, members of the gay fansub group construct their own identity through the role-playing of "foreground" and "background". "Role-playing" mainly refers to identity construction through the roles of "manager", "chief translator" and "opinion leader" in the virtual Internet community. Meanwhile, in the context of fan culture, fans of the gay fansub group also gain "identity" through "affective play". Affect plays a vital role in distinguishing groups with multiple boundaries, because it constantly constructs the possibility of differences and constructs a way to highlight specific differences. The gay fansub group skillfully integrates their own cultures with foreign cultures to achieve localization through text and cultural reproduction, especially within the environment of new media technology, showing great initiative and creativity. As communicators, the gay fansub group effectively controls the second wave of transmitting gay culture in Chinese-speaking areas in the process of secondary coding and implanted some localized elements and Chinese culture, which promoted the new trend of cultural exchange to some extent.

5. *Constructing an identity through media use behavior*

From two aspects of self-identity and group identity, this paper examines how the gay fansub group constructs identity through media use behavior. Identity is accomplished by self-examination and exploration of one's relationship with others. First, although each fan is an individual, his or her self-identity construction cannot be separated from self-reflection and interaction with others. The author divides the study of self-identity into two parts. On the one hand, from the stage when the individual's ideal self appears, the fan realizes the unity of "real self" and "ideal self" through a series of self-reflective

activities. On the other hand, from the perspective of the relationship between individuals and others, without the reference function of others, the self is meaningless, and the evaluation and affirmation of others play a vital role in the construction of individual identity. In this paper, through the classification of fan types, the author discovered that these fansub group members received the affirmation, praise and recognition of others through their media use by playing different roles, such as group managers, opinion leaders and fansub group members, and building their identity from the specific media use behavior. Self-identity is to solve the problem of "who am I", and the development of individuals can never be separated from the nourishment of the group. So, "who are we?" is the new question if we broaden the research scope from a gay fan to the gay fansub group. These questions involve group identity. The development of new media, especially the flourishing of the Internet, is the motive of identity construction of the gay fansub group. Meanwhile, the fansub group's media use behavior can promote the establishment of identity labels.

In the 1980s, scholars including Fiske demonstrated the initiative and creativity of mass culture. Instead of adopting ideological analysis methods, they argued that the masses were not just passively controlled objects; there is a kind of active and independent power hidden in mass culture (Fiske, 2010). The audience's subjectivity in popular cultures such as film and television dramas is particularly obvious. As a member of popular culture, the members of the fansub group are, in a sense, acts of text reconstruction in the translation of texts, which is the outward release and embodiment of the receiver's subjectivity. This culture of online downloading is also a kind of acquiescence to piracy. That makes this group appear marginalized. Subsequently, the interpretation of the causes, behaviors and participating groups of the fansub group entails the complexity of the cultural game. Fan culture is a participatory culture, and the interpretation of existing texts may lead to new texts, new cultures and new communities.

6. *Fansubbers' social identity in modern society*

Gofman's dramaturgical sociology holds that life is a performance, society is a stage, and the process of interpersonal communication is the process of people performing "self", but this "self" is not the real self, but the "self" disguised by symbols (Goffman, 1978). Fansub groups have their own identities and roles in real life. These "selves" are often carefully decorated and play a regular role in front of others. The fixity and standardization in daily life, as well as the standardized living space, cause fan social self-alienation. Fans are more likely to regard the online community as a platform for self-presentation and extension so that they can more actively show themselves and vent their emotions in fan activities such as text reconstruction. Almost all online fansub groups volunteer to translate American TV drama resources without pay and regard subtitle translation as intervention and participation in modern life, as recognition and realization of self-worth.

Meanwhile, the incompleteness and fragmentation of modern society also breeds the incomplete and fragmented self. For these online fansub groups active behind the scenes, the identity of fans is, in a sense, a psychological compensation for this atomized and

isolated modern life (Giddens, 1991). Fans can prove the value of individual existence by participating in the dissemination or reconstruction of their favorite cultural and industrial products. The seemingly mysterious communication between fans can be seen as experiencing an illusory sense of community. In this virtual environment, fan imagination and creativity are stimulated, and they also incorporate more self-emotion and creativity in the process of text reconstruction, thus forming a new consumption of cultural industrial products.

Corresponding to the official culture, the fan culture of the online fansub group belongs to folk culture in a sense, which has a unique set of cultural paradigm and power, sometimes showing amazing creativity in reconstruction and cultural communication, but sometimes also restricted and constrained by ideology. The fansub group, wandering on the edge of social norms in the traditional sense, is controversial and complex. The government intends to filter the cultural resources people receive, by controlling popular cultural products, but this stimulates piracy. The prosperity of Internet downloading, though decreasing DVD piracy, has become another type of piracy. In the virtual community, the members of the fansub group have the cultural rights and channels that are difficult to obtain in real life. Therefore, this is a kind of self-awakening and recovery of cultural cognition and ideology brought about by life in the information age.

The mainstream cultural concept can easily regard the fansub group as a marginal group. They are regarded as being easily incited and sometimes blind. However, fans have formed another society that is contrary to mainstream society and formed a relatively open space where there is a confrontation between democracy and freedom. In reality, the members of the fansub group may not get such a channel to realize self-culture, and it is difficult to communicate with others due to ideological differences. In the online fansub community, it is easier to realize cultural rights and resonate with others' thoughts, which adds a romantic color to the interpretation and reconstruction of the text.

7. *Conclusion*

Within a fansub group, fansub members build their identity from the specific media use behavior. In the context of fan culture, fans in the gay fansub group also gain "identity" through "affective play". Affect plays a vital role in distinguishing from groups with multiple boundaries, because it constantly constructs the possibility of differences and constructs the way to highlight specific differences. As research on LGBTQ culture in China is limited, the author hopes to provide some valuable information for the study of online gay fansub groups through this study.

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