

Mainstreams, Mavericks, Misfits, and Amphibians:

On the Mainstreaming, Platformisation, and Re-conventionalisation of the Former Home of Chinese ACGN

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ABSTRACT: The concept of platformisation has been used throughout contemporary Chinese sociology and media studies to explain the process by which emerging local digital platforms facilitate and revolutionise daily life. Scholars have also examined how fans of ACGN (anime, comics, games, and novels) create heterotopias through the development of virtual communities and the departure of online territory from more conventional cultural and heteronormative norms. This article analyses an often-overlooked subject: the mainstreaming, platformisation, and re-conventionalisation of digital platforms and their impact on creative video production and fandom culture. We investigate Bilibili, a video-sharing social media which can be considered as the former home of Chinese ACGN culture, with a particular focus on the current commercial expansion that has seen it deviate from ACGN's cultural themes. Howard Becker's (1982) categorisation of innovative creators (*mainstreams*, *mavericks*, *misfits*) and Jones et al. *amphibians* are utilised to examine the ways in which the various video creators and former ACGN fans have (or have not) adapted to the platform's commercialisation, mainstreaming, and re-conventionalisation.

KEYWORDS: digital platforms, fandom, ACGN, online ethnography, gender, queer.

Introduction

The global influence of various digital platforms and their component tools, frameworks, and algorithmic logic, as well as the expansion of data science, has become a topic of considerable research. Previous studies have suggested that digital platforms serve as technological architectures, playing a key role in the transition from two-sided market systems to complex multisided platform arrangements (Nieborg and Poell 2018; Nieborg and Helmond 2019). Nieborg and Helmond (2018: 4275) understand this transitional process as platformisation: "the penetration of economic and infrastructural extensions of online platforms into

the web, affecting the production, distribution, and circulation of cultural content."

Fandom culture is influenced by the platformisation of cultural production. The participatory nature of digital fandom, the process of presumption, the progressive elements of digital fandom (e.g., Generation Z vibe, feminist themes, and LGBT-friendly spirit), and fan practices have all increasingly been incorporated into the working mechanisms of online platforms (Jenkins 2006; Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010; Ritzer 2013). The "data-isation of online fandom" emerges from a platform's computational logic to organise and reward content providers, resulting in fans contributing to online ranking and voting, and supplying traffic statistics for their idols (Yin

2020: 475). As fans become increasingly dependent on platforms and gradually transform into complementors, subject to the political economy of the platforms, a pressing question arises: what new norms of fandom culture have been introduced to support the continuous process of platformisation? To address this question, this research explores the effects of platform transformations on creative video production and its surrounding fandom culture.

We have selected the case of Bilibili, a former heterotopia (Chen 2020, 2021) that has been considered the home of Chinese anime, comics, games, and novels (ACGN) fandom (called in China the two-dimensional culture (*erciyuan* 二次元)). Bilibili has recently been transformed into a pan-entertainment video empire for a broader audience to support its mainstreaming commercialisation agenda. Empirical evidence shows that the creative videos circulating on Bilibili have radically changed to become mainstream and diverse, and that some former ACGN fans have been outraged by Bilibili's dramatic mainstreamisation, a process they view as a "deterioration of the ACGN culture," with the result that "Bilibili is not that Bilibili anymore."¹

This article involves three empirical research components. The first one consists of in-depth interviews with Bilibili staff (both current and former) and sheds light on how the commercialisation of video production becomes the ultimate driving force for platform transformation, thus shaping the re-conventionalisation² of Bilibili. The second component involves in-depth interviews with top-ranking Bilibili video creators (locally understood as "video uploader" (*up zhu*, *up 主*), their staff members, and other people who work with video creators. The third research component draws on an online ethnographic study of a group of ACGN-VTuber³ fans and their "forced migration" from Bilibili to other platforms, focusing on how these hardcore ACGN fans have responded to the re-conventionalisation of Bilibili. The research questions driving our investigation are:

Question 1: Against the backdrop of the 2016 mainstreamed re-conventionalisation and the emergence of platform-based commercialisation of Bilibili, what has changed in Bilibili's operation?

Question 2: Which of the "old" video creators have adapted and remained successful?

Question 3: Which newly arrived video creators are currently flourishing?

Question 4: What happened to the former ACGN fans?

The remainder of this article is organised as follows. We begin with a review of the literature on Chinese ACGN culture to contextualise our research on Bilibili. Next, we review the categorisation of innovative creators proposed by Becker (1982) and other scholars, which will assist us in mapping out the new and old video creators on Bilibili. After a discussion of our research design, we offer an analysis of the collected data and concluding thoughts.

Literature review

Background: Chinese ACGN fandom and Bilibili

Studying contemporary Chinese fandom culture often begins by looking at Jenkins' concept of "participatory culture" (2006),

which refers to the changing role of fans from passive consumers to active participants in the creation, adaptation, and distribution of content, as well as becoming prosumers (Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010; Yang and Bao 2012; Liu and Lai 2020; Chen 2021). Chinese ACGN fandom began in the early 2000s with the distribution and consumption of media content via noncommercial, informal, and occasionally illegal, channels such as peer-to-peer (P2P) file-sharing networks (Meng 2012). It has continued to negotiate this space as copyright regulations and state censorship have intensified (Gu 2018). With the prosumption of online volunteer translation groups, current Chinese fandom culture is characterised by a lively cultural exchange between China and other Asian nations, notably the manufacturing powerhouse of ACGN cultural items, Japan (Zhang and Mao 2013; Zhang 2020).

A significant component of ACGN culture is its fans' dedication to Girls' Love (GL) and Boys' Love (BL) fan fictions, specifically young female fans' active interpretation of ACGN characters' gender and sexual identity, pairing of same-sex characters from ACGN content, and the resulting increase in representations of bromance/womance/romance (Martin 2012; Yang and Bao 2012; Tan 2016; Lavin, Yang, and Zhao 2017; Hu and Wang 2020). In fact, the growth of GL and BL culture is not an isolated case but a part of the dramatic transformations in Chinese sexual practices and attitudes and public discourses on sex, gender, and queerness that have transpired since the 1980s (Rofel 2007; Ho et al. 2018). GL and BL culture fandoms oppose the normalisation of gender, sexuality, and traditional patriarchal social relations and have been found to permeate the discourse of civic engagement (Zhang and Mao 2013; Ho et al. 2018; Song 2022a).

In recent years, local market-driven platforms and companies have triggered transformations in fandom activities (Zhao 2021; Yin and Xie 2024). Over the last decade, China's fandom economy (*fensi jingji* 粉絲經濟) has exploded, evolving from noncommercial grassroots operations to a platform-based, data-driven economy worth billions on an annual average (Pearson 2010; Yin 2020; Zhao 2021; Yin and Xie 2024). As in other contexts (Finan 2021), Chinese fans have become "sponsors, co-creators of value, stakeholders, investors, and filters" of the platform economy (Galuszka 2015: 24), a process understood by Yin and Xie as "playing platformised language games" (2024: 619). At the same time, there have been fierce online fan conflicts. Fan communities, which cannot escape the influence of social hierarchies along the dimensions of class, race, and gender, also reproduce and consolidate power relations and stereotypes (Reinhard 2018), resulting in "toxic fan practices"

1. These sayings are widely acknowledged in the anime and manga fan communities and the information technology industry. For more information, please see "B站是變了, 還是我們變了?" (*B zhan shi bian le, hai shi women bian le?*, "Has Bilibili changed, or have we?"), *Zhihu.com* (知乎), <https://www.zhihu.com/question/399658192> (accessed on 16 March 2024); and "B站真的變了" (*B zhan zhen de bian le*, "Bilibili has truly changed"), *36 Kr* (36氪), <https://36kr.com/p/2319493143478665> (accessed on 16 March 2024).

2. Re-conventionalisation refers to the process of returning to traditional or established norms, practices, or standards after a period of deviation or innovation. In the context of China, this term specifically denotes the country's shift back to traditional values and practices.

3. A VTuber (*xuni zhubo* 虛擬主播), sometimes called a virtual YouTuber, is an online streamer who utilises a virtual avatar created with the use of computer graphics and real-time motion capture software or technology (Bredikhina 2020; Bredikhina and Giard 2022).

(Hills 2018: 105). Moreover, there are numerous divisions within the fan community: between fans and nonfans of an idol or a specific culture; between the different camps based on their respective interpretations of a metatext; and between the core fans, fan leaders, and “plain fans,” differentiated by their cumulative cultural capital, or their contributions, fame, and technical input (Reinhard 2018; Wang and Ge 2022).

Bilibili has long been the central hub of China’s ACGN culture (Chen 2020, 2021). A group of infotech engineers with a passion for ACGN culture launched Bilibili.com as a website in June 2009. Between 2009 and 2016, Bilibili was often regarded as the home of Chinese ACGN culture, and even a heterotopia for Generation Z and the socially unfit (Chen 2020, 2021). Inspired by several Japanese predecessors (Niconico and Pixiv), Bilibili has established an infotech ecosystem welcoming noncommercial ACGN-related user-generated video content. It has set up a unique feature, “danmaku,” that invites website visitors to post moving comments onto a video as it is playing; these comments are time-stamped to the video and are generally displayed as “shooting” across the screen (Yang 2020). Previous research on Bilibili argues that its unique user interface design should be regarded as “semiotic technology” with the capacity to transform youth social practices (ibid.), create new forms of communicative activities full of creativity and playfulness (Zhang 2020), and foster the growth of alternative democratic spirits (Yin and Fung 2017). From the outset, Bilibili was at odds with its larger societal context. Originally established as a noncommercial venture and characterised by a youthful rebellious energy, it served as the leading Generation Z “identity college” banner (Chen 2020). Due to its vast corpus of male-male romance/bromance content and queer-friendly environment, Bilibili has been jokingly referred to as “China’s largest same-sex dating site.”

However, Bilibili has gradually transformed from a community-based website for marginalised groups into an integrated video platform. On 28 March 2018, Bilibili listed itself on the US NASDAQ (National Association of Securities Dealers Automated Quotations) stock market, which is emblematic of its successful mainstreaming and commercial transformation. Thus, one may wonder what happened when Bilibili sought to expand its business and become a mainstream video platform accessible to all (Question 1). Moreover, what does Bilibili’s transformation mean for ACGN fans (Question 4)?

Theoretical framework: Categorisation of different innovative creators

Becker’s understanding of art as collective action (1974) and classification of various drivers of innovation in creative industries (1982) are useful for answering Questions 2 and 3. Becker identifies *mainstreams*, *mavericks*, and *misfits* as three roles and associated positions that might reproduce, modify, or create new creative norms.

Specifically, the *mainstreams* are “integrated professionals” who have trained and acquired cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986) in a particular industry, and who conform to established norms of performance and draw inspiration from established artistic traditions. As a result, the *mainstreams* have close links both within the industry and to societal norms. By contrast, the *mavericks* are

creative performers who challenge some existing societal norms while maintaining others to minimise incomprehension and propose innovations. The marginality and dissociation from which *mavericks* derive their creative power may not be a reflection of their cultural identity, but rather the result of modern art education, formal training within the profession, and a conscious decision to shield creativity and dissenting ideas from the mimetic pressures of the mainstream (Jones et al. 2016). Finally, the *misfits* are marginal creators who challenge the norm to such an extent that they are excluded from, or choose to remain beyond, the confines of what the creative community deems socially acceptable.

Inspired by the concept of amphibious entrepreneurs (Powell and Sandholtz 2012), Jones et al. (2016) later proposed a fourth category: the *amphibians*, whose generative creativity corresponds to the dynamic rather than static nature of Becker’s categories. This category prompts us to consider the evolution of innovative drivers over time (Patriotta and Hirsch 2016). *Amphibians* may traverse the categories and provide the creative field with significantly more flexibility and diffuse practices across domains (Powell and Sandholtz 2012; Jones et al. 2016).

The above literature greatly informs our research of Bilibili, as well as changes in Bilibili’s video content, creators, and fans. Previous studies on Chinese livestreaming practices (Liu et al. 2021) and creative video production (Lin 2020) have reported the evolution of Chinese online video creation from not-for-profit individual acts to commercially-driven collective action, echoing the concept of art as collective action. Becker’s classification of the various drivers of innovation enables us to move beyond preconceived notions of Bilibili’s content based on genre divisions such as lifestyle, movies, drama, games, and manga. Classifying Bilibili’s dazzling landscape of video content and genres using Becker’s schema also allows us to concentrate on the relationships between the content and social elements, such as political ideologies and macro power relations. This is because the classification schema is both explanatory and critical in nature. It also allows us to examine the evolving nature of Bilibili and the platform contents, and explain it as consequences of societal structures, economic forces, and fan conflicts. Certainly, the actual configurations of Bilibili video content are diverse, changing, and contingent on the negotiated collaboration between several elements and actors in the creative field: the platform, advertisers, marketing agency, target audience, and surrounding political environment. Becker’s classification assists us in exploring who has stayed and adapted, and who has chosen to leave Bilibili. In the following analysis, we explain how we combined and synthesised a multidimensional method to identify Bilibili’s current *mainstreams*, *mavericks*, *misfits*, and *amphibians*.

Research methods

We have drawn part of our research data regarding Bilibili’s transition from our offline research in Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou between March 2019 and June 2021. During this period, we contacted nine current or previous Bilibili employees: content creators who created original video content, staff or chief executives responsible for placing advertising and public relations orders with well-known brand owners on the company’s behalf,

and interns from multi-channel network (MCN) agencies working alongside Bilibili content creators. Our interview questions focused on the following lines of inquiry: (1) What kind of videos are currently most popular on Bilibili, and why? (2) How much did Bilibili's content management change after its NASDAQ listing? (3) What are your thoughts on Bilibili's expansion strategy? Additionally, we discussed broad issues such as platformisation and the future of ACGN culture. Along with these interviews, we examined public documents and media reports, including Bilibili's NASDAQ listing prospectus, annual earnings reports, and presentations to investors. These materials facilitate a better understanding of the company's business transformation strategy and concerns.

Our research on the successful new and old video artists, notably the mainstays, mavericks, and amphibians, relied heavily on a detailed textual analysis of videos on Bilibili. We also paid close attention to Bilibili's list of popular content and its official promotional lists, such as the "General Hot," "Weekly Must-see," "Bilibili Must-see," and "Rankings," to gain an insight into the platform's popularity patterns. Moreover, we attempted to contact and conduct interviews with prominent video makers. Fortunately, one of the authors had the opportunity to visit the studio of a leading Bilibili video creator in Shanghai and could conduct face-to-face interviews with a Guangzhou-based restaurant brand manager who works closely with MCN companies to select Bilibili content providers. These interview opportunities shed fresh light on how Bilibili video creators were actually working and adapting to the platformisation of Bilibili.

Last but not least, we conducted a long-term online ethnography that proved helpful for researching the Chinese fandom community (Wang and Ge 2022). Two of the authors were active members of the Chinese fan community for Rainbow Society (*Nijisanji* 彩虹社), a Japanese VTuber agency. VTuber fandom is a digital phenomenon that began as a fad in Japan in the mid-2010s and has since grown into an international internet sensation (Shirai 2019; Bredikhina 2020). Because a VTuber does not present as a real person, they

can elicit various interpretations from fans regarding personality traits, gender, or sexual orientation (Shirai 2019; Bredikhina and Giard 2022). Bilibili is the first digital platform to allow Chinese VTuber fans to exchange and discuss relevant video material. VTuber culture quickly converged with GL and BL fan fiction, establishing itself as an important subgenre of Chinese ACGN culture.

Between March 2019 and June 2020, we participated in online and offline VTuber fan community events such as online fan meetings, offline fan gatherings, album promotion, and online livestreaming festivals. Via text conversations and video calls facilitated by QQ and WeChat between March and December 2019, we interviewed ten core members of Rainbow Society, which gave us an in-depth understanding of their challenges and experiences vis-à-vis Bilibili's transformation (Table 1). We also continued a 15-month ethnography of the fan community between March 2019 and June 2020, exploring the questions: (1) What are the day-to-day lives of ACGN/VTuber fans like? (2) If Bilibili was once the home of ACGN/VTuber culture, what made members become dissatisfied and leave? (3) How do these fans adapt to and use new symbols and strategies to cope with Bilibili's transformation?

The commercialisation and data-isation of Bilibili

As mentioned above, Bilibili was previously an ACGN heterotopia (Chen and Cheung 2018; Chen 2020) marked by Generation Z energy, semiotic creativity, and a queer-friendly, playful spirit (Zhang 2020). However, when it sought to expand its business, especially when seeking to list on the NASDAQ around 2016, many considered its heterotopic nature an obstacle to further development. Since then, Bilibili has implemented various methods to commercialise and make its content more mainstream, resulting in a re-conventionalisation process that downplays the ACGN content. As it proudly states in its recent company overview:

Table 1. Information about key informants

Pseudonym	Place of residence	Gender	Age	Estimated annual income (RMB)	Length of time as a VTuber fan
CaiD	Shanghai	male	26	Around 100,000	3.5 years
Aku	Shanghai	male	23	Unknown	3.5 years
MIYAKO	Shanghai	male	29	Around 250,000	3 years
WYD Maiya	Beijing	male	30	Around 250,000	3 years
Yiwen	Zhongshan	male	25	Fluctuated as a freelancer	3 years
Zhuazhua	Changsha	female	25	Unemployed	4 years
ASHU	Nanchang	male	25	Unknown	4 years
Shino	Fuzhou	male	24	Around 100,000	5 years
Orga	Beijing	male	24	Unknown	3.5 years
Kanbeki	Guangzhou	male	24	Around 140,000	2 years
Flamingo	Shandong	male	21	None (student)	3 years
Shanchui	Xiamen	female	26	Unemployed	3 years

Source: authors.

Starting with our initial website launch in June 2009 and official branding as “Bilibili” in January 2010, we have evolved from a content community inspired by anime, comics, and games (ACG) into a full-spectrum video community bringing a wide array of interests from lifestyle, games, entertainment, anime, and tech & knowledge to the masses. We provide users with “All the Videos You Like” as our value proposition.⁴

Our interviews with the past and present Bilibili employees helped us to identify a few areas regarding the platform’s commercialisation and re-conventionalisation that we felt required further examination. The fundamental causes are twofold. (1) To begin with, Bilibili rebranded itself as a video community with a diverse range of offerings for the *masses* (in its own words, a “full-spectrum video community”), deliberately moving away from its ACGN roots, as stated in the quote above. (2) In terms of demographic, Bilibili’s original target user group, Generation Z, is usually defined as those born mainly between the mid-1990s and 2010s. However, Generation Z users have limited consumption capacity, and the company relies on wealthy customers to grow. Chan, Bilibili’s former vice president, explained this expansion strategy to us in an interview on 10 May 2021:

Bilibili used to be a platform for a small minority; its early users were primarily young people. To acquire more high-quality (*youzhi* 優質) user markets, Bilibili now has to continue expanding and jumping into a more popular market. (...) Overall, Bilibili’s “breaking-out of the circle” (*poquan* 破圈) strategy is to expand its target user group and content production from ACGN fans and culture to pan-users and pan-hobbies. Its user landscape needs to be broadened; for example, mainstream cultures and older user groups are now targeted.

This interview excerpt indicates that Bilibili’s management department has linked the concept of human quality (*suzhi* 素質) with its users’ spending capacities. *Suzhi* is a popular discourse constructed and endorsed by the state to distinguish the perceived low-*suzhi* groups (i.e., rural people and labourers) from the expected high-*suzhi* groups (i.e., the urban, the well-educated, and the white-collar) in the reform era (Yan H. 2003). In the interview excerpt above and many other online articles, it is apparent that in today’s Chinese infotech business circles, one’s consumptive strength is associated with one’s human qualities.

Our interviews further revealed that the standard content-creation processes of Bilibili’s staff had shifted towards full commercialisation and data-driven operations. Ms Li, who formerly held a senior position at Bilibili, told us: “[At present,] Bilibili is dedicated to increasing its total number of daily active users (DAU) and monthly active users (MAU).” According to several of our respondents, an increasing number of people on their management team are proficient in internet firm management, while ACGN fan numbers are dwindling, “unlike the good old days.” From 2018 to 2019, before and after Bilibili’s listing on NASDAQ, many recruitment advertisements on Bilibili included language such as “a priority for individuals who independently or fully planned successful user growth experiences.”⁵

A new landscape of mainstreams, mavericks, misfits, and amphibians

Recently, Bilibili has placed unprecedented emphasis on uploaders’ analytics, i.e., clicks, views, comments, and reposts, in keeping with a trend identified by Yin (2020) as the “data-isation” of China’s online video market. Because of these mainstreaming and data-driven operation efforts, Bilibili has grown to become one of the most visited and prominent online short video streaming platforms in contemporary China. As a result, a new, varied landscape of video content has evolved to replace the previous ACGN-dominated content, which we classified as mainstreams, mavericks, misfits, and amphibians (see typical cases in each category in Table 2). We explain this in detail below.

Table 2. Explanations and typical cases of Bilibili video types

Types of innovative drivers	Innovative drivers on today’s Bilibili	Typical examples (English titles used in the analysis, translated by the authors)	Typical examples (original titles on Bilibili)
<i>mainstreams</i>	Those who adhere to the Chinese Communist Party’s soft propaganda	National Benevolence and Rural Construction; China Positive Energy	國仁鄉建; ZG 正能量 China
<i>mavericks</i>	Emerging video creators who are motivated by profit	Ah Rui and the Photographer	阿銳與攝影師
<i>misfits</i>	Original hardcore ACGN video creators and fans	Nijisanji	彩虹社
<i>amphibians</i>	Original ACGN video creators who are adapting well to commercialisation and mainstreaming	Shikakuhome	視角姬

Source: authors.

Mainstreams: Copyrighted, and patriotic videos

In terms of content production, most of the ACGN-related videos posted on Bilibili in the past were user-generated. Many consisted of secondary adaptations of anime, comics, video games, or translated

4. For details, see “Bilibili 2020: Environmental, Social, and Governance Report,” <https://ir.bilibili.com/media/gehmubik/bilibili-2020-environmental-social-and-governance-report.pdf> (accessed on 7 March 2024).

5. “招聘信息” (*Zhaopin xinxi*, Recruitment information), Bilibili’s recruitment page, <https://jobs.bilibili.com/social/positions/18056> (accessed on 16 March 2024).

Japanese ACGN works, inviting ACGN-related *danmaku*. These kinds of items ran the risk of copyright disputes in China's ever-tightening copyright enforcement (Gilardi et al. 2018; Gu 2018). Our research reveals that following Bilibili's transition from an ACGN heterotopia to a pan-entertainment video empire from 2016, a group of new mainstreams, consisting of copyrighted television series, films, videos, or vlogs that conform strictly to the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) soft, patriotic propaganda, have landed and flourished on Bilibili. The work of Zhao (2021), Chen (2021), and Lin (2020) remind that Bilibili's movement towards data-driven, mainstream cultural production is not an isolated case; all video streaming services in today's China rely on algorithmic metrics and patriotic sentiment to compete for the state's sponsorship, advertising, and investment.

National Benevolence and Rural Construction as well as China Positive Energy are two typical channels developing on the new Bilibili among the various mainstreams that are significantly at odds with ACGN norms. National Benevolence and Rural Construction is a video channel founded by a state-supported non-profit organisation, the National Benevolence Urban and Rural Science and Technology Development Center in Beijing, to promote the 2017 CCP's grand project of rural revitalisation (*xiangcun zhenxing* 鄉村振興). The channel has consistently welcomed mid-career professionals in cooperative economics, ecological agriculture, ecological architecture, rural literature, and rural art to present pertinent information. It has boosted educational content related to industrial prosperity, ecological liveability, rural civilisation, effective governance, and quality of life.

Less obviously issue-focused, China Positive Energy is a channel that celebrates the rise of China as a whole, including an acknowledgement of China's strong, still-socialist political system, efficient epidemic prevention and control, and excellent economic system. The channel is not run by any organisation or studio, but by a group of volunteers who solicit videos from all patriots. Due to their lack of relevance to Generation Z, video channels such as National Benevolence and Rural Construction and China Positive Energy are more a sign of Bilibili's allegiance to the Party than attention-grabbers.

Mavericks: Innovative and commercial newcomers

As Bilibili has recently converted into a pan-entertainment video empire for a wide audience, which supports its mainstreaming and commercialisation goal, various new non-ACGN video genres and channels are being developed, including lifestyle, fashion, food, sports, and education.⁶

These genres are not like the above-mentioned mainstream videos that fail to attract viewers owing to their overt propaganda agenda (Li and Li 2021); rather, they harness the ACGN or youth spirit to reinvent their material and content (Wang and Picone 2021, 2022). These new video channels attract a significant number of viewers, making Bilibili an important platform for e-commerce merchants and brands seeking to increase traffic and sales (*ibid.*). We categorise these videos and channels as mavericks because they endeavour to adapt their video-making practices to the conventions of ACGN content production and distribution,

at the same time showcasing entrepreneurialism, creativity, and imagination in making videos (Jones et al. 2016; Patriotta and Hirsch 2016).

According to a Chinese financial analysis article,⁷ ACGN content accounted for just 30% of all videos on Bilibili in 2018; that said, the most popular video categories on Bilibili are no longer directly ACGN-related. A landmark event in Bilibili was the release of the video ad "Back wave" (*houlang* 後浪). "Back wave" features an ordinary non-ACGN middle-aged, middle-class man wearing a neat black suit and a white shirt, speaking as a father figure congratulating Generation Z in a patronising manner.⁸ "Back wave" has received considerable backlash from the ACGN community, who believe this typical mansplaining ad targets middle-aged advertisers and investors, and that ACGN fans are being used as clickbait.

Here, we will use the genre of cooking demonstration video to briefly illustrate the issue of Bilibili's commercialisation. We spoke with Tom (male, 27, Guangzhou), a brand manager for a restaurant company. Whenever the brand opens a new store or launches a new menu, it is Tom's role to prepare and disseminate the associated promotional material to a MCN company, which in turn sends business orders to various content creators on different platforms, such as Bilibili and Douyin. The content producers on each platform create content according to the "tone" of the platform. For example, a typical food-promotion video on Bilibili would involve video creators replicating the process of making food in anime productions. Below is a screenshot of a Bilibili video creator (Figure 1) simulating the creation of egg tempura, which has emerged in a Japanese anime, *Food Wars!: Shokugeki no Soma*.⁹ This video is featured on a list of 30 videos called "anime food replicas," and has been viewed over 6.6 million times. An increasing number of channels on Bilibili show and sell food, in a standard type of short video advertising (Addo et al. 2022), such as those that display and sell meatballs, without demonstrating any clear connections to ACGN culture (Figure 2).¹⁰

- For details, see Bilibili's company overview: https://r.bilibili.com/?spm_id_from=333.1007.0.0, (accessed on 28 December 2021).
- Li Xinyu 李心語, "B站的2018: 與資本共舞的二次元帝國" (*B zhan de 2018: Yu ziben gongwu de erciyuan diguo*, Bilibili's 2018: The ACGN empire dancing with capital), *Jiemian xinwen* (界面新聞), <https://www.jiemian.com/article/2661755.html> (accessed on 4 December 2022).
- "Bilibili獻給新一代的演講'後浪,'" (Bilibili *xiangei xin yidai de yanjiang* "houlang," Bilibili speech "Back wave" dedicated to the new generation), *Bilibili.com*, https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1FV411d7u7/?spm_id_from=333.337.search-card.all.click (accessed on 15 March 2024).
- "完美復刻! '食戟之靈餐之皿'之'雞蛋天婦羅Don'" (*Wanmei fuke! "Shiji zhi lingcan zhi min" zhi "jidan tianfuluo Don"*, Perfect replica! "Egg tempura don" from *Food Wars!: Shokugeki no Soma*), *Bilibili.com*, https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1f44y1n7GQ?spm_id_from=333.337.search-card.all.click&vd_source=299fdb5ce50f6e44bcbf6dcb1c1f373b (accessed on 7 March 2024).
- "實拍潮汕牛肉丸製作: 牛肉含量僅60%, 1斤55元還能爆汁, 這能吃嗎?" (*Shipai Chaoshan niurou wan zhizuo: Niurou hanliang jin 60%, 1 jin 55 yuan hai neng baozhi, zhe neng chi ma?*, Capturing the making of Chaoshan beef balls: The beef content is only 60%, and it is 55 yuan per pound, and it is still juicy. Can this be eaten?), *Bilibili.com*, https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV16p4y1s7uQ?spm_id_from=333.337.search-card.all.click&vd_source=299fdb5ce50f6e44bcbf6dcb1c1f373b (accessed on 7 March 2024).

Figure 1. Extract from a video of simulating making egg tempura (2017)



Source: screenshot taken by the author.

Figure 2. Extract from a video demonstrating how to make meatballs from beef



Source: screenshot taken by the author.

Amphibians: ACGN video creators adapting to mainstream commercialisation

Education isn't worthwhile; business is all about learning and practising in the real world. I regret going to university. If I hadn't, I could've started making money much earlier. (Interview in January 2020 with Ming Gao, 31, male, creator of the Bilibili video channel Perspective Hime (*Shikakuhime*))

Shikakuhime is a channel that has been successfully transformed many times on Bilibili. Ming Gao originally intended his video channel to be devoted to video games. However, around 2017, it was transformed into a lifestyle vlog channel, and has subsequently evolved into a car branding one. You could liken our channel to a continually changing lampshade. Our colour, curves, and angles are always changing, but the light bulb remains constant: we strive for numbers, traffic, and money. (Interview in January 2020 with Jerry, 29, female, business manager overseeing operations at channel *Shikakuhime*)

Ming Gao and Jerry made these remarks in response to interview questions regarding their video-production and business experience, and how they have adapted to the mainstreamed re-

conventionalisation and platformised commercialisation of Bilibili. The interviews took place in the luxury three-story villa in a Shanghai suburb they rented and used as the studio for their Bilibili video channel). At the time of writing this article, *Shikakuhime* had 283 million followers and contained 316 videos; it was listed as a top-ranking (*toubu* 头部) video channel (Wang and Picone 2021), and employed four assistants. If the above Ah Rui and the Photographer channel represents the successful newcomers on Bilibili, then Ming Gao, a former ACGN video creator, represents the amphibians, who adjust to the platform's shift.

Ming Gao's "learning and practice" experience encompasses a decade-long career as a video creator. Hailing from a small city in Guangdong, he had been a big fan of ACGN and Japanese popular culture since primary school. But his conservative mother prevented him from studying Japanese, and he was forced to study Chinese medicine at university. During his studies (2010-2014), Ming Gao's ACGN-themed Sina Weibo account gained popularity and began to attract advertising funding. In early 2016, he created his first video for Bilibili, which was devoted to digital gameplay. He had moved to Shanghai, where he was renting a modest flat, and had hired two assistants – one to administer his Weibo account and the other to edit his videos. Soon afterwards, he signed a contract with Bilibili and became a professional video creator. He also met Jerry, then a programmer at Bilibili, who would later become his wife and business manager. Ming Gao did not earn as much as Jerry when they first met, but his income later far exceeded hers. Together, they worked out how to do Ming Gao's makeup, constantly creating engaging videos and adapting to the evolving platform, finding trustworthy MCN to commodify their content, just as the other video content providers had (Hou 2018; Wang and Picone 2021, 2022).

Ming Gao and Jerry did not regret or feel guilty about shifting away from ACGN content towards their current business focus, which primarily centres on sports car promotion. Jerry explained their turning away from ACGN content and their understanding of Bilibili in detail:

We are still big fans of ACGN, but it's too niche, right? If Bilibili aims to become a universal platform to earn big money, it can't remain as an ACGN hub. The title "ACGN" is not compelling to investors, and the country now sees a high anti-Japanese, racialised sentiment. It's really difficult for local games to get licenses anymore. Considering all that, it makes sense to change, doesn't it? (Interview, January 2020)

Jerry's response highlights some of this article's central concerns. *Shikakuhime* represents amphibians, a former ACGN video channel that has effectively and nimbly adapted to the sociocultural changes, as part of Bilibili's expansion, which is directly tied to market value and financial considerations. *Shikakuhime* has transformed from a videogames channel to a lifestyle one, as evidenced by their vlog-funded GoPro, Inc., which emphasises on promoting luxury sports cars. In their videos, they do not attempt to disguise their sponsors; rather, they have employed a method Wang and Picone (2021) have termed "frank commodification," highlighting commercial support.

The *Shikakuhime* crew is also extremely politically sensitive and attuned to anti-Japanese sentiment. Negative opinions about Bilibili as the former Japanese ACGN hub, which have surged in recent years, were in fact significantly influenced by nationalist propaganda. In addition, since 2018, the Chinese video game industry reached a turning point, mostly owing to the National Press and Publication Administration's (NPPA) suspension on releasing licenses.¹¹ As a result, it is becoming more difficult to obtain license clearances from the state's censorship division, and the gaming industry is becoming less profitable overall.

ACGN hardcore fans becoming the misfits and their forced migration

Against this gradual mainstreaming backdrop, a group of Bilibili users who self-identify as hardcore ACGN and VTuber fans have become disillusioned with Bilibili's shift towards the mainstream and consider the process the "deterioration of the home of ACGN culture."¹²

Lying at the centre of ACGN fans' disappointment is the re-conventionalisation and commercialisation process for Bilibili's new content, particularly surrounding issues of gender and sexuality and the influx of consumption-driven material. For instance, Chinese VTubers, most of whom are new female VTubers, tend to adopt a cutesy, feminine cisgender persona. This persona often entails a sexy image, slim physique, revealing clothing, and deliberately poor gaming skills (which invites help from men). In many cases, these new female VTuber personas are designed to satisfy a typical heterosexual male audience.¹³ In some cases, these VTubers perform in soft-sell advertisements for feminine items, such as snacks and beauty products.¹⁴ These VTubers have gone viral on Bilibili, attracting legions of new fans.

What our participants considered to be the embodiment of hardcore ACGN culture, however, was the transgressive performativity of VTubers, something which is becoming marginalised. Nekomasu is a good case in point: she is not purely a virtual human being but rather a personification of an adorable spiritually minded fox. She has a cute young comic girl appearance, a rough male voice, an uncle-like personality, and a flexible sexual orientation. However, due to Bilibili's mainstreamisation, VTubers such as Nekomasu have gradually been marginalised, and videos containing such transgressive VTuber images now receive several negative comments on *danmaku*.

Our participants reacted to this "deterioration of the home of ACGN culture":

I cannot bear to see this nonsense! [referring to the VTubers who appeal to the male gaze] (Miyako, male, 29, 25 April 2019)

ACGN culture is, in essence, queer culture, in that it was extremely liberal and supportive of unfit individuals: Boys' Love culture, female masculinity, and male femininity, or anything else that has no gendered limit. I was born to read novels and comics about Boys' Love. Now that new VTubers have come along, they are all exclusively heterosexual, and I cannot accept this historical regression! (Clumsy Claws, female, 25, interview on 27 April 2019)

Bilibili is not that Bilibili anymore. I can still remember the good old days, around 2012 and 2013, when Bilibili was honorarily called "China's biggest same-sex dating platform." Wake up, that time is gone. The Philosophy Channel [a channel featuring gay porn-like ACGN creative content] has been blocked for two years. Now, these newcomers are Bilibili's primary consumers, you know. We are the remnants of the old world, and the new world has no place for us. (WYD, male, 30, interview on 23 January 2020)

To comprehend the participants' furious and disappointed responses, we must broaden our scope to include the shifting gender relations and sexuality patterns in Chinese culture. From the 1980s to the 2010s, ordinary Chinese citizens gradually attained the opportunities and relevant cultural capital to explore more varied life experience and to build a wide range of intimate relationships as a result of the country's post-socialist reform and opening up transitions (Rofel 2007; Yan Y. 2009; Farrer 2010; Song G. 2022b). Bilibili and a slew of other queer-friendly online spaces (for example, location-based gay and lesbian dating apps) emerged against this backdrop. Bilibili developed a reputation as "China's largest same-sex dating site" due to its queer-friendly environment and early channels, such as The Philosophy Channel, which welcomed homosexual pornographic parody (*guichu* 鬼畜).

However, the scenario took a dramatic turn in 2016 with the emergence of a wave of "systemic homophobia" (Song L. 2021) and a backlash against "sissy" males in the broader Chinese media environment (Song G. 2022a). Discursive venues for the production and circulation of queer content have dissipated while state power has intensified its regulation of gender nonconforming media content (Bao 2018, 2020; Liao 2019). In this context of "systemic homophobia," Bilibili sought expansion and a listing on the NASDAQ. Soon after, many queer-friendly channels, such as The Philosophy Channel, were deemed obstacles to attracting "good quality users" and as lacking good commercial value. Thus, they were shuttered by Bilibili.

Hardcore ACGN fans have faced the waning of the content they adore and the flourishing of content with heteronormative and commercial ideals, which they abhor. The immediate result has been a series of contentious online battles, including verbal spats between fans in the *danmaku* – fans reporting each other for "moral problems" to the platform's increasingly strict surveillance,

11. Zheping Huang, "China's Games Industry at a Turning Point Amid Regulatory Crackdown, with Korea Offering a Vision of its Future," *South China Morning Post*, 11 September 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/tech/policy/article/2163595/chinas-games-industry-turning-point-amid-regulatory-crackdown-korea> (accessed on 6 March 2024).

12. See footnote 1.

13. A typical example is the VTuber girl band, A-Soul, see "ASOUL五個小姐姐以前和現在的區別, 變化真大" (ASOUL wu ge xiao jie jie yiqian he xianzai de qubie, *bianhua zhenda*, The differences between ASOUL's five sisters then and now, such big changes), *Bilibili.com*, https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1qB4y1278c/?spm_id_from=333.337.search-card.all.click&vd_source=299fdb5ce50f6e44bc6f6dcb1c1f373b (accessed on 16 March 2024).

14. "超真實數字人直播電商帶貨案例" (*Chao zhenshi shuzi ren zhibo dianshang daihuo anli*, "Ultra-realistic digital human livestream e-commerce case study"), *Bilibili.com*, https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1xT41H7Ad/?spm_id_from=333.337.search-card.all.click&vd_source=299fdb5ce50f6e44bc6f6dcb1c1f373b (accessed on 16 March 2024).

and even the doxing of real people behind the virtual IDs. One of the fiercest conflicts has been the “Tengu vs. Rainbowmen” battle, which saw two distinct fanbases clash. On one side, the Tengu supported the VTuber Kagura Mea, who embodies a conventional, mainstream and commercial VTuber persona. On the other side, the Rainbowmen supported the VTubers of the Rainbow Society, a more niche, queer ACGN VTuber persona. The battle thus revolves around who represents the authoritative narrative of VTubers: the mainstream or the non-normative.

The clash lasted for several months on Bilibili and also extended throughout other social media platforms. The hardcore ACGN fans frequently lose these conflicts. For example, during the “Tengu vs. Rainbowmen” war, Rainbow Society members’ material was removed, and accounts were banned. The primary reason for this was that the massive new fan base dwarfed that of the Rainbow Society, and the new fans were also more familiar with the reporting process. Thus, it was difficult for fans of the Rainbow Society to secure an advantage throughout the series of confrontations.

As such, these hardcore ACGN/VTuber fans, have been forced to migrate away from Bilibili and other platforms. In what follows, we present our ethnography of a group of former fans of the Rainbow Society who have left Bilibili and established a new online home in a QQ chat group. QQ is a social networking site that once dominated Chinese social media. It was founded in 1999 by the Chinese technology company Tencent and was China’s most popular social media platform from 1999 to the early 2010s. With the advent of Tencent’s mobile-focused app, WeChat, which contains multi-purpose instant messaging, social media, and a mobile payment app, QQ’s dominant status declined. However, prior research suggests that as WeChat has become the leading commercial and personal contact social media platform, several marginal groups, among which ACGN/VTuber fans, have “recycled” QQ as a primary site (Liu 2019). Our analysis corroborates these findings, indicating that QQ has surpassed other platforms as the new home of ACGN fans.

Among our research participants, fans of the Rainbow Society, some of the earliest members were from the first generation of online Japanese video subtitle groups and active members of user-generated ACGN content in China. Their QQ group consisted of 30 to 40 active users, with an age range between 18 and 30. These members are primarily white-collar professionals (i.e., financial analysts, civil servants, IT engineers and university students). “Everyone in our group has a story,” one of them explained. CaiD was the founder of this chat group; he had previously founded an online VTuber video subtitle community. He is also a household name in the VTuber circle and has been a prominent participant in China’s Rainbow Society online public forum, where he has participated in several key battles. Aku, an IT engineer who works in Beijing, is another prominent member of this chat group. He is a typical VTuber enthusiast who has promoted the Rainbow Society in China for several years. Miyako, who was quoted earlier, is a devoted follower of Rainbow Society, and another core member who enjoys spending money on VTubers. He has returned from working in the United States and is now employed in a financial services firm. WYD, ASHU, and Yiwen are also active members of this chat group. They are responsible for translating and conveying

relevant VTuber news from Japan, producing summaries and promotional articles, and moderating some of the VTuber sections on online public forums. Shino, Orga, and Yamafubuki are newer members and have been devoted to Japanese VTubers for over four years, while Clumsy Claws is a recent college graduate.

The group initially had 47 members, but after 15 months, only 36 remained. These fans have undertaken three general categories of efforts to safeguard the “cleanliness” of their chat group and maintain their faith in ACGN culture. They scrutinise who is allowed to join their new QQ chat group. Only those existing members who have validated as genuine fans of Rainbow Society are eligible to join, which is determined via an online quiz or interview. Due to these restrictive access criteria, few new members were able to join throughout our ethnography.

Over time, group members have also developed a symbolic system that only group members understand, including new nicknames for VTubers and sarcastic words for the ongoing mainstreaming of ACGN fandom culture and a slew of memes and emojis they have created. For instance, the term “Voldemort,” referencing the famous villain from the globally celebrated Harry Potter series is employed derogatorily within this QQ chat group to describe certain mainstream VTubers on Bilibili. It specifically referred to fans of Kagura Mea, notable for their aggressive online behaviour, including reporting others to the extent of getting content and accounts removed, and then was expanded to include other prominent VTubers.

Other examples include “bug fight” (*douchong* 鬥蟲), “unicorn” (*dujiaoshou* 獨角獸), and “Skeleton King” (*kulou wang* 骷髏王). “Bug fighting” is a disparaging term used in a QQ chat group to refer to the practice of VTuber supporters comparing statistics such as each VTubers’ follower counts and subscriptions. Fans particularly interested in data comparison are maligned as “bug warriors.” “Unicorn” is another negative term, and refers to the new VTuber fans who expect their female VTubers (both the virtual avatars and the real people behind them) to be virgins. “Skeleton King” is the most arcane term for outsiders, and relates to Kagura Mea’s close buddy, the VTuber Minato Aqua. Minato Aqua is well-known for her live game broadcasts. After announcing her retirement from live game broadcasting seven times in one year, only to return to work each time, Minato Aqua is viewed by some members of the QQ group as a humorous liar who keeps returning “like skeletons in games.” Thus, she has been dubbed the Skeleton King.

Finally, this QQ chat group’s members have collaborated with other ACGN fans to participate in a broader “protest” against Bilibili’s mainstreaming and commercialisation. For instance, in 2020, on Bilibili’s 11th anniversary, numerous ACGN fans reposted a Weibo post by Chen Rui 陳睿, Bilibili’s CEO, from five years earlier, in which he stated “Bilibili would never change.” ACGN fans reposted this to express their outrage about Bilibili’s transformation and to mock the CEO. Later that month, Bilibili announced its investment in 觀察者 (*Guanchazhe*, Observer), a mainstream left-wing political and news media outlet unrelated to its primary business of ACGN culture. In response, many Bilibili fans expressed their outrage on Weibo with the hashtag #ACGNWillNeverBeEnslaved (*erciyuan shi bu wei nu* 二次元誓不

為奴)。Members of this QQ chat group have participated in similar demonstrations.

Conclusion

Platformisation is marked by the expanding capacities of platforms, on which most forms of commercial activities and cultural production must eventually rely. This phenomenon may result in unequal power relationships between a platform and its producers, consumers, and partners (Gillespie 2010; Bucher 2012; Langlois and Elmer 2013; Nieborg and Helmond 2019; Lin 2020). The platformisation, mainstreaming, and re-conventionalisation of the digital video-streaming platform Bilibili, the former home of Chinese ACGN culture, has been highly contentious. This article has examined the commercialisation of digital video-sharing platforms, taking Bilibili as a case study, and its influence on fandom culture, showing that the push for increased diversity following Bilibili's mainstreaming has resulted in a new landscape of different varieties of video genres. Howard Becker's categorisation of innovative creators (mainstreams, mavericks, misfits) to which we have added Jones et al. (2016) category of amphibians has been utilised to map out the newcomers, as well as the "old" video creators. The platformisation of video creation, valuing video creators according to computational logic, has arranged these different types into a hierarchy: the mainstreams, represented by copyrighted and patriotic videos, have enjoyed great platform support but not received much attention. The mavericks and amphibians, who are

either newcomers bringing new lifestyle, fashion, food, sports, and education material while maintaining some ACGN vibes, or ACGN video creators adapting to mainstream commercialisation, have enjoyed the greatest success in today's Bilibili. Later in the article, we have also included an online ethnography of ACGN fans' angry responses to Bilibili's shift towards conventionality.

In conclusion, this article demonstrates that the categorisation of online videos is a dynamic process rather than a fixed, static phenomenon. Seeing it as static ignores the evolving experiences of video creators and fans, as well as the diverse pathways that were chosen by video creators and fans in adapting to platform changes. It also demonstrates that platform changes are not value-neutral, but rather an adaptation to political-economic environment and societal norms, which has led to both changes in fandom culture and online conflict. Our research also demonstrates the agency of fans by vividly demonstrating their continued opposition to convention and commercialisation.

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