

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Patriotic rabbits or toxic men? Media ideology, entextualization, and enregisterment on Chinese interfaces

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## Abstract

This article argues that social actors' media ideologies about digital interfaces are key to the enregisterment of online activities. Focusing on an online register emergent from user activities around *Year, Hare, Affair* (YHA)—a state-aligned Chinese animation—I explore how different metadiscourses evaluate this register by entextualizing digital activities around this animation on two platforms, Bilibili and Weibo. First, mainstream discourses praise the YHA-derived, user-generated register as a case of youth patriotism based on an expressionist, affective understanding of Bilibili's *danmu* interface. This shows observers' media ideology of an interface can inform their enregisterment of user activities. Second, I analyze YHA's audience design to show that, the interface's organization of user activities conditions the design of the media artifact; the alignment between the audience design and actual user participation in turn informs subsequent enregisterment. Finally, I trace how some users, by drawing on the design of individuated user accounts on Weibo's timeline interface, put forward a different social meaning for the YHA-derived online register. Meanwhile, mainstream media erase such interface features to assert the official uptake of the register. This shows that observers' perceptions of how interfaces organize the interdiscursive distance between user activities and the source media inform their evaluations of an emerging register.

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网络活动如何成为具有社会意义的语域(register)?本文认为,社会成员对数字平台交互界面(interface)的媒介意识形态(media ideology)在此过程中起着关键作用。以网络动画《那年那兔那些事儿》相关的线上语域为例,本文探讨不同元话语(metadiscourse)如何通过对B站和微博两个平台的用户行为进行文本化(entextualization),从而对这个围绕这部动画形成的语域作出不同评价。首先,主流话语将B站的弹幕界面视为一个表达性的(expressionist)和情感性(affective)的工具,进而将弹幕中出现的《那兔》相关话语解读为青年爱国主义的体现。这表明,评价者的媒介意识形态会影响其对用户行为的语域化(enregisterment)。其次,我分析了《那兔》的受众设计(audience design),发现交互界面的用户行为组织方式能够反作用于媒体内容的设计。当动画的受众设计与实际用户实际行为契合时,这种契合也可能成为后续评价者语域化的依据。最后,我观察到部分微博用户利用平台界面中的用户名、头像等符号,将那兔话语使用者塑造为具体独立的个体,从而对他们的《那兔》语域得出与主流话语不同的结论。相应地,主流媒体在借助微博用户的评论巩固官方解读时,则选择了抹除该平台界面的某些设计。这表明,观察者对交互界面如何组织用户活动与媒体内容之间的话语距离(interdiscursive distance)的认知将影响其对新兴语域的评价。

In March 2015, Rising Wind, a media studio in China, began to release free episodes of its first product—an animated series titled *Year, Hare, Affair* (那年那兔那些事儿, *YHA* henceforth). A cartoon featuring talking animals, *YHA* represents China's modern history as a story of Communist Rabbits defending their nation against American Bald Eagles, Japanese Chickens, and Russian Bears. Within months, the series received praise from both ordinary Internet users and mainstream media. For a long time, the state's official discourse had warned the public of the potential negative influence the Internet and foreign cultural products (especially Japanese popular culture) may have upon young people. On state-aligned mainstream media, young people were often depicted as anime-watching, Internet-addicted, hedonistic individualists indifferent—if not antagonistic—toward mainstream values (Pissin, 2021; Saito, 2017).

In the mid-2010s, however, with the state's growing investment in platform economy, these mainstream media pivoted to highlight cases that demonstrated how the Internet and popular culture could promote the state's official ideologies among the youth. Not long after *YHA* rose to popularity on major streaming platforms, both mainstream media and social media users observed the rising phenomena where Internet users began to refer to China as *wo tu* (my Rabbit), attach the word *tu* (Rabbit) to their home provinces as a form of self-reference, and use images of the Communist Rabbit for social media profile images. Mainstream media writers cited these digital activities to argue that the official discourse had misunderstood the youth: rather than selfish individualists, the popular use of *YHA*-derived forms proved Chinese young people were, in fact, genuine patriots. In contrast, some social media users reported negative online encounters with those who used *YHA*-related forms and argued that, instead of being young patriots, those users were actually “brainless, toxic men.” As these competing discourses continue to circulate, *YHA*-derived linguistic and visual forms evolve into an online register that, for mainstream media, indexes youth patriotism, while for some social media users, points at toxic masculinity.

What accounts for these metacommentaries' divergent uptakes of this online register? While this is a multidimensional problem with no single answer, one important facet that I explore in this article is the very *interfaces* that facilitate the entextualization and meaning-making of certain digital activities around a media artifact like *YHA*. As my case studies demonstrate, whether seeing the *YHA*-derived register as indexical of youth patriotism or toxic masculinity, these persistent, public conjectures always emerge from the meaning-makers' metapragmatic uptakes of the interface through which they encounter the media artifact or relevant user activities. In other words, analyses of enregisterment processes in online interactions must consider the multiple ways in which digital infrastructures condition the meanings that come to be imputed to those registers. In effect, this extends Michael Silverstein's (1979, 1981) argument about metapragmatic awareness to recent accounts of enregisterment (Agha, 2005, 2007) in online contexts.

While it is not uncommon for participants of a subculture to develop their own self-indexing registers (Chun, 2013; Ludemann, 2024; Park, 2016; Singh & Campbell, 2022), the enregisterment process can sometimes take place at a metadiscursive level *before* becoming salient in actual social interactions (Inoue, 2006). In our case, the aforementioned social media users' alternative interpretation of *YHA*-derived forms as indexical of toxic men suggests that the figure of Chinese young patriots may be less of an organic social identity ready to be "found" out in the world than a discursive construct upheld by interested parties like the mainstream media. That is, the use of *YHA*-related forms may not necessarily pin down any specific register user to any fixed identity category by itself.<sup>1</sup> Rather, it is through the metadiscourses made by parties like mainstream media and disagreeing Internet users that instances of *YHA*-derived forms become enregistered as indexical of specific kinds of social personae.

All this is to say that the contested enregisterment of *YHA*-derived digital activities is conditioned by different observers' metadiscursive uptakes of those platform interfaces where they observe such activities. In this light, I compare how public discourses make sense of the online register around *YHA* across two major digital platforms where the series gained significant popularity: the YouTube-like Bilibili and the Twitter-like Weibo. Each platform has distinctive interface features. Bilibili's *danmu* interface collects viewer comments submitted at different times and displays them anonymously at the same playback time, creating an animated layer of texts flying over the streaming video. Weibo's timeline interface, on the other hand, attributes user activities to individuated, traceable user accounts and synchronizes them to current news trends. While the *danmu* interface reduces the distance between users' *YHA*-related language and each *YHA* episode's diegetic temporality to the minimum, the timeline interface distances users' deployments of *YHA*-derived forms away from the animation and instead inserts them into the temporality of social media's calendar time. These divergent interface designs shape different observers' perceptions of the *YHA*-derived register, which influences how they subsequently make evaluations of the register users.

Instead of making a technological deterministic claim (Slotta, 2019), my attention to the platform interface highlights the fact that infrastructures—be it platforms or languages—are always experienced through participants' meaning-making practices (Silverstein, 2004). Specifically, I identify three ways in which the digital interface conditions the enregisterment of online activities that use linguistic and/or visual forms from a media artifact. First, when observers encounter an online event where users are consistently using a set of media-derived forms, these observers' metapragmatic uptakes of the interface's affordance and the platform's user body would impact how they entextualize the digital event and how they evaluate the users. I discuss this in the first two ethnographic sections focusing on Bilibili's *danmu* interface after introducing this article's data, method, and ethnographic background. Second, when an interface positions a media artifact as a co-participant, the artifact may incorporate

features of that interface into its audience design (Houtkoop-Steenstra, 2000: 67) to make certain parts appear especially entextualizable. I discuss this in the third empirical section on *YHA*'s audience design. Third, different interface designs introduce different interactional distance between the media artifact and the entextualized forms deployed in an online register. Echoing Charles Briggs and Richard Bauman's notion of intertextual gap (1992), this interactional distance sets a limit to the observers' perceived indexicalities of the media-derived online register: the closer the register is to the artifact, the more it shares the qualities indicated within the media artifact; the further away it is, the more likely it adopts other qualities foregrounded by the interface. I discuss this in the last two empirical sections on Weibo's timeline interface.

Taken together, this article offers an in-depth discussion on how social actors' media ideologies (Gershon, 2010) of platform interfaces inform and facilitate the enregisterment of an online register derived from a media artifact. Tracing how powerful parties find common interest through their shared evaluations of an interface and how parties discontent with the former draw on features of a different interface to contest their enregisterment, I show that in order to understand the power dynamics at work in digitally mediated social interactions, it is crucial to understand the competing media ideologies of different observers, which are often not limited to the interface's immediate users. Shedding light on the deeply social nature of media technologies, I demonstrate how such technologies channel the affective nature of register circulation (Fine, 2020) into larger scale social effects (Gal, 2018) in the age of platformization (Helmond, 2015).

## DATA AND METHOD

From 2018 to 2023, I conducted regular online ethnography (Boellstorff et al., 2012) to understand how digital platforms figure into spectacles of online nationalism in China. *YHA* caught my attention because it was frequently referenced as the site where social media users and media writers reported they had encountered people who they would identify to be online "patriots" (*aiguo zhuyi zhe*) or "nationalists" (*minzu zhuyi zhe*). In this initial observation phase, I noted that, state-aligned news media appeared especially consistent in reporting the popularity and success of *YHA*, including coverages of Bilibili's spokespeople discussing the series, whereas opinions on social media tend to be more mixed. Thus, in addition to regular fieldnotes, I built a digital archive of publicly available discourses about *YHA* from both social media and mainstream media.

After this initial phase, I conducted manual, abductive coding (Rädiker & Kuckartz, 2020) of my fieldnotes and the digital archive. This process showed that discussions about users engaging with *YHA*-derived forms primarily referred to patterned digital activities on two interfaces: Bilibili's *danmu* interface and Weibo's timeline interface. Bilibili's *danmu* interface was where most people first encountered *YHA* and user engagements with forms derived from the animation. Displaying users' comments in a flattened, animated layer on top of the animation, this interface creates a surging, repetitive spectacle of user-generated texts that was frequently cited by both mainstream media and Bilibili's spokespeople as evidence for the existence of youth patriotism.

In contrast, on Weibo's timeline interface, I noticed that users often drew on account identifiers (such as handles or profile images) to individuate and evaluate those who used *YHA*-derived forms. This observation led me to explore how Weibo's interface design might impact users' perception of the use of *YHA*-derived forms and individuated account holders. Prompted by this idea, I conducted another round of data collection which focused on Weibo discussions about people who were perceived to be associated with *YHA*-related forms. Specifically, I carried out a keyword search on Weibo with terms like 那兔 (the Rabbit), 兔子

(rabbit), 种花家 (*Zhònghuā Jiā*),<sup>2</sup> archiving those posts that discussed *YHA*-related online activities. I manually coded these posts and found the category “Rabbit profile image” (那兔头像) consistently emerged as a prominent topic. Building on this, I did a second round of keyword search using combinations of 那兔 (the Rabbit), 兔子 (rabbit), and 头像 (headshot). With data from both rounds, I conducted one more cycle of fine coding and identified a divergence in some Weibo users' attitude toward *YHA* the media artifact and the people who use *YHA*-derived forms.

## PLATFORMIZING POSITIVE ENERGY

As mentioned above, mainstream media in China celebrated *YHA* for proving the existence of youth patriotism. This celebration was in tandem with the official media's increasingly mixed attitude toward the Internet and its influence on the nation's youth. Since 2010, the central government has been proactively pushing forward policies aimed at boosting the nation's economy through platform-based business models (Hong, 2017; Keane, 2016; Liang et al., 2021). While earlier protectionist discourses about youth and the Internet did not entirely disappear (Pissin, 2021), mainstream media also began reporting new cases where digital platforms and the Internet proved instrumental to the state's official ideology. After 2012, Xi Jinping's administration launched a series of political campaigns encouraging cultural platforms to actively produce “positive energy” (*zheng nengliang*), that is, sentiments that align with the party-state's ideological or value system (Yang & Tang, 2018). In October 2014, two bloggers with pro-state orientations were personally endorsed by Xi for upholding “positive energy” on the Internet. It was in this context that, when *YHA* was first released, it was immediately endorsed by official institutions like the Central Communist Youth League and Xinhua as a successful case of “positive energy.”

Before the animated series, however, the figure of the Communist Rabbit had already existed. This can be traced back to [cjdbby.net](http://cjdbby.net), a popular military fandom forum. In February 2011, a [cjdbby.net](http://cjdbby.net) user under the handle Yefeng Zhilang (YZ) began a thread titled *The Little White Rabbit's Honorable Bygone Days*, offering commentaries on the history of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). According to YZ, the associations between the animal figures and nation states were part of a jargon (*hei hua*) already familiar to military fans on [cjdbby.net](http://cjdbby.net); and they decided to use this jargon in the thread for both humorous effects and to avoid censorship (Yefeng Zhilang, 2011). Inspired by YZ's posts, in June 2011, Lin Chao, at the time also a [cjdbby.net](http://cjdbby.net) user, began creating a comic version of the Little White Rabbits' stories in a new thread titled *Year, Hare, Affair*. While YZ's writing contained some criticism of the CCP, Lin's comics positively depicted it as a cutely cunning cartoon Rabbit. In June 2014, motivated by the comics' success, Lin registered Rising Wind to produce the animation version of *YHA* to be streamed on popular platforms like Bilibili.

Also during the 2010s, Bilibili and Weibo, along with other rising platforms, faced significant regulatory pressure from the state. For Bilibili, originally a youth site mostly for fans of Japanese pop culture, one of the challenges was to rebrand itself as a mainstream platform worthy of state support. Facing the official mandates to promote “positive energy” and “cultural confidence” (Rosenberger, 2020), Bilibili had to distance itself from its past associations with Japanese culture while self-censoring content at risk of spreading “negative energy.” In its effort to become a key player in China's growing animation industry, since mid-2010s, Bilibili has been investing in many domestic animation studios, including a 20 million RMB (about 2.9 million USD) investment in Rising Wind in April 2016 (Dumou & Xia, 2021). Meanwhile, Weibo witnessed the rise of China's online feminism (Xue & Rose, 2022) as well as the push-and-pull between nationalist and anti-regime sentiments (Zhang et al., 2018), both of which contributed to the state's

increasing pressure upon the platform to monitor its user activities. Thus, neither of the platforms discussed in this article is free from censorship. The digital spectacles of *YHA*-related forms cited in the metadiscourses I study are not “natural” reflections of anyone’s innate qualities but mediated events cooperated by platforms, media artifacts, users, and observers with various ideological stances.

## MAKING AN OFFICIAL SENSE OF YOUTH THROUGH *DANMU*

As mentioned earlier, the official discourse in China has a history of viewing the Internet and foreign cultural products as potential causes for young people’s hedonist, individualistic inclinations. In this context, *danmu*, an interface widely used by young people, was once also regarded by state-aligned media as a pleasure-seeking technology. In January 2016, a *China Youth Daily* article titled “*Danmu*: Millennials’ Never-Ending Carnival” states:

[...] 90后、00后就是成长在“天下太平”的时代，他们是中国经济发展的受益者，大多数衣食无忧[...]对他们来说 [...] 自己的感受比什么都重要。所以周围事物的价值不是以所谓宏大的社会意义和人生意义来衡量。

有人说70后、80后忙着建构，而90后、00后忙着解构[...] 对他们而言，似乎主流(*zhuliu*)就是用来被调侃的，而弹幕提供了一种特别的表达方式，[...] 这其实跟公交车站被画了胡子的明星广告有异曲同工之妙。90后、00后倒未必想做意见领袖，他们就是天生对什么都有意见，对权威质疑，对规则怀疑。

[...] the post-90s and post-2000s generations grew up in an era of peace and stability. They have benefited from China’s economic growth. Most of them grew up without worries about basic needs. [...] To them, [...] nothing is more important than their own feelings. Thus, the value of things around them isn’t measured by grand social and life meanings.

Some say those born in the 70s and 80s are busy constructing, while those born in the 90s and 2000s are busy deconstructing. [...] *For the latter, the mainstream (zhuliu) seems to exist to be ridiculed, and danmu provides a special way to do so [...] much like doodling mustaches on celebrity ads at bus stops. The post-90s and post-2000s generation may not intend to become opinion leaders; they are simply born with opinions about everything, questioning authority and doubting rules.*

(Wang, 2016, italics mine)

Framing the 1990s and 2000s as an “era of peace and stability,” the author asserts that people born in this period must have grown up with abundance, which—through a hasty logical leap—makes them only interested in personal happiness rather than “grand social and life meanings.” This author then establishes an axis of differentiation (Gal & Irvine, 2019) between those born in the 70s and 80s, who represent a certain “mainstream” (*zhuliu*), and the younger generation, who constitute a subculture that “deconstruct[s]” and “ridicule[s]” this mainstream. Comparing *danmu* to graffiti on bus stop ads, the author highlights the demarcation between *danmu* and the video content, indicating a hierarchy within this axis: just like graffiti is a subaltern critique upon the mass-produced advertisement, the author sees *danmu* comments as youth’s compromised social critic which cannot bring actual change to the dominant culture. When the author claims that

youth “may not necessarily want to be opinion leaders” and “are simply born with opinions about everything,” they exhibit a paternalistic tolerance, brushing aside young people’s potential political aspirations by treating their discontent with the mainstream as something they will eventually outgrow. Published by the official news outlet of the Communist Youth League, this article metapragmatically depicts *danmu* as an interface that renders the opaque youth minds visible without introducing any real challenge to mainstream ideologies.

This axis of differentiation between youth and adult is soon to be revised with the rise of *YHA* and platformization. In July 2016, a few months after the previous article was published, a *Shanghai Observer* article finds that, instead of being merely complimentary to the media artifact, *danmu* has increasingly become a major motivation for people to consume digital media. According to the authors, some mainstream media products—like a documentary promoting traditional Chinese artisanship—that struggle to succeed on traditional outlets find surprising popularity on Bilibili thanks to the rich *danmu* scene their viewers generate (Zhang & Li, 2016). According to this article, *danmu* and the youth are not necessarily antagonistic to mainstream culture; in fact, they represent new ways to bolster and promote mainstream values in a new era.

Raising *YHA* as an example of a mainstream cultural product receiving popular *danmu* endorsement, the authors include a screenshot from the animation with its *danmu* comments. In this screenshot, a Rabbit scientist is inspecting atomic machines while swarming *danmu* comments overlay the video in the uniform structure of “birth year + school major + Rabbit” (Figure 1). To these comments, the authors write,

[图注]剧中,有做科研的兔子为了原子弹研究牺牲了自己的健康,受感动的观众们纷纷用弹幕上传自己的年级和所学专业,以表达愿为国效力之情。

[Caption] In the story, one scientist Rabbit sacrifices his health to atomic bomb research. Moved by this, viewers flood the *danmu* interface with their school year and major to express their willingness to serve the nation.

[正文]众多“小粉红”纷纷“现身”(xianshen),以“96土木兔,93电气兔,97机械兔,98传媒兔”等弹幕,表达对科研前辈的致敬(他们纷纷以兔子自称,前面数字代表出生年份,后面是各自所学专业)。

[Main text] Numerous “Little Pinks” “showed themselves” (*xianshen*) by posting *danmu* such as “96 Civil Engineering Rabbit, 93 Electrical Rabbit, 97 Mechanical Rabbit, 98 Media Rabbit” to pay tribute to the scientific pioneers. (They referred to themselves as rabbits, with the numbers representing their birth year and the words following indicating their respective school major.)

(Zhang & Li, 2016, italics mine)

Even though there is an inconsistency between the caption and the main text on the meaning of the numbers in these comments, in both places, the authors call attention to the comments’ formal coherence and metapragmatically interpret them as viewers’ performative gestures to “pay tribute to scientific pioneers” and to “express their willingness to serve the nation.” While the previous article sees in youth’s *danmu* activities a rebellious tendency to “question authority and doubt rules,” this article perceives *danmu* activities as young people endorsing mainstream values in national security and patriotic pride. Interpreting *danmu* participants’ use of “Rabbit” in self-references as the means for “Little Pinks” (nationalist youth)<sup>3</sup> to “show themselves” (*xianshen*)—a kind of self presumed to be hidden from public view until the moment of *danmu* posting—this article depicts the *danmu* interface as a digital tool that renders visible young

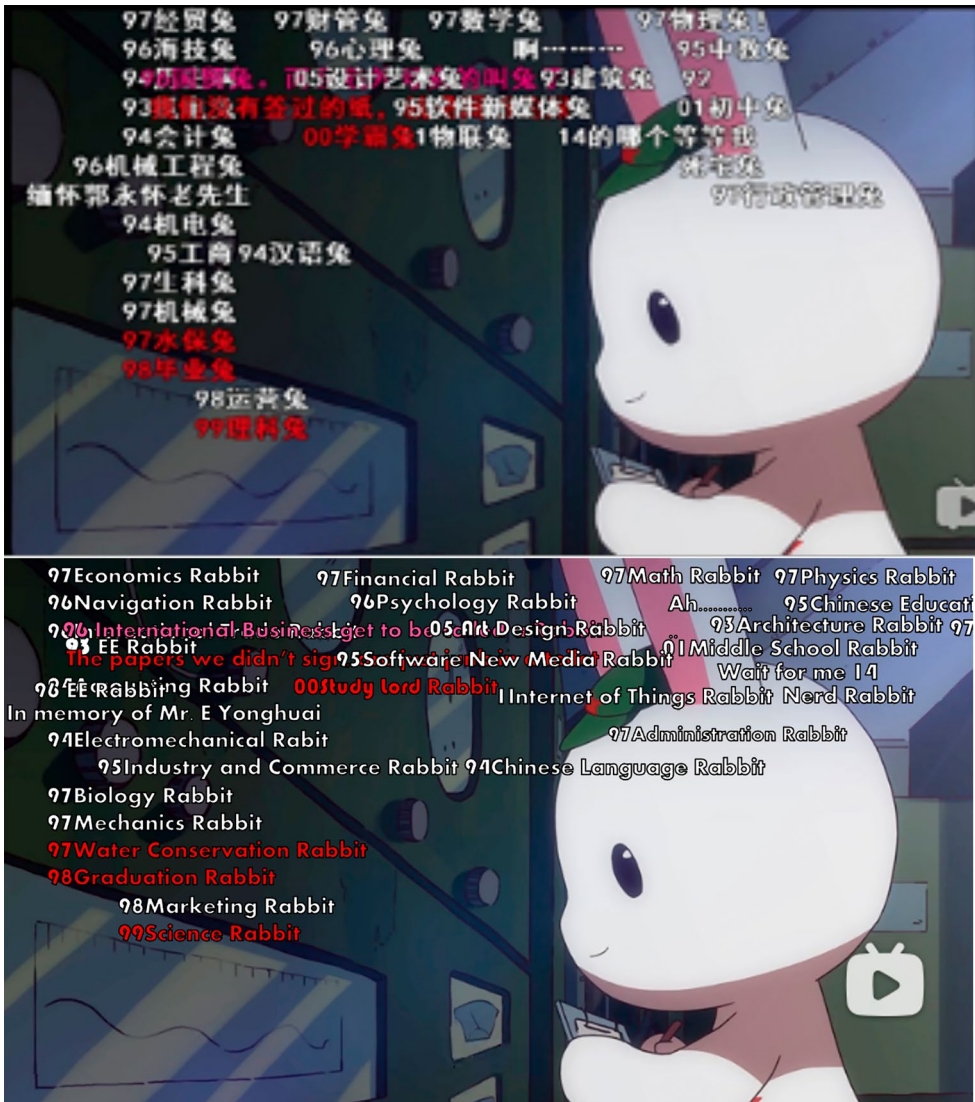


FIGURE 1 The image on top is the screenshot used in the Shanghai Observer article (Zhang & Li, 2016). The image below is my English translation for the danmu comments captured in this screenshot.

people's patriotic essence through the platform users' textual citations of the Rabbit as a means of self-reference.

Building on this, the article continues,

当弹幕上汹涌着(*xiongyong zhe*)[...]对国家历史的骄傲, 当遮蔽在历史暗影里的文化及其守护者与青年亚文化以新颖的形式相遇相知时, 我们 (*wo men*)再没有担心的理由。

When the *danmu surges with* (*xiongyong zhe*) [...] pride in national history, when the culture and its guardians, once hidden in the shadows of history, meet and connect with youth subcultures in novel ways, *we* (*wo men*) no longer have reason to worry.

(Zhang & Li, 2016, italics mine)

Acknowledging the long-held impression that national pride, as part of the mainstream culture, has been “hidden in the shadows of history,” the authors entextualize and recontextualize the spectacle of the “surg[ing]” (*xiongyong zhe*) *danmu* as a promising “novel way” for young people to “meet and connect with” the mainstream. This way, the article tactically dulls the tension between the two sides, depicting the youth culture as even less meaningfully critical against the mainstream than the previous article. When they wrote “*we (wo men)* no longer have reason to worry,” the authors implicitly evoke the same axis of differentiation deployed in the previous article, an axis between the adults (*wo men*, us) and the youth (the implicit *ta men*, them) they worry about. What is different here is that, by seeing the *danmu* interface as promoting rather than vandalizing mainstream cultural artifacts, these authors unify—or splice (Gal & Irvine, 2019: 144)—what mainstream discourse has previously perceived as a value difference between youth and adults. In effect, the youth-adult axis is softened into one marked not by difference in values but in *forms of expression*, a difference the authors see as carrying far less political weight than the former.

Both articles from mainstream media demonstrate the authors' metapragmatic awareness of how user activities on the *danmu* interface relate to (a perceived) young people's stance toward the mainstream culture aligned with the state's official ideologies. In effect, these articles discursively establish the *danmu* interface as a tool for gauging the ideological orientation of Chinese youth. The first article positions youth's *danmu* activities as a subculture that ridicules the mainstream but is ultimately subordinate to it. Highlighting *danmu*'s ability to promote mainstream cultural artifacts, the second article aligns surging *danmu* spectacles with mainstream values, further reducing the possibility for online activities (presumably conducted by young people) to assume any meaningful antagonistic position against the mainstream.

As cultural platforms continue to expand amid the country's platform economy, both the official discourse and digital platforms find it necessary to ideologically fend off user activities' potential threat to the establishment. The first article is able to brush off young people's overall interest in “becoming opinion leaders” because its author has established the *danmu* interface as a trivial, subordinate disruption to the mainstream culture. Later in the second article, on the other hand, the authors quote one Bilibili employee who states that “*danmu* [...] does not encourage *opinion leaders (yijian lingxiu)*, but effectively reflects the collective psychological fluctuations in real time” (Zhang & Li, 2016, italics mine). Depicting the *danmu* interface as one that reflects collective, temporary affect rather than voicing meaningful political opinions, this media ideological uptake further strengthens the article's argument that Chinese young people pose no actual threat to the established values. Through these discourses, the *danmu* interface increasingly appears as an apolitical technology that does not undermine the official ideology, a media ideology that both reassures the mainstream culture and protects the platform itself. In the following section, I discuss how Bilibili's leader entextualizes *YHA*'s *danmu* spectacles as a strategy to secure governmental support for the platform.

## “EVERY RABBIT HAS A BIG NATION DREAM”

In September 2016, Chen Rui, Bilibili's then-CEO, made a public speech at the Eighth China Online Audiovisual Industry Forum in Shanghai, a high-profile conference hosted by governmental institutions including the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television (SAPPRFT). Starting his speech by addressing Dir. Luo Jianhui, who was at the time the head of SAPPRFT's Department of Online Audio-Visual Program Administration, Chen treated this speech as an occasion to demonstrate to state officials Bilibili's social value as a platform. Featuring *danmu* as the platform's signature interface, Chen first plays

a video clip showing dense *danmu* comments covering an animation video. With this, he remarks in Mandarin,

在B站里面看的动画的感觉是这样的，是不是有一种看不见画面的感觉？其实这个弹幕，在B站不仅是一种功能(*gongneng*)，它更多的是用户情绪的一种表达方式(*yonghu qingxu de yizhong biaoda fangshi*)。大家通过看到弹幕，更多的感觉到一种氛围(*fenwei*)，跟大家一起看视频的感觉(*ganjue*)太好了。

This is how it feels like to watch an animation on Bilibili. Don't you feel like you can't even see the video image itself? In fact, on Bilibili, *danmu* is not just a *function (gongneng)*. It is more of a *means of emotional expression for the users (yonghu qingxu de yizhong biaoda fangshi)*. By looking at *danmu*, what people feel is more of an *atmosphere (fenwei)*. This feeling (*ganjue*) of watching a video with everybody is so good.

(Wen & Tao, 2016, italics mine)

Calling no attention to the content of the video nor the comments themselves, Chen's entextualization of the *danmu* spectacle highlights its visual opacity. To discuss the significance of the interface, Chen argues *danmu* is not simply a *technological function (gongneng)*, but “more of” a means for users to *express (biaoda)* their *emotions (qingxu)*. Here, Chen equates the act of posting *danmu* comments with that of expressing one's emotions, as if the words displayed on the interface directly reflect the submitters' interiority. In other words, the CEO establishes for his audience an expressionist media ideology that perceives the interface to be making visible users' pre-existing inner qualities (see Carr, 2013), a logical basis for his subsequent discursive moves.

Chen continues, the result of this mediated emotional expression is for *danmu* to create an *atmospheric (fenwei)* experience of collective viewing for the users. As Paul Kockelman has pointed out, ontologically speaking, affect is the subject's “cognitive and corporeal attunements” to the entities they perceive to exist in the world they inhabit (Kockelman, 2011: 428). By describing the function of the *danmu* interface as creating a feeling (*ganjue*) of companionship, Chen characterizes it as something that attunes users to others they perceive to exist in the digital world of Bilibili. This way, the CEO invites his audience—governmental officials who may not know much about *danmu* before—to view the platform's signature interface as an *expressionist, affective* technology of media consumption.

To further illustrate *danmu*'s value for the state, Chen plays a short clip from *YHA* with dense *danmu* comments. With this clip, he draws attention to the content of both the animation and the comments. In the animation, a group of Rabbit scientists studying abroad are arrested by Bald Eagles, who aim to prevent them from returning home with their acquired scientific expertise. At the climax of the story, the Rabbits unanimously utter, “Every Rabbit has a big nation dream” (每一只兔子都有一个大国梦). Reproducing this utterance, swarming *danmu* comments quickly cover the screen (see Figures 2, 3, 4 for an illustration). To this, Chen remarks,

大家在看这个片子的时候，从弹幕的反应(*fanying*)能够感觉到这部片子给了很多(*henduo*)人共鸣(*gongming*)，因为B站的用户年轻人非常多，其实年轻人(*nianqing ren*)看这部动画，是真正(*zhengzheng*)感受到了一个爱国主义(*aiguo zhuyi*)的教育，而且这个教育不是说教式的，是发自内心的感受(*fazi neixin de ganshou*)。

As you watch, from the *reactions (fanying)* in *danmu*, you can tell that this video *resonates (gongming)* with *many (henduo)* people. Because many Bilibili users are young people, so, in fact, when *young people (nianqing ren)* watch this

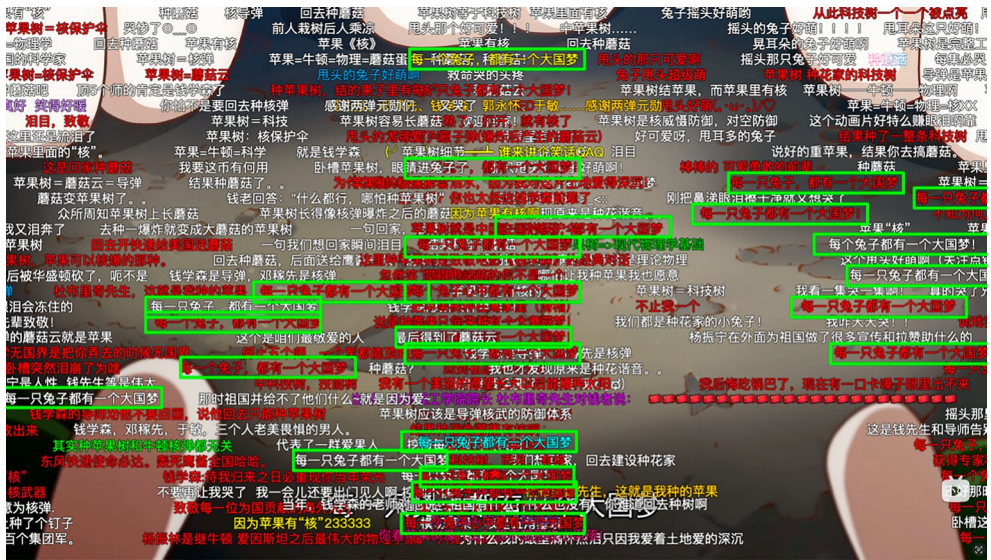


FIGURE 2 Year, Hare, Affair, Season 1 Episode 5 (5:07) with danmu comments. Screenshot by author on October 30, 2024. Danmu comments that repeat the punchline “Every Rabbit has a big nation dream” (每一只兔子都有一个大国梦) are marked by green boxes.

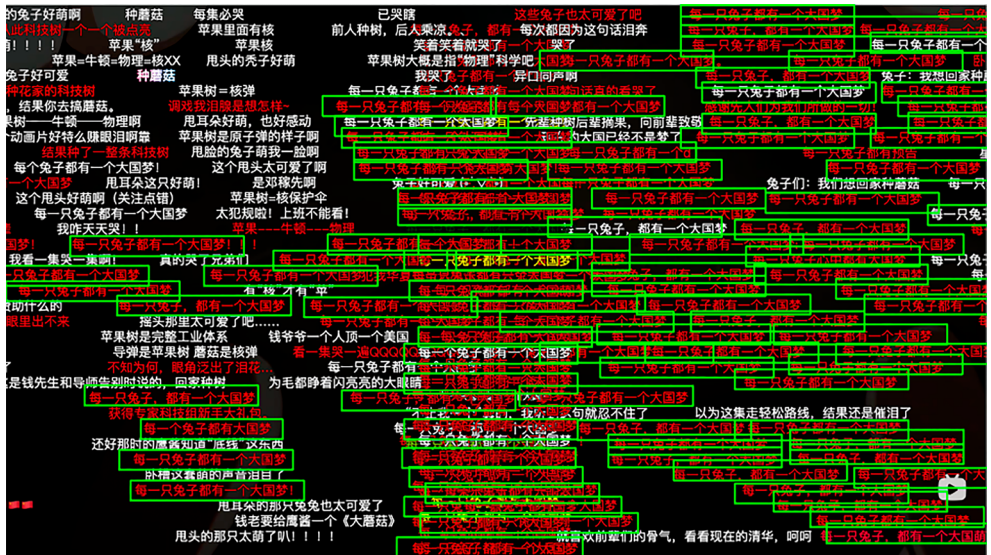


FIGURE 3 Year, Hare, Affair, Season 1 Episode 5 (5:12) with danmu comments. Screenshot by author on October 30, 2024. Danmu comments that repeat the punchline “Every Rabbit has a big nation dream” are marked by green boxes.

animation, the agency (*zhengzheng*) feel a patriotic (*aiguo zhuyi*) education, and this education is not preaching, but a sensation from their inner heart (*fazi neixin de ganshou*).

(Wen & Tao, 2016, italics mine)



**FIGURE 4** *Year, Hare, Affair*, Season 1 Episode 5 (5:17) with *danmu* comments. Screenshot by author on October 30, 2024. *Danmu* comments that repeat the punchline “Every Rabbit has a big nation dream” are marked by green boxes.

By selecting this clip for his speech, Chen entextualizes one specific moment from the animation's continuous *danmu* spectacle in order to underscore the interface's social meaning. As he characterizes these comments as a “reaction” (*fanying*) from the viewers, Chen draws on the expressionist ideology he has just established to equate the comments with users' feelings. By concluding that “this video *resonates* with *many* people,” Chen directs his audience's attention to the repetitiveness and large amount of the comments: the repetitiveness is treated as an icon for a perceived sense of “resonance” while the visual density comes to embody the large number of people behind the comments. Through a semiotic process of rhematization (Gal & Irvine, 2019), the contiguous relationship between the people posting *danmu* comments and the entries they post becomes a resembling one.

Building on this, Chen continues to say that because many Bilibili users are young, their engagement with *YHA* shows that “when *young people* (*nianqing ren*) watch this animation, they genuinely feel a patriotic education.” By deploying the general category of *young people*, Chen subtly conducts a scalar work (Carr & Lempert, 2016; Pritzker & Hu, 2022) that upscales one digital spectacle created by one small group watching one single video at one particular moment to represent the platform's entire user base and, ultimately, all young people in China.<sup>4</sup> Gal and Irvine have found that rhematization is “most powerful when it attributes perceptible qualities to something that is not directly observable” (2019: 19). Therefore, Chen's previous move of rhematization and his upscaling work here together suggest to governmental officials that they can read the opaque youth minds through the content and form of *danmu* spectacles. Deploying three descriptors of interiority in one sentence, when Chen says young people can “*genuinely* feel a patriotic education” that is “not preaching, but a *sensation* from their *inner heart*,” he is performatively reinforcing for his audience a media ideology that views *danmu* as a technology that directly and accurately resembles young people's interior sensations.

In addition to presenting the platform's interface and media content as aligned with mainstream values, Chen proceeds to rationalize Chinese young people's patriotic essence:

其实这一代年轻人，90后、00后，他们非常爱国(*aiguo*)。他们从小的生活很富足，他们的教育各方面都很好，他们是真的觉得(*zhende juede*)他们生活在一个非常非常好的(*feichang feichang haode*)国度，他们是发自内心的(*fazi neixin de*)爱着我们这样一个国家。[...] 刚才动画片里面有一句话“每一个兔子都有大国梦”，其实在我看来，每一个二次元都有一个中国梦。

In fact, this generation of young people—those born in the 1990s and 2000s—they are very *patriotic* (*aiguo*). They grew up with abundance and received good education and everything. They *truly feel* (*zhende juede*) they are living in a *very, very good* (*feichang feichang haode*) country. They love our country *from their inner heart* (*fazi neixin de*). [...] Just now in the animation there was this line “Every Rabbit has a big nation dream.” In my opinion, every member of the anime fandom (*er ciyuan*) has a China Dream. (Wen & Tao, 2016, italics mine)

Like the mainstream media articles discussed in the previous section, Chen also frames the younger generation as growing up without material concerns. As a result, he suggests, these people perceive China as a “very, very good country”—an ontological status that they would affectively attune to with a “love [...] from their inner heart.” To back up this claim, Chen quotes the Rabbits' line repeated by the swarming *danmu* comments, “Every Rabbit has a big nation dream.” Entextualizing it out of the animation, Chen rephrases the punchline into a new statement, “Every member of the anime fandom (*er ciyuan*) has a China dream.” Through the poetic parallelism between the Rabbit's big nation dream (*daguo meng*) and Xi Jinping's famous China Dream (*Zhongguo meng*), Chen treats the *danmu* spectacle around *YHA* as a medium that reflexively calibrates (Silverstein, 1993) the Rabbits' cartoon world with the actual world occupied by Bilibili users—the interface becomes where the two worlds “sync.” Proudly presenting his platform as the sponsor of *YHA* and host of the *danmu* interface, Chen reflexively positions Bilibili as a patriotic platform capable of visualizing genuine patriotic passion of young people who were previously perceived as hedonistic individualists.

In the months and years to come, Chen and others working for Bilibili would continue to cite *YHA* and its *danmu* spectacles to affirm the platform's political alignment with the state. Since 2016, Bilibili expanded its business model to include video games, in-video advertisement, and paid membership services—lucrative revenue streams requiring implicit approval from governmental overseers. Meanwhile, discourses in mainstream media also continued to draw on *YHA* and its *danmu* comments to portray Chinese youth as sincere patriots in support of the state's official values. Time and again, as mainstream media and platform spokespersons continue to reinforce the iconicity between the *danmu* comments for media products like *YHA* and the affective intensity of Chinese youth's innate passion for the nation, youth patriotism becomes increasingly solidified as a social fact within mainstream discourses.

## YHA'S AUDIENCE DESIGN FOR ENTEXTUALIZABILITY

While metadiscourses studied above appear effortless at entextualizing certain *danmu* spectacles from *YHA*'s total viewing experience for their own arguments, one important question remains: What about *YHA* and its *danmu* spectacles makes these observers believe they would make a convincing case for their intended audience? Like any register, online registers acquire social indexicalities not simply because an observer has made a metapragmatic statement about it. Rather, such meanings always arise from the intersection

of the participants' conjecturing practices and the (infra)structure organizing the register-use events themselves (Silverstein, 1981).

In this section, I look into how *YHA's audience design* (Houtkoop-Steenstra, 2000: 67) draws on specific features of the *danmu* interface to encourage and facilitate user activities in alignment with the animation's intended message. Like recipient design, where speakers in face-to-face conversations design their turns with an orientation toward their interlocutors (Sacks et al., 1974), an animation's audience design also organizes its content with a sensitivity toward its intended audience. The difference is that, while actual conversationists design their talk turn by turn, the *danmu*-conscious animation designs its content before the audience takes over the floor.

In Goffmanian terms, the *danmu* interface enables a mode of interaction that allows the audience to make contributions in response to, alongside, and regardless of the video (Goffman, 1981: 134). In our case, this versatile mode of interaction presents media artifacts like *YHA* with both challenges and opportunities to deliver its intended message while facilitating audience engagement in alignment with that message. Below, I provide a CA-style media analysis of the same clip that Chen used in his speech, illustrating how *YHA* audience-designs its content to (1) make certain linguistic forms appear entextualizable (i.e., segmentable, reusable, and meaningful) to the intended audience—thereby providing them with the “what” of the intended digital activity, and (2) indicate the intended timing for posting these entextualizable bits through the *danmu* interface—that is, the “when” for such user activities to take place.

The clip Chen used in his speech starts at 4:38 in Episode 5 of *YHA's* first season, approximately 1 min past the midpoint of the 7 min episode. Before this point, the story introduces a study-abroad Rabbit scientist who is under pressure from the Bald Eagles not to leave the Eagles' country, as he has acquired knowledge of missile and rocket development. Chen's chosen clip starts when the scientist finds other Rabbits also under custody. The transcript in Figure 5 focuses on the audio poetics that designs the Rabbits' collective utterance as entextualizable.

The clip starts with the Rabbit scientist asking the other Rabbits, “My dear comrades, why are you all locked up in here?” After a brief pause, the Rabbits reply, “We want to return home and build Zhonghua Jia.” With the staggered onset of *wwwo*: (first person deictic) at the beginning and an extended *Jia::* (home) in the end, this utterance audibly highlights its collective nature. Following this, soft piano music starts, shifting the verbal conversation into one accompanied by music. From the next turn (Line 6) onward, the pauses between turns extend to an average of 1.42s, a slower exchange compared to the previous transition between Lines 1 and 3, and much slower than ordinary conversation (Meyer, 2023: 6). Together, the gentle music and paced conversation slow down the narrative development to foreground the affective attunement among the Rabbits.

After telling the Rabbits his intention to return and plant an apple tree (a euphemism for nuclear development), the scientist chuckles, “Hehe, how wonderful...” Upon another Rabbit's prompt, he continues, “It turns out I'm not the only one...” As the scientist takes a 0.6-s mid-turn pause, a mellow strings music joins the piano (Line 13), adding another layer of acoustic ambience to his speech. He then continues, “I'm not the only one who still cherishes that saying...” By stopping at the locative deictic *nei ju hua* (that 1-CL sentence), the scientist presupposes (Silverstein, 1979: 206) the existence of a sentence that is already entextualized as a certain “that saying.” When the Rabbits utter “Every Rabbit has a big nation dream,” they effectively entail (Silverstein, 1979: 207) the saying's status as a social fact known to their community.

Splitting the revelation of “that saying” between turns, the dialogue design makes the punchline stand out from the rest of the episode. When the scientist ends his turn, the Rabbits does not immediately respond, leaving a long pause (1.8s) in verbal exchange.

01       **Scientist**   亲们: (0.4) 为 何 被 关 在 这 里  
qinmen: (0.4) wei he bei guan zai zhe li  
2P                   For what PASSIVE locked in here  
My dear comrades, why are you all locked up in here?  
02\*                   (0.5)  
03       **Rabbits**   (.hhh)<我:们 想 回 家 (h) 回 去 建 设 种 花 家::>  
(.hhh)<wwwo:men xiang huijia (.h) huiqu jianshe Zhonghua Jia::>  
1P                   want go home go back to build PR-N  
We want to return home and build Zhonghua Jia.  
04                   -> (1)  
05                   -> //soft piano starts//  
06       **Single R**   你 呢?  
ni ne?  
2S Q  
What about you?  
07                   (1.6)  
08       **Scientist**   <我 啊>° (.hhh) 回 去 种 苹 果 树 ((chuckle)) (.H) °真 好:°  
°<wo a>° (.hhh) huiqu zhong pinguo shu ((chuckle)) (.H) °zhen hao:°  
1S                   go back to plant apple tree                   So good  
I'm going back to plant an apple tree. Hehe, how wonderful...  
09                   (1.3)  
10       **Single R**   怎 么? 亲?  
zen me? qin?  
What 2S  
What's going on, comrade?  
11                   (1.4)  
12       **Scientist**   原 来 不 止 我 一 个  
yuanlai buzhi wo yige  
All along not only 1S 1-CL  
It turns out I'm not the only one...  
13                   //mellow strings join the piano//  
14                   (0.6)  
15       **Scientist**   -> 不 止 我 一 个, 还 潜 藏 着 那 句 话  
buzhi wo yige, hai qiancang zhe nei ju hua  
Not only 1S 1-CL still cherish PT that 1-CL sentence  
I'm not the only one who still cherishes that saying...  
16                   //loud keyboard from the theme song joins//  
17       **Rabbits**   -> (1.8)  
每 一 只 兔 子 (.) 都 有 一 个 大 国 梦;  
mei yizhi Tuzi (.) douyou yige da guo meng;  
Every 1-CL Rabbit all have 1-CL big nation dream  
Every Rabbit has a big nation dream.  
18                   //keyboard continues for 6.3s//  
19                   //percussions joins for 3s//  
20                   //vocal starts & continues for 25s//

\* pauses & music are numbered for analytical purposes

ABBREVIATIONS OF INTERLINEAR GLOSSES	CONVERSATION ANALYTIC TRANSCRIPTION SYMBOLS
1S/2S first/second person singular noun	(0.1) pause length
1P/2P first/second person plural noun	(.) micro pause
CL classifier	(.hhh) in-breath
PR-N proper noun	jia: elogation
PASSIVE passive voice marker	°zhen° breathy voice
PT particle	↑loud↑ loud voice
Q question	<slow> slow speech

FIGURE 5 Transcript for a clip of *Year, Here, Affair*, Season 1 Episode 5 (4:34–5:08).

However, unlike in naturally occurring conversations, this is not a full pause in the unfolding event. Right after the scientist's turn, the animation's theme song starts. Titled "Chasing Dream with a Child's Heart," this song is an enregistered sonic representation of mainstream "positive energy" on the Chinese Internet. Before the Rabbits respond, the theme song's prelude already sets up a poetic anticipation for an affective attunement between the song's "positive energy" and the punchline. When the Rabbits finally reveal the punchline, the script writing, sound design, and voice acting co-produce a unique sonic profile for this

line, rendering it narratively highlighted and audibly distinct from the ongoing conversation. In effect, this sentence stands out from the diegetic context, thereby reflexively marking itself as entextualizable for subsequent use.

The visual design of the episode also corresponds to its audio to achieve the entextualizability of the saying. However, unlike the audio which is entirely controlled by the animation, the streaming window is where the animation “meets” *danmu* comments. As a result, aside from serving narrative and poetic functions within the diegesis, the visual design also plays an important role in facilitating *danmu* engagement at specific moments within the episode. When the Rabbits utter the punchline in Line 17, the camera focuses on a five-star symbol that they have presumably already carved out on the ground (Figure 6). As the collective utterance ends and the theme song dominates the audio, the five-star image fades into a dark screen for 5 s—a visual “pause” longer than any audio pause in the clip. This is followed by a fast montage of black-and-white historical photographs with the cartoon Rabbit photo-shopped into the scenes. Leaving viewers with 10 s of instrumental music, a black screen, and unexplained historic images after the poetic delivery of the punchline, the animation creates something close to a transition-relevance place (Sacks et al., 1974: 703) where the audience, as a whole, is given a relevantly “quiet” floor to respond to the Rabbits’ diegetic utterance through the *danmu* interface.

Indeed, although *danmu* comments are always present in this episode, they remain largely heterogeneous most of the time. However, in the 10 s following the Rabbits’ punchline, the comments quickly unify among themselves, resulting in a screen filled solely with texts repeating the same line (as illustrated by Figures 2, 3, 4). This way, the utterance poetically rendered entextualizable by the animation’s design is actually entextualized by the viewers whose *danmu* comments recontextualize it into not just the animation’s diegesis but also the shared viewing experience established by the *danmu* interface. Through processes of entextualization and recontextualization as such, the animation, the interface, and the users collectively create an intense digital spectacle whose visual density and formal uniformity further render itself entextualizable to subsequent observers like the ones studied above. By designing the intended “what” and “when” for the audience to post *danmu* comments in its



**FIGURE 6** *Year, Hare, Affair*, Season 1 Episode 5 (5:07) without *danmu* comments. Screenshot by author on October 30, 2024. The text on screen is the animation’s built-in subtitle for the Rabbit’s unanimous utterance, “Every Rabbit has a big nation dream,” not a *danmu* comment.

audio and visual poetics, the animation itself contributes to the formation of a *YHA*-derived online register as an active participant in the audience-media interaction enabled by the *danmu* interface.

## INTERFACIAL CONTESTATION OF THE RABBIT HEADSHOT

Unlike Bilibili's *danmu* interface which situates users' deployment of *YHA*-derived forms in close juxtaposition with the animation itself, Weibo's timeline interface distances the use of *YHA*-derived forms from the animation text and instead situates such use within interactions where participants experience each other as distinct individuals. While mainstream media and Bilibili's official discourses portray users of the *YHA*-derived register as a likable, patriotic mass, Weibo users arrive at different conclusions about these register users based on their encounters with them as individual social media users. In their metadiscourses, the indexicality of the Rabbit profile image appears especially prominent. In explicit metapragmatic discourses like the two entries shown in [Figures 7](#) and [8](#), one's choice of a profile image is interpreted as an ideologically laden project of personality presentation; as a result, profile images come to pick up nonreferential indexicalities beyond its original source. In the post shown in [Figure 7](#), SharksRule argues that the Rabbit headshot, especially when used by a man, is an index of self-indulgence, toxic masculinity, and limited intelligence. Similarly, Nemomo in [Figure 8](#) concludes that male users of *YHA*-derived profile images are dangerous like bombs; the unlikeable qualities of these profile image users are perceived to be historically salient ("for all these years") and persistently evident ("without exception"). Instead of indexing young age and patriotic passion as mainstream discourses would have it, when the use of *YHA*-derived images is taken up as signs not about the animation artifact but about specific individuals, it becomes an index for masculinity and unpleasant qualities. By publicly describing the Rabbit headshot users as unwanted interlocutors, these Weibo users distance themselves from the mainstream ideology behind the Rabbit on the ground of gender politics—what appears to be patriotism innate to all young people according to mainstream discourses turns out to be cases of toxic masculinity in events of digital interactions.

These instances show that, how platforms organize the unit of interfacial actors would impact how observers attribute the accountability of those activities conducted on the interfaces. Here, Goffman's discussion on production format is instructive. By closely juxtaposing *YHA*'s media text with viewers' comments, Bilibili's *danmu* interface highlights users' role as *animators* of the forms initially appearing in the media artifact. Meanwhile, as the previous discussions demonstrate, the flattened, anonymous display makes the *principle* of the *danmu* comments—"someone who is committed to what the words say" (Goffman, 1981: 144)—readily appear to be a generalized user collective. Weibo's interface design, on the other hand, does not set the animation text as the immediate context for its users' behaviors. Instead, users' citations of *YHA*-derived forms are recontextualized in the flow of digital



Hi! SharksRule

23-4-15 21:59 发布于 山东 来自 HUAWEI Mate 20 Pro

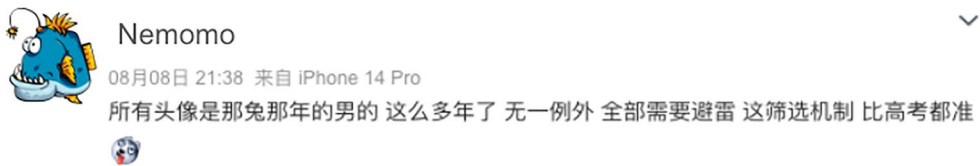
第一定律，用那兔当头像的，特别是男的，又油又爹又弱智

+关注

**FIGURE 7** Weibo post #1. Translation: First law, people who use the Rabbit headshot, especially men, are self-indulgent, toxically masculine, and retarded (SharksRule, 2023-4-15). *Note:* All translations are done by the author. To protect user privacy, both user handles and profile images used in this article have been replaced with pseudonyms and substitute stock images.

encounters of posting, commenting, and private messaging. As a result, it is easier for users to perceive individuated, discrete users as the principle for online behaviors. This is most explicitly illustrated in the post shown in [Figure 9](#).

Like the previous Weibo users, FuzzyWhale here describes users of the Rabbit profile image as “stubborn, brainless jerks with foul mouths.” To support this claim, they post screenshots of several user profiles from their own block list, a feature which allows users to not to see their chosen users' Weibo activities. FuzzyWhale's ability to pinpoint specific users in their block list by listing screenshots of handles and profile images shows the user's shared perception with the platform: user behaviors are seen as contiguous to individuated account holders. As the block list is designed to filter out future activities of selected users, it attributes accountability for online behaviors to individual users presumed to be operating within a linear temporality. Unlike the generalized group presented by Bilibili's *danmu* interface,<sup>5</sup> those who deploy *YHA*-derived forms on Weibo are held accountable



**FIGURE 8** Weibo post #2. Translation: All men who use *YHA* headshots, for all these years, without exception, need *to be avoided like bombs (bilei)*. This screening mechanism is even more accurate than the college entrance exam. (Nemomo, 2024-8-8, italics added by the author).



**FIGURE 9** Weibo post #3. Translation: It has been proved by facts that people who use the Rabbit or other similar profile images are just stubborn, brainless jerks with foul mouths. You can tell from the high proportion of them on my block list (not to say anything bad about the Rabbit itself; I too like the anime, but somehow people who use it as their profile image are all super duper obnoxious) (FuzzyWhale, 2023-07-30). The author anonymized the handles of the users FuzzyWhale pulled from their block list.

by users like FuzzyWhale as distinct individuals, whose activities are anticipated to remain consistent over a linear time.

Although it is tempting to explain away the *YHA* Rabbit's different orders of indexicality as a mere reflection of the observers' opposing attitudes toward the official discourse contained in the animated series, opinions on Weibo show a more complex relationship between cultural artifacts and everyday online interactions. Just like FuzzyWhale's note in parenthesis, many Weibo users are bewildered when finding themselves liking the Rabbit in the animated world but shunning the people who use it as profile images in actual online interactions. Seeing cultural artifacts endorsing the official ideology as actually likable, users SaltyFish (Figure 10) and BOLDYU (Figure 11) remark on their own tendency to separate media products from people who "claim" to embody the personae in such products. Similar to what Briggs and Bauman see in intertextual gap (1992: 149), the indexicalities of the Rabbit headshot change according to the distance between the Rabbit image and the animation's narrative. For these Weibo users, the closer the Rabbit figure is contextualized within the animation, the more likable it becomes; the further away from the animation and the closer it is to actual events of online interactions, the more dislikable it gets.

What this case adds to Briggs and Bauman's observation is that, in the context of digital-content-mediated interactions, the interdiscursive distance between a media artifact and audience activities is conditioned by observers' metapragmatic awareness of the digital platforms' interface design. The *danmu* interface discourages media observers from perceiving the comments as tied to individuals by presenting comments as a continuous on-screen event segmented by seconds of play time. Consequently, this interface minimizes the gap between user activities and the media artifact, making it easier for media observers to perceive *danmu* users' discursive alignment with the Rabbit to be a sign for the likable qualities of the Rabbit in the cartoon world. In contrast, Weibo and other similar social media do not necessarily presuppose media artifacts to be the immediate context for users' interfacial interactions. Instead, their interfaces organize user activities in closer relation to an interactional temporality perceived by individuated users as a linear calendar time. On these platforms, when a user entextualizes a Rabbit image out of the animation text and recontextualizes it as their own profile image, they inevitably increase the interdiscursive gap between the Rabbit and the animation text; in turn, such a user situates the Rabbit closer to digital encounters where their interlocutors can hold them accountable as individual persons.

By publicly calling out the engagement with *YHA*-derived forms as an individual choice rather than a collective action conducted by all Chinese youth, Weibo users quoted in this section highlight the gap between the virtual world in animation and the actual world occupied by young Internet users. Through a process of scalar inquiry—scale-making activities where “participants interrogate normative relationships, roles and ideologies”



SaltyFish



2022年06月14日 07:43 来自 iPhone 12

虽然不清楚内在逻辑，但我观察到的现象是这样的：虽然战狼这部电影和他的主角本身很好，但你在网络上遇到的以战狼一样的中国男人自居的人，一般都跟这些美好特质八杆子打不着，就好像《那兔》也是一部挺好的动画片，但是要是有人拿这个动画片的图片做头像，提前拉黑也不太过分一样。

**FIGURE 10** Weibo post #4. Translation: I am not so clear about the logic behind it, but here's my observation: Even though the film *Warrior Wolf* and its protagonist are pretty good, if you meet someone online who *claims to be* (*ziju*) a warrior-wolf-like Chinese man, he usually has nothing to do with those good qualities. It is like *YHA* is a pretty decent animation, but if someone uses its image in their profile, it is fair to blacklist them out of precaution. (SaltyFish, 2022-6-14, italics added by the author).



BOLDYU

2022年06月20日 22:01 来自 HUAWEI Mate 20

现在网上冲浪看到那兔头像的会应激，谁懂，明明我挺喜欢动画的 😞



**FIGURE 11** Weibo post #5. Translation: When surfing the web, I get PTSD at the sight of those with the Rabbit headshot. Who would understand? I actually rather like that animation (BOLDYU, 2022-6-20).

(Pritzker, 2023)—these users position their evaluation of the Rabbit image at the scale of online interactions, thereby implicitly challenging mainstream media's generalizing claim for widespread youth patriotism. By voicing their own perplexity over their shifting attitudes toward the Rabbit image, these Weibo users highlight the gap between the patriotic ideal upheld by mainstream discourses and the gendered tension experienced in specific online encounters. Taken together, the many different conjectures about user activities around *YHA* show that, instead of completely taking over the meaning-making process, digital interfaces—through different social actors' metapragmatic ideologization—constitute a complex mechanism that organizes and conditions how an online register picks up social meanings.

## ERASING THE INTERFACE, RECONTEXTUALIZING PAST TEARS

So far, I have discussed how platform interfaces influence the indexicalities of an online register through social actors' metapragmatic awareness of those interfaces. It is important to point out that Weibo's interface is not inherently more immune to powerful discourses' entextualization than Bilibili's.<sup>6</sup> In fact, despite some Weibo users' rejection of mainstream media's characterization of *YHA*-form users, the official discourse continues to recruit *YHA*-related Weibo activities to serve its narrative. This section studies another case where Weibo engagement with the Rabbit headshot is recruited by mainstream media for another discursive project of online patriotism. With this, I show that, in order to entextualize Weibo participation for its totalizing purpose, the mainstream media article erases certain features of the platform's timeline interface. This case of selective entextualization further illustrates the interconnection between media ideologies and interface design by showing that the entextualizability of a set of digital activities depends as much on interfacial structures themselves as on the discursive work of the meaning-makers.

In February 2021, mainstream news outlets report that the late Xiao Siyuan—a young soldier who died in a Sino-India conflict in 2020—was using the *YHA* Rabbit as his WeChat profile image. Reporting this news, Sina Military, a state-aligned Weibo account affiliated with the tech giant Sina, created the hashtag #烈士肖思远的微信头像# (#MartyrXiaoSiyuan'sWeChatAvatar#) in a post where it writes, “Every military fan has a big nation dream. Maybe he is just like you and me, waiting for the new episode [of *YHA*] ...” (Figure 12). Just like Bilibili's CEO replaces the “Rabbit” in “Every Rabbit has a big nation dream” with “anime fan,” here Sina Military replaces it with “military fan.” Through these events of entextualization, the Rabbit becomes a shifter (Silverstein, 1976) indexing fandom for different causes aligned with the official values. Following this with “Maybe *he* is just like *you* and *me*,” Sina Military deploys personal deictics in a manner that presupposes its addressee to be *YHA* fans, initiating an alignment among Xiao (he), the reader (you), and the account itself (me) under the category of “military fans” who share the same experience of looking forward to a new *YHA* episode. In effect, the post discursively carves out an addressee position for its readers as simultaneously military fans, *YHA* viewers, and supporters of the official ideology.



新浪军事

2-20 14:43 来自 微博发布平... 已编辑

+关注

【#烈士肖思远的微信头像# 🐰】每个军迷都有一个大国梦，也许他和你我一样等着更新…… @-逆光飞行- #他们是为我而死#



FIGURE 12 A screenshot of Sina Military's original post that creates the hashtag #烈士肖思远的微信头像# (#MartyrXiaoSiyuan'sWeChatAvatar#). Translation of the caption: "Every military fan has a big nation dream. Maybe he is just like you and me, waiting for the new episode [of YHA]..." After this caption, it mentions Lin Chao's Weibo account and uses another hashtag #他们是为我而死# (#TheyDieForMe#). In addition, the post also includes the short video news where Xiao's WeChat profile picture is seen, and the original image of that profile picture.

Not long after this post went live, the WeChat official account of *People's Daily*, the official newspaper of the CCP, published a short article titled "Upon seeing his WeChat headshot, I cannot help but cry again." Reporting that Xiao's profile image "makes many Internet users cry," the article includes screenshots of some Weibo users' comments to Sina Military's original post with the user handles blurred (Figure 13). In its body text, the article summarizes these comments as,

许多网友看后表示(1)“很感动，哭得稀里哗啦的”(2)“那兔，看的时候一边哭一边看”(3)“种花家的兔子”(4)“这头像，都懂的……”

Upon seeing this [Xiao's profile image], many Internet users commented that, (1) "I'm moved and crying my eyes out," (2) "It's YHA, I was crying the whole time while watching," (3) "It's the Rabbit from Zhonghua Jiā," and (4) "It's that headshot, we all know what it means..."

(People's Daily WeChat Official Account, 2021, numerations mine)

It is not hard to see that the comment B in the screenshot (Figure 13) contains the exact same words in the (1) comment quoted in the article's body text. According to the screenshot, its full



**FIGURE 13** One collection of Weibo comment screenshots Sina Military's post used in the *People's Daily's* WeChat article. The lettered marks are added by the author. From A to D, the entries can be translated as follows: (A) Rabbit! Zhonghua Jiā! (B) I watched it [YHA] in history class. I was moved and cried my eyes out. (C) It's the Rabbit; I was crying the whole time while watching it. (D) My 11th grade history teacher showed it to us.

text is “I watched it [YHA] in history class. I was moved and cried my eyes out.” As Chinese doesn't have verb inflection, the author of the article simply erases the first half of this comment when quoting it, transforming the user's narrated past event into a performative event of a user crying in the here and now. This way, the article creates a cross-chronotope alignment (Koven, 2023) between one particular user's reported past event of crying when watching YHA with its own current reporting event of a generalized Internet user crying at the sight of Xiao's profile image. Following this truncated quote in the article is the second quote “It's YHA, I was crying the whole time while watching,” an explicit recollection of the user's past experience of crying over YHA. As instantiated by Figure 13, many users' comments selected in this article are reporting past experiences of crying when watching YHA. By recontextualizing these reported past affective experiences into the current event of reporting Internet users' mourning over Xiao's death, the article reduces the interdiscursive gap between YHA and Xiao, the user of the Rabbit profile picture, making it easier to both attribute Rabbit's positive qualities to the young martyr and to give a sense of affective authenticity to the current news event.

To further establish its intended spectacle of patriotic mourning online, the article also erases some interfacial features of Weibo when entextualizing these comments, arguably making them appear more “danmu-like.” By blurring users' handles and presenting them in a collage of screenshots, the article downplays the individuality of user profiles and instead foregrounds the spectacle of the comments whose repetitive use of the crying character 哭 and emoji creates a sense of visual homogeneity. In effect, this allows the article to generalize the heterogeneous comments into a shared sentiment among

“Internet users.” Meanwhile, similar to how *YHA* provides ready-made snippets for users to recontextualize in *danmu*, Sina Military’s post also reminds its readers of *YHA* and highlights the entextualizability of its punchline. By choosing to use comments in response to Sina Military’s post instead of original posts submitted by ordinary Weibo users also using the same hashtag, the article narrows down its evidence selection to digital spectacles whose context is already preconditioned by a discursive subject (Sina Military) aligned with the state’s mainstream ideology.

By downplaying Weibo’s interfacial features and foregrounding the collective, homogeneous qualities of the selected comments, the *People’s Daily* WeChat article draws on contributions from Sina Military and its followers to discursively construct an imagined digital spectacle of Internet users shedding tears at the sight of the young martyr’s profile image. This case shows that mainstream media can and do recruit digital activities from interfaces other than *danmu* to advance their ideological agendas. Yet, in doing so, they inevitably have to wrestle with actual user activities and the interfacial structures facilitating those activities. In other words, the discursive work of the observers does play an important role in entextualizing and recontextualizing specific digital activities as socially meaningful. But even for a powerful observer like the state’s official media outlet, their discursive work still involves meticulous negotiations with the platforms’ infrastructure and users’ participation.

## CONCLUSION

This article argues that social actors’ metapragmatic uptakes of digital infrastructures play a crucial role in the enregisterment of digital activities. Tracing how a *YHA*-derived online register picks up different indexicalities across two platforms, I conclude that platform interfaces impact the enregisterment of online activities in three key ways. First, as demonstrated by mainstream media and Bilibili’s former CEO’s citations of the spectacle of *danmu* comments on *YHA*, interested observers’ entextualization of digital activities is informed by their media ideologies of how the interface organizes the relationship between users, their digital activities, and the media artifact. Second, *YHA*’s audience design for intended *danmu* participation shows creators’ metapragmatic awareness of the media-consumption interface can also have an impact on how user activities appear on the interface, which can pick up further uptakes. Finally, while Weibo users draw on the interface’s individuation of user accounts to rescale the relationship between the *YHA*-derived forms and the qualities of the form-users, mainstream media, in their own discursive moves, can erase those interface features to generalize the register users as patriots. This demonstrates that observers possess a degree of meta-awareness for the different interdiscursive distances between the media artifact and user activities, which are facilitated by the interface. Such meta-awareness subsequently influences how these observers evaluate the participants of the interfacial activities. Together, these cases show the enregisterment in digital contexts is always achieved through media infrastructure and its uptake in events of entextualization.

To highlight the power dynamics operating beyond immediate digital interactions, my analysis focuses on metacommentaries made by people who do not claim to be direct participants of the online register that they comment on. Future research can further explore how actual users of a given interface perceive a media artifact’s audience design, how their metapragmatic awareness of the interface contributes to their participation, and how they evaluate existing metadiscourses’ evaluations of their activities. Delineating how media ideologies about a given interface contribute to the entextualization and enregisterment of certain interfacial activities, this article offers anthropologists interested in digital media and other cultural activities a fine-grained, interactional approach to account for the production of social meanings beyond face-to-face encounters.

Throughout this article, readers may notice that I have used strategies similar to those adopted by the observers I have studied to support my argument for the importance of digital interfaces in the production of social meanings. When I make decisions to entextualize news articles, public talk, animation video, and Weibo posts through textual quotations or screenshots for my analysis, I am also informed by my own media ideologies of the interfaces to highlight the aspects that are relevant to my argument and downplay the rest. Just as the people in my data form metadiscourses about the interface users, here I am providing a linguistic anthropological metadiscourse for their metadiscourses. In this light, the point of this article is precisely to emphasize that it is through social members' ongoing, iterative interpretation processes (Silverstein, 1998: 128) that digital activities become meaningfully situated within the rich cultural life for billions of people who are spending an increasing amount of their time socializing online and through digital media products.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> This also partly explains why some social scientists (e.g., Wang et al., 2016) reported difficulties in recruiting subjects who identify as “online nationalists” from the Internet.
- <sup>2</sup> *Zhōnghuā Jiā* (种花家), literally meaning “The Flower-planting Family” is a term unique to *YHA* that refers to the Rabbits' motherland. It is phonetically iconic to *Zhōnghuá Jiā* (中华家), “The Chinese Family.”
- <sup>3</sup> Several emic terms for online nationalists exist in Chinese, notably *wu mao dang* (the Five Cent Party) (Han, 2015a, 2015b) and *xiao fen hong* (the Little Pink) (Fang & Repnikova, 2018; Shan & Chen, 2021). Considering the increasingly complex, often negative connotations of these terms, this article chooses to not engage with them. By doing so, I aim to set aside pre-existing value judgments and instead focus on the processes through which different actors ascribe their own meanings to specific interfacial activities they observe.
- <sup>4</sup> Media scholar Daniel Johnson has similarly observed that the busy, opaque *danmaku* (*danmu* in Japanese) interface on Japanese streaming platforms made it unlikely for observers to perceive the comments as entries made by particular individuals; rather, they tend to view the comments as coming from an “aggregate audience” who constituted “a kind of virtual playing of a character or role that is shared across a body of people” (Johnson, 2023: 4). Here I am providing a semiotic explanation for why and how it is the case.
- <sup>5</sup> This is not to say that Bilibili entirely avoids imagining its users as individuated accounts operating in linear time. As a platform, Bilibili does allow users to block others in the same way as Weibo's block list. However, its *danmu* interface offers alternative ways to curb unwanted behaviors. For example, instead of filtering comments based on user accounts, it allows users to filter comments containing specific keywords. Even when users opt to block comments from a particular user, the anonymous interface keeps the filtered user's account hidden, and the block applies only within the scope of a single video. This approach implies a temporality distinct from the linear, calendar time assumed in Weibo's interface design.

<sup>6</sup>In addition to Zhang et al. (2018), many have studied online nationalism on Weibo (Cairns & Carlson, 2016; Huang et al., 2019; Zhang, 2020). The argument here is not whether Weibo's interface does or does not facilitate the making of online nationalism, but that digital spectacles of online nationalism are just that—*spectacles* mediated by interface designs so that they become entextualizable and reanalyzable for different observers to advance different ideological arguments.

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