

Danmu-mediated Communication and Audiovisual Translation in the Digital Age

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Viewing Experience

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Danmu's Affective Impact on Documentary Viewing Experience

Shiqing Liang and Jorge Díaz-Cintas

2.1 Introduction

The rapid development and pervasiveness of digital technologies in society have profoundly reshaped the manner in which individuals engage with audiovisual productions. In an evolution that has gone from large-scale cinema screenings to family television sets, and, more recently, to digital streaming platforms accessible via portable devices, the consumption of audiovisual content has transitioned towards a significantly more personalised experience enjoyed individually at one's convenience, anytime, anywhere. This technological (r)evolution not only has enabled a more customised consumption experience for individuals, but it is also fostering a growing desire for engagement, companionship and community building amidst consumers. Drawing on affect theory, Tomkins (1963, in Hemmings 2005) suggests that people are connected to others by affect, which offers the individual a way of narrating their inner life – (dis)likes, desires and revulsions – to themselves and others. Affect and emotion are two terms often used interchangeably to refer to the interactional and intercorporeal aspects of sentiments that evolve through forms of human sociality (Katila et al., 2023). Decades later, individuals are increasingly inclined to connect with others who enjoy similar interests in the digital realm, seeking avenues to share their perspectives, opinions and emotions. Building on Massumi's (2002) interpretation of affect as a pre-conscious bodily intensity that shapes human interaction, the concept of affective engagement (Ahmed, 2014) can be used here to understand the phenomena that individuals are driven to engage in collective actions through emotional responses and entanglements, such as joy, anger, fear, excitement and amusement. This trend has given rise to well-established online forums, live chats, fan sites and more. Among these new forms of engagement in cyberspace, the practice of *danmu*, whose literal meaning in Chinese is 'bullet comments', has gained great significance in certain countries of East Asia.

Danmu was initially introduced in December 2006 by Niconico Douga (www.nicovideo.jp), Japan's leading video-sharing website, under its Japanese name '*danmaku*'. This feature allows viewers' comments to appear on the video in real-time as they enter the entry bar (Hamasaki et al., 2009). Subsequently, *danmu* was introduced to China in around 2009 by Acfun (www.acfun.com) and Bilibili (www.bilibili.com), which were the main online video platforms for fans of animation, comics, and games (ACG) and user-generated content (Yang, 2020). Throughout the 2010s, with Bilibili emerging as the premier *danmu*-themed site in China, the practice gradually ceased to be restricted to niche ACG fan groups, and in the past decade has gained wide acceptance nationwide as a common feature in video-sharing platforms (Zhang and Cassany, 2020). In addition to *danmu*-devoted websites like Bilibili, most video-streaming websites in China, whether advert-based, such as Tudou (www.tudou.com) in its early years before merging with Youku (www.youku.com), which follows a hybrid model, or subscription-based, such as Tencent (<https://v.qq.com>) and iQiyi (www.iqiyi.com), have been supporting *danmu* commenting systems for some time now (Chen et al., 2017). Consuming audiovisual productions with *danmu* has become a daily routine for many people in China, and it is gaining popularity amongst the younger generation, particularly those born in the post-1990s and post-2000s.

In recent years, *danmu* has gained more visibility on the global stage because of its popularity in China and the academic research conducted by scholars on its features and functionalities, with some of them seeing it as a form of fansubbing activity, wherein audiences engage in collaborative translation efforts by providing subtitles through *danmu* (Díaz-Cintas, 2018; Yang, 2020, 2021). *Danmu*, as an amateur-led initiative rooted in the concept of participatory culture postulated by Jenkins (2006), transforms streaming media platforms into alternative spaces for democratic discussions (Yin and Fung, 2017), by allowing viewers to overlay text onto moving images, and thus transforming them into content creators, or prosumers, with the potential of enacting change through social practice (Yang, 2020). *Danmu* becomes a novel approach to community-building in digital spaces, as it enables viewers to enjoy the video accompanied by comments sent by other users, thus expanding the number of 'pseudo' co-viewers and eliminating the constrain of synchronicity in social media co-viewing (Johnson, 2013; Chen et al., 2017). In addition, *danmu* can play an active role in fostering language and intercultural learning (Zhang and Cassany, 2019a, 2019b, 2020).

As a special feature found in numerous video-sharing platforms, the *danmu* interface synchronises every comment feed to a precise playback time at a specific position in the video, thus creating a sense of 'pseudo-live' communication for viewers. This effect is further intensified by the density

of *danmu* accumulated by all past entries that end up being displayed at the same playback time (Hamasaki et al., 2009). In contrast to the traditional post-hoc reflections on the audiovisual content, audiences are now granted the opportunity to exchange detailed, specific and real-time information through *danmu*. Furthermore, the prompt appearance of rolling comments on screen encourages viewers to express their instantaneous emotions and sentiments (Chen et al., 2017). As *danmu* comments are embedded and overlaid onto the video, they respect the original information while at the same time adding extra information and value co-created by viewers. Even passive viewers can get involved in the ongoing discussions and emotional resonance stimulated by *danmu* senders by simply keeping *danmu* visible on screen (ibid.). By enabling an ever more socially engaging viewing experience than any other previous systems, *danmu* also leads to a more complex interplay of semiotic resources in the meaning-making process (Liu et al., 2016). Furthermore, this phenomenon also facilitates a more multilayered knowledge sharing and information transfer across languages and cultures (Yang, 2020).

Scholarly enquiries into *danmu* predominately explore its diverse functions from multiple disciplinary perspectives, but a notable gap still remains in the literature as to how *danmu* impacts the way in which audiences perceive, consume, and experience audiovisual productions. This chapter uses the documentary, a traditional audiovisual genre, and provides insight into *danmu*'s role in reshaping the viewing experience of audiences in China's most *danmu*-devoted site, Bilibili.

2.2 *Danmu* and Documentaries in China

Historically, documentaries in China were primarily broadcast on television. However, in the past decade, with the rapid emergence and growth of online media platforms, many documentaries have found their way to online distribution, aiming to reach a broader audience. A pivotal change was first witnessed in 2016, when the documentary ‘我在故宫修文物’ [*Masters in the Forbidden City*] initially failed to achieve the anticipated popularity during its television broadcast on CCTV Documentary Channel but subsequently gained a vast viewership on Bilibili and became a sensation on the internet. This unexpected success highlighted the immense potential for documentaries to broaden their distribution and exhibition channels beyond television and to thrive in the cyberspace. The increasing visibility and consumption of documentaries on over-the-top (OTT) media platforms has led to the emergence of the so-called ‘internet-born’ documentaries, which are specifically produced for distribution through online channels (He et al., 2018; Wang, 2019). The fast development of these media outlets, coupled with China's supportive policies for documentary

production, have revitalised the documentary genre, which used to be often perceived as dull and serious. In recent years, the documentary genre has flourished in China, becoming one of the core content categories on online video platforms such as Bilibili, iQiyi and Tencent (He and Han, 2023).

Thanks to the wider dissemination of documentaries in cyberspace, *danmu* has become a staple feature of many viewers' watching experience of this type of productions, and has also been the subject of academic interest (Zhu, 2017; He et al., 2018; Pérez-González, 2020; Zhang and Cassany, 2021; Wang, 2022). Major OTT platforms looking for new commercial ventures have been expanding their operations in recent years, from purchasing streaming rights to actively participating in the documentary production process. A point in case is Youku's documentary channel, which in 2016 produced over 30 mini-documentaries using online live shows (Yu, 2017), while Bilibili has become increasingly involved in every aspect of documentary production and distribution by collaborating with established documentary producers, launching innovative documentary projects and investing in commercialising documentary-like productions (He and Han, 2023). Likewise, Netflix has also increased its investment in original documentaries, due to the genre's growing popularity and the platform's interest in documentary films and series (Iordache et al., 2023).

As one of the most popular video sites in China, Bilibili (2023) has over 9 million active visitors per day, 315 million active visitors per month and over 200 million paying users. Serving as a premier destination for Chinese audiences seeking a diverse array of high-quality documentaries, Bilibili dedicates a special webpage (www.bilibili.com/documentary) to house the official streaming versions of the documentaries available on the platform. Unlike a mere subsection, the documentary webpage is meticulously crafted, reaching the calibre of a standalone homepage. The site features scrolling headlines to showcase the latest and most popular content, complemented by navigation tabs cataloguing documentaries based on popularity, genre and producers. Within each category, a range of subtabs allows viewers to navigate through targeted types of documentaries. Popular documentary series such as '但是还有书籍' [*And Yet the Books*] (2019), '但是还有书籍第二季' [*And Yet the Books II*] (2022) and '人生第二次' [*Second Life*] (2022) enjoy specially curated homepages with thematically decorated backgrounds and illustrations, creating a toned atmosphere and welcoming space for viewers to enjoy and keep coming back for more episodes.

Danmu, much-loved by millions of young viewers, has become a key metric for audience navigation and selection of documentaries on the platform: under the '热播' [Hit Stream] tab, alongside subtabs for playback times, rankings and update times sits the amount of *danmu* created for a particular production, underscoring its significance in affecting Bilibili

users' viewing decisions. As of May 2024, Bilibili's domestic documentary series '人生一串第二季' [*The Story of Chuan'er II*] (2019) holds the record for the highest *danmu* count on the platform, accumulating nearly 2.66 million *danmu* entries across its six 40-minute episodes. The foreign documentary with the highest *danmu* count on Bilibili is *Man vs. Wild* [荒野求生] (2006–2020), produced by Discovery Channel and made available on Bilibili in 2019, which has accumulated 645 thousand *danmu* entries across its fifteen 40-minute episodes. In addition to the official documentary versions streamed on Bilibili, a considerable number of fansubbed versions of documentaries in foreign languages are regularly uploaded to the platform by fansubbing groups, attracting high playback rates and a large number of *danmu* entries. Instead of being a niche pastime, watching documentaries with *danmu* on online media platforms has evolved into a popular lifestyle among the younger generation in China.

Given the vast amount of time that viewers spend in front of screens a part of their daily routines and their online interactions with others through various forms and channels, Stavning Thomsen et al. (2012: 2) propose to unpack the affective implications that interfacial encounters have on people. For this, they reformulate the classical question of the relation between body and affective reactions – i.e., 'what can a body do?' (Deleuze, 1988) – into the more contemporary question 'what can an interface do?', thus reflecting the increasingly significant role that interfacial technologies play nowadays in representing and distributing people's affective participation and affective encounters in cyberspace.

Emerging from the netizens' growing desire to connect with fellow colleagues in cyberspace, *danmu*, as a rising feature in the user interface of many OTT platforms, can serve as an important ground for researchers to seek answers to the aforementioned question. From an affective perspective, the following sections investigate how the multifaceted functions of the *danmu*-featured interface contribute to revolutionising the online documentary viewing experience, by analysing representative examples selected from documentaries, with a focus on aspects such as humour, emotional bonding and knowledge sharing that have fostered positive affective participation and attracted significant playback and *danmu* engagement on Bilibili.

2.3 Unpicking and Creating Humour

Humour, along with the amusement it evokes, is not typically a common element in traditional Chinese documentary styles, which tend to be more expository and didactic. However, one of *danmu*'s added value is the fact that it enables viewers to capture and respond to humour in documentaries promptly, with a direct affective body reaction, i.e., laughter. Indeed,

when a comical scene or line is acknowledged by members of the audience, a barrage of ‘哈哈哈哈哈’ [Hahahahahaha] *danmu* messages is likely to dominate the screen. Furthermore, *danmu* not only allows viewers to react to explicit humour, but it also serves as a tool for uncovering and amplifying hidden humorous elements. It can even inspire the creation of new comedic moments, as audiences contribute their own witty remarks and interpretations while watching.

One such example occurs in the first episode of the Bilibili-produced documentary ‘历史那些事’ [*That History Stuff*] (2018), when the narrator recounts that the ancient poet Su Dongpo:

游历赤壁作一词两赋，引来了无数点赞收藏投币

[Visited the Red Cliff and composed one song and two poetic essays. The works gained countless likes, favourites and add coins.]

At times, when viewers come across a ‘梗’ [gěng] in the documentary, they enjoy engaging with it through *danmu*. Similar to the concept of ‘meme’ in Western culture, ‘梗’ [gěng], which derives from the term ‘哏’ [gēn] and traditionally referred to punchlines found in Chinese crosstalk comedy (Kang, 2021), is nowadays widely used cyberslang for humorous jibes found on internet communication. The register of the catchphrase at the end of the above narration lines, ‘点赞收藏投币’ [likes, favourites and add coins], does not pertain to a documentary about a historical figure since the expression is contemporary jargon used in the buttons that are found below every video on Bilibili, indicating the video’s promotional attraction, popularity, and commercial value. The expression has become internet slang because many Bilibili content creators and video uploaders regularly accompany their productions with prompts that encourage viewers to endorse them. For instance, they will verbally mention ‘一键三连’ [one long press for all (likes, favourites, add coins)] in their voiceovers, to which some viewers, upon hearing the prompt, will jokingly reply, via *danmu*, with something like ‘下次一定’ [I will definitely do it next time]. Exchanges of this nature have become so popular among creators and users that they are a distinctive integral part of Bilibili’s communicative culture.

In this particular example, the documentary producer, Bilibili itself, appropriates the popular meme to explain, in a jocular manner, that the ancient poet Su Dongpo gained a lot of recognition from his contemporary readers. Such an unexpected association between an ancient poet and the Bilibili meme has the effect of triggering a significant surge in the number of *danmu* messages, sent by surprised yet amused viewers. In addition to the most common response, ‘Hahahahaha’, that reflects viewers’ most

direct affective reaction upon recognising the meme, and the classic reply ‘I will definitely do it next time’, other interesting *danmu* comments are along the lines of ‘官方暗示’ [this is an official subliminal request (from the producer)]. For this viewer, the amusing part is not only the reference to the poet’s popularity with such contemporary jargon, but also the fact that Bilibili, as the documentary producer, is using the cyberslang jocularly to subtly encourage the audience to support their production, by indirectly asking them, as part of the narration, to click all the three buttons. The catchphrase is perceived by the viewer as a playful ‘trick’ on the part of the producer and a *danmu* message is posted to show that they have been able to see through the producer’s tactic and find it amusing.

As discussed by Díaz-Cintas and Remael (2021), the success of humour often depends on a high degree of shared socio-cultural knowledge between the sender and the receiver of the message. In this case in point, viewers excitedly identify the meme rooted in Bilibili communicative culture, react favourably to the humorous point with laughter and interact with it affectively.

In addition to reacting to humorous triggers deliberately planted by video producers, *danmu* also allows viewers to discover and capture subtle nonverbal details contained in the production. In the first episode of ‘人生一串第二季’ [*The Story of Chuan'er II*], a documentary series that focuses on the life stories of people selling or consuming Chinese barbecue as late-night snacks paired with beer, a character appears to be holding a selfie stick, although, on closer inspection, the stick is actually missing. Instead of questioning the mysterious disappearance of the selfie stick, which for many may appear to be the result of the editing team’s negligence, some members of the audience take to *danmu* to quip about the scene, using meme phrases reminiscent of intertextual references, such as ‘皇帝的新杆’ [the emperor’s new stick], ‘隐形自拍杆’ [invisible selfie stick], and ‘原力自拍杆’ [selfie stick driven by the Force]. As a result, this ‘faulty’ scene turns into a humorous opportunity for users to increase their involvement by sharing their own memes and striving to be funnier than the previous ones. Audiences actively look for potential hidden humour in the documentary and encourage other viewers to share their enjoyment. This is what happens in the case of a later close-up featuring a sheep baaing, which only serves the prosaic purpose of connecting two stories but motivates a viewer to make use of *danmu* to announce their discovery to the rest of netizens: ‘调成0.5倍速播放太鬼畜了’ [slowing the video to 0.5 speed makes it so funny].

As well as to engage with humorous instances contained in the original production, *danmu* is also utilised as a tool for audiences to create humour on the spot, during their viewing process. In the first episode of the documentary ‘曹雪芹与红楼梦’ [*Cao Xueqin and A Dream of*

Mansions] (2021), an animated scene illustrates Nuwa, a Chinese mythological goddess, hitting the final stone piece with a hammer in order to fix the broken sky. While no comical subplot is intentionally designed here, it has become a humorous scene upon the appearance, on a prominent part of the screen, of a bold-red *danmu* entry stating ‘80!’. This numerical reference comes from a widely known Chinese sketch named *Construction*, in which a construction worker rigorously hits the wall with the hammer while cheering himself up by shouting out loud ‘80! 80!’, his wage for the day’s work. The iconic scene has left a deep impression on audiences of all ages nationwide since it was first aired in 2005, by China Media Group, on Chinese New Year’s Eve, when families gather to celebrate. In this case, the sender of the first ‘80!’ *danmu* entry creates an instance of culture-based referential humour by establishing a connection between the comedic Chinese sketch and this rather faithful animated scene of a mythological story, based on the visual resemblance between Nuwa hitting the stone with a hammer and the construction worker hitting the wall with a hammer. In this way, *danmu* plays an irreplaceable role in enabling viewers to co-create humour by means of intertextuality, which provokes more laughter and interaction, and contributes to the creation of a relaxing and entertaining viewing experience.

2.4 Growing Virtual Community Bonds and Intimacy

While engaging with humour through *danmu* provides momentary entertainment for documentary viewers, certain affective impacts, such as a sense of belonging, companionship, gratitude and understanding, emerge from the longer-term cultivation of emotional bonds and intimacy in cyberspace. During the period spent watching regular releases of the various episodes of a documentary series, viewers have the opportunity to ‘meet’ other fellow colleagues frequently and to enhance their sense of collective belonging to a cyber community of people interested in similar topics. The development of this intimacy can often be observed by comparing *danmu* comments posted during the first episodes with those found in later ones. When the first episode of the Bilibili-produced documentary ‘*但是还有书籍*’ [*And Yet the Books*] was released, the primary themes of *danmu* focused on the documentary itself, including discussions about the viewers’ eagerness to watch the series, the value of books and the voice quality of the off-screen narrator, who happens to be a famous Chinese actor. By the time the third episode was aired, a clear shift could be observed in the content of the *danmu* entries, with numerous messages reflecting personal circumstances such as ‘*我来啦*’ [I’m here], ‘*我来晚啦*’ [I’m late], or ‘*来了来了*’ [coming, coming]. Though *danmu* is traditionally considered to be ‘pseudo-live’, it is indeed a live conversation among audiences who crave

the weekly release of a new episode and watch it immediately once available. The latest released documentary episode becomes an occasion for joining a crowd of like-minded people and, as in face-to-face encounters, warm greetings and salutations are part of social etiquette.

With the passing of time, viewers grow increasingly accustomed to each other's presence and company through regularly meeting at the documentary's site, greeting each other, watching the new episode together and discussing new topics through *danmu*. This budding camaraderie in a friendly and relaxing atmosphere materialises in the sharing of more personal information and stories with fellow viewers. In the fourth episode of '但是还有书籍' [*And Yet the Books*], featuring graphic books, many members of the audience share the graphic books that are intimately connected to special moments in their personal lives, as illustrated in Table 2.1.

The entanglement of various affective events transforms the traditional documentary-watching experience, which typically focuses on learning,

Table 2.1 *Danmu* entries on personal experiences about graphic books

看的第一本绘本，是几米的，初中看的	[The first graphic book I read was Jimmy's. I read it during my middle school year.]
我是《躲进世界的角落》	[Mine was <i>How to Own a Corner</i> .]
记得小学读的第一本书就是绘本 如今已是大学 小学老师说阅读绘本的那句话依然记忆深刻	[I remember the first book I read in my primary school year was a graphic book. Now I am in college. But what my primary school teacher said about reading graphic books still has a deep impact on me.]
在国外上学 给前任带回来很多绘本 想留给以后的小孩 英语意大利语和日语的 都有 是我们俩说的语言 后来分手了 觉得还挺可惜的	[When I was studying abroad, I brought back many graphic books to my then-partner. I wanted to leave them to our future kids. I have graphic books in English, Italian and Japanese. These are the languages we speak. We ended up breaking up, and I take it as a wistful memory.]
决定给自己的新年礼物是百年孤独了	[I've decided to give myself <i>A Hundred Years of Solitude</i> as my gift for the new year.]
前面那一位，我给自己的生日加新年礼物也是百年孤独	[To whoever left that <i>danmu</i> before me, the gift I gave myself for my birthday and the new year was also <i>A Hundred Years of Solitude</i> .]
这次寒假回家，就给五岁的外甥买了一本立体插画的小王子嘻嘻	[When I came back home during the winter vacation, I bought my five-year-old nephew <i>Little Prince</i> with pop-up illustration haha.]
我也想送我的侄子侄女们送一些好看的绘本	[I also want to give my nephew and niece some good graphic books as a gift.]

into a deeply personal and emotional journey, where viewers share their memories and stories, while being touched by the experiences and emotions of others. The numerous examples of *danmu* entries indicate that viewers actively use them to share their personal memories and emotions triggered by the graphic books that have a special meaning to themselves. Some feel nostalgic of their childhood and teenage years, some feel wistful about a cherished relationship that came to an end, some enjoy the moment to treat themselves to a loved book as a gift for special occasions, while others are excited about bestowing the magic of graphic books to the next generation. Made possible by *danmu*, this affective intimacy is developed by the instant sharing of personal recollections.

Danmu also plays a significant role in empowering viewers to co-create new collective memories. At emotionally moving scenes in the documentaries, many viewers express their feelings with messages like ‘我要哭了’ [I am going to cry] and ‘泪目了’ [tears in my eyes]. This growing sense of intimacy is further demonstrated in *danmu* entries embedded in episodes streamed during festive celebrations. The third episode of *And Yet the Books*, which aired on Christmas Day, saw many *danmu* messages wishing ‘圣诞快乐’ [Merry Christmas] to fellow viewers, in a similar fashion as one does with relatives and close friends. Likewise, in a later episode released during Chinese New Year, the screen was flooded with ‘新年快乐’ [Happy New Year] messages, highlighting the warmth, closeness and a sense of community fostered through *danmu* interactions in cyberspace. *Danmu* also leaves a lasting imprint on the video, allowing viewers who watch it later to experience the festive atmosphere of the original broadcast. Even latecomers to the series often engage by noting the time or mentioning any special occasions in their *danmu* comments as they watch the episode.

Thanks to *danmu*, the invisible threads of fluid emotions and feelings shared by viewers at different moments are captured, embodied and preserved in the video. When ‘但是还有书籍’ [*And Yet the Books*] came to a close, many viewers expressed their appreciation with phrases symbolising a celebratory ending, such as ‘完结撒花’ [flowers to celebrate the ending], and extended their heartfelt gratitude for the companionship shared throughout the documentary’s streaming months with comments like ‘感谢陪伴’ [huge thanks for (your) company]. To their pseudo-live cyber companions, they offered best wishes for each other’s offline endeavours with phrases like ‘一起好好读书’ [let’s read books together], and expressed eager anticipation to reunite virtually for future seasons: ‘期待第二季’ [looking forward to Season 2] and ‘我们继续’ [we will continue in 2022 (the year the viewer expected the release of the second season)]. Reflexive expressions that indicate group recognition, like ‘let’s’ and ‘we’, used by *danmu* contributors to communicate with fellow viewers, denote a strong sense of emotional bonding and community belonging. Throughout

the documentary viewing journey, *danmu* not only allows viewers to share an intensified affective experience through tears and laughter, but it also fosters a gregarious and emotional bond among the viewers in cyberspace. Additionally, the intimate and sharing-friendly environment cultivated through *danmu* during the streaming months creates an enjoyable milieu for later viewers to immerse themselves in. These viewers are more likely to feel encouraged to participate in the ongoing sharing of personal stories, feelings and emotions, and to contribute to the creation of further collective memories within the community.

In some cases, shows are chosen based on viewers' strong pre-existing affective interests, such as documentaries about filmmaking or about popular movies or television programmes that already have a dedicated fan base. For these fan audiences, such documentaries with *danmu* become an ideal hub for fandom interaction, allowing them to access exclusive behind-the-scenes content and engage in real-time discussions to share their affection, excitement and reflections about their favourite characters, storylines, and all aspects of the story world they are passionate about.

In addition to aiding fans to discuss scenes, storylines and characters instantly, *danmu* also plays a crucial role in strengthening the bond between fans and the production team. For example, in '灵笼: 研发记录' [*Ling Cage: Research and Design*] (2019), a documentary about the filming of the popular Chinese animation series '灵笼' [*Ling Cage: Incarnation*] (2019), co-produced by Bilibili and YHKT entertainment, tensions existed between fans and the production team prior to the documentary's release, due to the fans' dissatisfaction with the long wait between the first and the second parts of the series. Many viewers wrote their opinion in the show's comment section, voicing their complaints and enquiring about the reasons for the delay. Unexpectedly, the documentary provided some answers, revealing, for instance, how the animation director had spent months perfecting a single action through repeated attempts. A large number of viewers responded with *danmu* comments such as '辛苦了' [thank you very much for your hard work], quickly filling the screen with a barrage of messages that showed fans' acknowledgement and appreciation of the production team's dedication and efforts in creating a high-quality anime with arresting design.

In a similar vein, another scene from the documentary shows a respected director who relocated to the production team's city, away from his family, to support the animation's production. Late at night, he returned to his cramped rental room alone. Viewers, especially those who are away from their families for study or work, were deeply moved by the scene, as it resonated with their own experiences, and expressed their gratitude through a torrent of '辛苦了' [thank you very much for your hard work] comments. Realising the real-life difficulties and sacrifices endured by the

production team for each frame of this high-quality animation, many fans stopped being unhappy or dissatisfied with the waiting time. Instead, they conveyed their changed mindset and feelings through *danmu* remarks like ‘我再也不催你了’ [I will never rush you again], alongside thank-you messages, showing understanding and care for each individual in the production team. In this way, *danmu* captures these direct and immediate expressions of positive emotions and inscribes them into the video, with the peak of emotional resonance clearly visible in the most impactful scenes. The strong visual impact created by the *danmu* bullet curtain amplifies the warm messages of recognition, gratitude and understanding to broader audiences witnessing these exchanges on their screens. In conjunction with the documentary’s content, *danmu* helps dissolve negative emotions such as dissatisfaction and frustration, transforming them into positive feelings that foster a supportive and appreciative relationship between fans and the production team.

2.5 Improving Factual Information and Sharing Knowledge

In addition to enhancing the entertainment and engagement experience of watching documentaries on Bilibili, *danmu* also serves as a powerful and effective tool that supports and reinforces the primary reason viewers choose to consume the documentary genre in their leisure time: intellectual rewards. In this respect, *danmu* has revolutionised the way in which knowledge is disseminated by actively allowing viewers to have their say by providing new insights as well as enhancing and sometimes even correcting factual information.

‘伟大诗人杜甫’ [*Great Poet Du Fu*], the officially translated Chinese version of the British documentary *Du Fu: China’s Greatest Poet* (2020), can be taken as a prime example to demonstrate how audiences use *danmu* to share and challenge the insights provided by the documentary and their fellow viewers, rewarding them with an intellectually enriching experience when watching culturally intensive documentaries. When introducing the poet’s early career, the documentary resorts to visual materials depicting court life during that time as well as the relationship between Emperor Taizong of Tang and his Consort Yang. One scene shows two royal figures, dressed in Tang Dynasty royal attire, walking through the corridors of the palace, while another depicts various ministers bowing respectfully to the emperor in court. In the background, a royal woman is seen sitting behind a bead curtain, listening to the conversation between the emperor and the ministers. As these scenes unfold, viewers quickly notice issues with the visual content and begin sharing their comments via *danmu*. The source of the footage is from the Chinese documentary ‘大明宫’ [*Legend of the Tang Empire*] (2009), and the actual figures depicted are Wu Zetian and

Li Zhi, Emperor Gaozong of Tang. To inform fellow viewers, especially those unfamiliar with the original Chinese documentary, members of the audience share *danmu* comments such as ‘这是纪录片大明宫里的唐高宗和武则天啊’ [these are Emperor Gaozong of Tang and Wu Zetian from the documentary *Legend of the Tang Empire*], making the misused footage and its original source clear to all.

Some *danmu* contributors go further, ruling out the possibility that the scene could be a visual representation of the Tang Dynasty’s ruling family: ‘这个女的是武则天，放错纪录片片段，杨玉环怎么可能垂帘听政’ [this woman is Wu Zetian. The documentary uses the wrong material. There is no way that Consort Yang can reign behind a curtain]. Indeed, in ancient China, imperial concubines were forbidden from listening to conversations between the emperor and the court ministers. However, Wu Zetian was an exception, as she gained real power and ruled from behind the curtain, eventually becoming empress. Therefore, any depiction of her cannot be used to represent royal figures like Emperor Taizong of Tang and his Consort Yang. Through *danmu*, viewers draw attention to these historical inaccuracies, correcting the information contained in the documentary and preventing misunderstandings for viewers unfamiliar with the subject matter. Some users also expand on these insights discussing distinctions in clothing between Consort Yang, a concubine, and Wu Zetian, who held power as a regent and later as ruler. This sharing of knowledge offers viewers the chance to learn beyond the documentary’s content, therefore enriching their experience. For *danmu* contributors, this active participation brings a sense of fulfilment, accomplishment and intellectual satisfaction, knowing that their additions – viewed by hundreds of thousands – can enhance the accuracy of the content and prevent misinformation from spreading.

In the case of foreign documentaries, enthusiastic viewers also use *danmu* to provide fan-made subtitles, enabling a wider audience to overcome language barriers and access the content and knowledge disseminated in the production. For example, ‘伟大诗人杜甫’ [*Great Poet Du Fu*] keeps the original English soundtrack of the on-screen performer reciting the English translation of Du Fu’s poems and adds the original Chinese verses on the right side of the screen to serve as Chinese subtitles. Yet, many viewers make use of one of the *danmu* functions to provide verbatim subtitles, in English, of the performer’s oration, so that other members of the audience can learn about the English translation of Du Fu’s poetic works presented in the original documentary, word by word. This contribution was quickly acknowledged by Bilibili’s documentary team, who, in recognition of the fan-subtitled efforts, later updated the translated version by adding official bilingual subtitles for this segment, which has become the foundation of a lively debate about the quality of the English translation of Du Fu’s poetic work in *danmu*, as illustrated in the excerpts contained in Table 2.2.

Table 2.2 *Danmu* entries on the English translation of Du Fu's poems

英文的感觉像现代诗

[The English (translation) feels like a contemporary poem.]

这部片是面向大众，换个角度思考吧，不然莫非要让中国大众读莎诗时只能看英文？

[This documentary is for the general public. Let's think from another angle. Are Chinese people only allowed to read English from Shakespeare's poems?]

中国古诗可以从多方面理解含义，这种翻译除就是韵律之外，往往也只翻译出一层意思

[The meaning of ancient Chinese poems can be understood from many aspects. This kind of translation can only translate one layer of meaning without its texture and rhythm.]

翻译很准确，只是韵律丢失了

[The translation is accurate, only the rhythm is lost.]

不可能完全译准，中文莎剧又丧失了多少韵味谁知道呢

[It is impossible to be completely accurate in translation. Who knows how much texture is lost in the Chinese translation of Shakespeare's plays.]

诗意就是在翻译里丢失的东西

[Poetry is what we lost in translation.]

杜诗翻译成英文，剥去了语言格律上的对仗，直白的英文表达更显苍凉

[The English translation of Du Fu's poems takes away the verbal parallelism inherent in its original structure, the straightforward English expression makes the desolation even more pronounced.]

Through *danmu*, viewers express a wide range of opinions on the English translations of Du Fu's poetry. Some criticise the prose-like solutions for sacrificing the original rhythm and form, which are key features of ancient Chinese poetry. They contend that this approach undermines Du Fu's mastery of these elements, which are essential to the unique beauty and high literary value of his work. As a result, they believe that the Western audience misses out on fully appreciating the aesthetic qualities of Du Fu's poetry. Others defend the English translation, arguing that preserving the classic rhythm and form is less important than delivering the meaning in a way that is accessible to a foreign audience unfamiliar with the original socio-cultural and linguistic contexts. Additionally, some viewers suggest that the prose-like English translation adds a new texture to Du Fu's poems, offering a different aesthetic experience through the lens of the English language. This lively debate, facilitated by *danmu*, reflects the diverse perspectives of viewers and enriches the documentary-watching experience by fostering an open dialogue on the complexities of poetry translation.

Accessing fellow viewers' perspectives on poetry translation through *danmu*, exposes audiences to niche knowledge that might otherwise remain under-explored. For instance, in the Chinese-translated version of the documentary, the on-screen performer reads out the English version of a verse from Du Fu's poem '江村' [River Village] as 'A man who is often sick needs medicine', while the Chinese verse provided on screen by the translator is '但有故人供禄米' [if only an old friend could supply me with his rice-received-as-salary]. The sharp discrepancy between the English and the Chinese verses has caused a heated debate in *danmu*, questioning the quality of the linguistic transfer. However, this confusion is swiftly resolved through *danmu* when knowledgeable viewers share an important clarification:

杜甫这首诗有另一个版本，多病所须唯药物，BBC英文版用的这版，国内翻译没看英文，直接放的常见版本，所以看起来在瞎翻

[This Du Fu poem has another version: A man who is often sick needs medicine. This is the version used in the BBC English version. The Chinese translator provides the most common version without considering the English translation. This is why the English translation seems to be completely unfounded.]

This additional information not only provides context for viewers to make a more informed judgment about the English translation but also enriches the discussion by revealing the limitations of relying solely on the commonly used Chinese verses without cross-checking. Furthermore, it uncovers a lesser-known fact for many Chinese viewers: the existence of two versions of this particular poem. This interaction demonstrates how *danmu* fosters the discovery and dissemination of new knowledge, offering viewers an opportunity to deepen their understanding. For those watching documentaries for educational purpose, this kind of exchanges enhance their learning experience.

Despite these differing perspectives, many viewers agree that the translation, while imperfect due to the loss of the original rhythm and form, is still acceptable. This consensus is rooted in the understanding that reproducing the rhythm and form of ancient Chinese poetry in another language and cultural context is highly challenging. Some Chinese viewers empathise with English-speaking audiences by recalling their own experiences of relying solely on Chinese translations of Shakespeare's poems. Facilitated by *danmu*, translation, typically an overlooked topic, emerges for public discussion. *Danmu's* ability to instantaneously embed viewers' input into specific scenes allows real-time engagement, and viewers who watch documentaries for inspiration, new insights and personal growth can benefit

from an enriched experience facilitated by the interactive space created by *danmu*, where audiences can express their thoughts and respond to others' prompts and ideas on particular scenes. As playback counts increase, a growing collection of *danmu* comments becomes available to later viewers, often evolving into substantive and insightful discussions shaped by both the documentary's content and the viewers' interjections. In this process, viewers not only express their immediate thoughts via *danmu* but also engage with the accumulated insights and reflections from previous viewers, creating a dynamic and evolving conversation. These interactions serve as a valuable source of inspiration, prompting new reflections on translation, poetry and cross-cultural dissemination. Through *danmu* discussions, both active contributors and passive viewers benefit from the range of insights shared by others, thus enriching the documentary-watching experience with intellectual engagement and stimulation that goes beyond the content of the documentary itself.

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter has explored how *danmu* is transforming the documentary viewing experience on Bilibili through affective dimensions, focusing on three key aspects of audience emotional entanglement reinforced by the accumulative bullet comments synchronised with specific scenes: humour discovery and creation, emotional bonding within the virtual community, and the enhancement of factual information and knowledge sharing. By anchoring comments to specific moments in the video and enabling 'pseudo-live' conversations, *danmu* fosters positive affective encounters and resonance among documentary viewers. These reactions include finding and creating humorous instances, sharing in a collective viewing experience, and connecting with others' personal stories and feelings. Additionally, viewers experience a deeper sense of intellectual fulfilment and achievement by sharing information and knowledge, while also gaining further details and insights beyond the documentary's content thanks to the debates and discussions with fellow companions. In the past, documentary viewers were passive recipients of information, isolated in their viewing experience and unable to engage in discussion – much like students in a traditional classroom. The stereotype of documentaries as offering dull, purely instructive content has been dismantled as the genre has embraced online media streaming platforms. Thanks to *danmu*, viewers now enjoy a far more interactive and enjoyable experience, where they can freely share their thoughts, emotions and opinions within a supportive and connected virtual community. This shift has transformed documentary watching from a solitary learning activity into a rich, communal

experience augmented with a broader range of positive affective emotions such as amusement, a sense of connectedness, and intellectual stimulation.

While this research focuses on the official versions of documentaries available on Bilibili to illustrate *danmu*'s positive affective impact in the documentary viewing experience, further research could explore a variety of new directions. For example, it could extend to fansubbed documentaries on Bilibili, examine this audiovisual genre on other online media platforms that feature *danmu*, investigate any potential negative affective impacts that may arise through *danmu* engagement, or analyse other genres such as fiction to gain a more comprehensive understanding of *danmu*'s role in transforming the experience of watching audiovisual productions. Such research would offer broader insights into how *danmu* reshapes audience interaction and engagement across diverse content types.

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