

Examining How Fans' Portrayals of Platonic Relationships Queer *Empresses in the Palace*

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Empresses in the Palace is a popular Chinese TV series set in the Qing dynasty that depicts how the emperor's concubines scheme against each other. The drama extensively depicts how women suffer under patriarchal heteronormativity. On Bilibili, a popular video-sharing website, many users create mashup fan videos in which they rewrite or edit content from the show to pair up characters from the drama who were not paired up in the source show. These mashup videos include same-sex romance (denoted as GL for female relationships and BL for male relationships), heterodox heterosexual romance (denoted as BG), and platonic romance. The same-sex romances and heterodox heterosexual romances represented in these fan productions queer the source drama by subverting patriarchal heteronormativity of the source drama and showing alternative relationship types. By queer, I mean to deviate from and to show the oppressiveness of the norms promoted by the society, such as heterosexual unions. My research shows that, just like romantic videos, the platonic fan videos also queer the drama by challenging the patriarchal heteronormativity and providing alternative relationships. Moreover, platonic videos demonstrate nonromantic relationships' potential to push against norms.

In my research stage, I surveyed a wide range of GL, BG, and platonic (and some BL) mashup videos on Bilibili. I studied how these mashup videos use clips from the drama to create new meanings and the new queer meanings they create. Then, I closely analyzed three platonic mashup videos in my writing. The themes of the three mashup videos I analyzed are sisterhood, revenge, and pet-human relationship. I found that platonic videos subvert patriarchal heteronormativity through similar strategies as GL and BG videos, such as mocking and killing the emperor. Platonic videos also expand people's imagination on relationship types. For example, the pet-human relationship video mocks the emperor by showing an imaginary creature to be more important than the emperor. The pet-human video shows how meaningful relationships are not restricted to gender, physical form, or which world one is from, expanding our understanding of what it means to be, coexist, and desire.

While the fan videos challenge the norms in the drama, the fan videos are not necessarily all queer and the TV production might not be all heteronormative. Sometimes the drama challenges some aspects of patriarchal heteronormativity, and the fan videos further advance these aspects. Thus, scholarship should focus on the relationships between fan productions and source texts without assuming or concluding which one is more heteronormative or queer. The queer potential of platonic videos reveals the limitation of scholarships that only focus on sexual or romantic intimacy. Nonromantic intimacy like pet-human and sisterhood questions the hegemony of patriarchal heteronormative relationship. Thus, platonic videos should also be on the queer continuum with GL, BG, and BL videos. Therefore, I suggest that queer studies in the context of Chinese internet culture to study non-romantic relationships as well.

Faculty Mentors: Angel Matos, Belinda Kong

Funded by the Kaufman Family Fellowship

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