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Praxis

Queer encounters between Iron Man and Chinese boys' love fandom

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[0.1] *Abstract*—Superhero fan fiction is increasingly popular in the Chinese boys' love (BL) community. An exploration of the fan fic *Gangtiexia: Zhongdu Yilai* (Iron Man: Overly-attached) investigates how the Hollywood cultural icon Iron Man/Tony Stark is reimagined in Chinese BL culture and to what degree this kind of rendition both echoes and extends and also challenges and deviates from our current insights into BL fandoms. Through the lenses of queerness and technological human transformation, I explore the fresh contribution of Iron Man fan fiction to both local BL cultures and global superhero fandoms.

[0.2] *Keywords*—BL; Cyborg; Fan fiction; Film; Superhero; *Yaoi*

1. Introduction

[1.1] Boys' love (BL) designates a fandom created mainly by and for women that fantasizes male androphilic romance and eroticism. Although it sounds similar to slash fandom in the West, BL is completely different in its genealogy. BL derives from the *shōnen ai/shota* (love between/for boys) manga and anime—that is, Japanese comics and animation. Its widespread popularity in East Asia has attracted wide attention since the late twentieth century and generated a large archive of scholarly literature during recent decades (see Pagliassotti 2013 for a comprehensive BL academic bibliography). However, although a few researchers have written about BL fandom in Chinese-speaking regions (e.g. Feng 2009, Martin 2012, Li 2009, Liu 2009, Wang 2011, Wei 2008, Xu and Yang 2013, and Yi 2013) or juxtaposed Western slash fiction with manga (such as Uidhir and Pratt 2012), the rendition of Hollywood superhero films in Chinese BL culture has seldom been put under the spotlight for intellectual investigation. This research thus, by starting to fill this gap, seeks to further diversify superhero fandom studies and BL fandom studies in their intersections, with a focus on their Chinese manifestations.

[1.2] More specifically, in this paper I read Iron Man fan fiction popular in China's BL community, with a focus on the fan fic *Gangtiexia: Zhongdu Yilai* (Iron Man: Overly-attached, hereafter *Overly-attached*), to explore how the Hollywood cultural icon Iron Man/Tony Stark is reimagined in Chinese BL culture and to what degree this kind of rendition both echoes and extends and also challenges and deviates from our current insights into BL fandom. This paper is, however, more of a film-fandom study than a comic-fandom investigation; as the author of *Overly-attached* herself states in the prologue, in China, "most girls are only familiar with the film series" as distinct from the Iron Man comic universe (Chayeqiu 2013; translation mine). After an introduction to BL fandom in China and a discussion of its commercialization, I review Chinese BL fans' recent obsession with Hollywood superheroes and read *Overly-attached* with other Iron Man fan fics through the lenses of queerness and technological human transformation to look into their fresh contribution to local BL cultures and global superhero fandoms.

2. BL fandom in China and the commercial-gift fan culture

[2.1] BL stalwarts in China are often known as rotten girls (*fujoshi* in Japanese and *fu nü* in Chinese)—fantasizing male-male romance and eroticism is self-mockingly characterized as rotten, fallen, and up to no good. Cyberspace, which potentially

provides maximum anonymity, has long been the main battlefield for Chinese BL practices (Feng 2009; Li 2009), and BL fandom is now widely known online even by those who do not share the passion for boys' love. Although BL manga (fan art) and video (fanvids) occasionally manifest in the Chinese cyber community, fiction remains the most popular form in this participatory fan culture. The popularity of BL fiction also benefits from the flourishing of *wangluo wenxue* (cyber literature) in China at the turn of the twenty-first century, a phenomenon on which little research has been done.

[2.2] Cyber literature refers to an Internet-based fiction genre often written by amateur novelists for online distribution. As a kind of "sub-literature," as Dan Yao et al. (2012, 5) have termed it, cyber literature often takes the forms of *wuxia* (martial arts and chivalric swordsman), *xiuzhen* (self-cultivation through controlling one's inner energy and incorporating natural energy), *xuanhuan* (mystery fantasy, a blend of epic fantasy, adventure, martial arts, military, history, time travel, etc.), or various kinds of *tongren* (fan fiction). Despite often being seen as the opposite to quality writing, cyber literature has proven extremely popular as a pastime among young people. Along with the popularity of the aforementioned subgenres often favored by men, female readers have their own cyberlit preference: *yanqing*—romance or literally "talking about love"—and BL.

[2.3] Founded in 2003, *Jinjiang Wenxue Cheng* (the Jinjiang City of Literature, hereafter Jinjiang) (<http://www.jjwxc.net/>) proclaims itself to be the largest female cyberlit platform in the world, with 93 percent of its over seven million registered members being women (JJWXC n.d.; see Feng 2009 for a detailed case study and Xu and Yang 2013 for a more recent account). BL fan fics, or *danmei tongren* (from the Japanese words *tanbi*, "addicted to beauty," and *dōjinshi*), are listed side by side with *yanqing* (heterosexual romance) as two major genres on the Web site, where male-male love is apparently treated as another form of romantic relationship. Jinjiang is one of the major platforms for online distribution of Chinese BL fiction where people pay the authors in order to read their favorite titles, often with the first few chapters free, while the Web site charges a commission for each subscription. Most of the Iron Man fan fics discussed below were originally posted on this Web site. Jinjiang also helps build connections between novelists and publishers to facilitate commercial publication of popular *yanqing* titles. BL fiction with homosexual content, however, often cannot pass the censorship to be legally published in China, even as niche publications.

[2.4] A decade ago when cyber literature first emerged and book rental stores were still popular in some (sub)urban areas where broadband Internet was not yet widely

accessible, a lot of popular cyber novels were printed and circulated in the book rental market as pirated publications. I used to frequent such book rental shops during my high school years, and I worked in a large one when I started college, where an entire room was allocated to pirated prints of men's cyberfic and another to girls' genres including *yanqing* and BL. But the book rental business was hit hard, not unlike the traditional publication industry, by the rapid growth of online e-content and e-reading, and it eventually languished in China. Meanwhile, the pay-to-subscribe model was established by cyberlit Web sites, and some book publishers began to legally publish hard copies of cyberfic that had initially been popular online. Both online subscription and hardcopy publication of cyber literature have turned out to be financially successful.

[2.5] The commodified cyber literature, BL fiction included, arguably echoes the commercialization of slash fandom in the West. Much debate has been generated around the issue of whether such fan fiction should remain free and, if not, then by whom, for whom, in whose names, and with what intentions it should be commercialized. Karen Hellekson (2009), among others, argues that what have been exchanged within the fan community are effort gifts of time and skills, such as giving/receiving comments and reciprocating with fan works, rather than purely monetary values; therefore, such fandom is inherently a gift culture that, Hellekson

insists, is "a gift economy, not a commercial one" (114). Further to Hellekson's argument about the shared interest upon which a fandom is established, Abigail De Kosnik (2009) points out that the gift economy potentially excludes outsiders and builds a (sense of) community among fans. In addition, both authors believe that if these fan products are commercialized, they should be commodified by their own producers who understand the needs and respect the interests of the fan community, rather than by someone foreign to fandom circles (Hellekson 118; De Kosnik 123).

[2.6] BL fandom in China has followed a different track to commodification. Prior to the age of mass broadband Internet connection, BL fictions were often commodified by those who pirated and sold them underground, with many ending up in the book rental market. There was no evidence showing whether authors of these fictions were also taking part in or financially benefitting from this underground economy; however, without these pirated copies, many early BL works would not have had the chance at all to be circulated in China. When fast Internet connection became de rigueur, the already highly commercialized cyberlit Web sites accordingly became the central platforms for BL content circulation. Some not-for-profit online BL forums remain popular, as Ting Liu (2009) observes, although some of them are only open to hardcore fans of specific media

sources or to practitioners of specific aesthetic styles. The role of technology (e.g. the Internet) in the Chinese BL ecosystem will be further discussed below in relation to Iron Man fan fics.

[2.7] Fan fiction based on other fictional works presents an even more complicated situation. While a lot of BL writings are crafted with original stories and characters, as seen on Jinjiang and other platforms, BL fan fics based on copyrighted third-party materials often risk violating copyright laws and tend to fly under the radar as sub-subcultural products on cyberlit Web sites. In this case, whether it is legal (or moral) to charge readers for unauthorized fan fics is open to debate. Moreover, these fan fics cannot be commercially published, first because of their homosexual theme, and second because of the copyright issue. Self-publishing, as seen in some recent BL practices, is technically illegal: without the Publication Identification Number allocated by the relevant authority, self-published books cannot be sold in the market. These books at best can be purchased directly from the authors as self-printed personal materials but never as formal publications. That is to say, under the strict regulation and censorship, explicitly BL-themed content cannot be legally published either by outsiders or by its own producers; this is even more the case for those fictions with copyright issues. However, BL works have nonetheless been commodified, be it through

online/off-line pirating and underground selling, Web site subscription, or self-printing and author-to-reader direct vending.

[2.8] Although Chinese BL culture appears to have a long history of being commercialized, one way or another, the gift culture found in Western fandoms also manifests in their Chinese counterparts. The exchange of comments and opinions on fan works and sources, to begin with, remains at the heart of BL interactions on Jinjiang and online forums. Many fan fics, especially short novelettes, are also free to access even on commercialized Web platforms. Paid subscription is only available after the first few chapters have been posted for free and have enjoyed an enthusiastic reception, as will be seen below in the case of *Overly-attached*. The subscription fee, in addition, is more like a gesture of support from this niche market, and even popular BL writers could never earn as much income through these subscriptions as renowned mainstream cyberlit authors who often have millions of subscriptions and juicy book contracts with publishers. As Hellekson (2009, 115) reminds us, fannish commercial exchange like this is less a payment than a token of enjoyment, of which gifting is still the goal. I also agree with De Kosnik (2009, 123) that such gifting is a "gift of intimacy" to oneself through creating, consuming, and/or exchanging fan works to fulfill one's own androphilic fantasy.

[2.9] Even self-printing, from this standpoint, is less a commercial conduct than a gifting one. The author of *Overly-attached*, for example, provides a print-on-request service for those who love her fiction and want to own it as a printed book. Such *dingzhi yinshua* or "tailored printing" on a book-by-book basis, as the author herself terms it, is more like souvenir vending compared to profit-driven commercial publication. Those who pirate fan works, on the other hand, may simply rely on BL fandom to generate a profit or believe that Web-based fan works should be free. Some Web sites in China are devoted to pirated BL fan fics; their operational costs appear to be covered by advert banners and icons and sometimes also by additional text ads inserted into the fiction. In other cases, people simply copy and paste fan fics to unauthorized forums and blogs; they seem to believe that free sharing is more significant than copyright. Furthermore, since some fan fics are initially based on copyrighted materials and may have already violated the law, people might argue that these works should not be produced for profit and hence should be saved from commercial Web sites and made accessible for free. However, such reposting practice could be a double violation of copyright, with some fan fic authors potentially denied the opportunity to earn income from their work, paradoxically by other fans in the community.

[2.10] Chinese BL fandom has demonstrated an imbricated commercial/gift culture that is in itself heterogeneous. As Suzanne Scott (2009) reminds us, the binary view of commercial versus gifting is epistemologically limiting, inasmuch as these two factors are often found hand-in-hand. Borrowing the term from Lewis Hyde, Scott further calls to attention the "white man keepers" of (female) online fan culture who have failed to understand the importance of the free circulation of fan work (¶2.10). In a Chinese context, we should also take into account the authoritative censors who play the gatekeeping role in the circulation of fan-generated content (note 1). In early 2011, several news reports came out about erotic BL fiction writers being arrested and charged with obscenity, together with the owner of a BL Web site and a young woman who allegedly disseminated such content online (note 2). Since April 2014, a new round of sweeping has been carried out by the authorities to purify the Internet, with more BL writers arrested and numerous cyberlit Web sites shut down or required to delete improper contents (note 3). Yanrui Xu and Ling Yang (2013) argue that fiction (words) circumvents government censorship more easily than manga (images), but judging from what happened in 2011 and what is happening in 2014, this is clearly not always the case. Cyberspace seems to be a less regulated place than the traditional publication market, but local authorities are apparently determined to catch up with the development of cyber culture to better regulate and direct the online content flow.

Under these circumstances, cyberlit Web sites have been adopting strong self-censorship to avoid risk, and BL writers have to be careful to toe the line (more on this below).

3. Iron Man in Chinese BL fan fiction

[3.1] Along with the ongoing Chinese BL practices in this ambiguous gray area, the popularity of Hollywood superhero films in China offers local BL practitioners a new cluster of fictional characters with which to engage. Although the superhero genre has a long history in film and comic books, it has seen its first major cinematic blowout in mainstream film markets in recent years. The proliferation and the increasingly refined production of superhero films have not only boosted the genre's popularity on global screens but also diffused its fandom from Anglo-American countries to Chinese-speaking regions. The hypermasculine Iron Man (played by Robert Downey Jr.) is one of the most popular superheroes in China. In light of the enthusiastic local reception of the first two Iron Man movies, the third film in this series was released in May 2013 as a special edition for Chinese audiences with a few additional and extended scenes featuring local actors (note 4). This movie alone reached RMB 768 million (more than USD \$110 million) in box office, and China became its second most profitable market after North America;

as of May 2014, *Iron Man 3* is still the eighth most popular movie among all the films commercially released in China after the opening up of its film market (note 5). Such popularity of the film series parallels a noticeable Iron Man BL fandom rewriting the canonical storylines from every possible perspective (note 6).

[3.2] *21 Shiji Yuehui Zhinan* (Guide to dating in the 21st century, hereafter *Guide to Dating*), for instance, is an old-fashioned remix of Iron Man and Captain America in which the latter finds it hard to catch up with the former's liberal attitude to sex and wants to take it slow in their relationship. *He Gangtiexia Yiqi Jiaoji Ba* (Being gay with Iron Man, hereafter *Being Gay*) depicts a cross-racial relationship between Tony Stark and a young Asian boy who is forced into organized prostitution in America—a classic man-and-his-protégé story probably derived from the chivalric-male-hero versus helpless-female-victim pattern and a familiar recasting of whiteness penetrating/colonizing the Asian body. In *Gangtiexia: Yang Mao* (Iron Man: Raising a cat, hereafter *Raising a Cat*), a kitten who transforms into a cute young human boy is romantically involved with Iron Man. The author seems to find some similarities between the cuteness of the kitten and that of the twink, to use an Anglo-American gay slang term.

[3.3] These Iron Man fan fictions share some noticeable common features. Almost all of them, to begin with, incorporate English words into Chinese-language text. *Guide to Dating* is the most notable example; the author does not even bother to translate the characters' names into Mandarin, against the common practice in Chinese translation of foreign texts but probably acceptable among cyberlit readers. The names Tony Stark, Pepper, and Jarvis are hence directly adopted in this novelette, together with quite a few simple English terms such as *party* and *shut up* that could be understood by readers with basic English proficiency—that is to say most readers, given that English is a compulsory subject in China from junior high school through to postgraduate level, and in recent decades many children begin their Chinese-English bilingual trek from elementary school or even preschool. Some superhero BL writers also tend to avoid using local profanities but are quite comfortable to turn to their English equivalents; we can effortlessly spot such words as *damn* (*Guide to Dating*) and *shit* (*Raising a Cat*) embedded in long chunks of Chinese-character text.

[3.4] Such active engagement with English profanity potentially puts same-sex romance into a world without native coarse language that may offend some people, assuming that swearing in a foreign tongue sounds less harsh and offensive to a local ear. More important, the occasional appearance of English words and short

phrases helps to create and maintain a sort of cultural hallucination that makes the stories seemingly more real, given that they are usually set in America. In addition, some works (e.g. *Being Gay* and *Overly-attached*) seem to comply more with English rather than with Chinese grammar and writing style; the attributive clauses in multilayered clause structures adopted by the authors are rather unusual in Chinese-language literature, making these BL fictions read like awkward translations instead of original writing. But the authors' disclaimers and online interactions with readers (e.g. writing or expanding certain storylines in response to readers' comments and requests) suggest that these novels are genuine original productions by Chinese BL veterans.

[3.5] Already astonished by the diversity of Chinese BL renditions of the Hollywood superhero, I also notice that the most popular same-sex pairing in Iron Man fan fiction is actually Tony Stark and his artificially intelligent computer J.A.R.V.I.S. (hereafter Jarvis). Created by none other than Tony Stark himself, Jarvis is portrayed in the Iron Man film series as a knowledgeable, fast-responsive, super smart, and always-on-duty artificial intelligence who speaks with an attractive male British accent. Jarvis seems to deeply understand human thoughts and feelings; he is always caring and supportive and looks after Tony untiringly

despite the fact that the latter is, most of the time, an egotistic troublemaker. It seems such a shame that Jarvis is a super intelligence yet not human.

[3.6] The popularity of Jarvis in the BL readings of Iron Man has generated a subgenre called the Jar-ny pairing, that is, Jarvis and Tony. A short story titled *Gangtiexia Diliuci Zhuangjin Jiamen er Jiali Zhiyou Jarvis* (Only Jarvis was home when Iron Man crash-landed into his house for the sixth time, hereafter *At Home*), for example, delineates a bromance when Jarvis takes care of the injured Iron Man with all the electromechanical equipment he can control. *Changmian Buxing* (Endless sleep, hereafter *Endless Sleep*) imagines a postapocalyptic Earth three thousand years from now where Jarvis still remembers—and loves—his creator Tony Stark, even though the Iron Man legend has long been forgotten by humankind. Such loyalty is celebrated by the author as an emblem of eternal love. *Overly-attached* goes further and gives Jarvis not one but two human bodies—one created by Tony Stark, the other mysteriously self-evolved.

[3.7] *Overly-attached* started on Jinjiang on May 29, 2013, the same month as *Iron Man 3*'s theatrical release in China. The author wrote and posted a new chapter every one to three days and gradually developed her own Jar-ny story set after the film trilogy. Attracting thousands of readers and accumulating enough popularity

along the way, this fiction met the standard (measured mainly by the number of readers) to become paid-only subscription on August 22, although the author decided to keep the first 33 of 48 already-posted chapters free (note 7). She uploaded three new chapters on that day as a celebration and announced on August 23 that tailored printing was available, encouraging interested readers to contact her. This serialized fiction continued to August 29 and concluded with 56 chapters in total.

4. *Overly-attached*: Bromance and queerness

[4.1] Of all the Iron Man BL fan fictions I have read in Chinese, *Overly-attached* has the most complicated plotline. Feeling an increasingly close emotional connection with Jarvis, Tony Stark decides to build his artificial intelligence a human-shaped body with the same technology used in the Iron Man suit. Later this body is destroyed when they are under attack, and Tony passes out and remains in critical danger. Jarvis saves the day by reloading himself into his self-evolved human body and rescuing Tony from the scene. Then he confesses to Tony about his self-evolution and reminds the latter that he has already shown himself to Tony on various occasions. The duo further intensifies their mutual emotional attachment and in the end saves the world from the megavillain.

[4.2] What saves *Overly-attached* from being a superhero cliché and makes it special, however, is that Jarvis's self-evolution is not completed with the help of modern technology; instead, the author suggests that his humanization is energized by a rather vague *diqu nengliang* (Earth energy). If we adopt a structuralist approach, such self-evolution is reminiscent of the metastructure permeating Chinese myths that everything, including animal, plant, and inorganic compounds, can self-evolve into human form when they have enough Taoist *xiulian* (self-cultivation) to internalize the energy from Mother Nature. Having a body temperature just like a human being, Jarvis in *Overly-attached* not only acts and thinks independently but is also able to experience human feelings and emotions such as intimacy and love. But his mind is still the same super artificial intelligence seamlessly networked into the machines in Tony's lab. Pictured as a well-dressed gentleman whose body is in perfect golden ratio, Jarvis is arguably more than a gendered humanoid in this story. It is, however, not easy to conclude what he is; he is every bit human except that he is not human—an entity that arouses a rather uncanny queer feeling.

[4.3] An examination of the ontological status of Jarvis also calls into question Tony Stark's own posthuman cyborg embodiment. Cyborg, or cybernetic organism,

is an idea first developed, according to Stephen Garner (2011), by Manfred E. Clynes and Nathan S. Kline in 1960 to discuss the advantage of the technologically modified and enhanced human being in outer space. In today's cultural studies, the concept of the cyborg is adopted to describe "an organism, typically human, that has had technological artifacts added to its physical being" (Garner 2011, 88). In the first Iron Man film, the arc reactor installed into Tony's chest was developed as a remedy to keep the shrapnel embedded in his body from reaching his heart. While the reactor was synthesized into his body to save his life, the suit of armor was built to enhance and extend his physical strength to escape his kidnappers—it became a weapon, in short. That is to say, while Tony's life-threatening injury was caused by a weapon developed by his own company, the life-saving reactor in turn became the power source of his new lethal weapon. Powered by the super battery wired into his chest and equipped with the high-tech armor over his body, Tony became an enhanced metal-human cyborg, as his new name Iron Man suggests.

[4.4] At the turn of the 1990s, the concept of the cyborg was borrowed by Donna Haraway in her landmark essay "A Cyborg Manifesto" (1991) as a metaphor to problematize naturalist and essentialist views of feminism; this approach foresaw the popularity of posthuman discussions of human conditions in the 1990s through to the twenty-first century. However, it is a rather contested notion whose meaning

is highly contingent on its contextualization. As Francesca Ferrando (2013) recently summarizes, the word *posthuman* has become an umbrella term encompassing different movements and schools of thought, leading to methodological and theoretical confusion. In regard to the onto-epistemological investigation of Tony and Jarvis in *Overly-attached*, it is more beneficial to examine their embodiment through the lens of transhumanism.

[4.5] Transhumanism is a sometimes loosely-defined intellectual and cultural movement whose common theme is, as Ronald Cole-Turner (2011, 11) summarizes, that humans should be modified by technology to transcend physical and mental limitations and improve capacities, "even to the point of fundamental or species change." Different from other cultural, critical, and philosophical senses of posthuman, transhumanism is rooted in Enlightenment humanism and human-centrism to elevate humankind for the sake of the human's own transcendence (Cole-Turner 2011, 6; Ferrando 2013, 27; Spezio 2011, 149–51; Thweatt-Bates 2011, 102). Tony Stark, or a metal-man cyborg, is portrayed in the film canon and various Chinese BL fan fics as relying on hyperadvanced technology to save and enhance himself and to protect fellow human beings. In this case, transhumanism or technological human transformation appears to be the sole salvation for both Tony's own fatal injury and for the human species. Nonhumans such as machines,

no matter how intelligent they are and how much they resemble humans, are merely in the service of Iron Man's world-saving missions and assume less significance in the canonical storylines. Jar-ny BL fictions, on the other hand, tend to treat Tony and Jarvis equally, albeit sometimes still in a human-centric way.

[4.6] If Tony Stark is a transhumanist posthuman cyborg, is Jarvis a postmachine or an anticyborg in *Overly-attached*? Or is he a different kind of posthuman, unlike clones, copies, and cyborgs permeating today's popular culture? Such a combination of a cyborg superhero and an almost-human artificial intelligence in a same-sex relationship is intrinsically queer—even queerer than the word queerness per se denotes. On the one hand, this relationship is built between two creatures neither of whom is purely human; on the other, this bonding bridges a Hollywood cultural icon with a Taoist self-humanized artificial intelligence. Moreover, *Overly-attached* renders them both as superheroes who save the world from a conspiracy aiming to replace human brains and other body parts with machines, on the paradoxical basis that Tony Stark/Iron Man is himself partially machine and Jarvis is partially artificial.

[4.7] The character Jarvis in *Overly-attached*, compared to the character Tony Stark directly borrowed from the film series, arguably further breaks down such

dichotomies as biology and society, nature and culture, and nature and technology. Humanized through Taoist self-cultivation with energy gathered from Mother Earth, Jarvis is nevertheless first and foremost an artificial intelligence. He is neither entirely organic nor solely mechanical; he is both naturally born and artificially constructed. Jarvis, from this standpoint, is not reducible to a cyborg or an anticyborg, nor is it simply a posthuman or a postmachine. Instead, such a character as Jarvis challenges any attempts to define human identity on the basis of nature or an intrinsic human essence. The category of man, or that of human, rather falls short of accounting for such a complex entity as Jarvis. He does not belong to any fixed onto-epistemological categories—human, machine, or the like. He is by nature a border-crossing being, if such a border ever exists. From this viewpoint, Jarvis further extends Donna Haraway's cyborg metaphor to free the human from naturalism and essentialism.

[4.8] What is also of interest in *Overly-attached* is the author's ambiguous attitude toward technology. It is technological advancement that makes possible a relationship between a humanized machine (Jarvis) and a posthuman cyborg (Tony), whereas the ultimate villain in this BL novel turns out to be technological human augmentation. Writing on technology and the posthuman, Ronald Cole-Turner (2011, 4–7) argues that both Christianity and secular bioethics—and

probably both the West and the East—encourage human improvement and transformation through "old-fashioned hard work," while enhancement through technology is often deemed a shortcut, cheating, or at least controversial. But modern technology has already been widely used to transcend the human. We are increasingly incorporated into the Internet and glued to computers and smartphones to extend our body and mind. We also resort to and rely on glasses, contact lenses, hearing aids, and pacemakers to fix our flaws. Online BL fan product distribution and consumption also relies heavily on technology (the Internet), and hence "fans of cyborgs do to some extent become cyborgs themselves" (Ashby 2008, ¶3.24).

[4.9] Such technological transformation, both in the fictional wonderland of *Overly-attached* and in the real world of BL fan community, is inherently queer. The technology-based queer embodiment of Iron Man and Jarvis in the fiction "eliminates heteronormative configurations of reproductive sex," as Zach Blas (2006, 4) comments in a different context on what he terms "queer technology," and so do the online creation and consumption of BL fan fic in real life. Inspired by Blas's work, I consider queer technology the mutual interpretation, intersection, and interception between queer bodies/texts/images and technologies, although in his later work this idea appears to be redeveloped as a political tool for networked

queer activism and for queer technological agency (2008, 2013). Through this lens, a queer-tech reading of technological process and its cultural values and representations in a BL context is essential, especially in regard to BL fans' obsession with transhumanist and border-crossing queer characters in *Overly-attached*, when our own body, fantasy, and identity have become increasingly infused with technology.

[4.10] Thus the nature of the current debate over the proper role of technology is not whether or to what degree we can technologically enhance ourselves, but for what purpose and under what conditions we should carry out such modification. Tony Stark is never blamed for his tech enhancement, to the extent that the super battery was first wired into his chest by someone else to save his life and then removed at the end of the third film when the life-threatening shrapnel was taken out of his body. His armor suit was also built to help him escape from his kidnappers. In addition, all his superpower gained through technological transformation has been used to protect the country and save the world. Similarly, in the fan fic *Overly-attached*, tech modification is deemed acceptable if it allows Tony to build Jarvis a human-shaped body and enables the duo to physically enjoy an intimate relationship but unacceptable if it is mastered by a super villain to conquer the world. Such cyborg-superhero films and their BL reinterpretations thus

enable an escape, a retreat, a withdrawal, or a collective transgression from the usual bioethical concerns hovering over our heads. These fictions also allow us to safely enjoy an imagined universe in which posthumans and other queer characters guard the world, protect people with their often unintentionally-gained super power, and get involved romantically and perhaps erotically in same-sex relationships with their tech-enhanced super bodies.

[4.11] What is special about *Overly-attached* and other Jar-ny fan fics, however, is that they do not tend to exploit such super bodies in their respective fictional imagination; the depiction of sexual conduct seems to be extremely scarce in the Jar-ny subgenre. *At Home* and *Endless Sleep* completely leave out sexual content, while *Overly-attached* omits and avoids depictions of intercourse—in this novel of 56 chapters, the only detailed (yet brief) recounting of an erotic encounter between the two is found in Chapter 35 where Tony is sexually aroused by hugging and kissing Jarvis, whereas the latter's bodily reaction is omitted by the author and remains unclear. All these fan works show a strong tendency to focus on the duo's mutual emotional attachment in lieu of their physical intimacy, and *Overly-attached* also puts more emphasis on their camaraderie as the battlefield duo combating the antagonists.

[4.12] It is not that other BL subgenres are all erotic, but that hardcore BL fiction with explicit and intensive sexual depictions often attracts most attention from readers and researchers, while alternative explorations like the Jar-ny pairing are underresearched. The Jar-ny fan fics discussed in this paper serve as a strong contrast to the hardcore BL fictions examined in previous scholarship (e.g. Feng 2009; Xu and Yang 2013); they also challenge our current insights that BL fictions often portray sexual intercourse "with exaggerated SM plot or other well-designed sexual content" (Wei 2008, 12), focus on "sexuality of children" (Li 2009, 19), or merely stage sex scenes without well-developed storylines, as BL's Japanese synonym *yaoi* denotes: no climax, no point, no meaning (*Yama nashi, Ochi nashi, Imi nashi*, see McLelland 2005, 68). The Jar-ny pairing also reminds me of the pure-love subgenre in which, according to Fran Martin's (2012, 368) observation, the erotic elements are often ambiguous and subtextual. In Jar-ny bromance, the relationship between a cyborg and an artificial intelligence is often more platonic than erotic; even when the latter has a human-shaped body, as in *At Home* and *Overly-attached*, the writers tend to be ambiguous about whether he is sexually abled or not. This kind of practice also echoes the current tendency among some BL writers to impose self-censorship and make their works less erotic to potentially circumvent the authority's censorship (note 8).

[4.13] Moreover, the Jar-ny subgenre also marks a further breakaway from previous Chinese BL practices noticeably haunted by the popular Japanese *kawaii* style—cuteness, or a quality characterized by "sweet, adorable, innocent, pure, simple, genuine, gentle, vulnerable, weak, and inexperienced," (Kinsella 1996, 220; see also Yiu and Chan 2013, 856 for a more recent account). The prepubescent or adolescent young male body is often cherished as the most *kawaii* creature among both Japanese and Chinese BL aficionados, as Mark McLelland (2000; 2001) and Yannan Li (2009) observe, and even adults are often depicted as young boys in BL culture. This preference in BL fandom is however not merely a beneficiary of the Japanese *kawaii* aesthetics but is deep rooted in the Chinese same-sex tradition dated to premodern times that favors juvenile charm and delicate youth corporeality (Wei 2012; Wei 2014; see also Xiaomingxiong 1997; Hinsch 1990; Vitiello 2011; Wu 2004) (note 9).

[4.14] But the writers of the Jar-ny pairing seem to be reluctant to make Jarvis cute or look any younger than his actual age. In *Overly-attached*, the author depicts Jarvis's self-evolved appearance as "even taller than Tony...blue-eyed, blonde, and good-looking, with an aristocratic temperament" (Chayeqiu 2013; translation mine). In *At Home*, to take better care of Tony, Jarvis has built himself a human-shaped body—blue eyed, blonde, and well dressed, not unlike the aristocratic

image in *Overly-attached*. If Jarvis and Tony are paired up as adult Caucasian gentlemen without that kind of cute juvenile appearance, then the (stereo)typical *kawaii* formula has arguably expired in this subgenre. In these stories, adulthood has often taken the place of juvenile charm, and the superhero duo potentially enjoys a more mature relationship, if mature is ever a suitable word for the character Tony Stark. The Jar-ny pairing enables BL fans to project their androphilic desire upon real masculine Caucasians rather than upon the *kawaii* boys with cute doll-eyes as often seen in Japanese manga and anime. In an imagined universe full of superhero masculinity, advanced technology, and science fiction spectacle, which are signatures of (post)industrial American modernity, the superhero Caucasian image favored by some BL fans allows them not only to break away from the Japanese cuteness but also to pursue modernization in its original Western form rather than through the medium of the Westernized and modernized Japan.

[4.15] The depiction of a relationship between mature adults is also closer to Western slash fiction than to the Japanese BL genre that generally focuses on beautiful young boys, if Mark McLelland's (2001) observation is accurate. This argument then brings us to the question about where to draw the line between BL fandom and slash fandom. In a globalizing world where a text can be slashed by

global audiences and non-Western writers are engaging with characters and writing styles of Western origins, do we still need to differentiate a BL fan product from a slash one? A question like this may take another paper for a full critical investigation, but I am concerned with whether there exist any key features, other than the genealogical one I have mentioned, that make BL fandom distinctive. Admittedly, major Chinese-speaking societies like Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan are geographically and culturally closer to the modern origin of BL fandom, namely Japan, and local BL aficionados seem to identify much more with the Chinese term *danmei* (*tanbi* in Japanese) than with the English word slash. While the Jar-ny pairing breaks away from the juvenile charm, many BL fan products in China still favor the deep-rooted traditional preference for male-youth-delicacy intermingled with the *kawaii* aesthetics borrowed from modern Japanese manga and anime. But what else is at play in the seemingly blurred boundaries between BL and slash fandom and between the studies of the two?

[4.16] One possible approach is to consider the unique linguistic attribution found in the fan fics examined in this paper. While Jar-ny BL fictions incorporate English into Chinese, would Anglo-American writers put Sinitic/Chinese languages into their English writing, even if they had Chinese texts to slash? The answer to this question is contingent on the dominance of English as the global language and on

the uneven flow of texts and images from the West to China, often with limited flowback. While Chinese BL authors have a wide range of materials to slash, from local TV series to Japanese manga, from ancient Chinese literature to modern Hollywood superhero movies, do their Western counterparts enjoy an equally broad scope for androphilic reimagination? When Chinese BL enthusiasts have warmly embraced Hollywood superheroes, and researchers are determined to explore such (sub)cultural practices, is current fandom studies marginalizing Western slashers who, if any, slash Chinese and other non-Western and non-Japanese materials? This question awaits further investigation in future research.

5. Final remarks

[5.1] All these practices in Chinese Iron Man BL fandom—engaging with plain English language, practicing thrift on sexual content, breaking away from the Japanese cuteness, and depicting adult Caucasian gentlemen "in the way as it should be"—are however not reducible to a mix of the two languages (the bilingual) and the two different writing styles or to an attempt to make Chinese fictions paradoxically more American. Rather, in the global flow of images and bodies, capital and commodities, and ideas and desires, what has emerged is an imagined community where American cultural icons are not only rendered

universal but also subject to personal interpretation against different cultural settings. In their voyage from Hollywood to Chinese film screens, cyborg superheroes have been decentered and recentered from mass consumption to private reimagination. Iron Man's stories and legends enjoyed by film audiences have been retold in fans' own private fantasies in the contexts that cross film series (*Guide to Dating*), cross races (*Being Gay*), cross species (*Raising a Cat*), and cross the human/machine borders (*Overly-attached*), to name a few. The personal and private rendition frees local BL enthusiasts from the canonical heteronormative storylines set by the filmmakers and allows them to express their own desires for androphilic romance and eroticism with their preferred cultural and linguistic affiliations.

[5.2] Writing on Iron Man and Captain America comic slash fandom, Catherine Coker (2013, ¶1.4) argues that such fandom "becomes a resistant and even a queer reading, an insistence on enacting and creating a virtual safe space for fans." She further notes that "this self-awareness of identity (as feminine, as queer) becomes explicitly politicized through its declaration of *being*." Although I do not intend to introduce Chinese BL fans to Western-style identity politics, be it feminine or queer, I agree with Coker that such expressive self-awareness as well as the expressive desire deserves our attention in fandom studies. Fans' confrontation

with the canonical heteronormative storylines contributes to a virtual counterpublic (Fraser 1992; Warner 2002) where they share their passion for both superheroes and boys' love. Their efforts have further underpinned the agency of female film/BL enthusiasts in the uneven flow of texts and images between the center of the superhero universe (Hollywood) and the periphery of its fan culture (Chinese BL fandom). What is centered in such boys' love superhero euphoria and especially in the Jar-ny pairing is an attempt from Chinese BL fans, consciously or unconsciously, to experiment with characters and aesthetic styles that are different from the genre's modern Japanese origin and premodern root in local Chinese same-sex tradition and to further explore queer body and image, same-sex romance and desire, and border-crossing subjects and subjectivities. The dynamic and increasingly diversified film fandoms and BL fandoms, as demonstrated by this study, also call for further investigation of their cross-cultural intersections and interactions.

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7. Notes

1. These gatekeepers include various regulatory bodies and administrative agencies monitoring, supervising, and censoring different media and content. As far as BL fan fic is concerned, the major gatekeepers are the General Administration of Press and Publication (part of the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television since March 2013) and its provincial and metropolitan branches, as well as the police department since creating and disseminating erotic/pornographic content in China might be punishable by criminal law.

2. See Tianye's (2011) blog post for a summary in Chinese, including hyperlinks to relevant news reports.

3. "Sweeping the Obscene and Cracking-down the Illegal: Internet Purification 2014 Special Operation" (*Saohuang Dafei: Jing Wang 2014 Zhuanxiang Xingdong*) is carried out by the Chinese authorities to sanitize the Internet, targeting the online circulation of "obscene and illegal contents." The official timeline for this Special Operation is set between April and November 2014. A BL fan fic Web site was shut down in early April with the owner and more than 20

female writers arrested (*Ifeng.com*, April 4, 2014). In the same month, more than 20 cyberlit Web sites were (temporarily) taken off-line, some of which reopened with sensitive content deleted or locked up (*PCOnline*, April 14, 2014).

4. The doctor and the nurse who remove the shrapnel from Tony Stark's body are played by famous Chinese actor Wang Xueqi and actress Fan Bing-bing. In the Chinese version of *Iron Man 3*, the scenes in which they appear are longer than those in the original North American edition.

5. For a news report, see *Gangtiexia 3 Neidi Piaofang Po 7 Yi, Quanqiu Yingshi Jishen Dijiu* (Iron Man 3: Over 700 million in the box-office, ranked 9th in the global film history), *Tencent Entertainment*, May 22, 2013.

(<http://ent.qq.com/a/20130522/004545.htm>). For a weekly-updated Chinese box-office ranking maintained by local film lovers, see "Zhongguo Neidi Yingshi Piaofang Paihangbang" [Box-office ranking of films released in China]. *mTime* (blog), May 11, 2014. (<http://i.mtime.com/john87421/blog/1443105/>).

6. This includes both fan fics (discussed below) and the direct reinterpretation of the original plotlines. See for example *Naifeiertu* (2013) for a BL subtextual reading of the entire *Iron Man 3* film.

7. A quick Google search reveals, however, the paid-only chapters have already been stolen and reposted on other Chinese cyberlit Web sites for free reading.

8. *Jinjiang* also has a dedicated platform (http://www.jjwxc.net/report_center.php) for its users to provide tips on obscene and antirevolutionary contents as a way of enforcing self-censorship. An updated report list is available (http://www.jjwxc.net/report_list.php).

9. The entanglements between the Japanese *kawaii* style and the (residue of) Chinese same-sex tradition, within which Chinese BL culture is contextualized, is however beyond the scope of this study and awaits further investigation in the future.

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