



Xiazhui: The Real Person Slash Novel That Triggers the Blockage of AO3 in China

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ABSTRACT

耽美 *danmei* (Lit. 'Addicted to beauty; indulgence in beauty'), aka Boys Love (BL), is a contentious literary genre featuring male-male romantic and/or erotic relationships, which is predominantly produced for and consumed by female readers (self-)referred to as 腐女 *funü* 'rotten girls'. Since entering China's market in the mid-1990s, *danmei* has been attaining popularity and visibility, and it has developed into a subculture among legions of 'rotten' writers and readers. Nonetheless, owing to its dual correlation with homosexuality and obscenity, *danmei* in mainland China is subjected to state censorship. Therefore, in a hit online serial 陈情令 *Chenqingling* ('The Untamed') adapted from a popular *danmei* novel entitled 魔道祖师 *Modao Zushi* 'Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation', the male-male homosexual bond between two protagonists has been expurgated. Obsessed with the romance in the original narrative yet dissatisfied with the officially sanctioned adaptation, fangirls of the original novel and its visual adaptation create fanfiction, including real person slash (RPS) works based on the leading actor Xiao Zhan and his co-star from the *The Untamed*. Xiao's fans reported a piece of RPS work titled 下坠 *Xiazhui* (Lit. 'Falling') and Archaic of Our Own (AO3) that hosted it, causing AO3 to be blocked in China on 29th February 2020. Since *Xiazhui* features real celebrities, it concerns moral debates. Furthermore, *Xiazhui* pertains to Xiao's fanbase whose acts are interconnected with toxic fandom and the so-called 'heresy-style star worship' (邪教式追星 *xiejiaoshi zhuixing*). More significantly, the contentious aspect of *Xiazhui* also lies in its homoerotic depictions that are regarded to be indecent in a contemporary Chinese context.

Keywords

Danmei, Boys Love, RPS, fandom, censorship

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INTRODUCTION

On 29th February 2020, Archive of Our Own (AO3), a non-commercial and non-profit open-source multi-fannish repository for transformative works established by and for fans, became blocked in Mainland China (Cai, 2020; Romano, 2020). Owing to its dual commitments of freeing writers from corporate interests and proscription of social norms inconsistent with fandom values (Larsen & Zubernis, 2012), AO3 had been serving as a virtual safe zone and spiritual home for a variety of subculture communities in China since 2009. Enraged by the calumny against AO3 and hence its

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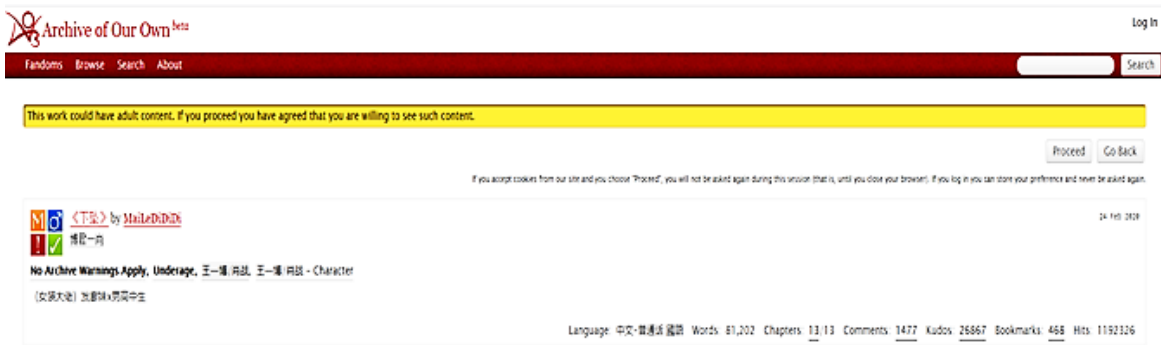
inaccessibility, AO3 users initiated a comprehensive cyber campaign and boycott against a Chinese celebrity named 肖战 Xiao Zhan, whose enthusiastic and devoted fans caused the blockage of AO3 via systematic and well-planned mass-reporting to government authorities (Global Times, 2020; Pang, 2020; Jiaqi, 2020; Economist, 2020; Yu, 2020).

Xiao Zhan, a Chinese singer-actor, rose to mega-stardom expeditiously in 2019 after starring in a hit online serial 陈情令 *Chenqingling* 'The Untamed' adapted from a popular online novel 魔道祖师 *Modao Zushi* 'Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation'. The original novel falls into a literary genre dubbed 耽美 *danmei* (Boys Love, aka BL), which literally means 'indulgence in beauty; addicted to beauty' and features male-male romantic relationships and/or homoerotic encounters between beautiful pubescent or mature men (McLelland, 2000, 2018; Fujimoto, 2015; McLelland & Welker, 2015; Welker, 2015). This marginalised literary genre permeated a niche market in mainland China in the 1990s, and since then, *danmei* has been evolving into a subculture of ever-growing popularity and visibility (Feng, 2009; L. Yang & Bao, 2012). As a 'transgressive' genre generating female-oriented and gender-inflected fantasies, *danmei* writings have attained the quintessential status of an 'oppositional discourse' that defies conventional literary genres and cultural norms (Martin, 1986, pp. 44-45; W. Wei, 2008; Xu & Yang, 2013), so they enable readers to express aesthetics, voyeurism and yearnings for gender equality and to attain escape from traditional gender norms and constraints (Chou, 2010; C. Zhang, 2016; Lilja & Wasshede, 2017). *Danmei* is believed to be produced by and for heterosexual female readers who are (self-)referred to as 腐女 *funü* 'rotten girls', though a trivial proportion of *danmei* fans are male (Xu & Yang, 2013; Nagaïke, 2015; Chao, 2016, 2017; Zhao et al., 2017). The audiences of *The Untamed*, therefore, are surmised to be mainly comprised of 'rotten' adolescent girls and adult women who are obsessed with female-oriented *danmei* narratives.

Nonetheless, Xiao's fans, who might not all be 'rotten girls', became aware of a piece of contentious fanfiction (aka fanfic) entitled 下坠 *Xiazhui* (Lit. 'Falling'), which was composed by a pseudonymous author MaiLeDiDiDi. *Xiazhui* was published simultaneously on Lofter and AO3 on 24th February 2020, featuring the homoerotic romance between a prostitute character named after Xiao and a schoolboy character named after his co-star from *The Untamed*, Wang Yibo. In the story, the 22-year-old cross-dressing protagonist suffers from gender dysphoria, and he is driven to prostitution for the cost of transgender surgery; his 16-year-old same-sex partner, however, loves him regardless of his gender.

With a claimed intention to protect their idol's reputation, Xiao's fans reported AO3 to censors as a platform hosting online obscenity. To some extent, *Xiazhui* functions as a catalyst for the cyber war between Xiao's fans and AO3 users who were joined by netizens of a wider social spectrum afterwards. As the topic was constantly looming large and had developed into a multi-faceted societal, ideological and economic phenomenon, it was referred to as the '227 Incident' (Xinhuanet, 2020a, 2020b; China Daily, 2020; Global Times, 2020; Gong, 2020). By the time this paper was written, the 227 Incident was setting off a perilous chain reaction such as cyber manhunt, social media account hacking, IP theft, online harassment and abuse, etc. One arguable paradigm of the aftermath concerning BL was that the application of Lofter, a Tumblr-like free blogging site open for transformative works and subculture groups, was pulled off the shelf for 'rectification' purposes in June 2020 (Lofter, 2020); in cyberspace, this 'rectification' was claimed to be caused by the 227 Incident, though Xiao's solicitor denied such a connection (Ifeng News, 2020; Jin Xià Shuō Xiàohuà, 2020).

Since the 227 Incident, *Xiazhui* has ironically been overwhelmed with enormous attention, which might run counter to the intention and expectation of Xiao's fans who reported it: the novel has received 1,192,326 hits on AO3 only (as shown in Figures 1 below, which was taken on 1st September 2022). Additionally, there were reviews eulogizing its artistry and profundity (Q. Wu, 2020), as this novel depicts not only bittersweet love and entanglements, but also the struggle of the grassroots, including impoverishment, miscarriage, illness, decease, suicide, etc.



Figures 1. *Xiazhui* novel has received 1,192,326 hits on AO3 website

METHODS

In this paper, I investigate *Xiazhui*, the piece of fanfic that triggers the blockage of AO3 in mainland China. *Xiazhui* belongs to real person slash (henceforward RPS). I scrutinise the text via hermeneutic analysis and draw on other *danmei* works.

The terminologies ‘RPS’ and ‘real person fiction’ (henceforward RPF) are sometimes interchangeable, because a vast majority of RPF works feature same-sex pairings (Thomas, 2014). In this paper, I treat RPS as a subcategory of RPF. Analogous to slash, RPS also features male-male romantic and/or erotic relationships, yet discrepant from slash, it entails real actors instead of onscreen characters (N. Zhang, 2020). Therefore, as a piece of RPS involving explicit sexual depictions, *Xiazhui* is constituted of three contentious facets: RPF, slash/BL/*danmei* and eroticism. Through analysing *Xiazhui*, I explore RPF, *danmei* and eroticism in a Chinese context in general, as well as specific issues related to this narrative, including toxic fan practices and the ‘heresy-style star worship’ (邪教式追星 *xiejiaoshi zhuixing*).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Xiazhui is produced in a background that the male-male relationship featured in the original novel has been expurgated from *The Untamed*, which suppresses the devotion and passion of ‘rotten’ audiences. In the officially sanctioned adaptation, the romantic and erotic relationship between two protagonists has been altered into pure friendship without sexual tension. As a consequence, fascinated with the romance and eroticism in the original story yet dissatisfied with its expurgation in the adapted serial, ‘rotten’ fans scrutinise the drama frame by frame in an attempt to spot any (claimed) homosexual hints that have luckily escaped the expurgation.

Simultaneously, they have produced an enormous amount of fanfic based on the characters and posted them on platforms such as AO3 and Lofter, which is similar to Wang’s (2019) observation on fangirls’ creation concerning an online serial titled 镇魂 *Zhenhun* ‘Guardian’ that is also adapted from a *danmei* novel via ‘top-down expurgation’. Note that fanfic in Chinese is referred to as 同人 *tongren*, which is coined based on a Confucian envisaged world of ‘grand union’ (大同 *da tong*) and deployed to articulate *danmei* fans’ utopia conceptualised and interpreted via same-sex relationships (L. Yang, 2017).

In addition to creating fanfic works based on fictional characters in *The Untamed* and its original novel *Modao Zushi*, ‘rotten girls’ have also transferred the adoration of fictional characters to actual actors, and created narratives regarding the imaginary relationship between the two leading stars Xiao and Wang. Since the release of *The Untamed*, legions of fans have expeditiously become their loyal CP 粉 *CP fen* ‘coupling fans’ and ‘shippers’ (a fandom terminology for those who support or wish for particular romantic relationships). The acts of CP fans typically coincide with the observation of Thomas (2014) and M. Zhang (2021): CP fans claim that the homosexual relationship ‘is real’, and there is ‘chemistry’ between Xiao and Wang; CP fans are also fascinated in gleaning and expounding ‘evidence’ by means of close reading the two actors’ interviews, shows and social media posts.

The imagined relationship between Wang Yibo and Xiao Zhan is called 博君一肖 *bo jun yi xiao* which is a coined homophone of an idiom 博君一笑 *bo jun yi xiao* ‘to cheer you up’, with the initial

and final characters being wittily substituted with characters in the actors' names. The popularity of the imaginary homosexual/romantic relationship on social media is predominantly reflected on Weibo, a micro-blogging platform with approximately 582 million monthly active users during the first quarter in 2022 (Lai, 2022). Posts and comments regarding the *bo jun yi xiao* relationship are accommodated by Weibo's virtual community called 'super topic', which is similar to a hashtag, yet the 'super topic' function has its own page and a team of dedicated, and sometimes professional, moderators who actively feature and manage it by manually selecting contents and tagging high-quality ones as 'essential content' to signpost visitors. By September 2022, the 'Bo Jun Yi Xiao Super Topic' has garnered enormous attention: it has attracted 114.79 billion visits, 10.23 million posts and 3.78 million followers.

Apart from contributing to the gigantic traffic on Weibo, CP fans have also created a considerable amount of RPS works, potentially exemplified by *Xiazhui*. The author of *Xiazhui* names the two protagonists after Wang and Xiao and specifies the relationship as Wang/Xiao and the fandom as *bo jun yi xiao* on AO3 (as shown in (1)). Moreover, the protagonist's appearance portrayed in the novel bears a resemblance to that of the actor, as Xiao has a mole on the same position known as his 'beauty spot' among his fans (Example (2)). Therefore, *Xiazhui* falls into the category of RPS.

(2) 她哭起来眼泪鼻涕横流……奇怪的是她嘴下的小黑痣好像也在哭。

She was crying her eyes out...Strangely, it was like the little mole below her mouth was crying too.

(下坠 *Xiazhui*; Chapter 6. Trans. Mine)

As for the identity of *Xiazhui*'s author and fans who reported it, there have always been various versions in cyberspace, such as anti-fans, CP fans of both Xiao and Wang, professionals paid by Xiao's own team, Xiao's 唯粉 *wei fen* (a fandom neologism with a literal meaning of 'only fan') who merely dote on Xiao yet abominate the behaviour of 'shipping', etc. It is notable that the reporting against *Xiazhui* and the blockage of AO3 also trigger divergent opinions and reactions within Xiao's fan community, including acts of 脱粉回踩 *tuofen huicai* 'stopping idolising and becoming anti-fans' and 脱粉不回踩 *tuofen bu huicai* 'just stopping idolising' as well as adamant support, the disparity of which might be correlated with different fan identities.

RPF is a subgenre of fanfic dramatising actual well-known public figures rather than fictional characters, so it is highly controversial within and outside fan communities (Larsen & Zubernis, 2012; Thomas, 2014; Popova, 2017; Fathallah, 2018). There is an ongoing debate regarding whether to chastise RPF for overtly objectifying public figures and unethically denying their personhood or to regard it as an extension of fannish conduct of textually poaching popular culture (McGee, 2005, p. 177).

In the Chinese context, RPF fans have formulated their own rules and proposed a canonical mantra 圈地自萌, 勿扰正主 *quan di zi meng, wu rao zheng zhu* 'keep fantasies within the circle; do not disturb real idols' (Trans. Mine). Through refraining from spreading RPF to the public and explicitly labelling it as fantasy, RPF fans limit the highly controversial RPF within its fan community, and emphasise the boundary between real celebrities and fictional characters; meanwhile, such a canon functions as protection for fans from disapprobation of impropriety and being deemed pathologically obsessive (N. Zhang, 2020).

There is no denying the fact that the author of *Xiazhui* has failed to 'keep fantasies within the circle', because apart from publishing her narrative on Lofter and AO3, she has posted the novel's link on Weibo. Given the fact that Weibo is a public platform (Han, 2019, 2020), promoting fanfic on Weibo may overly expose it in front of netizens across a wide social spectrum outside fandom. I suggest that advertising RPS content via a standard post is different from posting links of fiction on 'super topic' pages, in that dedicated space can only be accessible through intentional searches, yet the former may reach (non-)fan users against RPS in the processes of posting and reposting.

Since the era of socio-economic reform and opening up in the late 1970s, overseas media and cultural products have been imported into Mainland China (Zhao, 2017), including the Japanese BL subculture that first entered China's comic market in the mid-1990s. The Chinese version of the

terminology slash/BL is 耽美 *danmei* that literally means ‘addicted to beauty; indulgence in beauty’, with ‘beauty’ exclusively limited to that of young males (L. Yang & Xu, 2016, 2017, 2018; C. Y. Wang, 2019). Since entering China as a Japanese cultural export, *danmei* has attracted a prodigious amount of fangirls, yet it is still a marginalised subculture in China. Simultaneously, the increasing popularity and visibility of *danmei* place it under official surveillance, yet unfortunately, China is currently not the most lenient country in terms of homosexuality.

Same-sex sexual intercourse between men has existed in China since the imperial era, and it was comprehensively tolerated and embraced. Same-sex intimacy and desire were regarded as well-established social relationships and depicted in a variety of media such as classical literature and folk tales (Lau & Ng, 1989; Hinsch, 1990; van Gulik, 2003; Song, 2004; C. Wu, 2004).

Nevertheless, since the emergence of sexual conservatism in the Qing (1644-1912) dynasty, especially since the Chinese Communist Party has been in power, homosexuality is perceived to be correlated with interpersonal and moral issues and deviate from Confucianism and the (post-)socialist ideology of China for challenging the patriarchal heterosexual family (Sang, 2003, p. 46; Yeh & Bedford, 2003; C. Y. Wang, 2019). The Communist Revolution ‘brought a moralizing denunciation of homosexuality as perverse that was only ambiguously and contradictorily written into the criminal codes and medical diagnosis manuals’ (Kang, 2012, p. 231). In the Criminal Law of the PRC in 1979, homosexuality was tagged with ‘crime of hooliganism’, and the ‘crime’ of hooliganism enacted against homosexual men during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) was also re-enacted during the opening-up period (1978-1985) (Worth et al., 2017, 2019). Although in 2011, the diagnosis of homosexuality was officially removed from Chinese Classification of Mental Disorders, a diagnosis resembling ego-dystonic homosexuality was still retained (J. Wu, 2003). Furthermore, there are still circumstances under which homosexuality is unjustifiably treated by authorities. For instance, in 2016, a lesbian woman sued the Ministry of Education of PRC over textbooks that classified homosexuality as a ‘psychological disorder’ (Independent, 2016).

Apart from official surveillance, ordinary people also tend to regard homosexuality as deviance from social norms (Kang, 2012). According to data from the Chinese General Social Surveys 2013, most Chinese people held conservative attitudes towards homosexuality, in that approximately 78.53% of the respondents deemed same-sex sexual intercourse as wrong (Xie & Peng, 2018). In 2017, for example, Chinese parents were outraged at sex education books ‘preaching that homosexuality is normal, and that people should respect different sexual orientations’ (Whitelocks, 2017). Therefore, in contemporary China, people are expected to act straight, and homosexual people sometimes have to establish pretended heterosexual matrimonial relationships (Bennett, 2014). There is no denying the fact that there is recent prevalence of homosexually-themed discourse among straight-identified Chinese youth in describing intimate relationships among heterosexual men. Nevertheless, this phenomenon does not necessarily demonstrate social acceptance of homosexuality in China, as the discourse expands heteromale behaviours and reiterates heteromale identities. To be more specific, as a mechanism of ‘ironic heterosexual recuperation’, such discourse is initiated as a defensive response to (homo)sexual teasing, so as to resolve heterosexual men’s anxieties against the background of growing public awareness of homosexuality (W. Wei, 2017).

Owing to surveillance of the party-state and opposition from (some) ordinary audiences, homosexuality-themed discourse and media representation are social taboos, and supposedly offensive content must be expurgated from officially approved versions of the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (Ng, 2015; McLelland, 2015b; Zhao et al., 2017). Given its correlation with homosexuality, *danmei* literature is subjected to moral scrutiny and falls prey to state censorship in China (Xu & Yang, 2013; C. Y. Zhang, 2017; Hernández & Zhang, 2018; C. Y. Wang, 2019). Mainland Chinese media was initially supportive of the BL subculture, yet accompanied by BL’s increasing popularity, the media started to focus on its supposedly abhorrent impact on young fans (Jacobs, 2012, p. 160). Moreover, since BL literature is theoretically unprofitable, there is lack of commercial power and representation to enforce its legitimacy (Zheng, 2019).

In China, both textual and visual representations of *danmei* are strictly controlled. A typical gay-themed visual work is a phenomenal *danmei* serial titled 上瘾 *Shangyin* ‘Addicted’, which received

positive reviews from home and abroad yet was removed from all streaming websites by the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television in 2016. The reason lies in that *Shangyin* 'exaggerates the dark side of society', whereas the Chinese party-state has been exerting a hegemonic intervention on public media discourse by means of appropriating and promoting 'positive energy' of propagandist meanings (P. Yang & Tang, 2018). According to China's cultural crackdown on 'vulgar, immoral and unhealthy content', 'no television drama shall show abnormal sexual relationships and behaviours, such as incest, same-sex relationships, sexual perversion, sexual assault, sexual abuse, sexual violence and so on' (Ellis-Petersen, 2016).

Analogously, textual *danmei* is also stringently regulated, so the majority of *danmei* narratives can only be published online. As a pioneering and leading women's literature website hosting *danmei* fiction, Jinjiang Literature City (www.jjwxc.net), known as Jinjiang, is illustrious for its gigantic readership and commercial success (Yin, 2005; Feng, 2009; Xu & Yang, 2013): it has accommodated more than 5.07 million narratives and 55.8 million registered users by July 2022 (Jinjiang Literature City, 2022). Nonetheless, Jinjiang has been a target of official censorship, in that it is inextricably intertwined with homosexuality and supposed pornography. Since 2014, Jinjiang has been censored and fined for several times: in 2019, for example, Jinjiang was rectified twice within two months and was requested to eradicate pornographic publications, cease business operations and display notifications of corrective actions on the homepage (Nanyang Siang Pau, 2019). Analogous to the publication platform, *danmei* practitioners are also under state surveillance, so they write and publish under pseudonyms for self-protection (Xu & Yang, 2013). Nonetheless, *danmei* writers can still be subjected to anti-pornography campaigns and penalties if their works are found to be related to homoeroticism. For instance, in 2011, over ten writers of a commercial *danmei* website were arrested under the charge of disseminating obscene contents (Shen & Li, 2011); in 2015, a pseudonymous author 'Big Grey Wolf with Wings' was sentenced for imprisonment of three years and half (Peng, 2015); in 2019, eight *danmei* writers and practitioners were involved in illegal business crimes, and a writer was sentenced for four-year imprisonment (R. Yang, 2019; R. Yang & Teng, 2019). Among these cases, the most contentious one was that a *danmei* writer was sentenced to ten years' imprisonment in 2018 for self-publishing a homoerotic book which 'obscenely and in detail described gay male-male acts' (BBC News, 2018; Flood, 2018; Shepherd, 2018).

RPF 'consists of sexual fantasies involving public figures' (Byrne & Fleming, 2018, p. 704), and the vast majority of RPF entails sexual content (Thomas, 2014). In terms of slash, it serves as a radical challenge to the convention of presenting female bodies with negative, patriarchal and heterosexist connotations, and explores female sexuality and subjectivity on the relatively unmarked male bodies (Willis, 2016). BL has been perceived as feminist-utopian pornographic fantasy, in that it is characterised by explicit portrayals of sexual encounters and erotic spectacles (Suzuki, 1998; McLelland, 2015a, 2015b; Otomo, 2015). BL narratives often depict male-male sexual intercourse 'with exaggerated SM plot or other well-designed sexual content' (W. Wei, 2008, pp. 12) or sexual scenes void of well-developed storylines (J. Wei, 2014). Similarly, slash fanfic is analysed as noncommercial pornography produced specifically by and for women (Russ, 1985). In some slash fanfic works, authors indulge in depictions of male beauty as erotic objects, and 'the passive, acted-upon glories of male flesh' (Russ, 1985, p. 90) is an eroticisation of a kind of male beauty (Tian, 2015). Therefore, it is not unexpected for some RPS works to be perceived as being related to pornography.

Pornography is defined as a genre marked by lack of narrative skills in content and frequently by low technical standards. Viewers of online pornography, for instance, are not motivated by storytelling or narrative cinema, but a novel way of sensing media with scattered images and bodily arousal based on personalised rhythms (Paasonen, 2011, p. 186; Jacobs, 2015, p. 13). The concept of pornography, along with its opposite concept of *eros*, exhibit dichotomies of rape and love, humiliation and reverence, subordination and partnership, as well as suffering and enjoyment (Funabashi, 1995, pp. 251-252), in that pornography is often correlated with degradingness (Dines et al., 1998) and violence against women (MacKinnon, 1993; Russell, 1993, 1998). Being explicitly goal-oriented with a low cultural status, pornography is compatible with transactional or neoliberal culture, because the vast majority of pornography places the focus on pursuing consumers' orgasm, rather than extraneous material such as plot and characterisation. In terms of fan pornography,

some erotic fan narratives may potentially demonstrate pervasive neoliberal imagination, in that it may appropriate bodies, identities and histories of fictional characters and real celebrities without considering ethics, morality or intellectual property (Byrne & Fleming, 2018). RPF with sexual fantasies, therefore, ‘raises moral, ethical, and philosophical questions about culture under neoliberalism’ (Byrne & Fleming, 2018, p. 704).

In China, potentially pornographic contents are examined and classified by ‘Chief Pornography Identification Officers’, who are hired by a centralised administrative agency, viz. the National Office against Pornographic and Illegal Publications. These government posts have attracted legions of opportunistic applicants, yet the chosen officers and anti-pornography advocates are prone to antagonism (Roney, 2013; Schiavenza, 2013). Netizens disseminate versions of the simplistic entrance examinations for this post and ridicule the bureaucratic and simplistic mindset of screening questions (Jacobs, 2015, p. 4). In stark contrast to most netizens, Chinese parents urge the government to broaden and tighten controls, thereby protecting their children from obscenity on the Internet (Blanchard, 2009).

In China, there has been a series of anti-pornography campaigns launched by the government (Jacobs, 2012, p. 32). For instance, a 2014 crackdown on pornographic content on the Internet was announced by the National Office against Pornographic and Illegal Publications, in collaboration with other government departments and aiming to eradicate all online pornographic texts, images, videos and advertisements and to rectify websites involved in production or dissemination of pornographic information (Ji & Long, 2014; Ning, 2014). For instance, one of the latest crackdowns on pornography is the dedicated eight-month ‘clear and bright’ action launched by the Cyberspace Administration of China on 22nd May 2020, with a mission to establish a healthy Internet space and a clean social environment in China (Cyberspace Administration of China, 2020; Qin, 2020).

It is worth mentioning that the official censorship targeting pornography and that concerning homosexuality might be intertwined, exemplified by the eradication of over 56,000 posts with homosexual and/or obscene implications from Weibo in 2018 (Dalton, 2018; Huang, 2018). The notion that homosexuality is linked to obscenity and vulgarity functions as a protocol for today’s state censorship and nation-wide surveillance of cultural industries (A. Wang, 2020).

To circumvent the authority’s censorship and potential violation of criminal law, some *danmei* writers have imposed self-censorship and rendered their writing less erotic (J. Wei, 2014). Similarly, in order to circumvent state censorship on eroticism (and homosexuality), Jinjiang has also taken a series of actions. For example, a coined euphemistic tag 纯爱 *chunai* ‘pure love’ has been employed to substitute the explicit terminology *danmei* (Zheng, 2019). More significantly, as proactive reactions to government policies, in 2014 Jinjiang issued a ‘stricter-than-government’ self-censorship rule proscribing ‘any depiction of body parts below the neck’ in its published fiction. To ensure that obscene content is removed from approved versions of *danmei* writings, Jinjiang introduced a multiple-round manual checking system (Guancha, 2014; Southern Weekend, 2014; L. Yang & Xu 2018, p. 174; Zheng, 2019) and deploy automatic detection that blocks a long and ever-increasing list of sensitive expressions.

There is no denying the fact that Jinjiang’s self-censorship of ‘no depiction below the neck’ indeed makes a considerable difference. There used to be a myriad of so-called ‘abuse’ *danmei* narratives such as 不能动 *Buneng Dong* and 活着就是恶心 *Huozhe Jiushi Exin*, which abound in forbidden themes and non-normative sexualities, exemplified by rape, incest, sadomasochism, underage sex, etc. Since the censorship and self-censorship, those ‘abuse’ novels have been deleted and newly published novels no longer contain graphic description of sexual intercourse or controversial themes. In order to pass Jinjiang’s censoring process, writers either avoid producing potentially transgressive content altogether, or publish main text on Jinjiang yet post sexual depictions on AO3 and Lofter for readers without charge (which, of course, is no longer possible due to the blockage of AO3 and ‘rectification’ of Lofter). Vocal writers choose to satirically decry Jinjiang (Example (3)) or teasingly substitute obscene expressions with those pertaining to ideology and politics (Example (4)) (see my previous discussion in (S. Wang, 2020) for more details). Example (4) contains a Chinese ideal of 和 *he* ‘harmony’ that is related to the state doctrine of Socialist Harmonious Society (社会主义和谐社会 *shehuizhuyi hexie shehui*) and serves as a normative

complex prescribing social virtues, morality and ethics (Fan, 2011; X. Wang et al., 2016). In this example, the 'inharmonious activity' euphemistically denotes sexual intercourse, the expression of which would be detected and forbidden by Jinjiang for depicting 'body parts below the neck' and thus violating the state doctrine of Socialist Harmonious Society.

(3) 仅仅是一个吻, 什么脖子以下的事都没做, 谨守绿晋江社会主义核心价值观。

It was just a kiss and nothing below the neck happened—it strictly observed the core socialist values of the 'green' Jinjiang. (小行星 *Xiao Xingxing*; Chapter 47. Trans. Mine)

(4) 当晚, 一夜春风, 差点做不和谐运动的最后一步...季朗默念了三遍“和谐和谐和谐”然后忍住了。

There was spring wind during the night, which almost pushed them to the last step of an inharmonious activity...Ji Lang repeated 'harmony' for three times in mind and refrained himself. (辣鸡室友总撩我 *Laji Shiyou Zong Liao Wo*; Chapter 74. Trans. Mine)

Nonetheless, there is an issue concerning the correlation between censorship and creative freedom. Censorship has been existing in the Chinese society throughout different historical stages and in various types of restriction and control, and the discussion of censorship as a contemporary practice is complicated by a range of factors, including freedom of expression. In the case of *danmei* writing on Jinjiang, by virtue of the platform's 'stricter-than-government' self-censorship and harsh censoring procedure, writers are deprived of creative freedom to some extent. *Danmei* writers must be punctilious in plots and depictions, so that their works can be released, whereas even published works are faced with the danger of being locked retrospectively, triggered by policy shifts (Jinjiang, 2021). Being impinged upon by the stringent policies, some contracted writers with Jinjiang express frustration, irritation and/or sarcasm in their works (Example (5)), in that having novels being locked by Jinjiang not only imperils their creative freedom, but also jeopardises their income and profile.

(5) 康万里眨眨眼睛, 脸色蹿红, 在最后一刻挡住了花铭贴近。“不行!” 花铭挑眉:“为什么?” 康万里道:“像你那种亲法, 亲了是要被锁文的, 二十四小时都解不开!”

Kang Wanli winked and flushed, but he stopped Hua Ming from getting closer. 'No!' Hua Ming raised one eyebrow: 'Why not?' Kang Wanli said: 'If you kiss me, this novel will be locked, for at least twenty-four hours!' (重度迷恋 *Zhongdu Milian*; Chapter 76. Trans. Mine)

Since *Xiaozhui* pertains to Xiao's fanbase, the RPS issue is interconnected with toxic fandom and the so-called 'heresy-style star worship'.

Derived as the outcomes of fan cultures, toxic fan practices are correlated with performances of fannish identity due to indeterminacy and fan boundaries and borders. Affective attachment of fans to their idols, along with toxicity, might be attributed to their self-narratives and trajectories of the self (Proctor, 2017, 2018; Hills, 2018; Proctor & Kies, 2018). Toxic fan practices are by no means scarce in Chinese fandom, as fan quarrels, conflicts and trolling are abundant on social media platforms. As mentioned previously, the aftermath of the 227 Incident includes moral and legal issues such as cyber manhunt and online harassment and abuse. Confrontations between Xiao's fans and non-fan netizens who become averse to Xiao and his fanbase and boycott relevant products/shows might fall into the domain of toxic fandom.

Another paradigm of the toxic practices of Xiao's fanbase is their 'heresy-style star worship'. This neologism is coined by Chinese netizens to decry the conduct and mentality of excessively passionate fans, including worshipping their idol in a zealous religious mode, spending beyond their means as 'atonement', brainwashing underage co-fans, manipulating public opinion on social media, besmirching the reputation of administrative agencies, mainstream media, other celebrities and anti-/non-fans, etc.

To glorify and worship their idol, Xiao's fans refer to his superiority as 苏神泽世 *su shen ze shi* 'god of charisma illuminates the world'; moreover, Xiao's admirers refer to themselves as his 追星狗 *zhui xing gou* 'star-chasing dog' and 颜狗 *yan gou* 'looks dog' so as to emphasise their inferior position in the fandom hierarchy and the nobility of their idol. To compensate Xiao's economic loss

and tarnished reputation after the 227 Incident, devoted fans support their idol financially: Xiao's digital single reached over 33 million purchased downloads, earning more than 112 million RMB in total sales within days since its release, because Xiao's fans bought an average of approximately 66 repeated copies per head (Global Times, 2020; He, 2020; Li Xueli, 2020; Mahyuni, 2020; Economist, 2020). Parallel to other stars' fanbases, Xiao's fans might also include the so-called 'data fans' who volunteer their time and energy and deploy data-generation software and/or sockpuppetry to boost his social media traffic, profile and rankings, so as to make him more commercially attractive to investors and producers (Ju, 2019a, 2019b; Negus, 2019; Shan, 2019; Q. Zhang & Negus, 2020).

Returning to *Xiazhui*, I posit that driven by the 'heresy-style star worship', Xiao's fans reported *Xiazhui*, not only due to its genre as RPS, but also the fact that it 'smears his image' by portraying a character named after Xiao as a prostitute. Another contentious aspect of *Xiazhui*, according to Xiao's fans, lies in its homoeroticism: *Xiazhui* contains explicit depictions of male-male (non-anal) sexual encounters, such as masturbation and fellatio in Chapter 6. There is no denying the fact that in contemporary China, conservative heterosexual-patriarchal social norms and values still prevail, which is reflected by not only authorities, but also ordinary folk. Therefore, it is possible that fans' reporting against *Xiazhui* and its platform became an excuse for the government's crackdown of online homosexuality/obscenity and AO3, taking into account the 'clear and bright' anti-pornography campaign launched three months after the 227 Incident.

It is worth mentioning that cross-dressing involved in *Xiazhui* may also contribute to the chastisement it receives. As shown in Example (6), the effeminate-looking protagonist named after Xiao is clad in women's clothes.

(6) 她生得一张巴掌脸,五官却都大,所以显得有几分艳和媚...穿包身裙,堪堪遮住屁股的长度,她臀部浑圆挺翘,因此裙子显得更短些。

She had a small face and fine features, which made her somehow tender and enchanting...She was in a tight short skirt that fully exposed her figure and bare thighs; her firm and round buttocks made the skirt even shorter. (下坠 *Xiazhui*; Chapter 1. Trans. Mine)

In fandom, there is a special phenomenon of feminising youthful, handsome male stars, which is referred to as 泥塑 *nisu* 'clay sculpture', the homophone of 逆苏 *nisu* that literally means 'to reverse charm' or 'reversed Mary Sue'. Some fangirls imagine a 'reverse' world in which they are dominant males, whereas their male idols become delicate-featured females who are typically their imaginary girlfriends or wives. The objects of the *nisu* act are usually young, epicene male idols collectively labelled as 小鲜肉 *xiao xian rou* 'little fresh meat', who embody a new type of male aesthetics, viz. 'soft masculinity', as well as a novel trend of 'consumption of sexualised men' via the female gaze (Louie, 2012; Hu, 2017; Y. Wang, 2017; Zhou, 2017; Li Xiaomeng, 2020). Unsurprisingly, Xiao has *nisu* fans who have established a Weibo 'super topic' called 留守肥宅救助中心 *liushou feizhai jiu zhu zhongxin*, with approximately 266 million visits and 38,000 followers by September 2022.

Moreover, currently in China, a phenomenon of 伪娘 *weiniang* 'fake girl' is becoming increasingly visible on the Internet and in mass media, which denotes performing femininity on biologically male bodies, or more specifically, male cosplayers cross-dressing as female ACG characters of feminine physical traits. As a growing phenomenon with popularity and media exposure, *weiniang* has been accepted by some young people, which indicates increased tolerance towards cross-dressing and cross-gender performances in China (Chao, 2017).

Nevertheless, *weiniang* is still unacceptable to certain social groups, and it is thus discouraged, if not prohibited, by China's heteropatriarchal normative gender system (Chao, 2017). Similarly, the *nisu* act is not universally accepted, and not all Xiao's fans are *nisu* fans, in that the number of followers on Xiao's 'super topic' page is approximately 11.03 million in September 2022, whereas the number concerning his dedicated *nisu* 'super topic' is merely 38,000. That is to say, Xiao's fans who do not approve of *nisu* account for a majority of his entire fanbase. Therefore, given the fact that in *Xiazhui* the character named after Xiao is depicted as a feminine cross-dresser, which appertains to *weiniang* and *nisu*, it may have caused some fans' dissatisfaction and hence reporting.

I argue that although fans who have reported *Xiazhui* might not accept the act of *nisu* or the phenomenon of *weiniang*, the author of *Xiazhui* should not be castigated, because the author has tagged the novel with expressions 女装大佬 *nǚzhuang dalao* 'cross-dressed man' and 发廊妹 *falang mei* 'hairstylist girl' (a euphemism for 'brothel girl', i.e. prostitute), as shown in the image in (1). According to AO3, as long as authors have tagged their works, the liability falls on readers (Example (7)). Therefore, fans' censure of *Xiazhui* by virtue of cross-dressing is not justifiable.

(7) It's an author's responsibility to tag and rate and warn their fics appropriately. It's a reader's responsibility to read those tags and ratings and warnings and decide whether or not they want to read the fic. Anyone who isn't willing to do their part probably shouldn't be using the service. (Archive of Our Own. 3rd July 2019)

Finally, *Xiazhui* pertains to celebrities' fan management in terms of fulfilling their social responsibilities and guiding fans towards moral conduct. Currently, social media enables two-way communication between fans and idols: fans can control fellow fans and celebrities, while celebrities can also police fans (Marwick & Boyd, 2011; Jones, 2018). In Chinese fandom, there is a newly-coined motto, viz. 粉丝行为偶像买单 *fensi xingwei ouxiang maidan* 'idols are liable for fans' conduct', which manifests social expectations for celebrities' fan management. Previous fandom-related incidents indicate that detrimental aftermath would not be generated if celebrities could show a gesture of fan management and responsibility in time; moreover, celebrities would receive acclaim for positive fan management actions, such as preventing fans from trolling and overhyping (Fèi Jiě Tā Dà'yí, 2020) and discouraging fans' crowdfunding and data-generating (Mòhai Xún Lóng, 2020). The unexpected destructive power of *Xiazhui* that triggers the 227 Incident and aftereffects is partially attributed to Xiao's lack of fan management, rendering him to be defined as an 'unqualified idol' who 'ignores his own social responsibility' by *Procuratorate Daily* (Y. Wu, 2020), the newspaper issued by the Supreme People's Procuratorate of China. Over two months after the outbreak of the 227 Incident, Xiao was asked in an interview whether idols were supposed to manage fans, and he disagreed by emphasising that idols and fans were equal (N. Zhang, 2020). Although during the interview Xiao expressed that '[s]ome time ago, some disputes related to me occurred, and this dispute happened during the key period of the COVID-19 pandemic, and I feel very sorry', some AO3 fans refused to accept his words as an apology (Gong, 2020).

CONCLUSION

In this paper I investigate causes of AO3's blockage in Mainland China. As a controversial narrative that causes AO3 to be reported and thus blocked in China, *Xiazhui* needs to be analysed in three aspects. First, *Xiazhui* is a piece of RPF featuring the imagined homoerotic relationship between two actors, yet fannish textual processes of adapting real public figures to fictional characters entail moral issues. Although in Chinese fandom, RPF fans have formulated the rule of 'keeping fantasies within the circle', *Xiazhui's* author has failed to comply with the rule and hence attracted public attention and dissatisfaction. Second, the genre of *Xiazhui* is *danmei*, so this fanfic falls into the category of RPS. Impinged upon by Confucianism and the (post-)socialist ideology endorsing the patriarchal heterosexual family, conservative social values and norms prevail in contemporary China, so there are circumstances under which homosexuality is unfairly treated and biased by the government and ordinary people. As a marginalised subculture, both visual and textual *danmei* works are subjected to moral scrutiny and state censorship. Third, *Xiazhui* contains explicit sexual depictions and hence transgresses the government's regulations and laws. As a consequence of anti-pornography campaigns launched by the party-state, obscene content has been eradicated from websites represented by *Jinjiang*. Fans' reporting against *Xiazhui* and its platform might have been used as an excuse for the government's crackdown of online obscenity and AO3. Additionally, Xiao's fans have been demonstrating a tendency of 'heresy-style star worship' and toxic fandom: they would report to authorities if a work concerning their idol was deemed to besmirch their idol's image. Due to these reasons, *Xiazhui*, along with AO3 that hosts it, have been censored in China.

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