

# THE XIAO ZHAN CONTROVERSY AND THE CASE OF MISPLACED FAN ACTIVISM

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## Abstract

In January 2020, a Chinese slash (male homoerotic) fanfiction named *Falling* by the fan-author 迪迪出逃记 started its serialization in the popular transformative work sharing site named *AO3 (Archive of Our Own)*. The fanfiction starred fictionalized versions of real-life TV celebrities Xiao Zhan and Wang Yibo (the former in a titillating role of a transgender sex-worker), depicting a speculative homoerotic romance between them. The subsequent fanfictions and the fanarts spawned by this theme were created to pay tribute to their on-screen chemistry in the wildly popular xianxia-dangai drama *The Untamed* which was streamed on *Tencent Video* in 2019. While the trope of yaoi/danmei/slash is well-worn in the BL fan community, what set this incident apart was how fans pinned their love for their idol, Xiao Zhan, on two opposing kinds of misplaced activism. The first kind blamed the incident on the fan artists, resulting in the official block of *AO3* in China on 29 February 2020. The second blamed the hapless actor, who had nothing to do with the situation, that he should assume responsibility for the actions of his fans, leading protests to impose bans on his brand deals and boycotting several of the brands he endorsed. This article tries to look at the fiasco in the light of several dynamics,

ranging from the problematics inherent in RPF, the practice of writing fanfiction based on real persons (mostly celebrities), and the consumer culture of China that treats young male actors as “little fresh meat,” the existing popular culture of dangai/danmei (Chinese counterpart of Yaoi/Boys Love culture) fandom in China, the present day government outlook towards homosexuality and homoeroticism, and the frequent government clampdown in the name of purging obscenity and how it influences some fans, and how misplaced fan activism can jeopardize the professional lives of actors. To this end, I plan to use, the psychological theoretical framework of idol worship and its effects on the psyche of the fans involved, as well as esteemed sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of cultural theory, namely taste (for and against supposed homoerotic obscenity) distinction (what sets these opposing groups of fans apart), and habitus (what sort of community each of the warring groups of fans inhabit).

Keywords: Xiao Zhan, fan activism, slash, fanfiction, RPS, *Archive of Our Own*

## Introduction

This paper takes a closer look at the “Boycott against Xiao Zhan Incident,” known popularly as the “227 Incident,” as an example of misguided fan activism,

which if left unchecked, can easily ruin the life and the career of the person/celebrity the fans and anti-fans are based upon. It is worth noting, however, that due to the nature of internet repression, state intervention, and rumour-mongering that is common practice in the Chinese internet media, it is hard to tell whether the blame should completely lie with fans. In an alternative retelling of the incident, Vox journalist Aja Romano finds that the fans of Xiao Zhan have denied responsibility, and the ban on fan web spaces like *Archive of Our Own* (hereafter referred to as *AO3*), as well as explicit content removal from streaming site *Bilibili* and banning fanwork hosting site named *LOFTER*, may be orchestrated by the government's larger crackdown on internet freedom.<sup>1</sup> This particular incident occurring on *AO3* might just have coincidentally fallen on the path of the juggernaut of government diktat, propelling censorship that would anyway have happened.

### What Is the “227 Incident”?

Reports originating in China suggest that the “227 Incident” occurred in February 2020, as an online controversy sparked a heated online conflict between the fans of Chinese actor Xiao Zhan and fans using the *Archive of Our Own* to host their works/discussion of fandom, in Mainland China, embroiling the star himself, as well as his celebrity friends and those who supported him on the social media platform *Weibo*.<sup>2</sup> The incident began when the

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<sup>1</sup> Romano 2020.

<sup>2</sup> “观察 | 肖战事件及二次元的‘升维打击’\_文化课\_澎湃新闻 - The Paper” 2020.

internet censorship group *Great Firewall of China* blocked user access to the fan-work publishing platform *Archive of Our Own* in the country, due to the reports to the government made by the actor's fans regarding the vulgar and sexually explicit fan content about him that was hosted by the site.<sup>3</sup> This controversy led to larger events of cyberviolence and boycotting against Xiao Zhan, his fans, products endorsed by him, luxury brands employing him as an ambassador, as well as other Chinese celebrities who expressed concern for Xiao.<sup>4</sup>

### How Did It All Begin?

On 30 January 2020, an *AO3* user named “迪迪出逃记” (*Dí dí chūtáo jì* or Little Brother's Escape) began the serialization of a novel-sized fanfiction titled *Falling* (下坠), which focuses on the imagined romance between Xiao Zhan and his fellow Chinese actor Wang Yibo. The two idols-turned-actors starred as the leads in the popular xianxia-dangai drama *The Untamed* in 2019, based on the danmei (Boys' Love) web novel *Mo Dao Zu Shi*, which was published in Jinjiang by the pseudonymous author Mo Xiang Tong Xiu, who herself has faced incarceration from the government due to the explicit and queer content of her works.<sup>5</sup> The chemistry shared by the actors

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<sup>3</sup> Romano 2020.

<sup>4</sup> “粉丝恶意指报致平台被禁

肖战代言遭大批网友抵制|博君|cp粉|王一博\_网易娱乐” 2020.

<sup>5</sup> “同人小说平台ao3被举报·

肖战深陷抵制风波\_凤凰网娱乐\_凤凰网” 2020.

on-screen influenced the series' local and international popularity and eventually led to a large fanbase who shipped (supported the romantic relationship of) the two as a real-life couple in imagined scenarios, spawning a multitude of fanworks on the internet, including fanfiction and fanart, some of them sexually explicit. On 24 February 2020, links to chapters 12 and 13 of the said fan novel were posted by the fan author on the Chinese social networking site *Weibo*.<sup>6</sup> On 26 February 2020, some of Xiao's fans claimed that the fanwork contained explicit pornographic content and feminization of Xiao, as sketched by users “一只汐哥哥” (Yī zhǐ xī gēgē or One Brother Xi) and “一个执白” (Yīgè zhí bái or A White Executive).<sup>7</sup> The fanworks depicted Xiao Zhan as a female-impersonator teenage sex-worker working in a salon and falling in love with Wang Yibo, who was presented as a teenage student visiting the same shop. Many fans took the homoerotic works to be insulting to their favoured actor, “tarnishing Xiao's image,” thereafter denouncing the fanworks on *Weibo* as well as criticizing the fan artists involved. Users “来碗甜粥吗” (Lái wǎn tián zhōu ma or Would you like a bowl of sweet porridge) and “巴南区小兔赞比”, (Bā nán qū xiǎo tù zàn bǐ or Little Rabbit Zambì of Banan District, hereafter referred to as Zambì) were considered to be the “opinion leaders” among Xiao Zhan's fanbase. They are known to be the leaders of the backlash,

who reported the supposedly “vulgar” incident against the fan-author and the fan-artists to the government. In a *Weibo* post dated 26 February, Zambì commented that the actors and their fans need not accept vulgar literature depicting underage prostitution that is based upon artists and that such behaviour does not only infringe upon the reputation of the artist but also pollutes the online environment, bringing down large numbers of underaged fans lacking judgement.<sup>8</sup> The fans then decided to report these fictional contents to the Chinese authorities as “underage pornography,” hoping they would get censored. On 29 February 2020, the Chinese fan fiction site *LOFTER* and the international open-source platform *AO3* were officially blocked in Mainland China by the Chinese cyberspace police.<sup>9</sup>

### What Is the Significance of the Ban?

Seeing that *AO3* used to be the go-to destination for China's ACGN (Animation, Comic, Game and Novel) subculture fans, having an estimated size of around 300 million readers by the end of 2016, it is reasonable that this move was met with widespread anger and protest from the fans, as well as others whose feelings of victimhood due to the repressive state regime in China resonated with them. The protest became increasingly symbolic, uniting many, whether active users of the banned platforms or otherwise, who felt this action to be an infringement of free speech

<sup>6</sup> Wikipedia, s.v. “Boycott against Xiao Zhan Incident.”

<sup>7</sup> “AI财经社” n.d.

<sup>8</sup> “‘反肖战’背后：变成‘上帝’的粉丝·被捆绑的资本游戏\_偶像” 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Romano 2020.

on the internet. The site also held particular importance for the LGBTQ+ communities of China, who despite the legalization of homosexuality in 1997 are considered to be fringe elements in need of repression so that they cannot influence the wider public to follow their path. *AO3* was also a sanctuary for many kinds of alternative publishing that would have otherwise been censored by the increasingly restrictive media environment, bolstered by the actions of the Chinese Communist Party which seeks to guide the public taste and culture in a way that they see fit.

### Responses to the Ban

As expected, the said bans caused a massive uproar among the users of *AO3*, whose criticisms were spurred on by the controversial and repressive behaviour of some of Xiao's fans, and they claimed that the actor should share the responsibility for the actions brought about by his fans.<sup>10</sup> A section of *AO3* users called for boycotts of Xiao's brand deals and the products endorsed by him, flooding brand pages with negative comments and hashtags, so much so that the brands' massive engagement with the public became mostly negative.<sup>11</sup> Fearing the drop in sales, some brands, like Olay and Crest, removed product promotions featuring Xiao completely from their websites, although no company terminated their contract with Xiao.<sup>12</sup> This action was in sharp contrast to the sales figures seen in the 11.11 shopping fest of

2019 when Estée Lauder sold out US\$1.22 million (8.52 million yuan) worth of Xiao Zhan-themed products on its Tmall store in a mere hour.<sup>13</sup> Increasingly, in a dire example of misplaced fan activism, the object of the fandom (the star) was conflated with the subject of the fandom (the star's fans), and therefore identifying him with both the reporting and the subsequent ban, as well as holding him responsible, through no fault of his own. To make the matters worse for the idol, the event coincided with his grandfather's passing. During this period it appeared to be as though Xiao's career was about to be over. According to a report by Solarina Ho, "...dramas that he had filmed were being shelved, pre-recorded appearances in variety shows were being edited out, endorsements were dropped like hot potatoes. He — and even his family — were being viciously attacked online over a situation he did not start and had no genuine control over. He was also made the scapegoat for an incalculable loss within the online community."<sup>14</sup>

Soon after, a *Weibo* supertopic group titled "227 (February 27) Memorial Day" was formed by such fan-users, in a backlash against the *AO3* ban brought about by the reporting Xiao's conservative fans on 27 February. As we can see, fan activism from two different sides brought about this conflict. One of these two groups is the "conservative" fandom of Xiao Zhan (known as *duwei* or poison fans) who did not take kindly to pornographic imaginings featuring their idol, (for that matter, they want their idols to be single and pristine, as

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<sup>10</sup> Jiang 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Luo 2020.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

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<sup>13</sup> Zheng 2019.

<sup>14</sup> Ho "Reflections, Part I" 2021.

a Chinese fan in an NPR podcast notes). The other group consisted of the more “liberal” fans who supported the freedom of expression on *AO3*, (even some people who did not use *AO3* themselves) but their misplaced activism led them to hold the idol himself as guilty as the fans that carried out the ban on *AO3* in his name.<sup>15</sup> But as is clear, Xiao himself had nothing to do with all this controversy. A young star new to fame, he kept silent for almost four months regarding the incidents and had to face continuous cyberbullying by fans who turned anti (some of them initially followed works based on him on *AO3*), which could have cost him his career. Pulled into a tug-of-war between two competing fan universes, each with its personal view of fandom and freedom of online expression, Xiao was a victim of a very public battle that was fought over very private fantasies and outlooks.

Like a fan to the flames, Xiao’s silence led to increased cyberviolence against him, of his fans who had nothing to do with the incident, as well as people remotely connected to Xiao’s work. An example of such bullying was Chinese variety show host He Jiong, who was attacked by the now anti-fan group following a rumour that Xiao would appear in an episode of his show. Later investigation showed that some accounts that had led to online attacks and harassment against the actor belonged to paid “professional” anti-fans.<sup>16</sup>

While the cyberwar raged initially against the unreasonable Xiao fans who

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<sup>15</sup> Warner and Feng 2020.

<sup>16</sup> “检察日报--营造良好网络生态·平台亟须强化自净” 2020.

were party to government restrictions on internet freedom, it eventually snowballed into a vicious boycott of the brands the idol campaigned for, such as Estée Lauder, Piaget, and Cartier.<sup>17</sup> It could therefore be realized by this situation, that while China’s economy of idol (a celebrity who performs publicly) worship creates a lucrative campaign territory for international brands, it also has a dark side with the overinvolvement of fans who prefer to fight fire with fire, resulting in an intense culture of cyberviolence, irrational fandom, and overt digital censorship backed by the government. Fans have even walked an extra mile from the usual boycott stratagem by promoting the competitors of Xiao-promoted brands, crashing the brands’ customer service lines with incessant calls, and even pressurizing the brands to end their collaborations with Xiao. According to a report on SCMP, as of 17 March 2020, roughly a month after the incident, the Chinese *Weibo* hashtag #BoycottXiaoZhan had exceeded 3,450,000 posts and 260 million views.<sup>18</sup>

In March 2020, Xiao’s PR team issued a formal apology on *Weibo*, urging fans to “be more rational.”<sup>19</sup> However, the damage was done, crashing the idol’s public image as the nation’s pop-culture sweetheart to a “lowbrow” celebrity who came to international news due to negative publicity created by groups of crazed fans in the matter of a few days.

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<sup>17</sup> Hall 2020.

<sup>18</sup> Luo 2020.

<sup>19</sup> “粉丝恶意举报致平台被禁

肖战代言遭大批网友抵制|博君|cp粉|王一博\_网易娱乐” 2020.

## Introducing the Chinese Fandom Culture

If we were to trace the trends in the cultural scene of Chinese fandom, including the meticulous overinvolvement of fans, they would lead us to the core reason(s) behind such incidents. Chinese idols happen to have hardcore fanbases, which have highly organized operating systems. Unlike their Western counterparts who look up to their idols in feverish adoration, Chinese fan communities see themselves as the “mother figures” nurturing their idols and making (or in this case almost breaking) their careers. This desire of nurturing leads the fans to have very frank attitudes toward their idol’s life, the public perception of them, and the idol’s commercial collaborations. They see themselves as accountable contributors to their success by pledging their loyalty to the stars rather than the products they are buying. This results in the fans actively buying or promoting products endorsed by their idol online, therefore measurably boosting the idol’s commercial ranking. For example, a common way to earn respect in a Chinese fan community is to buy an idol’s advertised product, take a screenshot of the purchase, mark it with your username, and upload it to social media while tagging the brand.<sup>20</sup>

## Toxicity of the Chinese Idol Economy

But the idol economy has a sinister side. In the Chinese model of idol adoration, fans are the ones in control of the idol’s reputation and commercial worth – not the idol. And since fan communities are so

actively involved in their idol’s brand sponsorships, it also falls on them to attack brands that they perceive to be opposing their idol’s interests. In Xiao’s case, neither the idol nor the brands have done anything wrong, but things went off the rails because of poor fan behaviour. “Xiao Zhan’s fans have harassed others so violently online that they managed to kill a source of creativity and expression for massive numbers of people,” said a Beijing-based PR professional who asked to be anonymous. “This is an example of modern-day toxic fandom in China.”<sup>21</sup> As an ancient Chinese saying goes, “Water that bears the boat is the same that swallows it up.” When the fans adore and adulate the star, his popularity rises, and his career grows. However, when the same fans start to indulge in toxic fandom, the idol has to pay the price by having all the rage against his fans’ behaviour dumped on himself instead.

Fan Shuhong’s RADII China piece discusses at length how much power Chinese fans hold over their idols. When times are in favour of the idol, their fans are extremely organized and loyal, spending vast sums of money to buy products endorsed by them as a show of support. But things are not as good, they can easily tear any idol down, as well as anyone else who dares to associate with them. Talent management agencies also take advantage of the situation by catering to and bolstering these fandoms as well, even paying professional fans and water armies (bots and fans who are paid small amounts in exchange for the traffic they generate). This

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<sup>20</sup> Luo 2020.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

is especially true for the new fandoms. The agencies try to manipulate and exploit the fandom excitement to create a supportive market for the artists they promote. The heads of the official fan clubs often have a direct connection with the key people on the idol's management team.<sup>22</sup>

## Aftermath

On 1 March, a week after the incident, the talent management team that manages Xiao's professional affairs issued a public apology, which expressed regret for his fans "occupying (precious) public resources," keeping in mind the prevailing direness of the Coronavirus situation.<sup>23</sup> His fan club also apologised for its failure to prevent some of its members from voicing "radical" views online. But the apology failed to assuage people angry at the star, who had yet to respond to the scandal, which he did later on. Adding salt to the still open wounds and further reinforcing the negative image of China's crazy fan culture, a 15-year-old female fan of Xiao tried to commit suicide on 15 March after her father refused to give her 5,000 yuan (US\$700) to buy fan products. After taking a multitude of pills that threatened her life, she was sent to the hospital by her family and saved.<sup>24</sup> Also, the police bureau of Fujian Province announced around 20 March that a female fan of Xiao was scammed out of 57,800 yuan after joining a purported Xiao fan club on the

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<sup>22</sup> Fan 2019.

<sup>23</sup> “粉丝恶意举报致平台被禁

肖战代言遭大批网友抵制|博君|cp粉|王一博\_网易娱乐” 2020.

<sup>24</sup> Yau 2020.

Chinese social media platform QQ.<sup>25</sup> The Communist Party's official newspapers also joined the fray, with *Procuratorial Daily* and *Jiefang Daily* commenting on the scandal. A 14 March opinion piece in *Jiefang Daily* which was republished by the authoritative *People's Daily* said that Xiao needed to be held responsible for the repercussions of his fans' actions. "Although [Xiao's public relations team] apologised for his fans' behaviour ... the statement can only console his fans, but not persuade the public. His fans might not expect that their behaviour to protect the star has the opposite effect and has created the biggest crisis for him since he joined the entertainment industry." The piece also said that Xiao had become a public enemy overnight due to such online activities. According to the piece, "[Xiao] is far from the first idol to suffer because of fans' crazy action. Individual fans insult and attack voices differing from theirs. This incident should not only lead to much hand-wringing on the part of his fans but also a rethinking of the [echo chamber culture] of the Chinese entertainment fan circles."<sup>26</sup>

## What Makes a Fan?

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the meaning of the word "fan," stands for either "an enthusiastic devotee (as of a sport or a performing art) usually as a spectator" or "an ardent admirer or enthusiast (with regards to a celebrity or a pursuit)."<sup>27</sup> The word "fan" may have been

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Merriam-Webster, s.v. "fan."

derived from contracting the extant English word, “fanatic,” as the earliest records of the usage of the word “fan” link it with “fanatic,” as an 1885 *Kansas City Times* record shows, “of course, a fan is a fanatic.”<sup>28</sup> The word “fanatic” in turn derived itself from the modern Latin word “fanaticus” meaning “insanely, but divinely inspired.” It is interesting to note that celebrated philosopher George Santayana has defined the act of “fanaticism” as redoubling one’s efforts when that person has become oblivious to his/her original aim, which is especially true in regards to the misplaced and misguided fan activism that vilified and almost destroyed the career of the star Xiao Zhan, which could not have moved any further away from its original intention of protecting the freedom of expression. In both the cases of fan activism that I explore in this paper, mistakes have been made. In the first case, adoration has been seen as slander, while in the second, ironically enough, the actions undertaken by the fans have been conflated with the star the actions had meant to protect. While the religious nature of fandom and fan practices is worth exploring in China where atheists are in multitude, the innate fanaticism of fans worldwide has often been seen as pathological in nature whether in the form of a violent mob, or an individual overtly indulgent in their interests that might even give rise to mental conditions or the exacerbation of existing ones.

The word “fanatic,” with its inextricable links with fan practices, came to be used in English around 1550, meaning “marked by extreme enthusiasm and often intense

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<sup>28</sup> Etymonline, s.v. “fan.”

uncritical devotion.” Around 1647, the modern meaning, “extremely zealous,” came to the fore.<sup>29</sup> Both of these meanings ring true for the two incidents of misplaced fan activism as discussed in this paper. The word “fan” may also have roots in the Latin word “fanum,” meaning temple/sanctuary.<sup>30</sup> However, the fan activism on part of the overprotective fans has not been ameliorating, rather quite detrimental to the wellbeing of the star who is supposedly the central object of fan adoration, as well as the anti-fan hatred, which mistook the activities and responsibilities of his fans as the star’s own.

### **Bourdieu’s Ideas of Cultural Production Concerning Misplaced Fan Activism**

The earlier idea of culture as a singular codified entity to be studied in isolation of its time and space has been forsaken in the globalized world of today, where the lowbrow “culture” and the highbrow “Culture” are both to be decomposed into sets of social, material, and semiotic practices.<sup>31</sup> This way of looking at cultural actions lets us interpret and understand the ongoing processes through which “voices develop, acquire validation and are retransmitted.”<sup>32</sup> No cultural activity can be thought of as a monolith, and is, therefore, influenced by and in turn, exerts its influence upon relevant social processes that are spatiotemporally contextual. In line with the changing modes of reception and

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<sup>29</sup> Vocabularist 2015.

<sup>30</sup> Etymonline, s.v. “fan.”

<sup>31</sup> Choudhury n.d.

<sup>32</sup> Little 2011.



interpretation of the same event, in this case, the homoerotic fanfiction and the complementary fanarts which spawned both sides of the Xiao Zhan controversy, it is useful to have a certain interlinking framework of contexts and co-texts. This framework is fleshed out by Bourdieu's idea of the "field," which can be thought of as the micro-foundations of culture that go into the making of an artwork, or in this case, a widespread and multifaceted controversy.

In his 1993 collection of essays, named *The Field of Cultural Production*, especially in the title chapter, Pierre Bourdieu outlines his idea of the cultural field, which may be applied to a wide range of cultural phenomena. This methodology of sociological and cultural interpretation appears to be especially useful to find the causes related to the production of the kinds of fan behaviour that we sampled in this paper. Depending upon the cultural fields where the fans and their sensibilities operate, their behaviours are prone to change. As we discussed before the culture of fandom in China is quite different from its Western counterpart. Whereas in the West the celebrity is someone to be revered and emulated, in China the celebrity is a childlike figure whose fate depends on how their fans treat them. They are adored, their sales often artificially boosted by dutiful fans who take it upon themselves to nurture the idol and their career.

The key to Bourdieu's approach is "relationality," which signifies that cultural production is located within "a space of positions and position takings" – creating a set of relations, which are neither purely subjective/internal nor entirely

objective/external. It is a complex mesh of all such variables that go into the making of any specific culturally loaded event, such as these cases of misplaced fan activism. This position-taking, by either the celebrity or the fans, does not happen in isolation. Rather, it happens due to a partly invisible heuristic and hermeneutic training, which, for Bourdieu, occurs both at home and at the educational institutions amongst others, which creates the distinctive training in "taste," required for the appreciation of "high" or "low" art. This training, which in modern-day fandom happens in social media and online/offline fandom circles, is related to social distinction and is a key determinant of cultural competence. Bourdieu notes, "The literary or artistic field is a field of forces, but it is also a field of struggles tending to transform or conserve this field of forces."<sup>33</sup> If we see this playing out in the sphere of Chinese idol fandom, stars find their names in school textbooks as influential figures, just as Xiao Zhan has; fans need the most amount of money they can get to spend on their fandom, which gives them the "distinction" to be special amongst their peers. Appreciation of the artistic ability of the idol becomes secondary, just as Xiao Zhan's single "Light Source/Spot Light" has become the most sold piece of music in the entire history of the Chinese music industry, possibly through artificial sales boosting by fans. "Taste" then, becomes something perverse and capitalistic, where the most amount of money spent decides the popularity as well as artistic credibility of the idol involved. On the other hand, massive fan involvement in

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<sup>33</sup> Bourdieu and Johnson 2016.

enjoying the pop-culture artworks produced by an idol bridges the binary between “high” and “low” art forms through communitarian participation.

The warring fandoms were both products of the shared “taste” among the Xiao Zhan aficionados, as well as the shared “taste” of the free speech advocates. In his book *Distinction*, Bourdieu analyzed how social class acts as an important determinant of individual tastes in art, food, and music. According to his observation in the introduction to that book, “taste is more than an outcome of class – it also does its own sort of classifying.”<sup>34</sup> This is how the warring groups classified themselves in antagonism with each other, based on their own particular “taste.” This is also true for the BL fan-artists who dabble in real-person fiction (discussed later on) regarding their shared taste in homoerotic fanworks celebrating their love for the idol in question.

Bourdieu’s idea of the “cultural capital” relates to the symbolic elements like skills, tastes, mannerisms and other practices that are acquired by being part of a particular social class or group, as is the case of these fandom communities, which can relate to the feeling of being part of one social group, either through their collective attraction towards a particular idol, or simply uniting under the banner of free speech advocacy despite personal differences of preferences. This shared form of “cultural capital,” rising from similar taste, although fandom communities are virtual and dispersed across space and their members come from vastly different social strata, creates a comfortable

sense of collective identity. Bourdieu’s assumption that cultural capital breeds inequality between group identities by fostering feelings of “people like us” versus “people like them,” holds quite true for these warring fandoms.

Habitus is one of the most influential yet ambiguous of Bourdieu’s concepts, which refers to the physical embodiment of the cultural capital, which stems from the ingrained skills, habits, and dispositions which come to define us over time, things that we learn from our life experiences, things that make us who we are. According to Bourdieu, this is a “feel for the game,” something that is inherent and instinctive, something that underlines our proficiency in the fields in which we excel. For the fans of Xiao Zhan, this habitus is their connection to their idol, their interest in protecting him from supposed harm and the feeling his popularity and livelihood depend on them. On the other hand, the banning of *AO3* spurred even non-fans to become anti-fans of Xiao as their habitus was formed by their desire to lash out at the censorship machine of the Chinese government, making Xiao their hapless victim. Habitus also extends into the idea of “taste” and “distinction” as discussed before.

Habitus is shaped by an individual’s structural position in society and generates action in conjunction with that. Bourdieu suggested that habitus allows individuals to find new solutions based on newer situations without having to deliberate in a calculated manner.<sup>35</sup> In this case, this reliance on habitus took a dangerous turn as the

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<sup>34</sup> Bourdieu, Nice, and Bennett 2015.

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<sup>35</sup> Social Theory Rewired, s.v. “Pierre Bourdieu.”

opposing fandoms did not stop to think twice about the repercussions their actions may have. As is true for Chinese fans, their habitus of nurturing and protecting their idol, spurred them to thoughtlessly lash out against the last few bastions of free speech in Chinese media, creating the mass mobilization of hatred against their idol by the fans of the banned fansites as well as random people who took this attack on free speech personally.

### **RPF/RPS Fan Praxis, Morality, Appropriation, Backlash**

Real-person fanfiction/fiction (RPF) is a genre of fan-writing that is similar to other kinds of fanfiction but features celebrities or other real people. Generally, the public personae of the celebrities in question are adopted by the authors as their own characters, in the process of building a fictional universe that is based upon the supposed real-life histories of their idols. Information collected from interviews, documentaries, music videos, and other sources is woven into the stories. This has become easier and widespread in the modern age of social media where the stars themselves give multimedia information about themselves in the social media, so fans do not need to depend solely upon the gossip featured in tabloids to act as fodder for their imaginary world-building, which brings them a bit closer to the lives of the celebrities they love. Fan communities build collective archetypes of the stars featured in the stories based on their public personae, as well as the kind of characters they play in the various projects they act in. Fan

communities have also developed their own ethics on what kind of stories are acceptable. Some are uncomfortable with homoerotic fiction, with the mention of the celebrity's real-life families, or with stories involving violence, whether physical or mental. The RPF genre includes fanfictions of every kind, whether innocuous, sadistic, or pornographic. Many fanfiction writers or fan studies academics tend to consider that writing real-person fanfiction is unethical. However, the RPF phenomenon is not native to fannish culture. Historical fiction and sagas about real people have been created for a long time and have enduring popularity. William Shakespeare's history plays are considered to be early examples of RPF, and the Brontë children, all of whom became successful authors, wrote RPF from 1826 to approximately 1844, based on the children's roleplaying game about the Napoleonic Wars.<sup>36</sup>

The morality of RPF is often debated. Most RPF authors deny the intention to claim their fictional portrayals of celebrities as real. Some authors of fanfiction based on fictional media view RPF with suspicion, disdain, or disgust. Some feel that fanfiction writing as an activity is already on shaky enough legal ground and that RPF, especially those with erotic content, may turn public and corporate opinion against fanfiction as a whole. The oft-included disclaimer at the beginning of Western fanfiction which states that the work is pure fiction protected RPF from the charges of slander and libel against the celebrity. However, the presence of such disclaimers in Chinese RPF fanworks, even though the

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<sup>36</sup> Stitch 2021; Ratchford 1941.

CPF (couple fans) wholeheartedly believe in the supposed love relationship between their beloved idols, does not act as an impediment to the frequent bans and removal of such fanworks.

Real person slash (RPS), involves homoerotic relationships between celebrities. These portrayals are usually complete fabrications, based on the fantasies of the author/fandom and the desire to experiment with the erotic subtext between the idols in question. RPS is almost equal in popularity to the less controversial types of RPF. The content of these stories can range from mildly romantic relationships, deep friendships, innocent crushes, and carefully written love stories, as well to explicit erotica. Practising and appreciating sexually charged RPF fanworks give rise to the moral issues of sexual consent as well as the objectification of real people.<sup>37</sup>

However, close observation would go on to show that the RPS fans' perception of the celebrities as real people and their RPS practices are often contradictory. On the one hand, RPS fans almost always take recourse to disclaimers preceding their fanworks, claiming their clear awareness of the performative, public selves of celebrities. They realize that celebrities are simultaneously real and fictional; and as McGee points out, celebrities are social constructions.<sup>38</sup> On the other hand, RPS fans also "refuse to follow the cliché of declaring the stars' public performances a fiction and the celebrities fake and fabricated," as Kristina Busse notes.<sup>39</sup> As pointed out by

Thomas, RPS fans often talk about how they can truly feel the "chemistry" between the celebrities in question.<sup>40</sup> They are also passionate about digging out the supposed "truth" of the celebrities' same-sex relationship through close readings of the celebrities' interviews, scenes in the shows, and their social media posts. Such obsessive display of looking-for-evidence behaviour is considered to be pathological by those fans who remain outside of RPS fandom, even non-RPS fans of the celebrities involved. Therefore, to skirt around possible accusations of impropriety, RPS fans have created a set of hard and fast rules to abide by within the fandom. The first and foremost of these is the rule, "keep the fantasy within a circle, do not disturb the real idol" (圈地自萌, 勿扰正主). This refers to limiting RPS practices among fellow aficionados and avoiding spreading it to the public and the celebrities themselves. As this expression suggests, RPS fans are dutybound to keep "the fantasy" within bounds, emphasising the boundary that is to be maintained between real people and their fictional counterparts in RPS fanworks. However, mainstream media does not give up on the juicy possibility of ambushing celebrities about the online RPS stories about themselves, which may be offensive or uncomfortable, to say the least, as well as creating unfounded gossip for tabloids.

However, many celebrities respond to such unprofessional questions with playfulness, acknowledging that such artworks are a display of the fans' love for them. One such celebrity, Wang Kai, of the

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<sup>37</sup> Riley 2018.

<sup>38</sup> McGee 2005.

<sup>39</sup> Busse 2006.

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<sup>40</sup> Thomas 2014.

2015 dangai drama *Nirvana in Fire* fame, has been heavily featured in RPS alongside show colleague Hu Ge, a testament to their chemistry onscreen. When asked by a reporter named Fang the question, “Do you mind some audiences regarding you as having a romantic relationship with another man?” Kai replied, “Not at all. Fans just have fun with it.”<sup>41</sup> However, despite Kai’s positivity, it was heartbreaking for the fans to know of Kai’s disappointment when his parents suspected him of being gay based on the mainstream news coverage of groundless rumours, taking a cue from the RPS on him. November 2015’s incident where a paparazzo reported about Kai on his Wechat entertainment account, made Kai’s RPS fans truly angry. According to him, Kai was a sexually promiscuous gay man, having recently participated in a sex party in Thailand. This event was soon followed by Kai’s celebrity management company condemning the journalist for making a false report. However, this did nothing to stop the rumour-mongering on social media and gossip sites, just as Kai’s blood donation activity got reported as an HIV test.<sup>42</sup> Such incidents caused Kai’s RPS fans to be strongly condemned by the non-RPS fans, as if the RPS fans’ activities fueled the public’s negative perception of Kai, as some people believed the rumours to be true.

Such incidents go on to clarify the low public rates of acceptance for LGBTQ+ groups in contemporary Chinese society and the very palpable fear of the fans that rumour-mongering about a celebrity’s

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<sup>41</sup> Fang 2015.

<sup>42</sup> “靳东团队造谣王凯艾滋、造谣献血志愿者 · 道歉声明竟然是彩虹屁?\_紫XX网友.” 2018.

heterosexuality can destroy their career. Even though homosexuality has been decriminalised in mainland China since 1997, LGBTQ+-related media are still largely banned from print publishing and television broadcasting. Given the hostile reaction from the government, RPS is mentioned in news reports as the work of crazy fans and not as a starting point for larger conversations about the social tolerance of real-life homosexuality. Meanwhile, the RPS fans’ willingness to not disturb their idols has been repeatedly neglected, which has deepened the ethical contradiction regarding their RPS practices.

Chinese Kai/Ge RPS fans are self-consciously aware of the boundary between reality and their imaginary fantasies in the digital era through employing hashtags and disclaimers that highlight the fictional nature of RPS and practising the most authoritative fandom rule that the fan-fantasy should not disturb or cause harm to the idol in question.

However, as one fan aptly points out on Tumblr – “[T]he real issue with RPF fanfiction isn’t the people who write RPF. The biggest problem is the fans who hate-read RPF, find a story that they find shocking and ‘omg [person] would be so upset if they ever saw this!!’ and proceed to do everything they can do to make sure that person sees it.”<sup>43</sup>

According to Kayleigh Donaldson writing for Pajiba.com, real person shipping (or RPF) should not bother people in theory, as long as it is treated like any other harmless fandom hobby, practised safely and privately, clarifying that it is purely fiction and not meant to harm anyone.

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<sup>43</sup> AO3 Comment of the Day n.d.

However, according to the article on RPF on Fanlore, the problem lies with the tin hatters and their inability to discern the fourth wall.<sup>44</sup> There lies an important difference between showing a preference for the imagined relationship between two beloved celebrities and writing fanfiction about that and resorting to extremes to prove, as tin hatters do, that this purported relationship is true in the real world, hurting the celebrities and people close to them in the process. While it is true that the people who are willing to cross that line are a minority, however as Donaldson writes, “[T]hey’re a loud and insidious minority who shouldn’t be written off as mere ‘crazies.’”<sup>45</sup> What the fans do not realize is that tinhatting happens to hurt and harm the very same people that they so adore.

The contradictory practices of CP (coupling) fandom and the anti-CP fandom in China have unwittingly ruined the career of an idol named Zhang Zhehan, whose already controversial situation (because of his presence at a Japanese war-memorial) was exacerbated by the rumours of him being gay in real life, as the fantasies of RPS fans were misrepresented by those of the non-RPS fans. The Xiao Zhan incident was brought about by a sort of reverse tinhatting, where the fans were overeager to disprove the imaginary erotic relationship between Xiao and fellow actor Wang Yibo, which innocent fantasy of the RPS fans had not caused Xiao much harm. However, the repercussions of banning the whole platform that hosted the RPF fanworks resulted in

tragic real-life consequences for the very celebrity the fans cared (too much) about.

Comparisons have been made by critics between real person fan fiction (RPF) and the film/television texts that dramatize real people in the debates regarding the ethics of RPF as a fan practice. RPF writers write RPFs through the appropriation of the various self-images of their celebrity subjects. According to Melanie Piper, these are – “the fragmented intertextual body of the star image... the celebrity’s physical body as a signifier of star image... [the celebrity’s] status as a real person.” For Piper, “[t]he fannish textual process of adapting real public figures to fictional contexts shares a common element with adapting public figures to the screen in the biopic: Both work to recontextualize the public self of a celebrity through the representation of a fictionalized or speculated private self.”<sup>46</sup>

### **The Many Evils of Celebrity Worship**

The term “celebrity worship,” which was coined by researchers Lynn E. McCutcheon and John Maltby, was seen as a psychological disorder in which a fan becomes obsessed with a public figure.<sup>47</sup> This phenomenon is currently conceptualized in psychology as an abnormal kind of parasocial relationship, which is driven by the overabsorption of media featuring the celebrity by the fan. This situation, if left unchecked, can have potentially significant clinical sequelae. In this obsessive-addictive mental disorder,

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<sup>44</sup> Fanlore, s.v. “RPF.”

<sup>45</sup> Donaldson 2018.

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<sup>46</sup> Piper 2015.

<sup>47</sup> McCutcheon, Lange, and Houran 2002.

fans become overtly involved and obsessed with the details of the personal life of a celebrity, giving rise to several mental health problems, such as symptoms of depression and anxiety, dissociation, and body image concerns. Teenage fans suffering from celebrity worship syndrome can have extreme distress and it can exacerbate existing mental health issues. Research suggests that celebrity worship has been negatively associated with general well-being and self-esteem. There appear to be three levels of the phenomenon – entertainment-social, intense-personal, and borderline-pathological. While there is no known direct cause of celebrity worship syndrome, as a condition with obsessive-addictive properties, the presence of certain mental health conditions may play a role in its development.<sup>48</sup>

As humans are social creatures and evolved to live in an environment where it is useful to pay attention to the people at the top, our fascination with celebrities may be an offshoot of this tendency, which is subsequently nourished by media and technology. While in the West fans worship their celebrities, in China, they become jiejie (elder sisters) or meimei (younger sisters) to their beloved didi (younger brother) or gege (older brother) idols. As the differentiation is removed through terms of familial affection, the fans take it upon themselves to decide the fates of their idols. Add to it the obsessive-compulsive behavioural pattern that makes them rage online slander campaigns or intrude in the private lives of their idols, going so far as to place tracking devices on their cars (as happened with

Wang Yibo) or spamming their personal numbers with incessant calls – fandom that should have liberated fans from their daily drudgery by giving them a glimpse of imaginative freedom has turned toxic.<sup>49</sup> This same toxic fan practice makes youngsters attempt to take their own lives if bereft of the opportunity to showcase their loyalty to their idols, just like the Chinese teenager mentioned before in this paper, who attempted to commit suicide at not being allowed money to buy Xiao Zhan fan products. There are also those who try to profit from such a mindset.

Four of such crazy fans were arrested by the Hangzhou police for the selling of the personal flight information of celebrities like Xiao Zhan and EXO frontman Jackson Wang. The group of four, themselves loyal stans (fans who engage in stalker-like behaviour) of the celebrities, had illegally found access to several celebrities' personal information and used it to track their flight numbers with the help of self-check-in machines at the airports. Then they would sell the information to other fans at a price of up to 15 USD per star. They even helped the fans who bought the information to purchase the tickets for the same plane, though the fans would not actually board the flights most of the time. Many fans would simply go to catch a glimpse of the celebrities at the boarding gate, after which the four now-convicts would help refund the money paid for the tickets.<sup>50</sup>

Before the habitual practice of superfans trying to trend their idols at number one in online social media rankings fell afoul of the

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<sup>48</sup> Gillette 2022.

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<sup>49</sup> Yorke “Wang Yibo” 2021.

<sup>50</sup> Tian 2021.

Chinese government for promoting “unhealthy values,” many, like Beijing high schooler Chen Zhichu used to spend at least 30 minutes online each day just to try boosting the social media posts and business campaigns featuring actors like Xiao Zhan as one of legions.<sup>51</sup> Chinese state regulations have now banned “irrational star-chasing” activities, such as creation of online celebrity rankings, fundraising and other tools that are used by the various Chinese idol fandoms to get their respective idols trending on social media.

Xiao’s good looks and acting abilities have earned him legions of devoted, mostly female fans. He currently possesses more than 29 million followers on Weibo alone, despite being a victim of misplaced fan activism, as discussed before. In Chen’s own words, “I used to upvote posts in his Weibo fan forum and buy products he promoted... It was pretty exhausting trying to keep him trending at number one every day.” Activities by such superfans bolster China’s lucrative idol economy, previously forecasted by the government to be worth 140 billion yuan (US\$21.6 billion) by the end of 2022.

China being a country where the young have barely any means of influencing the public life which runs as is dictated by the state, full-time fan content creators – known popularly as “zhanjie” or “station sisters” – can make a star rise from relative obscurity by creating and circulating viral images of them. According to the critics in favour of the state’s decision, “...fan culture is an exploitative industry aimed at profiting from minors, built on artificially inflated social

media engagement – something the government wants to eliminate through the new regulations.”<sup>52</sup> The authorities feel that these new rules are necessary to curb excessive the aspects of fan culture, which include cyberbullying, stalking, doxxing, and bitter online wars between fandoms – to which the “227 Incident” proves to be a bitter, but real example.

According to the fans however, such activities brought them a sense of communitarian achievement by expending shared efforts to make their idols flourish, which also gave them a sense of community from sharing the same online space, with the same aim for all.

According to a social studies professor at a Chinese university who did not wish to be named, the reason behind such crackdowns may stem from the fact that the Chinese Communist government might be worried about the idols and their ability to mobilise fan armies at a moment’s notice, as the trends created by them often dominating social media for days. “It’s the beginnings of a mass movement and that is what the government doesn’t want,” they said.<sup>53</sup> “Chinese youth lack other types of idols,” said Fang Kecheng, communications professor at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. “It’s very hard for them to have other means of civic participation (such as activism).”<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Chen and Lin 2021.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.



## The Little Fresh Meat Phenomenon and the Objectification of Idols

It seems ironic that the same culture that partakes in celebrity worship would treat the subjects of adulation as objects of desire – but it happens to be real for the Chinese idols in question. Little fresh meat (xiǎo xiān ròu) is a term coined by fans (mainly female) to refer to handsome young male celebrities, mostly rising stars.<sup>55</sup> The term, with its air of objectification that sees actual people as tasty consumables, has been widely accepted by the Chinese media and is frequently exploited as a selling point by the Chinese entertainment agencies in defining a star. Being labelled in such a way even helps young stars garner more fans. Taking this up a notch, low-budget and production value films featuring “little fresh meat” do well at the box office, even though they largely lack critical acclaim.<sup>56</sup> This is caused by the devout fanbase of the stars involved, who take it upon themselves to make every venture they star in a success.<sup>57</sup>

However, all of it should not be coloured negatively. The popularity of the “little fresh meat” stars, with their svelte features and make-up-clad feminine beauty, made it possible for the media to create newer representations of male beauty on screen, therefore making it so that men who possess delicate and feminine features are no longer ridiculed.<sup>58</sup>

However, some of these “little fresh meats” are so confident of their popularity that they do not think it is necessary to prepare for their roles and act well. Even if they lack acting skills, they end up getting prestigious awards, which has sparked a “Popularity vs Talent” controversy in the Chinese media.<sup>59</sup>

The phenomenon has been seen as an example of the rise in women’s agency. While women have traditionally been seen as objects of appreciation, they are now turning back that gaze on men. According to feminist Lü Pin, “I think the phrase is a symbol for the possibility of diversification. In the past, the mainstream was old men [dating] young women, but now matches of people of different ages are being accepted.”<sup>60</sup> The term “little fresh meat” has been used by women as part of a reverse objectification which expresses their desire for men who are young and beautiful. Li Yinhe, a sociologist, states that it is a sort of progress for women which has enabled them to recognize their sexual needs and ways of self-gratification in the otherwise heavily restrained society in China, which subscribes to strict gender roles.<sup>61</sup>

However, not every celebrity wants a bite out of this attention. A naysayer of this kind of objectification, swimmer Ning Zetao has said that he does not prefer being called by this nametag.<sup>62</sup>

It is important to note in September 2021, China’s state broadcast regulator banned performers with “lapsed morals” and “incorrect political views,” as well as “sissy

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<sup>55</sup> “Little Fresh Meat” 2015.

<sup>56</sup> “Little Fresh Meat Doesn’t Work Anymore? He Was Once the Top Traffic in China, but the Box Office Is Incredible.” September 1, 2019.

<sup>57</sup> “Fresh Meat” 2015.

<sup>58</sup> Wu 2016.

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<sup>59</sup> Zhou 2016.

<sup>60</sup> “Come to My Bowl” 2015.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

men” which is the state endorsed term for an androgynous aesthetic embraced by many male Chinese idols, which was initially popularised by Korean boy bands.<sup>63</sup> Beijing’s increasing discomfort with the alternative forms of masculinity synchronises with the time of the country’s falling birth rates and the state government’s feverish pitch for rising nationalism, as media featuring with macho, military heroes (known popularly as “Wolf Warriors” in fandom) are promoted by the state.<sup>64</sup>

Xiao Zhan is one such “little fresh meat,” whose overwhelming popularity has made him the fifth most popular person on the Chinese social networking platform *Weibo*. His career, although he is only 29 years old, has seen momentous ups and downs. He has won the “Charm Actor of the Year” at the 2020 Baidu Entertainment Awards in 2021.<sup>65</sup> This is indeed a far cry from when he won the 2019 Golden Broom Award for “Most Disappointing Actor” which was received in 2020 for his performance in the 2019 film *Jade Dynasty I*, which may have been influenced by the internet storm that had been raised in his name because although the film had generated a lot of negative feedback, his acting was quite passable.<sup>66</sup>

What these fan phenomena go on to show is that a star’s popularity can be a double-edged sword. It can make them a god in their fan’s eyes, raising them to the heights of commercial success, or make them a victim of their thoughtless activities,

hurling them to the depths of personal and professional misery.

### **Danmei Fandom in China and Related Governmental Backlash**

As we have discussed before, the controversy began with the online publication of male homoerotic fanworks. The genre of male homoerotic fiction, known in China as danmei, is an extremely popular phenomenon, garnering a huge fandom. We will now look at what danmei is and what makes it so popular.

Danmei (耽美 or indulging beauty) is a genre of literary fiction or multimedia in China featuring romantic relationships between male characters. Typically, Danmei is created by and targeted toward a heterosexual female audience.<sup>67</sup> Despite the global popularity of danmei works and adaptations, their legal status remains murky because of the strict censorship policies employed by the Chinese government.<sup>68</sup>

The origins of danmei stem from the male homoerotic romance genre of “boys’ love,” known popularly as BL, which originated in Japanese manga in the early 1970s. The tropes of the genre were introduced to the artists of mainland China via the pirated Taiwanese translations of Japanese comics during the early 1990s.<sup>69</sup> The term danmei is borrowed in Chinese to pay homage to the Japanese word *tanbi* (耽美, “aestheticism”). Chinese fans often use the words danmei and BL interchangeably.

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<sup>63</sup> Chen and Lin 2021.

<sup>64</sup> Mac 2020.

<sup>65</sup> Yorke “Xiao Zhan” 2020.

<sup>66</sup> “Xiao Zhan Gets into Trouble Again” 2020.

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<sup>67</sup> “Click Bait” 2015.

<sup>68</sup> Yang and Xu 2017.

<sup>69</sup> Lavin, Yang, and Zhao 2017.

Early online communities celebrating danmei were largely run by amateur fans of the genre. These websites were gradually replaced by commercial online fiction websites that were founded in the early 2000s. The largest of these, Jinjiāng Wénxuéchéng (晋江文学城 or *Jinjiang Literature City*), was founded in 2003. It now has 7 million registered users and over 500,000 titles. The various works published in *Jinjiang Literature City* include both original works and fan fiction. The romantic novels range from heterosexual to LGBT. Although there are many published stories in genres other than romance, the publishing website's popularity stems from being a large platform for original danmei novels.<sup>70</sup>

Danmei found its wide popularity in both China and globally in the late 2010s, with the censored danmei adaptations, known as dangai, which mask the homoeroticism of the original texts with permissible variations of deep friendship between men, reminiscent of the “tongzhi” culture of Chinese literary fiction.<sup>71</sup> Drama adaptations like *Guardian* (2018) and *The Untamed* (2019) in which Xiao Zhan played a lead character, received billions of views on the streaming services they appeared in as well as broad international distribution.

Other than featuring a central romance plot between men, danmeis vary widely due to their incorporation of tropes from other genres. Many of them draw on Chinese literary wuxia and xianxia tropes and historical settings, or they may incorporate elements of sports or science fiction. While the wider genre of danmei has been

criticized for its propensity to show pre-assigned “heteronormative” gender roles within same-sex relationships, in recent years the genre has grown to exhibit a wide variety of relationship dynamics.<sup>72</sup>

A survey of Chinese danmei audiences in 2015–2018 found that around 88% of the group identify as female, 66.5% identify as heterosexual, 15.7% as bisexual, and 2.7% as homosexual.<sup>73</sup>

Because danmei is primarily created and consumed by heterosexual women, it appears to have a “female perspective” and “heteronormative frame.”<sup>74</sup> Its appeal for heterosexual women lies in its ability to separate the female desire from the female body.<sup>75</sup> Since none of the bodies involved in a sexual act in danmei corresponds to a female body, the female audience does not feel violated, rather can poise their desire towards both the partners involved. Danmei fans also prefer equality between the partners (since both are male, and thereby socially empowered, with respect to Chinese society) in comparison to heterosexual romance.<sup>76</sup>

Most popular danmei works originate as web novels, published serially on websites like *Jinjiang Literature City*, *Liancheng Read*, and *Danmei Chinese Web*.<sup>77</sup> In this model, readers pay for the new chapters as they are released.<sup>78</sup> Complete novels are also be published as physical editions in China (either self-published or via Taiwan) and

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Coleman and Chou 2013.

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<sup>72</sup> Liang 2019.

<sup>73</sup> Madill and Zhao 2021.

<sup>74</sup> Zhao and Madill 2018.

<sup>75</sup> Williams 2020.

<sup>76</sup> Zhou and Ewe 2021.

<sup>77</sup> Liang 2019.

<sup>78</sup> Myers and Cheng 2017.

abroad. Fan translations of danmei web novels are widespread on the internet.

Danmei novels often see multiple multimedia adaptations in the form of manhua (comics), donghua (animation), audio dramas, and live-action series, which in most cases do not retain the queer elements of the source texts. Live-action adaptations of danmei are known to have achieved major commercial success through their balanced act of conforming to the demands of the Chinese government as well as broader consumer culture.<sup>79</sup>

Despite its massive popularity, danmei constantly faces the risk of legal action by the government since it “breaks two social taboos in one shot: Pornography and homosexuality.”<sup>80</sup> Although the exact laws regarding the possession and distribution of pornography are blurry, it is illegal in China.<sup>81</sup> Danmei literature that features explicit sex scenes is unambiguously classified as pornography. While homosexuality itself has been decriminalized in China since 1997, due to vague legal definitions of the terms “obscenity” and “abnormal sexual behaviour,” even non-explicit queer literature might be subjected to state censorship.<sup>82</sup>

Anti-pornographic crackdowns in 2004, 2010 and 2014 terminated many danmei websites and forums.<sup>83</sup> In 2011, Chinese authorities shut down a danmei website hosting a whopping 1200 works and the founder, Wang Ming, was fined and

imprisoned for 18 months.<sup>84</sup> In the October of 2018, a female danmei author writing under the nom-de-plume Tianyi was sentenced to 10 years in prison after her self-published homoerotic novel featuring rape and teacher-student romance sold over 7,000 copies. This occurrence violated laws about excessive commercial profit from unregistered books.<sup>85</sup>

The strict censorship policies of the government cause some danmei communities to self-police. As an example, *Jinjiang Literature City* asks its readers to report the explicit works featured on the website for deletion.<sup>86</sup> Some danmei authors circumvent these restrictions by hosting the explicit portions of their work on Taiwanese literature websites.<sup>87</sup>

Early 2016 saw the abrupt removal of the popular gay web drama *Addicted* (based on a danmei novel) from all mainland Chinese streaming platforms just before it finished airing. This happened on orders from the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT).<sup>88</sup> The following week, the China Television Drama Production Industry Association publicized guidelines dated 31 December 2015, which banned the television portrayals of “abnormal sexual relationships and behaviours,” which included same-sex relationships.<sup>89</sup> These new guidelines now served to impact web dramas, which historically have had fewer

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Yang and Xu 2017.

<sup>81</sup> Jacobs 2012.

<sup>82</sup> Yang and Xu 2017.

<sup>83</sup> Bostock 2021.

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<sup>84</sup> Wikipedia, s.v. “Danmei.”

<sup>85</sup> Merriam-Webster, s.v. “fan”; “Fresh Meat” 2015.

<sup>86</sup> Bostock 2021.

<sup>87</sup> Bordieu and Johnson 2016.

<sup>88</sup> Mac 2020.

<sup>89</sup> Jacobs 2012.

restrictions than television broadcasting.<sup>90</sup> The SAPPRT issued even stricter regulations regarding online streaming starting in June 2017.<sup>91</sup>

In the light of such events, the live-action adaptation of danmei novels skirts the regulations by the removal of explicit queer romance elements while retaining queer subtext, and even publicizing them through behind-the-scenes videos and live interviews of actors involved.<sup>92</sup> In 2018, right after the release of its final episode, the live-action dangai drama *Guardian* was pulled from the streaming platforms for “content adjustments,” following a directive from the SAPPRT to “clean up TV programmes of harmful and vulgar content.”<sup>93</sup> While it was later re-released with edited or deleted scenes, none of these scenes had any homoerotic subtext.<sup>94</sup>

According to Tong Shen, the primary reasons for the BL culture’s popularity in China are, one, the physical reason, that is the export of Japanese culture through the development of the Chinese Internet; two, the cultural reason, which is the lack of a sexual culture that has led to sexual repression in China for thousands of years.<sup>95</sup> The second reason has acted as an impetus for the widespread popularity of BL works with pornographic depictions in China.

## Conclusion

Xiao’s tremendous fan support held on despite everything, as was proven with the release of his single “Spotlight” becoming China’s fastest-selling digital single ever, according to the Guinness Book of World Records.<sup>96</sup> His single, “Made to Love,” ranked number seven on the IFPI’s Top 10 Global Digital Singles.<sup>97</sup> CCTV, China’s main state-controlled broadcaster, has continued to showcase him. From his appearance in September in a small role in the CCTV-backed COVID-19 ensemble drama *Heroes in Harm’s Way*, followed by several one-off performances, and the airing of two new dramas, it seemed like he enjoyed government favour for some unknown reason.<sup>98</sup>

Xiao had shared a lengthy open letter to himself and his fans exactly one year after the “AO3 227” incident that nearly ended his career. His post reflected on what had happened a year ago, the following fallout, and the lessons that he had learnt from this experience. “This time last year, the storm happened so suddenly, as though a barrel of explosives had suddenly detonated with such force that my entire being was left completely dazed,” Xiao wrote in this *Weibo* post that generated over a million comments and nearly 7 million likes in less than a day.

While it is entirely possible that this was an act orchestrated by Xiao’s PR team, he did not need to draw attention (albeit without referring to the incident in explicit terms) back to the event while his career

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<sup>90</sup> Wu 2016; Ho “Reflections: Part 1” 2022.

<sup>91</sup> Warner and Feng 2020.

<sup>92</sup> AO3 Comment of the Day n.d.

<sup>93</sup> Mac 2020.

<sup>94</sup> Vocabularist 2015; Jacobs 2012.

<sup>95</sup> Shen 2020

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<sup>96</sup> Ho “Reflections, Part II” 2021.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

appeared to be getting back on track. Anyone would be traumatized were that person was in his shoes both for the impact on his career and personal life as well as the intense online abuse that targeted even his friends and family. It might also be a concern that, as Solarina Ho notes, he had unwittingly become “the reason why creative and marginalized communities in [his] country suddenly lost an important online space for anonymous self-expression.”<sup>99</sup>

Unlike most of the young Chinese actors in recent years who, upon graduation from theatre academies are launched directly into a television or web drama production (and sometimes even before), Xiao was a late bloomer, having tried out a stint as a graphic designer and artist before participating in a singing competition in 2015. In his interviews, as Ho notes, “he comes across as introspective, sensitive, and humble — much more so than many other Chinese actors who light-heartedly charm their way through interviews with seemingly more trained polish... [p]erhaps... [this is how] he is ‘packaged’ by his handlers, but that introspection and thoughtfulness ...[are] difficult to feign.”<sup>100</sup>

Xiao, a 29-year-old still new to fame, had been blamed for actions that were completely outside his control and caused by the combination of both warring fandoms and smear campaigns. Due to the power and influence of toxic fandoms and the usual operating tactic of the Chinese entertainment industry, Xiao’s fall was swift and dramatic. “Friends” distanced themselves, he got

blacklisted, subjected to much online vitriol, losing endorsement deals for not “controlling” or “guiding” his fans better. Just when things appeared to be dying down, the scandal would somehow resurface with some new rumour or accusation. Superficially, this seems just like a classic example of the “cancel culture” of the West. However, Chinese fans have a huge online presence, and as we discussed before, the relationship between artists and fans is significantly more complex.

It is indeed ambiguous whether the accusations of “poor fan behaviour” referred to the fans who got *AO3* banned, or the fans that created the RPS content, sparking the controversy. Given the repressive media environment in China where one talks while skirting sensitive subjects or sensitive topics are bypassed altogether over the fear of backlash, we may never know for sure. In the statements that were issued by Xiao Zhan, his PR management, and his fan club, the issues regarding *AO3*, the fanworks in question, and the ban – are rarely mentioned directly.

In China, the public image of the celebrities must follow the government-endorsed “moral” standard, whereby their actions must be closely watched and likewise managed. Any behaviour or scandal that can be considered a “bad” influence (such as being cast in productions considered “inappropriate” by the government) can get the celebrity blacklisted for an extended period, or even derail their career completely. Even social media companies like *Weibo* would issue “recommendations” to the PR agencies for keeping the fans in check. According to the

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

Chinese government, since celebrities wield enormous power to influence, a celebrity must be a “role model” for the youngsters of the country to follow.

Censorship in China has worsened significantly since the COVID-19 pandemic. For an average person, any sensitive post may get deleted. For anyone prominent, every word posted online will be intensely scrutinized by billions of people as well as government censors. Golden Globe winner Chloe Zhao’s experience of being celebrated to vilified in the matter of a few days is a classic example of how public opinion can turn the tide.<sup>101</sup>

Despite all the backlash, Xiao himself has never explicitly or even implicitly condemned the existence of the fanworks. Given the media environment of China, it would have been an easy way to win the government’s favour. Instead, in his post, he advises fans in broad terms, as Ho writes, “...to lead a good life, to focus their energies in the real world, to become better versions of themselves.” It is ambiguous whether he is referring to the love or hate directed at him. “So here today, I want to tell my fans that everyone has the right to like and hate; whether it is like or dislike, it should all be respected, be allowed to exist in an individual’s personal space of expression.” He also mentions that such a right should be exercised in a way that does not harm others. “Everyone has their own interests and preferences. Fully respect each person’s freedom of choice and opinion. It is an individual’s right to like me or hate me.

Love itself should be the source of strength for everyone.”<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Bostock 2021.

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<sup>102</sup> “Reflections, Part II: Xiao Zhan One Year after the AO3 Incident” n.d.

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