Asian Studies Review

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/casr20

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To cite this article: Erika Ningxin Wang & Liang Ge (2023) Fan Conflicts and State Power in China: Internalised Heteronormativity, Censorship Sensibilities, and Fandom Police, Asian Studies Review, 47:2, 355-373, DOI: 10.1080/10357823.2022.2112655

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2022.2112655

Published online: 29 Aug 2022.

ASIAN STUDIES REVIEW
2023, VOL. 47, NO. 2, 355–373
https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2022.2112655

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Fan Conflicts and State Power in China: Internalised Heteronormativity, Censorship Sensibilities, and Fandom Police

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ABSTRACT

Fans as consumers of cultural products have received a great deal of attention from sociologists and cultural studies academics in recent years, and research on the relationship between fans and state power is gradually gaining traction. Through a 12-month digital ethnography of a large-scale fan conflict surrounding *The Untamed*, a popular 'Boys' Love'-adapted drama in China, we uncover a complex picture of two-way exploitation between fans and state power. By doing so, the article challenges previous assumptions by Chinese and Western scholars that fan culture is resistant to or negotiates with mainstream culture. We show that by perpetuating heteronormativity and censorship, fans internalise 'reporting' as a norm of legitimacy in consumer culture. Some fans portray themselves as 'fandom police' and use censorship to report 'illegal' comments by their rivals in order to prevail in fan conflicts. However, the power gained by these fandom police is illusory. Their practices are exploited by the state as a tool for censoring media users' speech and cultural production, with the ultimate consequence of perpetuating censorship and heteronormativity.

KEYWORDS

Fan conflicts; fandom police; state power; fan communities and subcommunities; heteronormativity; censorship; *The Untamed*; consumer culture; China

Introduction

This article shows that the relationship between social media users and state power in China is complex yet salient and is particularly manifested in fan conflicts. We demonstrate that, by internalising mainstream power discourses backed by the state as a norm of legitimacy for fan practices, some fans use state power to censor the comments and work of other social media users, a practice known in China as 'reporting' (*jubao*). In this article, we seek to investigate the complex two-way exploitation between Chinese fandom and state power by examining the '227 incident'. Our study argues that although in some communities 'fandom police' have reported their rivals, the power they gain is temporary and illusory. Simultaneously, censored social media spaces may seem to provide space for anonymous expression, but they also require participants in fan communities to hide their true personalities.

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This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

Chinese fans have developed the slogan 'reporting is effective!' to capture the desire to police the views of their peers, but this has had the effect of reducing fans' agency. Fans remain vulnerable in the face of omnipresent state power. In this article, we analyse the relationship between fan communities and state power and create two points of departure from earlier Chinese and non-Chinese studies of fan culture. First, we contend that fan communities are not as resistant to mainstream culture as is sometimes portrayed in the existing literature. Second, we show that Chinese fans are less eclectic than some scholars contend: that is, fan culture is a negotiation with mainstream culture and society, rather than a parallel sphere. As a result, we argue that fan communities remain subordinate to state power. Although some fans can momentarily wield illusory power as enforcers of censorship, the value judgements and logic of power they espouse are still centred on traditional heteronormative hegemonic narratives and norms of censorship. These fans therefore self-censor content that does not conform to mainstream value judgements. Consequently, in terms of power relations within Chinese society, we suggest that fan culture is still vulnerable and has little capacity to negotiate with mainstream culture. Indeed, the complicity of state power with fan culture enables state power to use fan practices to establish deeper surveillance of these communities.

Before discussing power relations between fan culture and the state from the perspective of fan communities during the fan conflict known as the '227 incident', it is essential to consider the contexts of Chinese fan culture and cultural policies more broadly. Chinese fan culture interacts more closely with state power than its Western counterpart (Jenkins, 2020). In recent years, the Chinese government has introduced increasingly stringent cultural policies to regulate fan culture and communities on various online platforms. In 2016, the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) launched a series of campaigns on the Chinese Internet known as 'Qinglang Xingdong' (Sweep-Up Campaign) (CAC, 2016). Initially, the campaign sought to combat the spread of illegal information on the Internet, but its focus has varied from year to year thereafter. China's provincial governments have also introduced corresponding measures in response to the national Sweep-Up campaign. In July 2020, the CAC stated that it would 'pay close attention to fans' blind idolisation of stars and fans' conflicts' (CAC, 2020), which is the first time that fan conflicts were made a priority in the cultural regulation by the Chinese government. Notably, the initiation and implementation of this campaign was the result of an unprecedented fan conflict in early 2020: the 227 incident.

The 227 incident happened within the fandom of a popular Chinese BL (Boys' Love)-adapted drama, *The Untamed* (*Chen Qing Ling*; Tencent TV, 2019).[1] Following the incredible popularity of the BL-adapted web series *Guardian* in 2018, the two male actors in this drama became stars in the Chinese cultural landscape (Ng & Li, 2020). Other male stars also tried to reap the benefits of this popularity by starring in BL-adapted dramas. In 2019, *The Untamed* aired online. Within two days of the release of its first episode on 27 June, this drama reached 200 million views. When the finale aired on 14 August, overall views had exceeded 4 billion. Xiao Zhan (hereafter Xiao), who starred in this drama, also enjoyed massive popularity through playing the protagonist, Wei Wuxian. Xiao's followers on the social media platform Weibo increased in number from fewer than 7 million before the drama was released to more than 15 million on 15 August 2019.

Xiao's extraordinary popularity included numerous subcommunities and hierarchies of fandom. The 227 incident originated from a conflict between two subcommunities, known as the 'Only-fans' and the 'CP ('coupling')-fans' respectively. The immense popularity of *The Untamed* created a sudden influx of Xiao fans via two channels. Viewers who loved Xiao himself were likely to become Only-fans, while those who enjoyed the homo-romantic relationship between the two male actors tended to join CP-fan subcommunities. In February 2020, the Only-fans organised collectively on social media to report a work of fan fiction written by a CP-fan. This campaign then led to the Chinese government's decision to block the international fan creation platform *Archive of Our Own* (AO3). The platform was blocked on 27 February 2020, and it therefore became known as the 227 incident. This intra-fan conflict deprived thousands of Chinese social media users of access to reading, circulating, and creating fan-made works on AO3. Fans who were denied access to the platform were furious and became *anti*-fans of Xiao, and subsequently joined in the festering conflict. They imitated the whistleblowing tactics to which they had been subjected: they retaliated by reporting Xiao and his Only-fans, who in turn had their social media accounts blocked. The 227 incident thereby reveals the cruelty of the Internet, in that social media platforms become a gladiatorial arena. The legacy of the 227 incident has outlived these initial events: it has further exacerbated the negative attitudes of mainstream society towards fan culture and has led directly to a series of government policies to regulate this culture.

Fan Culture, Intra-fan Conflicts, and Mainstream Culture

Studies of fan culture (e.g. Chin, 2018; Coppa, 2014; MacDonald, 1998; Stanfill, 2020; Tushnet, 2014) have focused on the hierarchy of fan communities and the related phenomenon of fan conflict. MacDonald (1998) argues that individual fans have distinctive hierarchical positions within fan communities, although these positions are relatively fixed. This view has been countered by Chin (2018), who argues that fan positions are not fixed and instead are in a constant state of contention and change. Tushnet (2014) sees fan communities as being made up of many different people, some of whom are prone to conflict. Chin (2018) argues that the root of fan conflict is discrimination. As Fiske points out, '(f)ans discriminate fiercely: the boundaries between the community of fans and the rest of the world are just as strongly marked and patrolled' (1992, 934–935). Discrimination enables fans to distinguish themselves from outsiders. Fan conflict is the result of power imbalances, especially when expressed in different interpretations of artistic works. Fandom is thus a site of struggle: some fans try to maintain dominant interpretations as set out by the media producers, but fan-made interpretations may compete with the original interpretations, giving these competitor interpretations influence among fans and positions of leadership in fan communities (Chin, 2018, 332).

These competitor interpretations are sometimes referred to as *anti-fandom*. Jonathan Gray (2019) identifies three types of anti-fan: those who compete and support different interpretations of an artist's work; those who are disappointed with media texts and express their anger; and those who pretend to be disgusted to gain attention and/or notoriety (2019, 25–41). Gray (2021) develops his framing of anti-fans based on Bourdieu's theory of cultural distinction (1984). For Gray, disgust can become

a performance of identity and demonstrate identity-based superiority on the part of fans. However, Gray focuses on how fans as individuals express their dislike of a text, so that the object of such expression is the text itself rather than its producers or other fans. In other words, Gray examines the relationship between anti-fandom and texts, but leaves unaddressed how conflicts between anti-fans and other fans are interpreted as well as the anger and resentment that drives these conflicts. As Gray (2021, 18) suggests, more attention should be paid to how these competing fan communities interact with each other and the development of anti-fan communities.

Drawing on the 227 incident and fan communities relating to *The Untamed*, this article offers new insights into the sociality of anti-fans and the interaction between fan and anti-fan communities. In focusing on how heterogeneous fan/anti-fan subcommunities resolved their conflicts in respect to the 227 incident, we examine the complex power relations and interactions among fan subcommunities rather than only examining how fans view media. We argue that there is no clear line between fans and anti-fans, and it appears untenable to examine them as distinct and dichotomous groups. That is, anti-fans are simultaneously critical of one type of media while being fans of others. They also share the typical characteristics and behaviour of other fans, and there are conflicts and interactions between the fan and anti-fan subcommunities. Therefore, we also include the anti-fans in our study of Xiao's fandom.

Conflicts between fans, and between consumers and texts, are summed up by Johnson (2018) in his conceptualisation of 'fantagonism'. He argues that fantagonism may be managed within different cultural industries and that this antagonistic stance among fans can be absorbed by the industry and become an important means of analysing consumer demand. Johnson (2018, 402–403) offers a new perspective on this kind of fantagonism, not only from the industry perspective, but also in the need to examine the relationship between fans and authority in relation to politics. As he states, politics and the various struggles in which audiences are involved as fans affect how both consumers and producers see the relative value of media objects.

Our research on the 227 incident responds to this new perspective, and in our case study we clarify that the politics and various struggles in which fans are involved significantly influence consumption patterns in cultural industries, as well as the management models of media platforms, which constitute an essential part of fan culture. A new cultural hierarchy is forming within fan culture, where discrimination and power relations are maintained and reconstructed within fandom (Sandvoss, 2005). 'Fandom is about consumption and production, resistance and collusion' (Duffet, 2013, 288). This assertion seems to attribute the establishment of fans' hierarchies and conflicts to the relationship between consumption and production at the economic level. Scott (2009) and Coppa (2014) also mention the risk of monetising fan practices, and the power differentials that may result from monetisation as an explanation for fan hierarchies. Fans' participation in cultural production and consumption leads to different kinds of power being given to fans, but we argue that such an interpretation, which is mainly relevant to capital, fails to explain the root of fan conflicts. In China's political economy, state power permeates all aspects of cultural production and consumption, exerting a deep-rooted influence on fan practices at the ideological level. Our study offers a non-Western perspective on fan conflicts, exploring how fan practices take different shapes in Chinese political and socio-cultural contexts.

The relationship between fans and anti-fans, and between politics, norms, and state power, has been examined by fan studies scholars. In his research on electoral politics, Sandvoss (2019) demonstrates that anti-fans can influence political participation and democracy generally. McCulloch (2019) interprets the expressions of anti-fans as being constrained by norms and social expectations, while Phillips (2019) argues that fans' expressions of dislike reinforce normative ideologies of race, class, and gender. These studies challenge the prevailing wisdom about anti-fans and inform our research. Our interpretation of the 227 incident and fans of *The Untamed* argues that the resistance of fans and anti-fans to mainstream culture is questionable: fans reiterate, reproduce, and even intensify heteronormative hegemony and censorship sensitivities when they express anger about cultural products and engage in conflicts with each other.

Prior research into the relationship between fan communities and state power in China has found that women of different educational backgrounds, socioeconomic status, locations, and ages have formed diverse online fan communities (Zheng, 2016). Female fan culture, especially in relation to the fantasies and consumption of BL elements, may reflect a form of resistance to the mainstream culture dominated by men. Liu (2009) compares the resistance strategies of BL fans in mainland China and Hong Kong and determines that BL resistance is cultivated and disseminated through social networks. Wood (2013) refers to the contribution such BL texts make to the creation of a 'discursive space . . . among an intimate network of strangers', a 'counter-public resistant to blithely consuming idealised heteronormative media'. Similarly, the notion of counter-publics has been adopted to analyse BL-adapted dramas. For example, Hu and Wang (2020) analyse how Chinese fans of the online drama *S.C.I Mystery* (Youku Video, 2019) use the notion of bromance as a form of masquerade to resist state censorship and increase the visibility of the BL subculture. That is, the practice of reimagining media texts to better meet fans' needs can be a form of resistance to existing power structures (Stanfill, 2020). In such a view, fans may find alternative subcultures that compete with the dominant culture.

However, some studies doubt that these forms of fan subculture amount to resistance to the mainstream. Recent scholarship (see Ge, 2022) has demonstrated that escaping into the world of popular media does not mean that individuals are escaping the systems of discrimination and power that define society at large. Instead, the hierarchy of mainstream society is re-created or reconstituted by fan cultures (Pande, 2018). As Yang and Xu (2016) suggest, under the censorship regime in mainland China, fans have mostly adopted what James Scott (1985, 241) calls 'the weapons of the weak' or 'cautious resistance and calculated conformity'. Chinese fan culture constantly negotiates with – and even assimilates – mainstream culture (Zheng, 2016). Ng and Li (2020) illustrate how female fans of BL drama negotiate both the heteronormatively structured nationalist policies and the highly gendered, consumerist culture of China's mainstream society and its entertainment industries. This negotiation is manifested in how Chinese women skilfully exercise their sexual agency. In a different way, Ge (2022) suggests that young female fans are, at the same time, demonstrating a dual ambivalence – internalised heteronormativity and misogyny – when they work as a counterpublic. Moreover, Zhang (2016) observes that fans can be mobilised to participate in society, but there are other forms of fan mobilisation in contemporary China too. Huang (2021) and Schneider (2018) have used the term 'fandom nationalism' in their studies of Chinese

fans' political participation, with Liu (2019) proposing that this form of fandom is a unique combination of nationalism, digital culture, and commercial culture.

Based on our study of the 227 incident, we argue that the relationship between fan communities and state power is not merely one in which fans are passively mobilised into public participation. Rather, some fans proactively use state censorship as a weapon in their conflicts with other fans. We have termed fans who conduct such practices the 'fandom police', a group who imagine themselves as enforcers of censorship, internalise disciplinary power as an ideology that guides fan practices, and report 'illegal' fan speech and products to the government. However, we also suggest that the power of the fandom police is illusory: these fans are constantly monitored and exploited by state power. These fans briefly gain the power to censor their rivals, and ostensibly appear to defend mainstream power discourses to punish behaviour that does not conform to the values advocated by the government. However, fans themselves are also the targets of enforcement by anti-fans. By claiming their 'non-fan' status, Xiao's anti-fans make themselves part of the mainstream, thereby gaining the legitimacy to report on the hateful fan subculture among Xiao's fans in the same way. But the power of the fandom police is exploited by the state to censor media users' comments and products, with the ultimate consequence of perpetuating censorship and heteronormativity, thereby exacerbating the self-censorship and mutual reporting of media users.

Methodology

As 'knowledge of the Internet as a cultural context is intrinsically tied up with the application of ethnography' (Hine, 2013, 8), this article uses digital ethnography to analyse and contextualise the fan conflicts in the 227 incident. Fans' assemblage and collective actions rely heavily on social media, so digital participant observation is an effective method to observe fans' cultural practices. As these sensational and prolonged conflicts originated within Xiao's fan communities, an insider's perspective helps to comprehend the intricate relationships among different subcommunities. Both authors are fans of *The Untamed* and have long been involved in different fan communities devoted to this drama. The ethnographic first-hand materials for this study were obtained during the fieldwork we conducted with ethical approval from our home institution.

Our online participant observation began in June 2019, when *The Untamed* was first released, and continued until May 2020. From June 2019 to May 2020, we conducted a 12-month digital ethnographic study on Weibo, a major Chinese social media platform that is akin to Twitter. The anonymity and openness of Weibo provides fans with a free platform to communicate and form online subcommunities. Thus, Weibo also functions as a major site for Xiao's fandom to assemble, form subcommunities, and collectively promote Xiao's public image. Fan activities include releasing fan-made products, writing posts, and comments with hashtags. We mainly observed the following sites: Xiao's Weibo account, *The Untamed*'s Weibo account, and webpages under hashtags including #Xiaozhan, #Bojun-Yixiao, #The Untamed, #227 Union, #I'm an ordinary person and I hate Xiao Zhan, and related derivative hashtag webpages.

The information we obtained through participant observation was sourced from fully public content on Weibo, and to protect our informants, the fan comments we

observed were paraphrased and de-identified to ensure that they were not identifiable to the community. Moreover, from February to May 2020, we interviewed three fans involved in the 227 incident. These anonymous informants were asked about their personal reflections on and experiences of participating in the fan conflicts. We talked with each informant four times from February to May 2020, for a total of 12 interviews. The three informants identified themselves as an Only-fan, a CP-fan, and an anti-fan of Xiao respectively. All were leading fans with more than 1,000 followers on Weibo, and thus played a role in influencing other fans' opinions and actions during the 227 incident.

Hierarchical Fan Subcommunities and Power Structures

As is the case with other Chinese BL-adapted dramas, women made up most of the *The Untamed* fan community in the summer of 2019 (Ge, 2022). Among fans of Xiao, the Only-fan and CP-fan subcommunities are distinct. These subcommunities produce and consume different images of Xiao, and their imagined relationship with Xiao determines the makeup of their communities. This has given rise to constant tension between these subcommunities. Only-fans tend to construct and promote Xiao as a single, glamorous, and versatile star, and most importantly, as their ideal boyfriend or husband. By contrast, CP-fans produce images of Xiao based on their fantasies about his coupling with another male star. These fans have created various homo-romantic materials regarding the couple, which have been predominantly produced, consumed, and circulated under the hashtag #Bojun-Yixiao ('let you smile'). CP-fans use this term, which combines Xiao's and Wang's real names, to refer to these two actors as a 'real couple' (Wang Yibo and Xiao Zhan). Other fan subcommunities include 'Wang-Xian', which refers to the two main characters in the drama. These phrases also signify the different fan communities and their preferred types of male–male coupling.

As shown in Figure 1, Only-fans make up the majority of the Xiao fan community. They consider themselves superior to CP-fans, in that they believe they are more loyal and dedicated. The relatively smaller number of CP-fans are also divided into various subcommunities in accordance with their preferences. The power structure within these subcommunities is hierarchical, forming a pyramid-like structure. Within each subcommunity, the relationship between fans is unequal (see Figure 2). Fans place great store in the opinions of Xiao and the two male stars, who sit at the top of the pyramid, and these opinions guide the fans' activities. It is worth noting, though, that behind the stars there are also talent agencies, production companies, and others who represent the economic capital of producers. Together they shape the persona of the stars, which may not correspond to the star's real character and behaviour. At the next level of the pyramid are the leading fans, who play important roles in the fan community. These fans acquire symbolic capital by building cultural, social, and economic capital among fans, which empowers the leading fans and enhances their influence. At the bottom of the pyramid are the ordinary fans, who, our analysis suggests, are no longer simply fans of the stars at the top. These fans have formed their own subcommunities with leading fans as their core. That is, the ordinary fans are not only fans of the stars, but may also

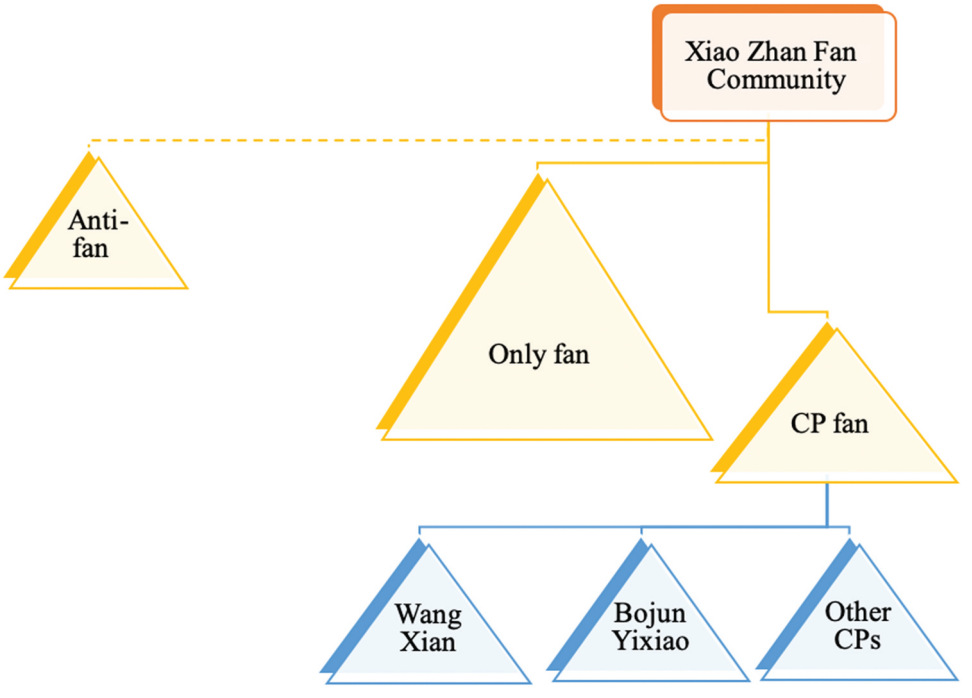

Figure 1. The structure of Xiao's fan community and subcommunities

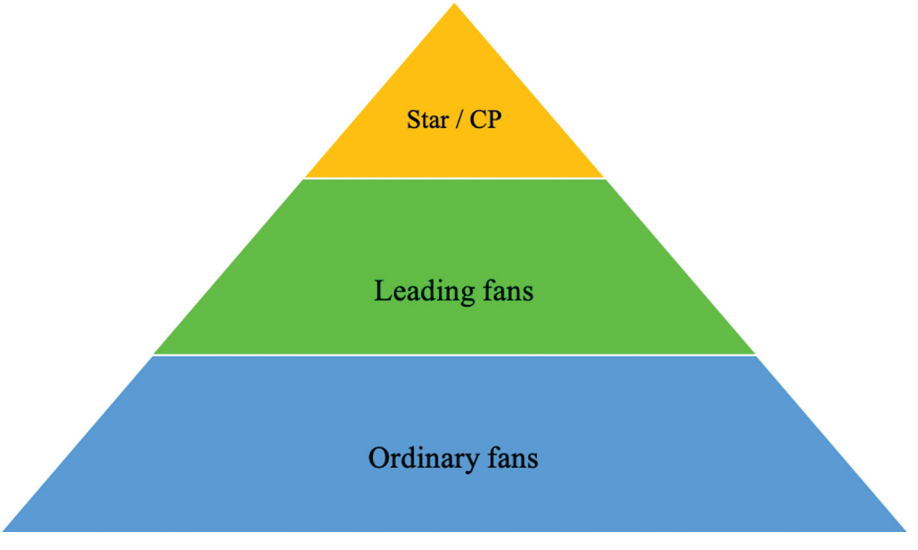

Figure 2. Hierarchy within the subcommunities

become fans of the leading fans: they trust these leaders, obey their orders, and defend their reputations and privileges.

Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital (1984; 1986) provides a way to analyse how fan 'status' is established (Hills, 2002). It helps us understand fan communities as hierarchies

in which fans compete for recognition and legitimacy. In such a hierarchy, 'fans share common interests while also competing over fan knowledge, access to the object of fandom, and status' (Hills, 2002, 20). Fan culture makes the members of fan communities value their own fanaticism and contributions, consider the star/CP as worthy of effort, and acknowledge their values – even though this acknowledgement may not be accepted by people outside the community. The production of fan culture creates a 'magic circle' (Huizinga, 1955), a 'transcendental grip' (Gadamer, 2013), an 'illusio' (Webb et al., 2002), or 'the temporary worlds within the ordinary world' (Booth, 2010), which establishes a kind of separation (Huizinga, 1955) that allows consumers of cultural products to leave the living space and enter another idealised realm beyond life.

Based on Bourdieu's conceptualisation of cultural capital, scholars in popular culture and fandom have proposed the notions of 'popular cultural capital' (Thornton, 1995) and 'fan cultural capital' (Fiske, 1992). Fiske (1992, 32) argues that fans occupy a 'popular habitus', a new, unclassed space that is devoted to the consumption of popular culture: 'popular cultural capital, unlike official cultural capital, is not typically convertible into economic capital' (1992, 34). Similarly, fan culture is considered by some academics to be based on gift exchange (de Kosnik, 2009; Stanfill, 2019). Fan-created texts and cultural products are in part theft of commercial property, and therefore must remain free to avoid the risk of litigation (Chin, 2018). This has led fan scholars to overlook the accumulation of economic capital when examining the empowerment of leading fans. This proved to be invalid in our study, where we found that the accumulation of economic capital is a specific means of self-empowerment for Chinese fans. Fan culture is seen as a subculture in China, and fan-made products are mostly circulated in the grey market. Fans use their social media accounts on platforms such as Weibo, WeChat, and QQ Groups to distribute information, and their followers form subcommunities around these fan artists in which they produce and sell fan-made products on a small scale. Some fan artists have also made large profits, as evidenced in our interviews:

> In our fan community, there are fans who have set up Weibo accounts as photo stations, posting photos of stars taken by themselves on various occasions without official permission, publishing and selling the photo books to their followers, making lots of money from them ... We jokingly say these photo station sisters could even buy sea-view houses ('Alice', aged 24, online interview, 10 March 2020).

However, fan artists often cannot accrue such revenue on their own and need to spend money to secure their status as leading fans. They can empower themselves by buying products such as drinks, makeup, and magazines that are endorsed by their beloved stars. This accumulation of economic capital is not only a consumer practice but also entails posting invoices publicly on Weibo. Ordinary fans appreciate these efforts to spend money on products that directly benefit the stars, so those fans who show evidence of large expenditure tend to attract more followers within the community and become leading fans. The posting of invoices on social media can be an effective way of transforming fans' economic capital into symbolic capital.

The accumulation of cultural capital is also a means of self-empowerment. In fan culture, this is manifested in two ways. The first is by publicly displaying one's educational background to gain admiration from other fans. As Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital (1984) suggests, fans acquire higher status and taste by showing and performing

their educational background, thus creating the possibility of becoming leading fans. Because a higher educational background is often associated with higher aesthetic tastes, fans often use the educational background of leading fans as a publicity stunt to prove that their idols are likeable and can appeal to a classy crowd of well-educated elites. One of our interviewees is an Only-fan and a leading fan who has more than 100,000 followers on Weibo. She posted on Weibo that she was admitted to an elite Chinese university as a postgraduate student with the highest grades, and showed her excellent transcripts to gain discourse power in the Only-fan subcommunity. However, this self-empowerment was still subjected to scrutiny from other fans, and her transcripts were questioned by some as fake and became subject to ridicule from other users outside the fan community. As a result, she eventually deactivated her Weibo account.

Thornton states that Bourdieu's view of cultural capital focuses on subcategories of capital that 'are all at play within Bourdieu's own field, within his social world of players with high volumes of institutionalised cultural capital. However, it is crucial to observe subspecies of capital operating within other less privileged domains' (Thornton, 1995, 11). Also, there is no one-to-one relationship between subcultural capital and class distinctions. Thornton's concept of subcultural capital is reflected in the second manifestation of fan self-empowerment, which involves building up one's subcultural capital through producing fan-made products such as fan fiction, manga, and video clips. In a fan community, fiction writers, cartoonists, and those who are good at video editing tend to have more power of speech and more followers.

Scholars such as Fiske have referred to 'fan cultural capital', or fans' knowledge of fandom, but there have been few studies dedicated to 'fan social capital' (Hills, 2002), which is acquired through making fan friends, establishing networks of acquaintances, and approaching media producers and professionals associated with the object of fandom. Fan social capital is particularly important among Chinese fans, because in addition to accumulating cultural capital, another important way to gain a higher position and status in fan communities is to accumulate social capital, mainly in terms of personal connections. Some fans are professionals in the media and entertainment industries and therefore have easier access to first-hand information and media resources. These fans often post 'exclusives' and industry commentary to build their own profiles within the fan community, thereby gaining a greater voice and more followers.

These empowered leading fans tend to be in a higher position in the subcommunities, with a certain level of convening power and leadership, but they are also given more responsibility. Leading fans are obligated to act as the voice of the community on important issues, such as reminding fans to be careful about what they say on sensitive political anniversaries. Their actions are constantly exposed to the attention of the fan community as well, and their words and actions often become the standard for how to be a fan. We also observed that the leading fan label not only helps them to attract many followers, but also forces them to take a stand and have a voice in fan conflicts, and to lead their fans to 'battle'. If a leading fan remains silent during a conflict, they may be condemned by other fans and their status as a leading fan will be challenged and attacked. Therefore, leading fans in a community gain a stronger voice and more prestige through self-empowerment, but they also lose some of their agency: their words, actions, and consumption practices are subject to the critical judgement of the community. Thus, although they have the power to set some rules in their communities, their words and

deeds are also subject to fans' surveillance. It is these leading fans who have become central to the collective reporting activities in fan conflicts.

Conflicts Start: Censorship Sensibilities and Internalised Heteronormativity

In general, Only-fans and CP-fans tacitly follow the rule of *Quandi Zimeng* ('QDZM'), or literally to 'enjoy oneself in one's own circle'. This is like McRobbie and Garber's (2006[1975]) view of subcultures, in that fans form a kind of 'defensive retreat' to avoid being constrained and judged by those who identify with the dominant culture. The formation of a community provides fans with a relatively independent and closed space. Fans who identify as members of a subcommunity have the right to enter the space and freely express, in the case of CP-fans, their male-homoerotic imagination. This is because all members of the community are considered to be 'us' and share similar gendered roles and coupling fantasies. However, QDZM reflects a de facto heteronormative landscape within Xiao's fandom: his Only-fans see themselves as superior, while CP-fans feel they are inferior or deviant compared to the heterosexual intimate fantasy embraced by the Only-fans. Specifically, the QDZM rule for CP-fans means that they need to use abbreviations or code names when discussing topics related to male coupling, to ensure that idols' names cannot be found by using Weibo's search function. Only-fans occupy broader online spaces than CP-fans. Only-fans work as digital labour (Yin, 2020) to promote and maintain their idol's public image. The right to discuss idol names is seen as the prerogative of the Only-fan subcommunity, and they often search for idol names as part of their fandom practices to ensure that the search results are positive and in line with the mainstream values of Chinese society. This means that CP-fantasies are excluded from the content that is acceptable to Only-fans. Once one subcommunity crosses the boundaries and breaks the QDZM rule, subcommunity conflicts between Only-fans and CP-fans will be provoked. Thus, it is no wonder that, in February 2020, a major conflict between Xiao's Only-fans and CP-fans erupted after the appearance of a particular piece of fan fiction created by CP-fans.

On 14 February 2020, a CP-fan author published her fan fiction on Weibo and AO3 simultaneously. This fiction was called *Xiazhui* ('Falling') and was a homoerotic story involving Xiao, who is a transgender prostitute, and Wang, a high-school student. Such a controversial theme was then detected by the Only-fans on Weibo, who expressed their strong dissatisfaction with this erotic writing. Leading Only-fans alleged that the obscene fiction first 'feminised' Xiao to construct him as a male-trans-female prostitute, which they took as a serious personal insult. Only-fans started to collectively make complaints and report this fiction to the Weibo administrative team and the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC), claiming the fiction's explicit erotic descriptions of illegal prostitution could have an extremely detrimental influence on juveniles. For instance, a post on 26 February 2020 by a leading Only-fan with more than 100,000 followers on Weibo advised other fans to make a report to the CAC on the grounds that the fiction would have a bad influence on underage juveniles (see Figure 3). The post also emphasised that calling the CAC would be the most effective way to make a report:

> Reporting by phone call is the best.
>
> The essence of this stuff is because someone posted [underage], [prostitute], and [erotic] fiction on [Weibo], an open-access platform. Many users with a large number of followers re-post and recommend this fiction, which would make many underage adolescents read it. Such fiction disseminates [the vicious idea of prostitution], which seriously affects the psychological health of the underaged, and damages the Internet environment.
>
> When we report to the CAC, let's use the above wording and not stray from the point (See Figure 3).

Subsequently, the author had to delete all her works on Weibo because of pressure and threats from the Only-fans, and the government then banned AO3 entirely. For Chinese fans belonging to other communities, AO3 is regarded as a crucial site for fan creation. Thus, a far wider constituency of participants in fan culture became furious with the Only-fans. On 27 February 2020, Xiao's anti-fans collaborated with the other non-fans who were adversely affected by the banning of AO3 to retaliate against Xiao online, using the hashtag #227Union. They organised a boycott of Xiao's commercial endorsements, films, and TV dramas. The call for a boycott further intensified the conflict. Mutual defamation and attacks within and among these subcommunities kept simmering for several months, and the dispute even extended offline. In response, on 22 May and 13 July 2020, the CAC published new policies for the 2020 'Sweep-Up Campaign' to urge social media platforms to strictly control material that was deemed harmful to adolescents, such as vitriolic fan conflicts and starstruck behaviour (CAC, 2020). However, public opinion towards Xiao and other BL-adapted stars has remained negative, with ongoing attacks and cyber-bullying against male stars and fan culture.

Both the Only-fans' excuses for reporting the fiction and the CP-fans' retreat reflect deep-rooted misogyny and homophobia, which has internalised heteronormativity with the backing of the Chinese state. During this conflict, the Only-fans objected to the feminisation of Xiao's image as a male star in the fan fiction *Xiazhui*, which reveals the

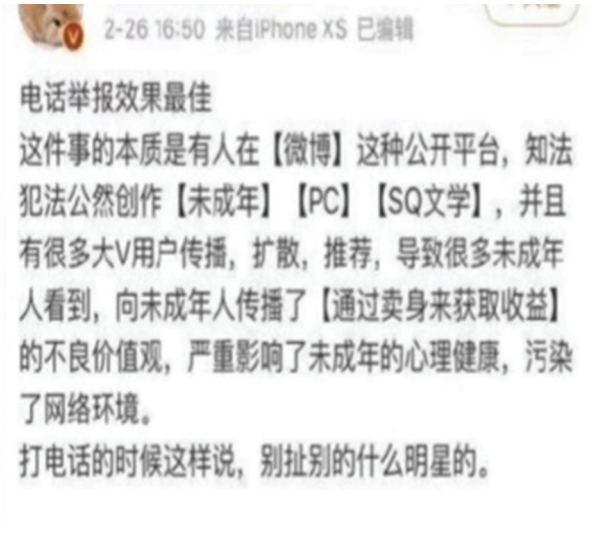

Figure 3. A leading Only-fan of Xiao explains how to make a report to the CAC

internalised misogyny among these fans, who are predominantly women. In a Weibo post under the tag '#I Love Xiao Zhan', which received more than 7,000 likes, one Only-fan said that 'I will break the legs of anyone who wants to feminise Xiao!' Femininity in the homoerotic fiction was regarded by the Only-fans as detrimental to Xiao's public persona as a masculine, heterosexual, and cis-gender male. Such an assertion among the Only-fans is not merely because these predominantly female fans consider Xiao to be their ideal partner (boyfriend/husband), but also because they believe that a mainstream cis-heteronormative public image would be more economically lucrative for Xiao. This belief also reflects a form of widespread misogyny (Banet-Weiser, 2018), the systematic devaluing and dehumanising of women, where women are regarded as a means to an end. Butler (1990) conceptualises the compulsory heterosexual matrix in which heteronormative power naturalises and designates the consistency in sex, gender, and sexuality, and the binary sex/gender system. The Only-fans identify with the heterosexual matrix discourse and urge other subcommunities to follow its disciplinary power. Hence, CP-fans who are obsessed with homo-romance or erotica have been marginalised by Only-fans and have not gained the authority to represent and speak for Xiao's fandom.

In the online conflict between the Xiao fans, we argue that the CP-fans tacitly agreed that they were inferior and deviant compared to the Only-fans. They preferred to remain in their own confined spaces, because they knew that the male–male romance they love was not accepted by the mainstream. They therefore chose to escape the mainstream. These fans enjoy imagining male–male romance between either the characters or the actors, but heteronormative narratives are still the default norm in their mindset. Moreover, the Only-fans were hostile towards the *Xiazhui* story and were furious about the depiction of Xiao as a transgender prostitute. When Xiao's female fans insist that the image of a transgender female prostitute is a serious insult to the star, it is an internalised misogyny and cis-heteronormativity that informs their hatred for this fiction, CP-fans, and BL culture. Within the online conflict, there were also plenty of anti-effeminate and homophobic posts in attacks by the Only-fans, who reported to the CAC on the grounds noted above and who became complicit with state power in perpetuating heteronormativity in Chinese society.

Such an internalisation of heteronormativity has also been the motivation for the practice of reporting. The number of Internet-mediated justice cases against celebrities has increased significantly since 2013, a trend that is inseparable from the rise of Weibo and the establishment of social media reporting systems (Huang, 2021). In order to censor cultural products and media users' speech, the government established a reporting mechanism on Weibo. Any registered user can report a post, comment, or Weibo user. Reporters are required to elaborate on what policies they believe a comment violates. Interestingly, this mechanism appears to empower users in monitoring others' speech, but it is still up to Weibo administrators to decide whether the reported information is ultimately illegal. Because of these vague censorship criteria, fans have developed a set of reporting tactics that they believe to be effective. When reporting, fans choose the reasons that are likely to result in bans by the administrators and post these specific reasons within their subcommunities. This reporting practice has become well developed and common among fans, with leading fans summarising the effective tactics and appealing to other fans to make reports. Reporting has become an effective weapon for dealing with fan conflicts when there are significant differences of opinion. This mechanism offers

whistleblowers a means to make their claims and thereby smear rival fans, thus convincing fans that they have the power to enforce censorship and become the 'fandom police' to punish illegal speech. 'Fandom police' is a derisive term used by fans who have been reported.

Conflicts Expand: Outside Reporting on the Fandom Police

This article analyses the sociality of anti-fans and the interaction among fan/anti-fan subcommunities by treating anti-fans as more than merely individual fans (e.g., Gray, 2003; 2021) and instead focusing on power dynamics within these communities. The case of Xiao's fandom and the 227 incident illustrates the roles of all participants in this conflict, whether they see themselves as fans or not. Members of the community who self-identify as fans or anti-fans, as well as those outside the community who do not identify as fans but instead regard themselves as non-fans, were all engaged in a conflict that internalised the sensibility of censorship. Victims of fan policing, similarly, used the same grounds and means to make reports against Xiao fans and even against Xiao's commercial endorsements and attendance at business events. Consequently, the 227 incident expanded from the original conflict between the Only-fan and CP-fan subcommunities to a conflict between the entire fan community and Xiao's haters, including anti-fans and outsiders who did not identify as fans. The conflict has had a major impact on the Chinese media industry and the social public sphere. Therefore, we developed a model

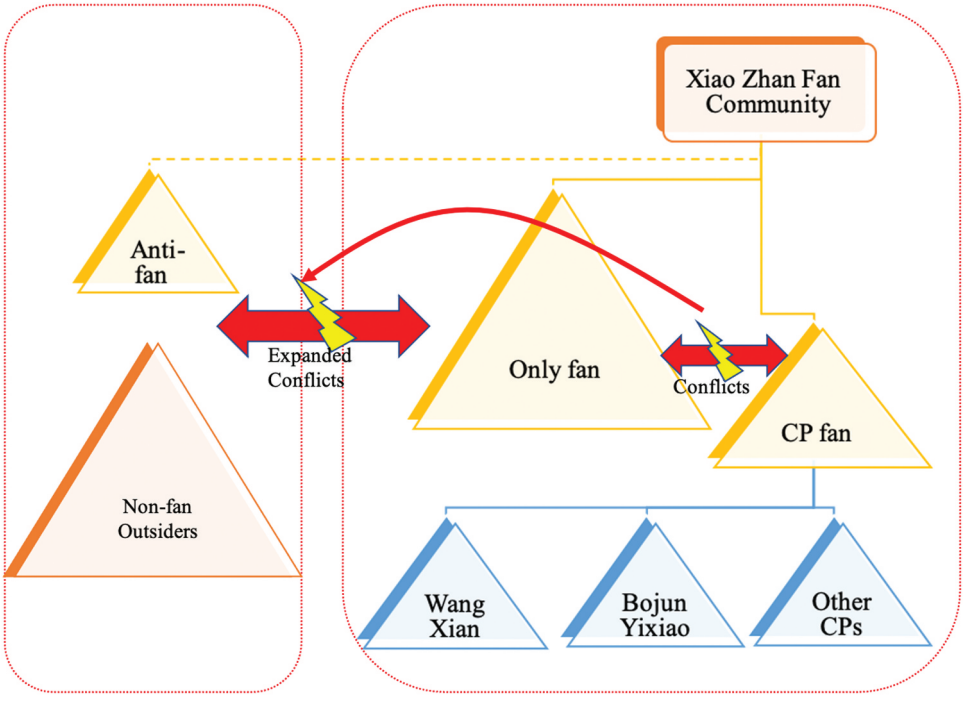

Figure 4. A model of the power relations in the fan conflict

(Figure 4) to describe the power relations of the fan conflicts, based on the power structure models within the fan community (see Figures 1 and 2).

After the government blocked AO3, fans from outside Xiao's fan community angrily denounced his fans and blamed Xiao himself for the closure of the platform. Non-fans elevated their conflict with Xiao's fans to the level of defending the freedom of creation, thus legitimising their boycott through widespread solidarity. On Weibo, non-fans denounced Xiao's fans for reporting on BL fan fiction and the creative platform for creating a 'literary prison'. They noted that there are many characters who are prostitutes in Chinese and foreign literary masterpieces, which garnered much support. The anti-fans and non-fans also used the tag '#I'm an ordinary person, and I hate Xiao Zhan' on Weibo to publicise the scandals surrounding Xiao, make abusive comments about him, and even fabricate rumours, as counter-responses to the Only-fans' actions. These anti-fans and non-fans also formed a relatively united subcommunity on Weibo by reposting, discussing, and showing solidarity with each other, and thus became as organised as their fan counterparts. Some leading fans have emerged at the higher levels of these anti-fan and non-fan subcommunities, gaining many followers. These leading fans often posted about scandals involving Xiao, amplified media reports critical of Xiao, and collected 'bad' news about his fans. They have even taken the same approach as the Only-fans in the 227 incident by initiating reports on Weibo to encourage further reports by anti-fans and non-fans of Xiao and his Only-fans. They claim that Xiao's fan activities have a negative impact on Chinese youth, leading underage fans to mindless consumption and worship. Most of these posts carry the tag '#I'm an ordinary person, and I hate Xiao Zhan'. If Weibo users click on the tag, it takes them to a summary page of all the criticisms of Xiao and his fans. By 13 January 2021, this tag page had just over 3 billion reads, almost 5 million discussion posts, and more than 170,000 participants.[2]

By using this tag, these anti-fan and non-fan subcommunities have also achieved intra-community discussion and interaction. On the one hand, they are victims of fan conflicts and reporting, in the name of defending the freedom of creativity against the abuse of state power by the fandom police. On the other, they make use of similar or even the same tactics, using the censorship of state power to report on Xiao and his fans. One comment added by our non-fan informant when reposting a leading fan's instructions on the reporting process states: '#I'm an ordinary person, and I hate Xiao Zhan. I actually didn't want to do it, but I had no other choice. Reporting is the only effective way to punish him and his idiot fans'.

The ideology of 'reporting is effective' is deeply rooted in the minds of non-fans. By drawing a clear line with fan culture, they seem to be demonstrating their disdain for the practices and reporting activities of fans, and their contempt for these antagonistic fan conflicts. They thereby have moralised and legitimised their own statements, even though they too have internalised the sensibilities of censorship.

We therefore suggest that the root of the conflicts between fan subcommunities derives from the fans' internalised identification with and subservience to the normative power discourses backed by the state. The BL fiction created by CP-fans contains elements that contradict the heteronormative discourse, such as an effeminate man, transgenderism, and prostitution. These themes are seen as sensitive and in need of *quandi zimeng*, and this perception itself is tantamount to rendering these themes ignoble and not in keeping with the mainstream values of Chinese society.

The 'defensive retreat' of CP-fans in the conflict also stems from a deep-rooted identification with mainstream culture and the internalisation of heteronormativity. Dai (2017) argues that Chinese BL culture is not a narrative that oversteps and sets aside power relations; rather, it reproduces and reiterates the power discourse in the real world. This is also true of the female-dominated fan culture, which is not resistant to mainstream culture or even a negotiation with it, but whose underlying power logic still reproduces heteronormativity and censorship sensibilities. The heteronormative narratives and the 'reporting is effective' belief seem to be an omnipresent spectre that pervades all subcultures, including female fans who seek to escape the patriarchy and establish a female subjectivity and an independent imaginary space. In the interaction of anti-fans and non-fans, we also see a schizophrenic phenomenon: people who consider themselves outside a fan community are sometimes harmed by fan conflicts, stand in opposition to that community, and fiercely criticise the fans' reporting and fan culture. However, self-identification as non-fans does not mean that they completely dissociate themselves from the power discourse of fans. On the contrary, non-fans continued to reproduce and reiterate the same normative power discourses, using the same means of reporting to censors to retaliate against Xiao and his fans. These non-fans in fact came to embody the fandom police that they hate. The heteronormative discourse and mutual reporting were thus reproduced in these extended fan conflicts.

Conclusion: Fandom Police with Illusory Power

This article provides a groundbreaking examination of the power dynamics of fan/anti-fan subcommunities and their interactions. Our analysis of the empowerment of leading fans fills a gap in the understanding of the accumulation of social capital by fans. It also highlights the nuances of fans' cultural and sub-cultural capital. More importantly, we discuss the interaction between fan communities and state power, which not only shapes fan practices but also influences fans' cultural consumption and the governance of media platforms.

The reporting mechanism created by censorship appears to provide equal power to all users, with fans on social media platforms taking on the persona of imagined enforcers who consider themselves to be fandom police by using this mechanism to make accusations against rival fans. In the process of reporting, fans often exaggerate the negative effects of their rivals' speech and actions using the pretext that they endanger vulnerable groups such as juveniles to justify their retaliation on a moral and legal level. This post-revolutionary thinking is embedded in fans' behaviour, internalising the logic of censoring and reporting as a code of conduct and an effective weapon for winning fan conflicts. As a leading non-fan informant ('Becky', aged 28, online interview, 20 August 2020) revealed in an interview:

> *Becky*: After all, many aspects of fan culture in China are in a grey area. We get high on CP, write erotic fiction, imagine male–male romantic relationships, collect money for supporting idols, etc. These practices are in themselves a legal foul. But if you don't report it, the 'above' won't care, and we'll still have freedom … It's all the fault of these fandom police; they are obviously fans themselves, but report their fellows to gain a momentary victory, while in fact, they're the ones who lose in the end.

Authors: The fandom police are so annoying, but why do people still report?

Becky: Because reporting does work! It is easy to find problems with the enemy's speeches, and whether they are harmful to young people, or even anti-Communist, we can always find a charge to put our rivals to 'death'.

'Reporting is effective!' has become the credo for media users, whether they are fans, anti-fans, or non-fans. They internalise the power discourses of heteronormativity and see fan practices that do not conform to heteronormative narratives as 'harmful' and 'unjustified'. This internalised power logic does not mean that fans are unaware of censorship. On the contrary, when dealing with fan conflicts, they actively use the reporting mechanisms of censorship to stigmatise and report the speech and behaviour of rival fans as 'harmful'. However, this internalised power is imagined and illusory. It does not allow fans to gain higher social status and more power; rather, the 'internecine struggle' in fandom has made fan communities increasingly vulnerable.

Fans use the reporting mechanism backed by state power to censor their rivals in fan conflicts, but these reporting practices are incorporated into governmental monitoring and become the very object of governance. In other words, the government's connivance with reporting by fans and the punishment of reported rivals makes the idea of 'reporting is effective' deeply rooted in the minds of fans, who thus replace the government as the fandom police of speech and cultural products. This is a form of self-censorship by fan communities. Fans are always subject to manipulation and exploitation by state power, and the use of censorship by fans in effect becomes the governmentality of state power to monitor fans. Thus, although the relationship between the fan community and state power in fan conflicts appears to be mutually exploitative, fans always remain the vulnerable party that is monitored and censored. Under the constant surveillance and intervention of state power in the Chinese cultural sphere, the creative space for fan communities will continue to shrink. Fans' production of mainstream discourses will not only perpetuate and reinforce mainstream heteronormativity backed by the state, but will also weaken the resistance identified by previous studies of fans. It will make fan culture subordinate to state power.

Notes

1 BL (Boys' Love) originated as a genre of Japanese *manga* in the 1970s. It focuses on 'love, sex, and romance between boys and young men' and has featured in a variety of cultural texts (Martin, 2012, 365).
2 https://s.weibo.com/weibo?q=%23%E6%88%91%E6%98%AF%E6%99%AE%E9%80%9A%E4%BA%BA%2C%E6%88%91%E8%AE%A8%E5%8E%8C%E8%82%96%E6%88%98%23&from=default.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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