

Participatory Censorship and Digital Queer Fandom: The Commercialization of Boys' Love Culture in China

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This article investigates the role of fans as content regulators in what we call the China model of Internet censorship. Expanding on Jenkins' participatory culture, we construct a framework of participatory censorship by focusing on how fans use the report function on social media platforms. We define "participatory censorship" as a type of decentralized censorship and content moderation facilitated by platform design and adopted by wider cyber groups and individuals. Based on discourse analysis, participatory observation, and digital ethnography, this article explores the boys' love (BL) fandom of the Web series *Guardian* in 2018. We explore how participatory censoring via *jubao* (reporting) creates micro rules and draws the parameters of the discourses that try to limit queer expressions of gender, sexuality, and relationships to achieve a more commercially successful fandom. We also investigate how other fans respond to participatory censorship by generating collective actions. Ultimately, this article connects queer fandom and censorship studies to relocate the queerness of BL fandom in not only experimenting with cultural texts but also creative responses to decentralized censorship.

Keywords: queer, participatory censorship, fandom, boys' love commercialization, reporting

In 2018, Tianyi, a prominent Chinese writer famous for creating online erotica of male homosexual themes, also known as boys' love (BL) or *danmei* in Chinese, was sentenced to more than 10 years in prison for producing and selling obscene material, a harsh verdict that shocked Chinese BL fans and the general public, and was widely reported on international news media (Hernández & Zhang, 2018; Shepherd, 2018). While publishing pornographic content is illegal in China, writing erotica online and publishing hard copies constitute a gray area that rarely leads to serious legal consequences. Notably, the arrest of Tianyi was the result of *jubao*, or being reported. In addition to the widely publicized Tianyi case, several other Chinese BL writers have been fined, arrested, and even sentenced because of being reported by others. Unlike Tianyi, who was reported by a non-BL fan, many other BL writers are often jeopardized as a result of disputes, including reporting among BL writers and fans. For example, a woman using the alias Mr. Shenhai was

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sentenced to four years in prison in 2017 for writing pornographic content and illegal publishing because another BL fan and writer reported her (Yuan, 2019).

The criminalization of BL writers Tianyi and Mr. Shenhai exemplifies a much larger shift taking place in Internet censorship and fandom in mainland China. Millions of fans have contributed significantly to the success of numerous singers, actors, and other celebrities in China during the last few decades, where fan culture has bloomed. Like in many other countries, fan participation takes a variety of forms in China, including online discussions of specific cultural products or individuals, showing support in offline events such as performances or events, or buying products of brands sponsored by celebrities, or even purchasing advertisement spaces for celebrities, and so on. The criminalization of BL writers highlights the specificities of fandom in China, which is related to the Internet censorship in China. China is famous for The Golden Shield Project, also known as the Great Firewall, which blocks foreign data selectively (Roberts, 2018), the keyword-blocking algorithm (Rambert, Weinberg, Barradas, & Christin, 2021), and the human censors hired by the government and major media platforms (King, Pan, & Roberts, 2014). In recent years, the Chinese government has strengthened its content regulation by enacting new legislation on cybersecurity, launching online “cleansing” campaigns, and providing incentives for reporting among netizens (Wang, 2021; Yang & Mueller, 2014). In this context, reporting has gradually become integrated into fans’ daily activities and could at times bring about severe consequences for those who create or disseminate controversial content such as BL novels. Online forums and social media platforms also play a role in this shift as many platforms have changed their design to incorporate report functions. The criminalization of BL writers is part of the result of an emerging trend in what we call the China model of Internet censorship.

We categorize the Internet censorship features discussed above as the China model of Internet censorship for two reasons. First, it has become a model from which many other countries are learning; for instance, Venezuela and Sri Lanka have imported content-filtering technologies from China (Polyakova & Meserole, 2019; Weber, 2019). Second, we prefer the usage of “the China model of Internet censorship” instead of terms such as “Internet censorship with Chinese characteristics,” as we are aware of the multiplicity of Chineseness. While China’s Internet censorship model often grabs international media attention and scholarly interest because of its sheer scale, intensity, and international impact, Internet censorship operates in different ways in other Sinophone societies such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore. Since the 2000s, as we will review in more detail later, numerous scholarly works have pointed out how BL fandom is a queer fandom that destabilizes heterosexuality, challenges social norms, and provides a collective space for intellectual and affective engagement for fans, particularly female fans in various Sinophone societies and other Asian contexts (Martin, 2012; Ng & Li, 2020; Wood, 2006, 2013; Zhang, 2016). In this queer BL fandom scholarship, when discussing state censorship and the governance of fandom, BL fans are often seen as either victims of the state-sanctioned cultural production system, which prohibits or censors homosexuality, or as proactive practitioners who bypass the effects of censorship, and rarely as the participants who censor each other.

The shift in BL fandom and the reporting culture in China outlined above paints a drastically different picture from the discussions of BL fandom as a queer and digitally facilitated subculture. While many of the queer fandom arguments may still be relevant to contemporary BL fandom in China, the reporting from fans and the criminalization of BL writers draw attention to another field of inquiry—the study

on Internet censorship and surveillance systems. In particular, scholars have studied the “digital authoritarianism” and regulatory forces in places such as China and Singapore and how commercial digital platforms act in direct cooperation with the government to mobilize users online (Gillespie, 2018; Repnikova & Fang, 2018). The China model of Internet censorship discussed above contributes to the growing practices of “digital authoritarianism.” In the context of platform content censorship or moderation, platforms are often understood to function as intermediaries, and users appear as censorship collaborators who use the features designed for them by the platform to fulfill the platform’s design expectations. In China, where commercial platforms usually serve as the enforcers and supporters of state censorship through platform design and management, the distinction between state governance and commercial content moderation is blurring and opaque.

Examining the participation of BL fans on digital platforms, this article brings two fields into dialogue, namely censorship studies and fandom studies, particularly queer BL fandom studies. We follow the emergent works that focus on the entangled relationship between state violence and fandom operation in Islamic contexts (Oh, 2017) or where the state may use “fandom governance” and the political power of cuteness in cultivating a nationalist sense of belonging (Wong, Lee, Long, Wu, & Jones, 2021).

Through this article, we show the need to conceptualize the dynamic connection between fans and censorship by using the term “participatory censorship,” which stitches together the strong participatory features of fans with censorship and elucidates the interaction among and between online users and social media affordances through the example of BL fans. This article investigates how BL fans actively censor each other at the urging of the platforms. In the most notable cases, such as Tianyi and Mr. Shenhai, fans may bypass the platforms and complain directly to government regulators in the face of increasingly strict national censorship policies. These high-profile cases may lead to government penalties against the platforms, thus making them more stringent in censoring content. However, most of the censoring of each other among fans is in more mundane forms that take place on various digital platforms. Thus, this study develops the notion of participatory censorship to describe how fans are expanding their engagement with censorship as regular fan activity.

From Participatory Culture to Participatory Censorship in Online (Queer) Fandom

The notion of participatory culture has been used to describe the activities and creations of fans in the context of the convergence culture (Jenkins, 2008), which establishes a model of understanding that centers on audience participation and grassroots, multiform communication that goes beyond active traditional media content production (Jenkins, 2004, 2014). Fans are highly active individuals in this process of constructing and spreading the internal discourse of the fan community, and they can continue to deliver the “coperformance” on social media platforms through collaboration and mutual encouragement to attract more people to learn about and even join the fan community (Zhang, 2018). The participatory culture of fans has been studied from different angles, including the relationship between their free labor as prosumers and the digital media landscape (Boxman-Shabtai, 2018; Jenkins, 2004; J. M. Roberts, 2016; Zhang & Negus, 2020). Participatory culture can also turn into fan activism, which is closely related to youth political participation (Andini & Akhni, 2021) and has collective impacts on the national and transnational levels (Hodges, 2019; Jenkins, 2011).

The empowerment of participatory culture is also evident in the study of Asian BL culture as queer fandom. By creatively mismatching everyday constructions of masculinities, BL culture creates a critical queer hermeneutic that destabilizes the presumed naturalness of normative, hierarchical knowledge systems (Baudinette, 2020; Gong, 2017; Santos, 2020). BL cultures are not simply queer because they depict homoerotic romantic and erotic stories among men but rather because they “ultimately reject any kind of monolithic understanding of gendered or sexual identity” (Wood, 2006, p. 397) by providing fluid identifications and interpretations among its audience. In other words, it is not just the homosexual content within the text but also the diverse engagements of the audience that makes BL culture queer. As more publishers and distributors began to license and sell BL-related cultural products, the niche market for BL opens up new fantasies and ways of reading for audiences, and queer meanings in texts erased by censorship may be reintroduced into the work (Wood, 2013). For individual fans, in a female-dominated BL fandom, participants can achieve various goals while producing cultural capital (Feng, 2013). Chinese BL communities have also developed a strong sense of fan autonomy, with heated discussions to reach a consensus and establish new standards for the community (Yang & Xu, 2016). BL culture, as part of the growing global queer fandom cultures, is recognized as a transcultural affective force in the neoliberal era that has the potential to dismantle the identity-based structure of inequalities to achieve concrete social changes (Wong, 2020; Zhang, 2017).

While the notion of participatory culture often emphasizes the active agency of the fans and the empowering effect of fandom, the less progressive aspects of fandom are frequently disregarded. If we look closer at Henry Jenkins’ writing, which usually is seen to be celebratory regarding the power of fandom, we can notice how corporate copyright and censorship can influence participatory culture, as “citizens sometimes adopt bottom-up approaches to suppress others” and “changes in network technology do not always lead to democratic outcomes” (Jenkins, 2008, pp. 293–294). Fran Martin (2012) looks at how the BL scene functions as a participatory space in which complex debates around gender and sexuality play out through the fans’ reflections. She acknowledges that works on BL and fandom in fact “reproduce ambivalences around both homosexuality and feminine gender from the broader culture” (Martin, 2012, p. 374).

Expanding on these existing discussions on BL fandom as participatory culture and its complexities, this article proposes the term *participatory censorship* to address the aforementioned new phenomenon of the overlap between Internet censorship and digital fandom. Participatory censorship refers to the active participation in and engagement of decentralized censorship of online individual and group fans, which are shaped by digital platform design and policies. Unlike the typical understanding of censorship as state-imposed top-down regulations and actions, participatory censorship is a decentralized mechanism that depends on the activities of common individuals on the ground level, which usually relies heavily on the design and affordances of specific digital platforms.

The notion of participatory censorship bridges two streams of literature on Internet censorship. On the one hand, previous research on Internet censorship usually concentrates on how state censorship intertwines with digital platforms in regulating online content. Content censorship or moderation is achieved through a variety of collaborations between the state and the digital platform in varying degrees, from the removal of unlawful content, and the moderation of commercial content that generates profit, to stricter

ensorship such as keyword filtering (Gillespie, 2018; Hunt & Xu, 2013; S. T. Roberts, 2016). For example, China's "strict responsibility" policy mandates that Internet intermediaries prevent the dissemination of illicit content, which implies that platforms must proactively assist in censorship, and are frequently in direct collaboration with the government (Boas, 2006, p. 388; Gillespie, 2018, p. 258). Shana Ye (2022) also examines how commercial BL productions in China adapt coded forms of expression through the management of queer desires while also promoting heteronormative societal harmony for nation-building. In this context, Internet users, including both fans and producers, are targets to be censored.

On the other hand, as the usage of Internet censorship and monitoring systems has grown, several studies have focused on how individual users exercise self-censorship (Parks & Mukherjee, 2017). Self-censorship is described as the act of purposefully and voluntarily concealing information from others, and it is a psychological process in which individual decisions are influenced by societal variables on both the micro and macro levels (Bar-Tal, 2017). In Zambia, for example, a Facebook user deleted a post criticizing the government after a warning from her friend, which illustrates how the state informally regulates citizens' communication via self-censorship (Parks & Mukherjee, 2017). A quantitative study on Facebook's political posting also shows that self-censorship takes place as people are influenced by the normalizing pressures of the conversational context. The desire for social approval may lead to people regulating how they express themselves and the extent to which they share their opinions (Kwon, Moon, & Stefanone, 2015). Participatory censorship differs from both streams of Internet censorship studies that prioritize either the state-platform relationship or the psychology on the individual level. As part of the participatory fan culture, participatory censorship involves the fan group dynamics that involve not only self-censorship but also the censoring of others, which is related to larger state policy, social attitudes, and platform design. Specifically, we use the example of WeiLan CP (coupling) fandom, or the slash pairing of Wei and Lan, on Sina Weibo to explore the workings of participatory censorship. CP is a term commonly used in the Chinese context to describe a couple or coupling of two persons. Wei and Lan are the two male protagonists in the Web series *Guardian* (Ye, Qi, Hua, Zhou, & Xie, 2018), who have gained widespread popularity beyond the Chinese BL community in recent years. Weibo is one of the largest Chinese social media platforms.

Methodologically, this article combines discourse analysis, participatory observation, and digital ethnography. As acafans (Jenkins, 2006) of BL culture, we undertook participatory observation of the *Guardian* fandom. Specifically, from 2018 to 2020, we regularly followed fan discussions on WeiLan-related Super Topics on Weibo and viewed fan-produced cultural products such as fiction, comics, pictures, videos, and memes. We noticed the frequent use of reporting in fan discussions; the data collected formed the base of our analysis of participatory censorship, its patterns, and implications. Enriching the analysis of the data on social media, mainly Weibo, we also used digital ethnography (Pink et al., 2015) to analyze the process of participatory censorship and its impact on individual fans. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 15 BL fans from February 2020 to September 2020. These online interviews usually lasted about an hour and a half each. These informants were approached through the snowball sampling method via Weibo. We selected BL readers and/or writers with more than five years of experience and who are active online. These experienced BL fans are more knowledgeable about the BL fandom and the inner mechanism of participatory censorship. Using this three-pronged methodology, this article focuses on the mechanisms of reporting on Weibo Special Topic as an example of participatory censorship. In the following sections, we will first outline the different activity types of participatory censorship and then move on to how they contain queer expressions.

**“Jubao (Report) When You Encounter Anti-Fan”:
Activity Types of Decentralized Censorship and Content Moderation**

On June 13, 2018, the Web serial *Guardian* (Ye et al., 2018) was released on Youku, a Chinese video-streaming platform associated with the Alibaba group. This serial is adapted from a popular BL novel *Guardian* by Priest (2013), which archived 11 million hits on Jinjiang Literary City, one of the largest digital platforms for publishing creative writings in the world. The serial was immediately removed after its premier and frequented the trending list on Weibo. The WeiLan CP, pairing up the two main male characters in the show, quickly moved up to the top of the Weibo CP popularity list, which calculates any given CP's trending through Weibo data and algorithm. By July 25, *Guardian* received 2.7 billion views on Youku and generated 1.25 billion Weibo posts. A large number of these posts are on *chaohua*, or Super Topic on Weibo. Unlike common topics people can browse and participate through hashtags, Super Topics can only be activated when a certain number of accounts apply for it. Some of these accounts then become Super Topic Hosts and manage the discussion of these topics. Then the Super Topic Host positions become available for applications who aim to manage the Super Topics. Launched by Weibo in 2016, Super Topics attract high participation from fans and other users.

In the three most active WeiLan Super Topics,¹ each Super Topic has its posting restrictions and rules, which are clearly stated in the starred posts or admin posts, and topic managers are responsible for maintaining and regulating the Super Topics. The topic managers are usually reputable fans with considerable experience in the fandom. In all three WeiLan CP Super Topics, the common rules include (1) no pairing of Wei or Lan with others or reversing the *gong/shou*, or top/bottom roles,² (2) no plagiarism of fan-made works, (3) no advertising, (4) no starting a fight, and (5) no praising of one but satirizing another of the CP. Rules 1 and 5 are applicable to CP fandom in general and can therefore be applied to heterosexual and lesbian CPs as well.

Following these rules, in the starred posts of the Super Topics, the topic managers have dedicated posts that explicitly state “**jubao (report)** if you encounter any anti-fans” and “screen capture and privately message the managers” (Tianzhetang, 2018). Fans share the URLs of inappropriate remarks for managers to deal with in the comments section. Through participatory observations on these Super Topics, we found that internal self-management by the users of the Super Topics may resolve the issue mentioned in the comment sections in a matter of hours or even minutes. The content that was seen as going against the rules or was “anti-fan” content was soon deleted, and the account that made the post was blocked from commenting on or posting in the Super Topic. In the early days after the release of *Guardian* (Ye et al., 2018), the WeiLan-related Super Topics mainly censored comments that paired the two actors with others or reversed the top and bottom roles. Gradually, the main content removed became mostly obvious marketing and advertising materials. Thus, self-regulation by the fans and among the fans is quite effective.

¹ Including WeiLan Super Topic, WeiLan Derivative Super Topic, and WeiLan Web Serial Super Topic.

² Top and bottom are sex positions or roles during sexual activity, especially between two men. A top role is usually a person who penetrates, and a bottom role is usually one who receives penetration. In the context of many BL works, this identity distinction can impact the character's personality.

Many activities have been developed in the active management of the fandom community, especially the deletion of anti-fan content. Participatory censorship operates as part of the censoring activities initiated by online users on other users using specific platform designs and policies. Based on the observations of the aforementioned Super Topic and relevant ethnographic data, we find that the most common forms of censorship or content moderation that involve fan participation include: *kongping* (comment controlling), *lahei* (blacklisting), *jubao* (reporting), and *guaren* (account targeting) (Figure 1).

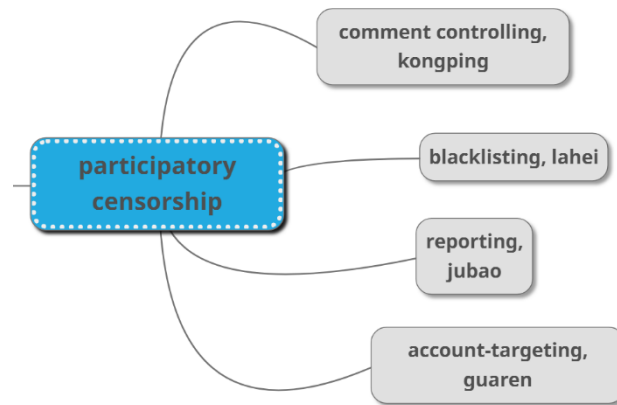


Figure 1. Different activity types of participatory censorship aided by platform design and function.

Comment controlling, or *kongping*, is the activity of fans trying to influence a post via massive replies in the comment area, using the social media platforms algorithm of sorting comments in descending order of popularity. These kinds of actions may influence the views of the social media account holder. Blacklisting is more about individuals filtering others' interactions, whereas reporting is more proactive since it is a collective action to react to others and may lead to broader consequences of the user being reported. These consequences can include the temporary blocking or permanent deletion of the reported account, and some may even lead to legal consequences. Though participatory censorship is not limited to fandom, we observe a growing tendency to use platform functions such as reporting among different individual fans as well as fan groups. When online users, including fans, tend to be the objects monitored in the past, some of them also start to take up the role of monitoring subjects. Participatory censorship in fandom relies heavily on the search function and platform design of the reporting system. Besides reporting on specific comments, *guaren*, or account targeting is another more advanced and commonly used technique in participatory censorship. In account targeting, a lengthy post is posted, usually in the form of a picture, on social media platforms such as Weibo.

The picture-form long essays present a collection of pieces of evidence, such as screen captures of the posts of specific accounts. Based on these "pieces of evidence," the associated social media accounts are criticized, if not attacked. These picture-form articles shared on Weibo trigger more fans to join the attacks or report anti-fans, which may lead to cyber violence against individuals. These seemingly dramatic actions are increasingly commonplace in online fandom. For example, reporting and account targeting are often used by fan groups that actively search and report anti-fan activities. These fan groups are referred

to as “anti-anti-fans groups,” which is common knowledge shared by all the informants in this study. Usually, celebrities, especially idols, with a huge fan base on Weibo have their own “anti-anti-fans groups.”

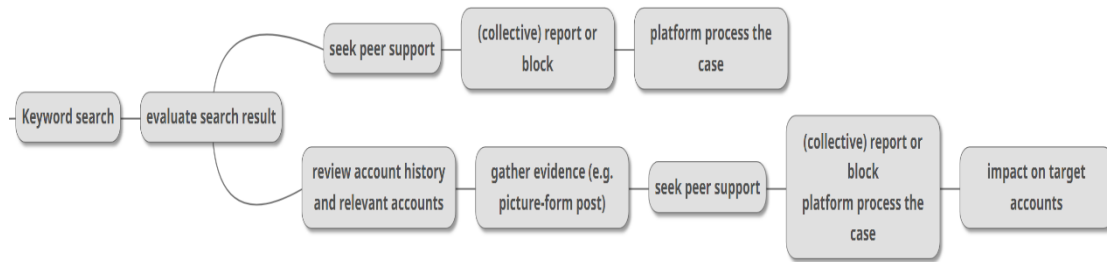


Figure 2. The action flows of reporting and account targeting by fans.

The flow of reporting and account targeting can be explained as two action chains that exemplify the decentralized nature of participatory censorship (Figure 2). These two flows of actions are similar to the four essential components in participatory processes, which include problematization, profit sharing, enrollment, and mobilization (Hardy & Williams, 2008). In reporting, after keyword search and evaluating search results (e.g., determining fan/anti-fan attributes), fans will seek peer support on the platform and then call for more fans to report or block specific comments. Based on the number of reports or instances of blocking, social media platforms are likely to prioritize the processing of the case. For account targeting, similar actions take place in the earlier part, such as keyword search and the evaluation of search results. Then more information is gathered through an in-depth investigation of account history and the relevant accounts. The information is collected and presented to other fans to mobilize them to reblog or attack the account. These actions sometimes lead to the account holder apologizing or their social ostracism. Some may even lead to cyberbullying.

While blocking and reporting can be done through individual fans and accounts via platform design, what is significant here is how core fans mobilize other fans as active agents in both reporting the content and targeting accounts. Structurally, the widespread network of fans makes censorship and content moderation more decentralized as more and more fans become active agents in reporting, blocking, or targeting other accounts. At the same time, the flows of action, as illustrated above, also show the temporal dimension of decentralization. These flows of actions could happen overnight or over a long period, but the decentralization occurs because the process involves multiple actors, including core fans, not-so-core fans, and platform design and affordances.

These types of participatory censorship are evident not only in BL fandom; they can be easily extended to explain the participatory censorship of fandom at large in a global context. Conflicts between fans and anti-fans are frequently settled by reporting them to the platform. On the K-pop band BTS’s fan page, for example, the advice for dealing with anti-fans is to ignore harsh remarks and report posts that spread rumors to the site (Jimin’s Laugh, 2018). The BL fandom in mainland China also offers a specific case to consider the difference between censorship and content moderation. Usually, social media users are invited by platforms to assist with content moderation in two ways: First, by inviting users to complain to

the platform about inappropriate content and flag it, which is then handled in various ways behind the scenes by human and algorithmic governance systems, but the “inappropriacy” can be highly subjective. As a result, this feature is frequently gamed by users (Crawford & Gillespie, 2014). The second method is to encourage users to block terms or other types of information that they choose not to view (Gillespie, 2018). Content moderation, such as the use of a blocklist to avoid online harassment (Jhaver, Ghoshal, Bruckman, & Gilbert, 2018) and the use of flagging, are common.

While these actions are usually understood as content moderation by commercial companies, what the BL fandom case raises is the blurring line between censorship and content moderation. In the case of BL censorship, the tasks of censorship and regulation of online content are usually assigned to the platform. The platforms use techniques such as keyword filters and manual labor to execute these regulations. For example, to coincide with the national campaign to clean up the Internet, Jinjiang Literature City, the major platform for Chinese online publishing, has devised a set of regularly updated internal censorship guidelines to control and prohibit BL-related novels (Wang, 2021). The dominant method is based on an examination of keywords connected to erotic content or sensitive topics. After a certain threshold of sensitive words has been exceeded, the system locks the text. Later, Jinjiang has also used manual review techniques to reward readers who report inappropriate content (Wang, 2021). To understand how participatory censorship works in drawing the parameters of queer expressions specifically, the following part will focus on the interaction between active BL fans and the Weibo platform in the WeiLan CP fandom.

Containing Queerness: Fans as Participatory Censors in BL Commercialization

We choose BL fandom in the context of mainland China as a case study as the government and platform censorship on this particular theme is more obvious and the process is opaque. Compared with the original BL novels, the Web series adaptations replace homosexual love with friendship but keep the ambiguous scenes and classical passages so that fans can imagine the missing plot and interpret the story from a queer perspective. That is also why in Chinese the serial is called *dangai* (BL adaptation), rather than *danmei* (BL). Production companies made this change to avoid the risk (of censorship) in the commercialization process, which involves the active self-censorship of content creators. Despite the underplaying of the homosexual theme in the adaptation, *Guardian* was abruptly removed by Youku in August 2018. Sina Weibo’s trending topic about *Guardian* was also blocked and later unblocked. These actions drew discussions among fans until November, when the series was reedited, including the removal of key intimate scenes, before being returned online. This context of strict government and platform censorship also made the participatory censorship of fans more pronounced. In this process, many discussions on the WeiLan Super Topics were trying to regulate fans’ discussions. Fans were confused or helpless and eager to ask the platform and the authorities why *Guardian* was removed, complaining about censorship and toxic business competition. In this situation, a popular hypothesis was that Youku had removed *Guardian* (Ye et al., 2018) to optimize the quality of the drama and that fans should not complain to the authorities nor participate in the *#Guardian* removal topic to keep it up on the trending list. Fans believed that the removal was to prevent *Guardian* from being noticed by the authorities, which could lead to an actual block (Little W, personal communication, March 22, 2020). Concerned about the adaptation and protection of the actors, many fans agreed with this assumption and stopped or deleted their complaints, as fans had done in many other reported cases. In this process, participatory censorship via *jubao*, or the

report function, creates micro-rules and draws the parameters of the discourses that try to contain queer expressions of gender, sexuality, and relationships in favor of a more commercially viable fandom.

In their study of the *Guardian* fandom, Ng and Li (2020) pointed out the self-censorship of the fan communities that “tacitly constrain their discourses” about homosexuality by “not directly mentioning romantic feelings” (p. 486) between the two actors in most public forums. Most notably, the use of “socialist brotherhood” by *Guardian* fans to describe Wei and Lan “cleverly queer party-state ideologies of a heteronormatively socialist China, while affording fans, at least temporarily, protection from immediate censorship” (Ng & Li, 2020, p. 489). While we recognize the potential of queer tactics and resilience in the *Guardian* fandom against state censorship, what we have observed in the fieldwork has shown a more complex picture of the “self-censorship” of the fans, in which fans censor or regulate each other on queer expressions using the report function or other activities outlined in the previous section.

First, the censoring among fans is evident in the curtailing of CP fandoms of fictional characters. The *Guardian* fans are heterogeneous, consisting of those who are fans of a specific actor, the WeiLan CP fans, and others. “We could only enjoy the actors’ coupling silently when we liked WeiLan,” said Little W, a 21-year-old fan of BL fiction writing with five years of experience (personal communication, March 22, 2020). “But we did not dare to state it directly in either the CP videos or the Super Topic. We merely enjoy WeiLan Super Topic because the actors’ CP Super Topic was reported to be deleted every time one was established.” And the comments beneath the actors’ CP videos were of many fans arguing that they were not pro-love but pro-socialist brotherhood, a term used in official advertising to define their relationship as a brotherhood rather than a romantic love. The experience of Little W shows that the disbandment of male-male CP Super Topic by the platform is common due to reporting by others. While this can be seen as a tactic of BL fans to stay under the radar of unpredictable state censorship, it can also perpetuate heteronormativity and gender policing and reinforce official discourse on surveillance, security, and norms. Like Little W, many of our interviewees point out the disbandment of CP Super Topic. In one of the incidents in 2019, a male-male CP Super Topic was reported as “harming teenagers’ physical and mental health and disrupting the online environment’s peace,” which was the official discourse in a state-sponsored project of Internet cleansing (Baibai, personal communication, September 13, 2020). A large number of similar complaints from various publishers appeared and led to the disbandment of the CP Super Topic. This case is a clear example of how the reporting among fans draws the parameters of the discourses that try to contain queer expressions of gender and sexuality in which fans become censors that extend the power of official censorship.

Even in the CP Super Topics that have survived, the CP fandom is often limited to fictional characters and is highly scrutinized when the discussions extend to the actors. As noted by Baibai, a WeiLan fan with nine years of BL experience, “Both WeiLan Super Topic and WeiLan Derivative Super Topic don’t allow RPS [real person slash]³ content, so fans do as they’re told and don’t post [relevant content] in them” (personal communication, September 13, 2020). One of the reasons is that when the CP fans start to do RPS, the fans of the actors involved may be against the idea and start reporting these posts or Super Topics.

³ Slash refers to fantasies of romantic or sexual relationships between characters of the same sex. Real Person Slash means that the characters are real people, such as celebrities, rather than fictional characters.

While some of these are gay-friendly fans who report considering the career of the actors, there are also many homophobic comments in the reporting.

Furthermore, the strict regulation within the CP fandom could also misfire and become a punitive space for CP fans. Little Q, a 25-year-old woman with five years of BL experience and an interviewee of WeiLan CP fan, has been a fan since the series was released and has created some fan-made videos. She stated that she had received insults and provocations because of WeiLan CP and that her favorite fanfiction authors had left the fandom community because of the abuse and reporting from other fans (Little Q, personal communication, March 4, 2020). It is worth noting the reasons for Little Q's departure. She did not leave this community because of her love fading or outsiders' insults. She had unintentionally used a phrase that was typically used by non-CP fans and anti-fans as a joke during a public online chat with her admired author. Although she did not mean to use the wrong word, the author and fans interpreted this intended frivolous joke as a satire. Other fans called her out in the comments, saying things like "don't pretend to be a fan" and "don't read it if you don't like it" (Little Q, personal communication, March 4, 2020). When she became aware of the misunderstanding and sought to explain herself, she discovered that the author had deleted her comment, as well as the aggressive replies in the comment section. She tried to explain herself once more, but her lengthy apology message went unanswered. Finally, she realized she had been blocked.

This experience, described by Little Q as "betrayed by one of our own," is not only a fierce confrontation between CP fans and non-CP fans, but it also underscores the strict internal rules among CP fans. This implies that CP fans are implicitly required to be familiar with CP and CP fans' knowledge, that particular words are seen as the dividing line between "fans" and "anti-fans," and that words, rather than actions or emotions, are used as the dividing line. The CP fans strictly adhere to the exclusionary norms of fans. If specific words are taken out of context, they can be used to prove that the users are non-fans or even anti-fans, thus, they can be expelled from or denounced by the fandom. Moreover, because any traces left at any time can be uncovered if it is stored in an accessible database, this type of identification is not time-sensitive. Fans expect to be questioned about previous "inappropriate" remarks. What Little Q went through is also typical of the affective dimension in participatory censorship. The platform design usually lacks an effective appeals system, and the platform becomes a punitive space, often leaving users feeling confused and frustrated (West, 2018).

Nomadic Queer: BL Fans Practices Against Commercialization and Censorship

With the ubiquitous practices of participatory censorship in BL fandom, alternative strategies and tactics are reinvented to queer the fandom. For example, in response to participatory censorship, fans attempt to move to new platforms in to circumvent censorship, which continues to illustrate the queerness of the fandom. Historically, replacing sensitive words such as sexual acts and sexualized body parts with other terms continues to be a common practice for writing BL stories or BL fan fiction (Wang, 2021). As participatory censorship relies heavily on platform designs, such as the report function, a significant number of fans prefer to support new platforms or non-profit sites to express their dissatisfaction with the existing platform's censorship and the frequency of reporting. For example, some BL fans boycott the use of commercial platforms such as Jinjiang Literature City, one of the largest online writing and publishing platforms, and Lofter, a fan-fiction blogging platform. Groups of BL fans collectively started to use new platforms to write and communicate. As times go by, these writings may still be censored via reporting or platform in-house censoring, yet migrating to these new platforms still buys time for uncensored publishing.

These guerilla-like practices have also led fans to break away from the nearly monopolistic platforms and begin exploring a discrete path of building their own websites for the sake of creative freedom. Additionally, overseas fan-fiction sites such as AO3 also become an option for writers to write sexually explicit content. One of the informants, a 24-year-old student who has been reading and writing BL for 11 years, Ccc, pointed out that some erotic paragraphs from the BL novels are posted on AO3 by the author so that readers from platforms in China can use overseas platforms to read the whole novel or just the parts with explicit sexual content that would otherwise be easily reported (personal communication, March 19, 2020).

Besides the use of alternative platforms, other nomadic queer tactics are used to negotiate, if not resist online censorship. In response to the censoring of sexual content, some BL fans have launched a pornographic writing campaign, claiming that each pair of CPs should have their own slut-writing to oppose the stigma of pornography and pornographic writing. The campaign calls for more BL fan writers to slut-write different BL CPs with sexually explicit language and plot development in mini-stories. These CP-related stories can be found on a variety of websites and social media platforms, such as Weibo, AO3, and personal blogs. Taking AO3 as an example, the CPs span from comic-book character pairings like Tim Drake/Jason Todd in *Batman* to RPS coupling. Notably, the most popular CP on AO3 with the "streetwalker" tag in the first month after AO3 was banned in China (from 27 February to the end of March 2020) was a satirical novel about Donald Trump and Xiao Zhan (Figure 3), an important actor in another popular series *The Untamed* (Sun & Wang, 2019), which was adapted from a BL novel of the same name.

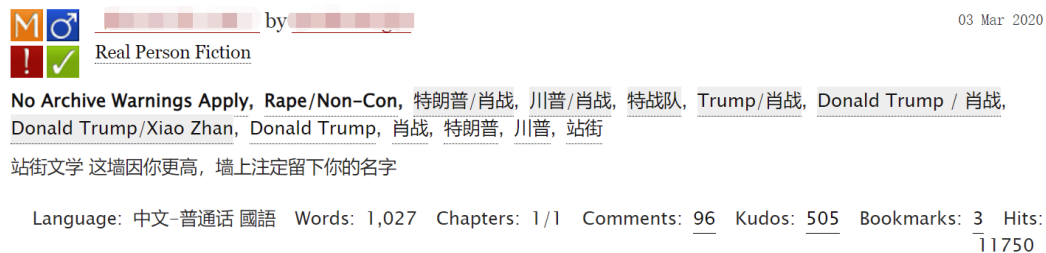


Figure 3. Screen capture of real-person fiction on the CP of Donald Trump and Xiao Zhan on AO3. The fiction is tagged as "streetwalker literature" with a tag line "The [great] firewall is higher due to you, and your name is destined to be carved on it."⁴

In this RPS fiction, Trump is examining a huge border wall when he encounters Xiao, a young man from an Asian country who does not mind performing sexual favors for anyone. After a sexual encounter, Trump comments that Xiao is a brick on the high border wall, which is a metaphor for the Great Firewall of China. Xiao, showing his indifference to Trump, decides to do a self-quarantine to avoid getting COVID-19 from Trump.

The writing campaign temporarily opens up uncensored online spaces as alternatives to commercial and censored spaces. Although this movement is short-lived, the way it is organized is highly flexible and covert, making it much more difficult to report. Some of these erotic writings eventually will be reported

⁴ For reasons of protection, the URL of this website will not be provided.

and removed by the platform. The users' accounts may be banned yet these fans move on to create new accounts and continue the slut-writing. As interviewee 3P33, a 27-year-old BL lover for more than 10 years, said, "The more they block, the more I write, the more men are going to make love [in my fiction]. I was worried about not having enough motivation to write novels before the block but not anymore" (personal communication, April 4, 2020). This flexibility and the mobility of this small number of BL fans against censorship can be seen as nomadic practices that queer the existing BL fandom and its participatory censorship. While the constant migrating of fan groups to different platforms is like nomads moving from one virtual place to another, the slut-writing practices create temporary virtual spaces for strong sexual expression. These nomadic practices add to the queer vocabulary of the BL fandom.

Apart from the more overt and active queer nomadic practices, some BL fans also take issue with the commercialization tendency of major social media platforms such as Weibo or merchants on e-commerce platforms such as Taobao. For example, when some platforms capitalize too much by merchandising BL-related content, fans collectively request hard copies of the invoices from the merchants or use other methods to increase operating costs such as deliberately browsing a large number of advertised products without consuming them. By law, the e-commerce merchant needs to send out the paper version of the invoice on request. Demanding the invoices on paper will increase the merchant's operating costs. By collectively requesting customer invoices at the same time, fans exercise their power as consumers and state their position to boycott the merchant in the future, thereby influencing the merchant's decision on what and how to merchandise. In some cases, this strategy of consumer protest has been successful. For example, in response to fan complaints following the blockage of AO3, which was partly related to actor Xiao Zhan, companies such as Olay, Crest, and Mengniu, which had planned to endorse or had already endorsed Xiao Zhan, replaced their spokesperson or withdrew the commercials. However, this has had only a modest impact on the overall trend of BL commercialization. Nevertheless, despite their limited impact, these nomadic queer practices have challenged the homogeneity and stability of the BL fandom and developed creative tactics of alternative practices in the context of BL commercialization.

Conclusion: Participatory Censorship Beyond China

Throughout this article, we have illustrated the process of participatory censorship, which contradicts the previous popular narratives of queer BL culture as a resistant subculture. Using the example of WeiLan fandom on Weibo Super Topics, we sorted out different types of participatory censorship activities, such as reporting, account targeting, comment controlling, and blacklisting, which rely heavily on specific platform design and review mechanisms. Specifically, we examined how *jubao*, or the report function, creates micro rules and draws the parameters of the discourses that try to contain queer expressions of gender, sexuality, and relationships in favor of a more commercially successful BL fandom. In this process, facilitated by the platforms, fans can censor each other or censor non-fans, sometimes incorporating state censorship regulations or rhetoric, where the lines between state governance and fandom activities become increasingly blurred. This complicated feature of participatory censorship thus expands on existing works on both fan studies and censorship studies. Additionally, while we suggest that participatory censorship is an emerging and growing pattern in fandom, we also identify the "nomadic queer" tactics that negotiate with participatory censorship and create alternative forms of queer expressions. The diversity and depth of this nomadic queer culture remain to be seen.

Though our conceptualization of participatory censorship is derived from the discussion of Chinese BL fandom, it can also be considered in the broader study of fandom and Internet culture. Participatory censorship points to an increasingly complicated landscape where state governance intersects with commercial operations and fan engagement. One of the features we highlight about participatory censorship is that it shows the shifting boundary between censorship and content moderation in fan activities. Compared with censorship, content moderation tends to be a more neutral term to describe the removal of illegal content, the moderation of commercial content, and the upholding of community rules such as the removal of anti-fan discourse. Notably, as seen in the case of WeiLan fandom, the boundary between (state) censorship and content moderation on specific platforms is unclear and could be shifting. This blurring line between state governance and commercial operations is most obvious in China, as commercial platforms are the ones to implement and uphold state censorship by means of platform design and maintenance. Meanwhile, the Chinese state is actively adopting “fandom governance,” which uses cuteness in the cultivation of nationalistic identifications (Wong et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, more and more countries are appropriating the China model of Internet censorship. Besides the aforementioned cases of keyword-filtering algorithms in Asia and South America, Russia and Nigeria are also using systems similar to the Great Firewall. Against this larger context, the forms and extent of participatory censorship or how fan engagement in entertainment entangles with state governance and commercial operations remain to be explored in other national and cultural contexts. Moreover, gender policing and the reinforcement of heteronormativity exist in fandom, even for overly queer idols and texts, such as in the Japanese and Taiwanese fan communities of Takarazuka (Kam, 2020). These kinds of gender policing may also take place in platform-specific fan activities, where Internet censorship is more associated with content moderation instead of state censorship. Illuminating the blurring line between state censorship and content moderation, the notion of participatory censorship can be further used to examine the regulatory forces within fan activities.

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