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

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Abstract

Owing to its dual correlation with homosexuality and eroticism, *danmei* (Boys Love) in China is subject to state censorship, so in a hit online serial *The Untamed* adapted from a popular *danmei* novel, the male-male relationship between protagonists has been expurgated. Obsessed with the romance in the original narrative yet dissatisfied with the officially sanctioned adaptation, fangirls create fanfiction, including real person slash (RPS) based on the leading actor Xiao Zhan and his co-star from the *The Untamed*. Xiao's fans reported a piece of RPS titled *Xiazhui* and Archaic of Our Own (AO3) that hosted it, causing AO3 to be blocked in China on 29th February 2020. Since *Xiazhui* features real celebrities, it concerns moral debates. Furthermore, *Xiazhui* pertains to Xiao's fanbase whose acts are interconnected with toxic fandom and the so-called 'heresy-style star worship'. More significantly, the contentious aspect of *Xiazhui* also lies in its homoerotic depictions that are regarded as indecent in a contemporary Chinese context.

Keywords: Xiazhui; Triggers; Real Person Slash Novel

INTRODUCTION

On 29th February 2020, Archive of Our Own (AO3), a non-commercial and non-profit open-source multi-fannish repository for transformative works established by and for fans, became blocked in Mainland China (Cai 2020, Romano 2020). Owing to its dual commitments of freeing writers from corporate interests and proscription of social norms inconsistent with fandom values (Zubernis and Larsen 2012), AO3 had been serving as a virtual safe zone and spiritual home for a variety of subculture communities in China since 2009. Enraged by the calumny against AO3 and hence its inaccessibility, AO3 users initiated a comprehensive cyber campaign and boycott against a Chinese celebrity named Xiao Zhan, whose enthusiastic and devoted fans caused the blockage of AO3 via systematic and well-planned mass-reporting to government authorities (Global Times 2020, Pang 2020, South China Morning Post 2020, The Economist 2020, Yu 2020).

Xiao Zhan, a 29-year-old Chinese singer-actor, rose to mega-stardom expeditiously in 2019 after starring in a hit online serial 陈情令*Chenqingling* (*The Untamed*) adapted from a popular online novel 魔道祖师 *Modao Zushi*. The original novel is of the 耽美 *danmei* (Boys Love, aka BL) genre featuring male-male romantic relationships and homoerotic encounters between pubescent or mature men produced by and for women (McLelland 2000, 2017, Fujimoto 2015, McLelland and Welker 2015, Welker 2015). The audience of *The Untamed*, therefore, is predominantly comprised of 腐女 *funü* 'rotten girls', viz. adolescent girls and adult women who are obsessed with female-oriented BL narratives (Xu and Yang 2013, Nagaike 2015, Chao 2016, 2017, Zhao et al 2017).

Nonetheless, Xiao's devotees, who might not all be 'rotten girls', became aware of a piece of contentious fanfiction (aka fanfic) entitled 下坠 *Xiazhui* (literally means 'Falling') (see Section 2 for detailed discussion). With a claimed intention to protect their idol's reputation, Xiao's fans reported AO3 to censors as a platform hosting online obscenity. To some extent, *Xiazhui* functions as a catalyst for the cyber war between Xiao's followers and AO3 users who are joined by netizens of a wider social spectrum afterwards. As this hot topic is constantly looming large and has developed into a multi-faceted societal, ideological and economic phenomenon, it is referred to as the '227 Incident' (China Comment 2020a, 2020b, China Daily 2020, Global Times 2020, Gong 2020). By the time this paper is written, the 227 Incident is setting off a perilous chain reaction such as cyber manhunt, social media account hacking, IP theft, online harassment and abuse, etc. One arguable paradigm of the aftermath concerning BL is that the application of Lofter, a Tumblr-like free blogging site open for transformative works and subculture groups, was pulled off the shelf for 'rectification' purposes in June 2020

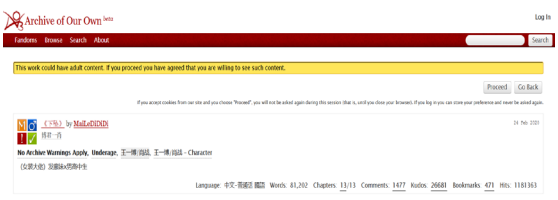
(Lofter 2020); in cyberspace, this 'rectification' was claimed to be caused by the 227 Incident, though Xiao's solicitor denied such a connection (Ifeng News 2020, Sina Entertainment 2020a).

In this paper, I investigate *Xiazhui*, the piece of fanfic that triggers the blockage of AO3 in Mainland China. *Xiazhui* belongs to real person slash (henceforward RPS). The terms 'RPS' and 'real person fiction' (henceforward RPF) are sometimes interchangeable, because a vast majority of RPF works feature same-sex pairings (Thomas 2014). In this paper, I treat RPS as a subcategory of RPF. Analogous to slash, RPS also features male-male romantic and/or erotic relationships, yet discrepant from slash, it entails real actors instead of onscreen characters (Zhang 2020). Therefore, as a piece of RPS involving explicit sexual depictions, *Xiazhui* is constituted of three contentious facets: RPF, slash/BL/*danmei* and eroticism. Through analysing *Xiazhui*, I explore RPF, *danmei* and eroticism in the Chinese context in general, as well as specific issues related to this narrative, including toxic fan practices and the 'heresy-style star worship'.

Xiazhui

Xiazhui was published simultaneously on Lofter and AO3 on 24th February 2020, featuring the homoerotic romance between a prostitute character named after Xiao and a schoolboy character named after his co-star from *The Untamed*, Wang Yibo. In the story, the 22-year-old cross-dressing protagonist suffers from gender dysphoria, and he is driven to prostitution for the cost of transgender surgery; his 16-year-old same-sex partner, however, loves him regardless of his gender.

Since the 227 Incident, *Xiazhui* has ironically been overwhelmed with enormous attention, which might run counter to the intention and expectation of Xiao's fans who reported it: the novel has received 1,181,363 hits on AO3 only (as shown in the screenshot below, which was taken on 2nd March 2022). Additionally, there are reviews eulogising its artistry and profundity, including praise from a university associate professor (Wu 2020), as this novella not only depicts bittersweet love and entanglement, but also the struggle of the grassroots, including impoverishment, miscarriage, disease, death, suicide, etc.



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

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

In addition to creating fanfic works based on fictional characters in *The Untamed* and its original novel *Modao Zushi*, 'rotten girls' have also transferred the obsession with fictional characters to actual actors, and created narratives regarding the imaginary relationship between the two leading stars Xiao and Wang. Since the release of *The Untamed*, legions of fans have expeditiously become their loyal CP 粉 *CP fen* 'coupling fans' and 'shippers' (a fandom terminology for those who support or wish for particular romantic relationships). The acts of CP fans typically coincide with the observation of Thomas (2014) and Zhang (2020): CP fans claim that the homosexual relationship 'is real', and there is 'chemistry' between Xiao and Wang; CP fans are also fascinated in gleaning and expounding 'evidence' by means of close reading the two actors' interviews, shows and social media posts.

The imagined relationship between Wang Yibo and Xiao Zhan is called 博君一肖 *bo jun yi xiao* which is a coined homophone of an idiom 'to cheer you up' with the initial and final characters being wittily substituted with the actors' names. The popularity of the imaginary homosexual/romantic relationship on social media is predominantly reflected on Weibo, a micro-blogging platform with approximately 573 million monthly active users during the third quarter in 2021 (Lai 2021). Posts and comments regarding the *bo jun yi xiao* relationship are accommodated by Weibo's virtual community called 'super topic' that is similar to a hashtag, yet the 'super topic' function has its own page and

a team of dedicated, and sometimes professional, moderators who actively feature and manage it by manually selecting contents and tagging high-quality ones as 'essential content' to signpost visitors. By February 2022, the '*Bo Jun Yi Xiao* Super Topic' has garnered enormous attention: it has attracted 108.25 billion visits, 9.84 million posts and 3.73 million followers.

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

她哭起来眼泪鼻涕横流…奇怪的是她嘴下的小黑痣好像也在哭。
Ta kuqilai yanlei biti hengliu…qiguaide shi ta zuixiade xiao heizhi haoxiang ye zaiku.
'She was crying her eyes out…Strangely, it was like the little mole below her mouth was crying too.' (*Xiazhui*; Chapter 6. Trans. Mine)

As for the identity of *Xiazhui*'s author and fan(s) who reported it, there have always been various versions in cyberspace, such as anti-fans, CP fans of both Xiao and Wang, Xiao's 唯粉 *wei fen* (a fandom neologism with a literal meaning of 'only fan') who merely dote on Xiao yet abominate the behaviour of 'shipping', and even professionals paid by Xiao's own team. It is notable that the reporting against *Xiazhui* and the blockage of AO3 also trigger divergent opinions and reactions within Xiao's fan community, including acts of 脱粉回踩*tuofen huicai* 'stopping idolising and becoming anti-fans' and 脱粉不回踩 *tuofen bu huicai* 'just stopping idolising' as well as adamant support, the disparity of which might be correlated with different fan identities.[1]

RPF in Chinese fandom

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

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

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

Danmei in China

Since the era of socio-economic reform and opening up in the late 1970s, overseas media and cultural products have been imported into Mainland China (Zhao 2017), including the Japanese BL subculture that first entered China's comic market in the mid-1990s. The Chinese version of the terminology slash/BL is 耽美 *danmei* that literally means 'addicted to beauty; indulgence in beauty', with 'beauty' exclusively limited to that of young males (Yang and Xu 2016, 2017a, 2017b, Wang 2019). Since entering China as a Japanese cultural export, *danmei* has attracted a prodigious amount of fangirls, yet it is still a marginalised subculture in China. Simultaneously, the increasing popularity and visibility of *danmei* place it under official surveillance, yet unfortunately, China is currently not the most lenient country in terms of homosexuality.

Same-sex sexual intercourse between men has existed in China since the imperial era, and it was comprehensively tolerated and embraced. Same-sex intimacy and desire were regarded as well-established social relationships and depicted in a variety of media such as classical literature and

[1] I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for raising the questions of fan identities and fanbase reactions.

folk tales (Lau and Ng 1989, Hinsch 1990, van Gulik 2002, Song 2004, Wu 2004).

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

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

Owing to surveillance of the party-state and opposition from (some) ordinary people, homosexuality-themed discourse and media representation is a social taboo, and supposedly offensive content must be expurgated from officially approved versions of the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (Ng 2015, McLelland 2016, Zhao et al 2017). Given its correlation with homosexuality, *danmei* literature is subject to moral scrutiny and falls prey to state censorship in China (Xu and Yang 2013, Zhang 2017, He and Zhang 2018, Wang 2019). Mainland Chinese media was initially supportive of the BL subculture, yet accompanied by BL's increasing popularity, the media started to focus on its supposedly abhorrent impact on young fans (Liu 2009, Jacobs 2012: 160). Moreover, since BL literature is theoretically unprofitable, there is lack of commercial power and representation to enforce its legitimacy (Zheng 2019).

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

Analogously, textual *danmei* is also stringently regulated, so the majority of *danmei* narratives can only be published online. As a pioneering and leading women's literature website hosting *danmei* fiction, Jinjiang Literature City (www.jjwxc.net), known as Jinjiang, is illustrious for its gigantic readership and commercial success (Yin 2005, Feng 2009, Xu and Yang 2013): it has accommodated more than 4.56 million narratives and 50.95 million registered users by December 2021 (Jinjiang Literature City 2022). Nonetheless, Jinjiang has been a target of official censorship, in that it is inextricably intertwined with homosexuality and supposed pornography. Since 2014, Jinjiang has been censured

and fined for several times: in 2019, for example, Jinjiang was rectified twice within two months and was requested to eradicate pornographic publications, cease business operations and display notifications of corrective actions on the homepage (Ma 2019, Nanyang Siang Pau 2019, Xinhua News 2019). Parallel to the publication platform, *danmei* practitioners are also under state surveillance, so they write and publish under pseudonyms for self-protection (Xu and Yang 2013). Nonetheless, *danmei* writers can still be subject to anti-pornography campaigns and penalties if their works are found to be related to homoerotism. For instance, in 2011, over ten writers on a commercial *danmei* website were arrested under the charge of disseminating obscene contents (Shen and Li 2011); in 2015, a pseudonymous author 'Big Grey Wolf with Wings' was sentenced for imprisonment of three years and half (Peng 2015); in 2019, eight *danmei* writers and practitioners were involved in illegal business crimes, and a writer was sentenced for four-year imprisonment (Yang 2019, Yang and Teng 2019). Among these cases, the most contentious one was that a *danmei* writer was sentenced to ten years' imprisonment in 2018 for self-publishing a homoerotic book which 'obscenely and in detail described gay male-male acts' (BBC News 2018, Flood 2018, Shepherd 2018).

Eroticism in China

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

Pornography is defined as a genre marked by lack of narrative skills in content and frequently by low technical standards. Viewers of online pornography, for instance, are not motivated by storytelling or narrative cinema, but a novel way of sensing media with scattered images and bodily arousal based on personalised rhythms (Paasonen 2011: 186, Jacobs 2015: 13). The concept of pornography, along with its opposite concept of *eros*, exhibit dichotomies of rape and love, humiliation and reverence, subordination and partnership, as well as suffering and enjoyment (Funabashi 1995: 251-252), in that pornography is often correlated with degradingness (Dines et al 1998) and violence against women (MacKinnon 1993, Russell 1993, 1998). Being explicitly goal-oriented with a low cultural status, pornography is compatible with transactional or neoliberal culture, because the vast majority of pornography places the focus on pursuing consumers' orgasm, rather than extraneous material such as plot and characterisation. In terms of fan pornography, some erotic fan narratives may potentially demonstrate pervasive neoliberal imagination, in that it may appropriate bodies, identities and histories of fictional characters and real celebrities without considering ethics, morality or intellectual property (Byrne and Fleming 2018). RPF with sexual fantasies, therefore, 'raises moral, ethical, and philosophical questions about culture under neoliberalism' (Byrne and Fleming 2018: 704).

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

In China, there has been a series of anti-pornography campaigns launched by the government (Jacobs 2012: 32). For instance, a 2014 crackdown on pornographic content on the Internet was announced by the National Office against Pornographic and Illegal Publications, in collaboration with other government departments and aiming to eradicate all online pornographic texts, images, videos

and advertisements and to rectify websites involved in production or dissemination of pornographic information (Ji and Long 2014, Ning 2014). The latest crackdown on pornography is the dedicated eight-month 'clear and bright' action launched by the Cyberspace Administration of China on 22nd May 2020, with a mission to establish a healthy Internet space and a clean social environment in China (Cyberspace Administration of China 2020, Qin 2020).

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

To circumvent the authority's censorship and potential violation of criminal law, some *danmei* writers have imposed self-censorship and rendered their writing less erotic (Wei 2014). Similarly, in order to circumvent state censorship on eroticism (and homosexuality), Jinjiang has also taken a series of actions. For example, a coined euphemistic tag 纯爱*chunai* 'pure love' has been employed to substitute the explicit terminology *danmei* (Zheng 2019). More significantly, as proactive reactions to government policies, in 2014 Jinjiang issued a 'stricter-than-government' self-censorship rule proscribing 'any depiction of body parts below the neck' in its published fiction. To ensure that obscene content is removed from approved versions of *danmei* writing, Jinjiang introduced a multiple-round manual checking system (Guancha 2014, Southern Daily 2015, Yang and Xu 2017a: 174, Zheng 2019) and deploy automatic detection that blocks a long and ever-increasing list of sensitive expressions.

There is no denying the fact that Jinjiang's self-censorship of 'no depiction below the neck' indeed makes a considerable difference. There used to be a myriad of so-called 'abuse' *danmei* narratives such as 不能动*Buneng Dong* and 活着就是恶心*Huozhe Jiushi Exin*, which abound in forbidden themes and non-normative sexualities, exemplified by rape, incest, sadomasochism, underage sex, etc. Since the censorship and self-censorship, those 'abuse' novels have been deleted and newly published novels no longer contain graphic description of sexual intercourse or controversial themes. In order to pass Jinjiang's censoring process, writers either avoid producing potentially transgressive content altogether, or publish main text on Jinjiang yet post sexual depictions on AO3 and Lofter for readers without charge (which, of course, is no longer possible due to the blockage of AO3 and 'rectification' of Lofter). Vocal writers choose to satirically decry Jinjiang (Example (3)) or teasingly substitute obscene expressions with those pertaining to ideology and politics (Example (4)) (see Author 2020 for detailed discussion). Example (4) contains a Chinese ideal of和*he* 'harmony' that is related to the state doctrine of Socialist Harmonious Society (社会主义和谐社会 *shehuizhuyi hexie shehui*) and serves as a normative complex prescribing social virtues, morality and ethics (Fan 2011, Wang et al 2016). In this example, the 'inharmonious activity' euphemistically denotes sexual intercourse, the expression of which would be detected and forbidden by Jinjiang for depicting 'body parts below the neck' and thus violating the state doctrine of Socialist Harmonious Society.

仅仅是一个吻，什么脖子以下的事都没做，谨守绿晋江社会主义核心价值观。
Jinjin shi yi ge wen, shenme bozi yixia de shi dou mei zuo, jin shou lv Jinjiang shehui zhuyi hexin jiazhi guan.
'It was just a kiss and nothing below the neck happened—it strictly observed the core socialist values of the "green" Jinjiang.' (小行星*Xiao Xingxing*. Trans. Mine)

当晚，一夜春风，差点做不和谐运动的最后一步…季朗默念了三遍 "和谐和谐和谐" 然后忍住了。
Dang wan, yi ye chunfeng, chadian zuo bu hexie yundong de zuihou yi bu…Ji Lang mo nian le san bian 'hexie hexie hexie' ranhou renzhu le.
'There was spring wind during the night, which almost pushed them to the last step of an inharmonious activity…Ji Lang repeated "harmony" for three times in mind and refrained himself.'
(辣鸡室友总撩我 *Laji Shiyou Zong Liao Wo*. Trans. Mine)

Nonetheless, there is an issue concerning the correlation between censorship and creative freedom. Censorship has been existing in the Chinese society throughout different historical stages and in various types of restriction and control, and the discussion of censorship as a contemporary practice is complicated by a range of factors, including freedom of expression. In the case of *danmei* writing on Jinjiang, due to the 'stricter-than-government' self-censorship and harsh censoring procedure of the website, writers are deprived of creative freedom to some extent. Even published works still face the danger of being locked or deleted triggered by policy shifts. Ironically and sadly, an author even encouraged audiences to read the pirate copy of their novel

in the 'author's words' section on Jinjiang (Example (5)). The income of Jinjiang's contracted writers is proportional to the size of their paid readership, but this irritated and/or frustrated writer would rather sacrifice their profit than show readers a 'soulless', expurgated Jinjiang version of the work.

诸位，看盗版去吧，这文为了过审已经没有灵魂了。
Zhu wei, kan daoban qu ba, zhe wen weile guoshen yijing meiyou linghun le.
'Everybody, go and read the pirate copy. To escape censorship, this novel has no soul now.'
(当我看了男友日记 *Dang Wo Kanle Nanyou Riji*. Trans. Mine)

DISCUSSION

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

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

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

To glorify and worship their idol, Xiao's fans refer to his superiority as 苏神泽世*su shen ze shi* 'god of charisma illuminates the world'; moreover, Xiao's admirers refer to themselves as his 追星狗 *zhui xing gou* 'star-chasing dog' and 颜狗 *yan gou* 'looks dog' so as to emphasise their inferior position in the fandom hierarchy and the nobility of their idol. To compensate Xiao's economic loss and tarnished reputation after the 227 Incident, devoted fans support their idol financially: Xiao's digital single reached over 33 million purchased downloads, earning more than 112 million RMB in total sales within days since its release, because Xiao's fans bought an average of approximately 66 repeated copies per head (Global Times 2020, He 2020, Li 2020, Mahyuni 2020, The Economist 2020). Parallel to other stars' fanbases, Xiao's fans are also constituted of the so-called 'data fans' who volunteer their time and energy and deploy data-generation software and/or sockpuppetry to boost his social media traffic, profile and rankings, so as to make him more commercially attractive to investors and producers (Ju 2019a, 2019b, Negus 2019, Shan 2019, Zhang and Negus 2020).

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

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

她生得一张巴掌脸，五官却都大，所以显得有几分艳和媚…穿包身裙，堪堪遮住屁股的长度，她臀部浑
圆挺翘，因此裙子显得更短些。
Ta shengde yizhang bazhanglian, wuguan que dou da, suoyi xiande you jifen yan he mei…chuan baoshenqun, kankan zhezhu pigu de changdu, ta tunbu hunyuan tingqiao, yinci qunzi xiande geng duan xie.
'She had a small face and fine features, which made her somehow tender and enchanting…She was in a tight short skirt that fully exposed her figure and bare thighs; her firm and round buttocks

made the skirt even shorter.'
(*Xiazhui*; Chapter 1. Trans. Mine)

In fandom, there is a special phenomenon of feminising young, handsome male stars, which is referred to as 泥塑 *nisu* 'clay sculpture', the homophone of 逆苏 *nisu* that literarily means 'to reverse charm' or 'reversed Mary Sue'. Some fangirls imagine a 'reverse' world in which they are dominant males, whereas their male idols become delicate-featured females who are typically their imaginary girlfriends. The objects of the *nisu* act are usually young, epicene male idols collectively labelled as 小鲜肉 *xiao xian rou* 'little fresh meat', who embody a new type of male aesthetics, viz. 'soft masculinity', as well as a novel trend of 'consumption of sexualised men' via the female gaze (Louie 2012, Hu 2017, Wang 2017, Zhou 2017, Li 2020). Unsurprisingly, Xiao has *nisu* fans who has established a Weibo 'super topic' called 留守肥宅救助中心 *liushou feizhai jiuzhu zhongxin*, with approximately 260 million visits and 38,000 followers by February 2022.

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

Nevertheless, *weiniang* is still unacceptable to certain social groups, and it is thus discouraged, if not prohibited, by China's heteropatriarchal normative gender system (Chao 2017). Similarly, the *nisu* act is not universally accepted, and not all Xiao's fans are *nisu* fans, in that the number of followers on Xiao's 'super topic' page is approximately 9.86 million in February 2022, whereas the number concerning his dedicated *nisu* 'super topic' is merely 38,000. That is to say, Xiao's fans who do not approve of *nisu* account for a majority of his entire fanbase. Therefore, given the fact that in *Xiazhui* the character named after Xiao is depicted as a feminine cross-dresser, which appertains to *weiniang* and *nisu*, it may have caused some fans' dissatisfaction and hence reporting.

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

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

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

CONCLUSION

In this paper I investigate causes of AO3's blockage in Mainland China. As a controversial

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

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