



RESEARCH ARTICLE

More than Conformity or Resistance: Chinese "Boys' Love" Fandom in the Age of Internet Censorship

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One of the most popular literary and cultural practices particularly in the digital age, "boys' love" (BL, danmei 耽美) manga and fictional works are fantasies on romantic or homoerotic male-male relationships, and therefore are often naturally associated with homosexuality and pornography, two "morally" suspicious targets of government censorship in the heteronormative Chinese culture. This article aims to examine the various, indeed often opposite, strategies and tactics taken by BL participants and by some conscientious netizens on popular social media to illustrate how those who are under the threat of censorship grapple with harsh reality. In this article I argue that the BL practitioners' responses to Chinese government's anti-pornography campaigns are not simply a passive or reluctant "reaction." I will first study the web adaptation of Priest's BL story *Zhenhun*, demonstrating Priest's as well as her fans' tactful collaboration with the consumer culture and willing conformity to official discourse. Forming a sharp contrast with Priest's commercial success, the controversial ten-year jail sentence of another BL writer, Gouwazi Tianyi, for profiting from producing and selling BL fiction has caused widespread outcry from both BL fans and ordinary netizens on Chinese social media. This case not only questions the dated criminal laws on obscene articles, but also challenges the patriarchal and problematic social institutions.

作為數字時代最受歡迎的流行文學和文化實踐，耽美漫畫和虛構作品是對男男浪漫的戀愛關係或性關係的想像，因此常與同性戀和色情聯繫起來。而在以異性戀為正統的中國文化中，常常成為政府審查制度針對的“道德”目標。本文旨在研究耽美參與者和一些有良知的網民在社交媒體上採取的不同甚至相反的策略，以展現人們如何應對嚴酷審查的現實。本文通過研讀網絡耽美劇《鎮魂》的接受情況解讀了耽美作家 Priest 及其粉絲與消費文化和官方話語的共謀。同時通過探討耽美作家狗娃子天一因寫作和銷售耽美小說而被判刑的案例，展示了耽美參與者和網民對陳舊法律的質疑，以及對父權制的社會制度的挑戰。

Keywords: BL, danmei, censorship, fandom, media studies, *Zhenhun*, Gouwazi Tianyi

關鍵詞： BL, 耽美, 審查制度, 粉絲研究, 媒體研究, 鎮魂, 狗娃子天一

The Journal of the Association for Chinese Studies (JEACS) is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by the EACS, www.chinesestudies.eu. ISSN: 2709-9946

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One of the most popular literary and cultural practices, particularly in the digital age, “boys’ love” (BL, a.k.a. *danmei* 耽美 in China) manga and fictional works, primarily by women and for women, are fantasies on romantic or homoerotic male-male relationships, and therefore are often naturally associated with homosexuality and pornography, two “morally” suspicious targets of government censorship in the heteronormative Chinese culture. At the same time, because of the fact that BL and its early-stage form, *yaoi*,¹ often deal with teenage boys or minors, BL is also considered “virtual child pornography” and sometimes, debatably, paedophilia in many western countries which legally accept homosexuality and adult pornography (McLelland 2005, 61–77). Anything not in the realm of official and mainstream cultures is by nature subversive (and therefore dangerous), because of its distinctive difference from and transgression against the dominant culture. Although Chinese people are not unfamiliar with various forms of pornography in the history of literature, art, and religion (such as *fangzhongshu* 房中术, sexual practices in Daoism), China has a centuries-long record of officially banning pornography (Yan 2014, 338). Under the current Criminal Law of China, article 363 lists the definition, circumstances, and penalties of the criminal offence of producing, possessing, duplicating, publishing, circulating or disseminating obscene articles (Zhongguo Renda wang 1997). Article 364(4) particularly states that anyone who disseminates obscene articles to minors under the age of eighteen shall be severely punished, and a jail sentence up to ten years can be imposed. On the other hand, BL writers are mostly women in their twenties or thirties, while the age of its readers ranges from teenagers to readers in their thirties. Legally speaking, anyone who writes about erotic scenes in their BL works risks being punished for producing, publishing, selling, and disseminating obscene articles, and if their readers are under eighteen, their punishment will be even more severe. BL readers who possess, read, and circulate works containing obscene descriptions are also breaking the law, and if they circulate, sell, and trade such works to minors, they face severe punishment, too. However, Article 367 further states that medical and scientific works are not pornography, and that literature and art works with artistic value (*yishu jiazhi* 艺术

¹ *Yaoi* is an acronym for “yama nashi, ochi nashi, imi nashi,” or roughly “no climax, no resolution, no meaning.” Although it is a global label, it has been used particularly for male-male erotic manga and anime since early 1980s.

价值) can have graphic depictions of sexual conduct. However, the law does not clarify what criteria can be used to decide whether a work has artistic value. In other words, the current laws only provide a vague definition of “obscenity” as graphic depictions/descriptions of sexual conduct or explicit pornography, excluding the highly subjective cases with artistic value (Zhongguo Renda wang 1997; Yan 2014)²

At the same time, there is currently no law in China regarding homosexuality or child pornography. I have argued elsewhere that although BL fiction is not gay fiction, the BL community has shown a strong sentiment towards understanding and supporting sexual minorities, whereas the government in recent years has become more cautious in drawing a delicate line between BL practice and homosexuality, addressing them differently when practising censorship (Tian 2020, 104–126). In other words, the government does not censor BL work *explicitly* for presenting same-sex relationships. It is also crucial to note that although there is no written law on any form of child pornography in China, in recent years BL communities across the country have voluntarily condemned and policed stories involving sex with minors, adopting a zero tolerance policy (Yang 2019, 198). Hence, “pornography” (or “alleged pornography”) is the dominant factor that triggers government censorship of BL practice.

As BL is a subcultural product and phenomenon primarily mediated by the Internet, the practice, fandom, and censorship of it mostly happen and appear in the cyber world. New media in the Internet age have unprecedentedly granted and enlarged individuals’ “speech space” and “public opinion space” (Qin 2018, 81). One’s traditional understanding of “Self” is also challenged and overridden by new technologies (Surratt 2001, 211). Among all the multiple new relationships that one builds up online and offline, fan identity is undoubtedly crucial for anyone (deeply) involved in popular culture (arguably any cultures). Like other fandoms, BL fandom in China, where the government takes pains to control cultural production to various degrees (Zhang and Zhang 2015, 200), first and foremost needs to secure its existence. As Weiyu Zhang (2016, 134) has observed, in China the politics of fandom is “a politics of survival first, then a politics of recognition,” especially under the harsh government censorship. However, many BL fans are not satisfied with merely being recognised by the official

² Meining Yan (2014) discusses the regulations on pornography in mainland China in detail.

and mainstream cultures, even though recognition is not yet fully achieved. They are eager to “poach” and change the dominant culture,³ and to further participate in the production of dominant culture. BL fandom is never monolithic; the differences among fan communities are substantial. As Ling Yang and Yanrui Xu argued, “there is no unified response or resistance to state censorship. Each community has its own stakes, concerns and survival strategies” (Yang and Xu 2016, 165). Indeed, BL practitioners’ responses to the Chinese government’s anti-pornography campaigns are not simply a passive or reluctant “reaction.” There is circumvention, conformity, and collaboration. There is also revulsion, resistance, and resilience. There is fear. There is also hope.

BL writers, readers and publishers are in constant fear of violating the law, and thereby are constantly guessing and testing the bottom line of government censorship, especially by using various tactics and technologies. BL manga was first introduced to mainland China in the early 1990s, both directly from Japan and via Taiwan, which had already been exposed to Japanese BL culture. Entering the 21st century, *slash* fiction in the English-speaking world joined the existing BL culture in China. The term “slash” refers to a fandom convention originating within the *Star Trek* franchise in the early 1970s. *Slash* often depicts an erotic and romantic relationship between two originally straight male characters (such as Kirk/Spock or K/S) from popular media products. Thus, the Chinese BL fandom currently comprises three major circles: the original BL circle (*yuandan quan*, 原耽圈) that creates and consumes original Chinese-language BL, the Japanese circle (*rixian quan*, 日系圈) that focuses on translation of Japanese BL works and their fan works, and the Euro-American circle (*oumei quan*, 欧美圈) that translates and creates *slash* works (Yang and Xu 2016, 165). Among these three prominent circles, as well as in the Chinese ACGN (Animation, Comic, Game, and Novel) world, the online literature, especially works produced by the original BL circle, is undoubtedly the most developed, and most visible to the dominant culture (Wang 2018, 86). The female-oriented online literature website Jinjiang wenxue cheng 晋江文学城, or Jinjiang Literature City (henceforth Jinjiang), is one of the largest and

³ Henry Jenkins (1992) discusses the idea of “poaching” the dominant culture.

the most influential online literature websites in China, therefore the top target of government censorship, and consequently the one most cautiously practising self-censorship. Both Jinjiang and its contracted writers have been more than once severely punished by the government; some of the writers have even ended up in jail (Yang and Xu 2016, 173–174). Therefore, teacher-student love affairs, bestiality, and sex with minors have been avoided in leading original BL websites like Jinjiang as a result of self-censorship since the 2014 anti-porn campaign (Yang and Xu 2016, 173). For years, Jinjiang has strictly applied the “above the neck” rule (*bozi yishang* 脖子以上), which means the most explicit description of intimacy and sexual behavior can only be kisses and caresses above the characters’ necks. However, as the conventional BL stories are made up of male-male romance and homoerotic elements, many readers are accustomed to, and expect to see, more sexually-graphic scenes between the main characters. Under such circumstances, writers resort to other web platforms and/or private file-sharing services, microblogging and social networking websites, such as Sina Weibo (henceforth Weibo), Wechat, and LOFTER (www.lofter.com), and other bulletin boards. Among all the alternative and supplementary platforms, Weibo is most often used by BL writers and fans, due to its large number of users, multiple functions and prominent social influence. However, precisely because of its increasing accessibility and social impact, Weibo has become notorious for over-practising censorship on its users.⁴ Technologically speaking, a pure text consisting of sequences of characters is much easier to censor than an image with text in it. Hence, BL writers first resorted to posting text images of the erotic scenarios of their works on Weibo, as supplements to the censored versions on Jinjiang. But in recent years, as technologies have developed, images with text can no longer easily pass censorship. To circumvent the image censorship, the users creatively come up with new tactics, such as posting upside-down or distorted images, or adding a sufficiently large border to the smallest dimension of the image (Huang 2020).

Current studies on BL and censorship mainly focus on the impact of censorship on BL community and practice (Yi 2013; Jacob 2015, 113–114; Yang and Xu 2016). In

⁴ Weibo’s indiscriminate ban on BL content and gay content caused a serious backlash from both its users and the government, resulting in the reversal of the ban on BL and gay content two days after its release. See Tian 2020.

this article I will examine two cases that have affected a larger realm of Chinese culture and society, other than the fan circles only. I will first scrutinise a renowned BL writer, Priest, and the adaptation of her BL story *Zhenhun* 镇魂 (The Guardian 2018) into a highly successful web drama, demonstrating Priest's as well as her fans' tactful collaboration with consumer culture and willing conformity to official discourse. Forming a sharp contrast with Priest's commercial success, the controversial ten-year jail sentence of another BL writer, Gouwazi Tianyi 狗娃子天一 (henceforth Tianyi), for profiting from producing and selling obscene BL fiction, showcases not only BL fans' but also ordinary yet conscientious netizens' responses on social media to severe censorship online and offline. Both cases under discussion have made themselves known to people who may never have paid any attention to BL or any fandom, known as *chuquan* (出圈). As the following sections will show, these two cases demonstrate the ever complex picture of subversive cultural practice negotiating with censorship as well as with any rigid system behind it. They have impacted and will continue to impact general BL practice and fandom as well as people's expectations for social changes. I will particularly discuss the various, indeed often opposite, strategies and tactics undertaken by BL participants and by some conscientious netizens on Weibo to illustrate how those who are under the threat of censorship grapple with harsh reality.

The Empowered Fans: The Success of Priest and “Zhenhun nühai” 镇魂女孩 (The Guardian Girls)

In discussing the Chinese government's 2014 anti-porn campaign, Ling Yang and Yanrui Xu examine various tactics adopted by three major online BL communities, including “secretly nibbling away at government policy, voluntarily keeping a low profile, behind-the-back complaints and so forth” (Yang and Xu 2016, 178). These strategies are still prevalent among BL fans who have been considered “perverted” since the inception of the genre. Such an observation defines the nature of BL practice as “cautious resistance and calculated conformity” (Yang and Xu 2016, 178) which inevitably emphasises the “reaction” and therefore “passivity” of the BL world when facing the antagonistic official and mainstream cultures. However, recent cases show that fans

can be more active in their dynamic with the official and mainstream cultures. In this section, I will examine the phenomenal success of the BL web drama *Zhenhun*, adapted from the 2012 novel of the same title by Priest, one of the best known BL writers. The web series was released on Youku 优酷, one of the leading video streaming websites in China, on June 13, 2018. The series was so successful that by the time it ended in July 2018, it had garnered over 3 billion views on Youku. Until January 2019, on the most influential Chinese social media site Weibo, the “super topic” hashtag #Wangban Zhenhun 网版镇魂 (webdrama Zhenhun) still remained the top popular topic in the TV series category, having 160.5 billion views and 511,000 posts. Even the party mouthpiece *People’s Daily* website recommended the drama for its “zhengnengliang” 正能量, or positive energy and influence (People.cn 2018). I will further argue that *Zhenhun* fans, self-proclaimed *Zhenhun nühai*, or *Zhenhun* girls, as well as the crucial role they played online in promoting the web drama, the novel, and the main actors, actively and strategically “poach” rather than passively respond to the mainstream and official cultures, in the hope of gaining recognition from the mainstream culture and further participating in its production.

Chinese original BL works have notoriously been the victims of plagiarism committed by writers of heterosexual romance. For years, due to government censorship, legislation, and general cultural discrimination, BL writers whose storylines/plots are “borrowed” by heterosexual writers have not dared to take legal action and seek justice to protect their intellectual property, fearing that they would be prosecuted instead (Yang and Xu 2016, 178). On the other hand, BL writers have to endure the fact that the TV or web adaptations of BL works are often turned into heterosexual romances by the producer in order to pass censorship. To accomplish this, these adapted TV and web series usually add a completely new female main character as a love interest, or change one of the male characters to a supporting character. Dramas that dared to retain the original male-male romance have without exception been censored and banned, such as the total ban on the 2016 web drama *Shangyin* 上瘾 (Heroin, a.k.a. Addiction or Addicted). Under such circumstances, BL stories that do not elaborate on romantic relations and that do not contain graphic sexual depictions are more likely to pass censorship and find a niche in the mainstream market.

Priest's stories naturally possess the advantages that facilitate success in a culture hostile to "abnormal" thoughts and deeds. Either because of her disposition and literary taste or commercial and ideological prudence, highly likely both, Priest has for years been well-known for writing "pure water" (*qingshui* 清水) BL stories. As opposed to "fleshy" (*rou* 肉) works, "pure water" stories do not contain any graphic sexual scenes. Actually, in recent years, rather than writing stories of romance between two men, Priest has been more interested in creating detective or fantasy works that loosely fall into the traditional "bromance" category. Her works do have a male couple but readers who do not favour same-sex romance can easily brush the romantic storyline aside without seriously ruining their reading pleasure. John Fiske points out that both fans and mundane viewers draw and agree on a clear line between the fan community and the mundane world. Knowledge of the target work determines if one is inside the fan circle or outside (Fiske 1992, 34–35 and 42–43). Hence, both Priest's writing strategies and the above-mentioned adaptation practices attempt to transgress the boundaries between the fan community and the mundane world, or *chuquan* (出圈), and ultimately to gain economic and cultural capital from and in the mainstream culture.

Moreover, Priest herself also keeps a low profile on the Internet. Like other online literature writers, she has a Weibo account and official fan clubs on QQ. But unlike most writers who actively interact with readers, show fans part of their daily lives through Weibo updates, or share their comments on hot social issues, Priest uses her Weibo account only as a means to advertise her work to a minimal degree, normally simply posting generic messages to inform readers that a new chapter has just been posted or a new book is about to come out. Such voluntary action to keep "a low profile," as Yang and Xu point out, despite whatever Priest's intentions may be, in reality effectively build up an image of a BL writer who is more interested in intriguing stories than homoerotic stories, and who focuses only on (commercial) writing and nothing else. As famous as she is, Priest voluntarily exerts minimal influence on her readers, and exists more like a popular writer "within the system." Her political prudence and "right" moral preference not only bring her commercial success while garnering her millions of readers who may be sexually "transgressive", but also allow her to walk the fine line between losing the BL essence and being censored. "Impersonal"

usage of public social media and keeping a low profile are effective strategies for self-protection (and hence self-censorship) by the best-known web literature writers such as Priest, which help to avoid public discussion of the author and unnecessary interaction with unknown netizens, and therefore reduce unwanted attention from both the government and other competitive players in the field.

When Priest's fantasy novel *Zhenhun* was adapted into a web series, the setting of the story was changed from China to alien planets, so the main characters are of alien races. More importantly, the main characters are only close friends sharing profound brotherly love. For ordinary audiences who have not read the fiction, the brotherly love between the two men may be slightly excessive but still "normal" in a society with a long history of homosocial practices like China. But for audiences who are book fans and know very well the "true" relationship between the main characters and the reason why a BL story has been changed to a bromance, their knowledge "increases the power of the fan to 'see through' to the production processes normally hidden by the text and thus inaccessible to the non-fan" (Fiske 1992, 43). The book-fans turned web-audiences therefore are empowered and superior, as they possess knowledge that is at once public and obvious (for the fans), and hidden and secret (for the non-fans).

"Knowledge, like money, is always a source of power" (Fiske 1992, 43). The *Zhenhun* fans who not only possess both public and hidden knowledge of the drama but also actively use such knowledge to advertise the book, the drama, and the main actors have created a special name and popular social media hashtag #*Zhenhun* nūhai. The web series of *Zhenhun* was the bombshell of 2018 mainly because people were bewildered by the fact that such a low-quality web drama suddenly went viral. The answer lies in the *Zhenhun* girls. Equipped with the "true" knowledge of the main characters, the *Zhenhun* girls excelled at decoding every single "normal" interaction between the two characters and were able to see the true love between them. Like most fans, they relished the subtle, sweet romantic exchange of the couple, and celebrated the verisimilar performance of the main actors who bring the fictional characters to life. They also created fan videos, *Zhenhun* memes, paintings, and essays to advertise the series and the actors. Among all these typical fan activities, memes of the series and of the two characters invaded and occupied all popular social media platforms soon after the

drama was released. Even the official Weibo accounts of *people.cn* (2018) and the China Meteorological Administration used *Zhenhun* memes (Zhongguo qixiangju 2018); the National Meteorological Center of CMA called the *Zhenhun* characters “*zijiren*” 自己人, or “our own people” (Zhongyang qixiangtai 2018). The wide usage of *Zhenhun* memes by official accounts showcases the successful infiltration of *Zhenhun* into the official and mainstream cultures. For the official culture, incorporating the latest products of popular culture may primarily be a means to popularise itself, adding a more “human face” to its commonly aloof image. However, appreciating, borrowing, recontextualising, and (re)creating (new) images of the *Zhenhun* characters is undoubtedly a form of collusion with the BL and its fan culture, as it illustrates the broad range of transmediating the *Zhenhun* text and its media products into various audiences’ own use.

In order to further increase the publicity for the two actors, the *Zhenhun* girls created another hashtag #*Zhenhun nühai C wei chudao* 镇魂女孩 C 位出道. “*C wei chudao*” is jargon used in the East Asian entertainment industry, imported from Korea. “*C wei*” is the “centre position of a group of actors” while “*chudao*” means one’s professional debut. Hence, only the best actor can occupy the centre spot on the stage. “*Zhenhun nühai C wei chudao*” aims at different goals, the first one of which apparently is the *Zhenhun* fans’ best wishes for the two actors as well as the *Zhenhun* show, hoping that they can be eminent actors in their careers. Moreover, since the subject of “*C wei chudao*” is the *Zhenhun* girls, they are actually the creators of the two rising stars (in reality, they are), and thereby the creators of a commercial commodity, which reverses the dynamics between fan culture and the cultural industries, from making fan culture out of cultural industries (Fiske 1992, 46–47) to producing commercial commodities for the cultural industries. In this sense, the *Zhenhun* girls achieved their goals when both actors were invited to participate in the 2019 Chinese New Year Gala, the most watched official New Year celebration. To everyone’s surprise, “*Zhenhun nühai*” eventually did “*C wei chudao*” and became the “stars” themselves, when they made their debut on the electronic billboards of the Twin Towers at Shanghai Global Bay after collecting 6.66 million “loves” from the VIP users of Youku (Jincudao 2018). Hence, the creation and promotion of *Zhenhun* as well as the *Zhenhun* girls is an achievement in obtaining social and cultural identity and recognition that the BL fans

have never received from the dominant and official cultures. In other words, fans “perform their constructed selves” (De Kosnik 2016, 242 and 248). “Zhenhun nūhai C wei chudao” is also a celebration of a new identity: these Zhenhun girls have transformed themselves from fans who struggle to gain recognition from the mainstream culture to creators of mainstream culture. *Zhenhun* is indeed *their* (the Zhenhun girls’) show, as they rather than the producers of the drama possess the object of their love and enthusiasm (Fiske 1992, 40-41). In the summer of 2018, *Zhenhun* and the Zhenhun girls were indeed successfully lifted out of the fan circle, or *chuquan*, and dominated the cultural scene in China.

Nevertheless, the fear of being censored is a constant concern for BL participants. Just like Priest’s hermetic attitude towards the public, fans also practice an ideal sharply contrasting with *chuquan*, the idea of *quandi zimeng* 圈地自萌, which literally means “claiming your own land, enjoying yourself on your own ‘territory’.” “*Quandi zimeng*” underscores a “closed-door,” self-protective strategy adopted by fans who do not want to be judged and interfered with by people from other fan circles and from the mundane world. The idea also emphasises the basic freedom that everyone should enjoy, even though sometimes it can be used as a safe haven for illegal activities. As mentioned above, “*quandi zimeng*” apparently runs at odds with the Zhenhun girls’ *chuquan* ambitions, but it never recedes from the *Zhenhun* fans’ minds. When *Zhenhun* and its hashtags swept the Internet, many fans as well as the producers started to worry that the drama might have been too successful and drawn unnecessary attention from government censors. The fans therefore voluntarily abandoned one of the most trending hashtags used by the drama, hashtag #Shehuizhuyi xiongdiqing 社会主义兄弟情, socialist brotherly love, to avoid being mixed up with other BL dramas and becoming implicated, and also to try not to make fun of anything “socialist.” Despite the fans’ proactive moves to “cool down the heat”, eight days after the final episode was aired, the *Zhenhun* series was removed from Youku on August 2, 2018, for unknown reasons. If the government does not give clear reasons for its actions, its ban on the *Zhenhun* series is more likely intended to regulate and restrain the fan power than to police the text, because of “the dominant culture’s need to maintain the disciplinary distance between the text and reader” (Fiske 1992, 41). The cultural capital

produced by the fans is dangerous and subversive for a government that strives to instruct its people on living “morally and positively”, and that has been increasingly emphasising the didactic message of literature and art, unwilling to recognise their function as pure entertainment. However, as shown above, in their contest with the government, the *Zhenhun* fans and the cultural commodities they have produced clearly “poach” the official culture and beat the government policy, especially when, after additional edits and revisions, the drama was back on Youku on November 10, immediately receiving over 52 million views for its playback in seven days (Xunye 2018).

Nevertheless, one should keep in mind that no matter how many “romantic moments” the fans decoded from the series, the web drama *Zhenhun* does not violate the tightened regulations on the production of film, TV, press, and radio. At the same time, censoring a drama in which an actor plays does not necessarily lead to the censoring of the actor. For example, although the web drama *Shangyin* was banned in China, the main actor Huang Jingyu’s career took off, and he has been highly recognised by the official culture after playing a series of patriarchal roles in several nationalist films. In this sense, the success of *Zhenhun* actors and the *Zhenhun* girls should be better seen as a “reward” by the official culture for voluntarily and creatively following the official rules and helping the official culture recruit, incorporate, and tame subversive powers.

Restless “Monkeys”: The Tianyi Case Controversy

Like a patriarch, if the official culture rewards its docile children, of course it punishes the naughty ones. As most BL practitioners celebrated the success of *Zhenhun*, in the same year many were chilled by the Tianyi case. In November 2017, BL writer Tianyi was arrested, and on October 31, 2018, sentenced to ten years and six months in jail, for making and selling obscene articles for profit. According to the official report, Tianyi made 150,000 yuan profit selling erotic BL books written by her. Although there are many cases of online literature writers being arrested for writing and selling “pornographic” content, the news usually shakes and affects mainly the online

literature community. Tianyi's case differs from all the previous ones in that it immediately drew public attention and has caused a widespread outcry from both BL fans and ordinary netizens on Chinese social media, for its sentence seems too heavy for such a "minor" crime. In other words, it is a *chuquan* case that has a larger social impact. In this section, I will discuss the responses from Tianyi's sympathisers and the strategies they adopted in an attempt to influence the judge's opinion on Tianyi's appeal, as well as the consequent challenges to China's outdated state apparatus and problematic social institutions. These challenges may not lead to immediate social change, but they have undoubtedly planted seeds of bottom-up democracy in the younger generations.

In Tianyi's case, one of her books, *Gongzhan* 攻占 (Occupy), was the main source of the profit that she made. *Gongzhan* is about a homoerotic relationship between a high school teacher and his seventeen-year-old student. This book is classified "Gao H" 高H among BL stories. "Gao H" is a combination of the Chinese word *gao* (high) and the Japanese word *hentai* 変態 in ACGN culture, meaning highly sexually abnormal. Homoerotic content (sometimes between/with minors) has characterised Japanese *yaoi* and Anglo-American *slash* practices, and has been an essential category in Chinese BL, despite government censorship. Therefore, Tianyi's *Gongzhan* is not a unique case among non-compliant BL participants. Due to the heavy censorship, legally publishing BL works in China is almost impossible. For years, well-received works have been published in either Taiwan or Hong Kong, or made into high quality private publications without obtaining an ISBN from the government in China. Tianyi is not the first or last writer self-publishing her work; nor has she made the most profit among self-published writers.⁵ She took the road that many BL writers have taken, only with less caution and less luck. Under such circumstances, the government adeptly used the old trick of "killing the chicken to teach the monkeys a lesson" (*shaji jinghou* 杀鸡警猴) to make an example of Tianyi.

However, rather than being intimidated, the "monkeys" were immediately enraged. As social media platforms like Weibo have become a tool for people to draw public

⁵ For more information on arrested and/or sentenced BL writers, see Yang 2019, 212-213.

attention and further seek justice, Tianyi's sympathisers also resorted to a public appeal in the hope of influencing the judge's opinion on her case. Nevertheless, the public responses and tactics ranged widely, from conformism to democratic reformism, demonstrating the fundamentally divided views on the state apparatus and social institutions. For the moderates, writing highly homoerotic BL stories is legally and morally wrong, and Tianyi deserves to be punished for making and circulating obscene materials. But they recognise that the pertinent laws were made in 1998 when making a profit of 30,000 to 50,000 yuan was considered a "serious crime", and a profit of 150,000 yuan (Tianyi's case) "extremely serious." However, as the Chinese economy has developed so fast in the past two decades, making a profit of 150,000 yuan can no longer be considered a serious crime in the public eye. Therefore the moderates suggest respecting the law but focus on persuading the judge that such a degree of penalty is too harsh for a young woman who simply wants to make a living. Thinking along this line, many others are afraid that a public appeal may irritate the government and cause a further crackdown; they "kindheartedly" suggest that BL writers should practise tighter self-censorship to avoid inviting unnecessary trouble (Beida wenxue luntan. 2018). Such pragmatic views aim to protect as many as possible within the state apparatus, whereas "truth" and "justice" are not the priority.

In her analyses of the philosophy of the ACGN world and fandom, Yusu Wang suggests that for younger generations the existing orders represent certainty, and a "normal" world that one falsely believes to exist. The young people prefer to accept and respect any existing law and order not because these are more just and/or more reasonable, but simply because following them is easy and simple, and such actions are protected by the state apparatus (Wang 2018, 101). Wang calls this tendency to avoid responsibility and to follow orders a kind of cynicism (Wang 2018, 101). Sue Curry Jansen also tells us that "the Powerful do not just have the first and last say. They do not just control access to podium, presidium, or press room. They also determine the rules of evidence, shape the logic of assertion, define the architecture of arguments" (Jansen 1988, 7). To respect the existing law on pornography is to accept the rationale and procedure of defining and identifying pertinent crime, and to follow the official logic on regulating the press and publishing. It not only illustrates the cynicism of a group/generation of people, but also unfolds in front of us how the official education

system has successfully and systematically affected and trained its receivers' way of perceiving the world, analysing the sources of information, and processing evidence. After all, the law is rather a human institution that changes from time to time than an immutable guardian and representation of justice and truth.

Veteran writers like Priest unfortunately showcase the social reality analysed above. Unlike what the *People's Daily* web account suggested in its complimentary comments, Priest does not demonstrate "positive power and influence." At best, she provides the masses and fans with an example of how to be commercially successful in a censored world. At worst, she helps to create an illusion and blind confidence that the existing censorship does not punish people for no good reason. At the same time, following the official regulations points to the fans' desire to enter or self-identify with the "normal" mainstream culture and the mundane world. It also shows the dilemma of resorting to public opinion and democratic force in a country with a long history and experience of censorship. Massive and strong public opinion on certain issues in China is always at the risk of becoming "sensitive" and being treated as "democratic protest", and therefore suffering a severe backlash from the authorities.

On the other hand, many BL practitioners, especially less commercialised writers and readers, regard Tianyi's penalty as deliberately targeting marginalised cultures—online literature and BL culture—for the following reasons: 1) Under the current judicial system, in practice, laws are not effectively applied to the ubiquitous adult ads on social media. 2) The current laws on the definition of pornography and obscenity are too vague. Whether a depiction of graphic sex is obscene is determined by its aesthetic value, while aesthetic value belongs to a highly subjective realm. In fact, many readers give personal experiences of reading classic literature as pornography. 3) It is the government's duty to establish and develop rating systems for film, TV shows, books, and other online content, but lacking such systems, the government punishes victims for its own wrong-doings (Shijiu yaoyiyao 2018a). A total ban on obscene content inevitably reduces adults to reading or communicating only what is fit for children (Heins 2007, 166). 4) Pornography is not harmful, and there is no scientific or psychological evidence proving it has a negative impact on adolescent development. 5) The government has amended or revised many laws in recent years, such as by

reducing the penalty on tax evasion and bribery, but never revisits laws on producing, publishing, selling, and circulating obscene articles, for which the penalty remains sentences from ten years to life (Wang Zhenyu lüshi 2018). 6) There is still no law against any form of child pornography. Real life child pornography and sexual harassment have been largely ignored and denied in the conservative culture. The public is particularly incensed by the sharp contrast between the Tianyi case and the well-known actress Fan Bingbing's tax evasion case of the same year: Tianyi was sentenced to more than ten years in jail for making a profit of 150,000 yuan, while Fan Bingbing was fined totally 890 million yuan for unpaid taxes and penalties without serving a single day in jail (Xinhuanet 2018). Tianyi's case not only touches a nerve with the public on legislation, demonstrating the increasing social injustice, inequality, and corruption that many Chinese experience daily, but also reveals that patriarchy is deeply rooted in the society and its institutions. Tianyi's sympathisers compare this case with how real child pornography, real paedophilia, domestic violence, child abuse, and rape are ignored and/or receive little penalty in life (Sohu 2018), pointing to the fundamental paradox between the deep fear of sexual freedom as well as lack of sex education in the society and the fierce encouragement of marriage and reproduction by the government as well as by the conservative, patriarchal culture. When the discussion goes beyond the ACGN world, it transgresses the boundary between fandom and the mundane world, creating a temporary common ground and solidarity among marginalised groups, victims of the patriarchal institutions, and the down-trodden in general. Through Tianyi's case, social media connect individuals of various identities, and offer them a platform to vent their dissatisfaction with the increasingly sensed social injustice and institutional corruption.

Had such public discussions successfully "evolved into formally organized collectivities, in which roles, norms, and tradition become fixed", they would lead to social changes (Zhang 2016, 5). But if the means of communication were not available, they would never form any new social entities. Not long after Tianyi's case appeared on the public's radar and evoked heated discussions, the government took a series of actions to crack down further on the BL community, such as deleting Weibo accounts and posts, banning BL websites, and policing publishers. More importantly, on many social media platforms, such as Weibo, Douban, and Jinjiang, more users have started

to report pornographic or inappropriate content to the authorities through the easy-to-use report mechanism.⁶ The last action is detrimental in every respect. In the past, there was an unwritten agreement and mutual trust between writers and readers. The writers took risks and employed various means to provide the readers with “sensitive” content, and believed that the readers would secretly enjoy the difficult-to-produce fruits and together protect the authors. BL fans also believed that trading and circulating “sensitive” materials were merely personal deeds, as they did not cause any harm to the public. But after the government reinforced the laws and regulations on pornography and obscene articles and applied more easy-to-use report mechanisms, anyone—a homophobic netizen, a concerned parent, a grudging reader, a jealous competitor, a moralist, an ordinary person who wants to make a little money—can secretly report anyone who produces, circulates, possesses, or trades BL works *with or without* pornographic content. Tipping off the authorities about someone on the Internet has never been so easy, whereas clearing one’s name has never been so hard. One may eventually prove to be not guilty, but the time and money invested are priceless, while the “whistle blower” does not suffer any penalty for providing false information. Fearful of being reported and wrongly punished, writers quickly deleted their old posts on document-sharing websites, publishers halted ongoing projects, and readers did not dare circulate previously-saved works to other unknown fans, all resulting in a new round of self-censorship. Although Jinjiang is notorious for its self-censorship and complete conformity with the government regulations, at the time of writing, in May 2019, it was once again reported by an unknown person to the authorities for having published works containing pornographic content. On May 23, 2019, Jinjiang announced via its Weibo account that two of the sections (those where the alleged pornographic works were published) under pre-modern BL stories would be closed immediately for fifteen days, so that the whole website could further scrutinise its works (Jinjiang wenxuecheng 2019). On May 24, Bingxin 冰心, the top administrator of Jinjiang, informed the public on Weibo that she was safely back home

⁶ Rumours indicated that the authorities increased the reward money given to citizens who report pornographic content to police. But one can never verify such “behind the scenes” information from the government.

(from arrest and/or police interrogation). More importantly, she warned the writers and readers that:

As long as you write about sexual conduct, sexual thoughts or any description related to sexual organs, be it long or short, concrete or stream of consciousness, using substitute adjectives or metaphors, about one person or the intercourse between two, as long as others can tell that it is about sex, it is of high risk. The book that has been reported and banned contains a paragraph of fewer than four hundred characters; there is no specific sexual organ mentioned, no intercourse, but it has been considered as the highest level of pornography.

只要你写了性行为性心理或其它涉及性器官的任何描写，无论是字数多少，无论是不是意识流，无论是不是用了各种形容词代称粉饰，是不是用了各种比喻，是一个人的行为还是两个人的交互，只要让人看出你这是写了性相关，就属于高风险。被封文章中有一段不足四百字描写，没有具体器官名称，没有交互动作，已经被鉴定中心鉴定为色情等级最高的淫秽描写。(Bingxin 2019)

She therefore pleaded with the writers and readers to apply higher regulation and self-censorship, not to attempt to write anything involving sex to the slightest degree, and to report to the website authority if they see anyone writing about sex. She emphasised that reporting pornography is not personal revenge or fierce competition among writers; it is being responsible for oneself and for all the writers at Jinjiang (Bingxin 2019). In other words, if one does not practise full-scale (self) censorship, it is likely that others who write at Jinjiang as well as the website itself eventually will be (has already been as reality shows) implicated and heavily punished. Bingxin was right in her pessimistic prediction: two months later Jinjiang was completely shut down for fifteen days, for full-fledged self-censorship and pertinent technical upgrades (Guanliyuan 2019).

Encouraging tip-offs not only “purifies” (*jìnghuà* 净化) the Internet as the government aims to do, and destroys the mutual trust shared by the fan communities, but also challenges one’s belief in humanity and one’s hope for a good future. Reader 冷死辣

崽(Lengsi lazai) commented on the Tianyi case and the government censorship under BL writer 十九瑶一瑶's (Shijiu yaoyiyao) Weibo post:

Sadly many people think this has nothing to do with them. Allow me to be blunt: when every historical incident happened, the masses thought it was an ordinary day. They did not even know why such things would happen, let alone anticipate anything.

悲哀的是还有很多人以为与自己无关。恕我直言，每一个历史事件发生的时候民众都认为这只是普通的一天，别说苗头了，甚至有人连为什么会发生都不知道。

The writer replied:

Everyday (he/she) watched someone being decapitated, and then went back home, saying how this person deserved death. Fewer and fewer people were left, until one day (himself/herself) was beheaded... That's how things go.

每天围观一次菜市口砍头，然后回家嗑瓜子，说这人死的怎么怎么活该，直到人越来越少，某天自己也被拎去砍头.....大致如此。(Shijiu yaoyiyao 2018b)

The masses' numbness, stupidity, and enthusiasm for spectacle-watching unsurprisingly reminded people of Lu Xun's well-known works on the Chinese national character a hundred years ago. Such a dismaying analogy is echoed in a post by another writer 十九岁子弹 (Shijiusui zidan), who wrote, "What makes me heartbroken is that I am only in my twenties but have already found out the world is rotten to the core, but I have to continue to live."⁷ Renowned BL writers are more cautious (interestingly, everything remained normal and peaceful in Priest's Weibo posts). For example author 徐徐图之 (Xuxu tuzhi) thanked her readers for their inquiries and comfort, and very obscurely yet humorously suggested that:

⁷The original text was post on November 17, 2018, but it was deleted later.

This harsh winter is cold, stay warm. Go to bed early and get up early...drink more hot water, and spend less money. I hope tomorrow is a good day. Thank you.

寒冬天冷，大家多穿衣，早睡早起...多喝热水，省着点花。希望明天是个好天气，谢谢你们。(Xuxu tuzhi 2018)

Her followers immediately decoded the message, knowing that she suggested that they keep safe and not buy BL books, at least for a while. This sense of disillusionment first and foremost enhances the opposition between BL fans and the official and dominant cultures. It also further complicates BL fandom and practice, and creates a sentiment of dystopian carnival. Some BL practitioners may hope to achieve more successes like *Zhenhun* by severe self-censorship, some may shed tears with Tianyi, and others may enjoy whatever they can get and lament the “good old days” (in fact BL days have never been good) before the apocalypse. Tianyi’s case and people’s various responses to the government’s actions once again demonstrate that the BL world is full of different and sometimes opposite views and practices, and its complicated dynamic with the government censorship illustrates the younger generations’ understandings and expectations of their country’s future.

Conclusion

Because of their political naiveté, their cynicism, and their idealism, but also because of their successes and failures, participants in different BL communities have formed a paradoxical relationship with government censorship and the state apparatus. On the one hand, they look for public recognition and acceptance. On the other hand, they strive to keep their unique and subversive features, resisting assimilation by the dominant culture. They are eager to be the owners and producers of their own culture, but they voluntarily offer free cultural labour to and are used by the dominant culture. They are the victims of censorship. They can also be the collaborators with and contributors to censorship. They witness, experience, survive, or perish. But ultimately, many of them are enlightened (and perhaps disillusioned at the same time), which has

planted seeds of courage for some to question and challenge what the government has told them, and to fight for a better future. Practice always appears to precede censorship. History and reality have shown us that although the government may take all kinds of actions to reinforce its censorship, it is always one step behind people's practice, and always one step behind their circumvention. I believe that as both BL practice and government censorship evolve, the dynamics between the two will only become more complicated and intriguing, inviting more scholarly study on the topic and in the field.

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