

Shipping on the edge: Negotiations of precariousness in a Chinese real-person shipping fandom community

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Abstract

The fandom community has been one of the most engaging and active segments in the global participatory culture. However, fans face multilevel and intertwined constraints from various social forces while seeking pleasure and fantasies. This study zooms in on a real-person shipping fan community in China where shippers are doubly marginalized as they fantasize about two male idols being in a romantic relationship in a society with both the derogative projection of fans and low levels of acceptance of same-sex relationships. Relying on a mixed-methods approach, this study found that the radical and disruptive practices are the results of tactical and calculative negotiations in relation to political, social, and technological risks while being driven by pleasure-seeking. I call these practices *precarious shipping*. The contextualized understanding of the fandom community emphasizes the importance of realizing the local tensions that are rarely addressed in previous literature that focuses on Western fandom.

Keywords

China, fandom, participatory culture, precariousness, real-person shipping

In June 2021, a special operation called *Qinglang* (晴朗, clear and bright) was launched by the Chinese government targeted at removing “harmful information” that provokes conflicts among fans and regulates disturbing fannish behaviors such as inducing

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crowdfunding among teenagers and trolling on social media (Cyberspace Administration of China, 2021). Three months later, an official notice by the Propaganda Department of the Chinese Communist Party (PDCCP) listed “the trend of *dangai*” (耽改, dramas adapted from boys’ love or *danmei* 耽美 novels) and “the chaos in fandom culture” as urgent problems in the entertainment industry (Zhang, 2021). The crackdown immediately prevented a dozen *dangai* dramas that had been produced from being released (Zuo, 2022).

Why did the Chinese government suddenly ban *dangai* dramas and regulate fans who are already marginalized in the popular culture landscape? It started with the unprecedented success of *dangai* dramas such as *The Untamed* (陈情令), which aired in 2019 on Tencent Video and was later bought by Netflix, a phenomenal hit with more than 9 billion views. The two leading actors Xiao Zhan (肖战) and Wang Yibo (王一博) subsequently became super idols in China, and gained an international spotlight in overseas markets, especially in South Korea and Japan (Zuo, 2022).

Differing from idol fans, who usually focus on a single celebrity (hereafter solo fans), or *danmei* fans, who are enthusiastic about fictional male–male romance, part of *The Untamed* fandom was attracted to the idea that Xiao and Wang were in a romantic homosexual relationship in real life, just as the two characters, *Wei Wuxian* (魏无羡) and *Lan Wangji* (蓝忘机), are indeed a same-sex couple in the original novel. Derived from the word “relationship”, these fans are typically called “shippers” (known as “CP 粉” in Chinese, meaning “couple fan”). Shipping can take many forms, such as uncovering evidence of the intimacy of the pair or creating fanfiction, art, and video featuring them (Gonzalez, 2016). Compared with *danmei* fans, shippers of Wang and Xiao face a massive backlash from the solo fans and beyond the fan communities in a sexually conservative society where same-sex marriage is not legalized.

Popular culture fans are seen as irrational and immature media consumers who are easily trapped by the industry (Gonzalez, 2016). Given that “fangirl” (粉/饭圈女孩) has been used as a derogatory word on the Chinese internet, shippers are further scoffed at as “daydreamers” and excoriated for violating heteronormativity. For non-shippers, it is inexplicable why millions of fans would spare no effort to find clues of romantic intent from the interviews or behind-the-scenes clips of two male idols. The conflict culminated in February 2020, when the irritated solo fans of Xiao reported the global fanfiction site Archive of Our Own (AO3) for publishing a real-person slash fanfiction where the character of Xiao was a feminized sex worker with gender dysphoria. Following the report AO3 was blocked in China and a large-scale boycott against Xiao and his fans emerged on the internet. The controversy, also known as “227 incident,”¹ has since become a heated topic with regard to the shipping fandom (Romano, 2020).

The participatory culture empowers fans in many ways (Jenkins, 2013), still, fanwork creators always face precarity, such as copyright disputes or the belief that fan labor can be exploited by the industry (Stanfill, 2019; Tang and Lee, 2020). However, less is known about the paradoxical political, social, and technological risks, which real-person shippers have to cope with when seeking pleasure in the mixture of media and idol fandom, and how the norms within a certain fandom community are created and enacted based on the negotiation of precariousness.

This study focuses on the Wang Yibo/Xiao Zhan shipper community in China to understand the intricacies, fluidity, and ruptures of the tactical and calculative negotiations to deal with the political, social, and technological risks, a fannish practice I call precarious shipping. Relying on a mixed-methods approach and precariousness theory, I aim for a contextualized interpretation of the practices and interaction within the fandom community where pleasure-seeking is simultaneously interwoven with homophobia, social pressure, and platformization. Anchoring the article in the concept of precarious shipping, I have organized the findings into two sections: the precariousness in different dimensions and how shippers negotiate the risks and norms in a porous fandom community. The findings suggest that it is imperative to be aware of the local tensions and struggles of an emerging fandom in new socio-technological logics when investigating the participatory culture of fans.

The paradoxical site of fandom: entertainment industry, state, and platform

In the contemporary media landscape, fans have been mainstream consumers and active participants in reshaping popular culture (Jenkins, 2006). Fans function as an interpretive community, cultural producers and an alternative social community (Jenkins, 2013). Nonetheless, fans are still subject to the stereotypes of being immature, irrational, and having no meaningful life. Even within the fandom community, fans see others as losers (Stanfill, 2013). The tensions between fans and the mainstream culture point to a variety of frontlines where fans act as social actors of resistance against an interconnected network of social constraints.

The fandom communities in China are subject to a multilevel, intertwined power networks dominated by the party-state. The entertainment industry follows the capitalist logic to pursue maximum profits but is under tight control of strict regulation and extensive guidance from PDCCP and the National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA) (Cai, 2016). The state also proactively constraints online communities' activities to create a harmonious and healthy online environment, with fans being one of the targeted groups (Zhang, 2021). Following the platformization of pop culture and the entertainment business, the datafied online fandom emerges from the platform logic centered on online traffic and quantifiable metrics (Yin and Xie, 2021). Under such complicated circumstances, even though fans are partially empowered with fragmentary agency via personalized digital media technologies, the fandom has been placed into a paradox of multiple social forces pointing in contrasting and often conflicting directions (Zhang et al., 2023). How to make sense of the unique fandom practices and experiences in this paradoxical site warrants updated theorization and empirical evidence (Busse and Gray, 2011).

Focusing on the relationship between the media fandom and the industry, scholars argue that fan-made works such as fanfictions, fan arts, and even online comments are valuable and benefit media producers and marketers as free labor (De Kosnik, 2013; Stanfill and Condis, 2014). The industry not only recognizes fans as an indispensable component of the business model but also shapes the relationship with fans to

influence their behaviors. Relying on what Stanfill (2019) called “domestication strategy”, the industry creates a desired fan subject built upon the inherent inequalities such that the norms of consumption and pleasure are largely determined by itself.

Analysis of Chinese entertainment industry and fandom communities would be intrinsically inadequate without the acknowledgement of the state’s role. The media industry in general is considered as a critical means of achieving political socialization, ideological control, and power dominance in China (Zhao, 2008). The party-state relies heavily on the media to advocate government policy, construct national identity, and promote official ideologies that are often packaged as “the main melody.” Since the 1990s, the party and government officials have identified the youngsters as one of the key target groups and learned to package ideological messages into popular culture, such as pop songs, films, and television dramas (Brady and Wang, 2009; Cai, 2017; Zhao, 1998). This political logic fundamentally shapes the dynamics of media industry and cultural products, although sometimes via a post hoc fashion.

The rapid expansion of information and communication technologies is key to understanding the datafied online fandom culture (Yin, 2020). According to Couldry and Mejias (2019), the huge amount of data produced as a daily routine by fans has been leveraged by the entertainment industry through the “quantification methods of computing” (Couldry and Mejias, 2019: 337). The fan community experiences “appropriation and exploitation for value as data” (Couldry and Mejias, 2019: 338) as a seemingly natural process. Platform paternalism refers to the mechanism where the large platforms, such as Weibo and Douyin, construct their authority and power by delineating which user behaviors are authentic, moral, and acceptable. Intervention or punishment on the part of platforms are often framed as serving the best interests of the users and the quality of platform content. It is common for content creators to receive punitive responses from platforms if they try to enhance their content visibility by playing with the platform algorithm (Petre et al., 2019). However, fans are not vulnerable targets who have no idea how the industry and platform are operating. The truth is, fans are able to invent a series of coded languages and develop norms of speaking that accommodate the logic of social media platforms (Yin and Xie, 2021; Zhang et al., 2023).

Following Gray et al. (2007), I argue that scholars should approach the desires, pleasure, and experiences of fans as agents in the existing social-technological and political structure. The next section first historicizes the boys’ love (BL) or *danmei* culture in East Asia, then it presents real-person slash (RPS, or shipping) as a unique fandom subculture. Finally, I illuminate why shipping fandom practices are precarious through articulating how shippers constantly negotiate with heteronormativity and homophobia.

Precarious shipping: from *danmei* fandom to real-person slash

Derived from Japanese manga and anime, the boys’ love fandom is primarily created for and by women who fantasize about male androphilic romance and eroticism (Zhou et al., 2018). BL fiction allows women to play with gender construction and to offer alternatives to heterosexual romantic stories (Zhang, 2016). In China, a similar genre of work depicting pure love between beautiful boys is often called *danmei* (Zhang, 2022). The everyday life experiences of *danmei* fans are a “mixture of the socialist legacy of equalities

and justice and the trending Western ideal of individual freedom and liberty” (Zhang, 2022: 157).

Originally based on media texts, slash works often resist the “limitations of traditional masculinity” and “reconfigure male identity” (Jenkins, 2013: 191). RPS addresses the intimacy between two male real people such as celebrities. The RPS community gradually form a unique culture that originated from previous *danmei* and slash fandom heritage and the idol culture in the entertainment industry. In this article, I use shipping to capture a wide range of RPS fandom on two Chinese idols that is not limited to fanfiction.

The idol culture in East Asia presents a profoundly new cultural paradigm of pop culture and the entertainment industry. Idols refer to young singers, models, or actors who are extensively produced and promoted, often through talent shows. Fans do not expect idols to specialize in any performance genre but are deeply attached to them via media intimacy. And the interdependence among fans, idols, and the industry has suggested that the fan community has become an integral component of the East Asia idol culture (Glasspool, 2012; Zhang and Negus, 2020).

In South Korea, democratization, the open policy towards overseas media products, and consumerism have together contributed to various fan subcultures, including enthusiastic straight women who are obsessed with portrayals of idols as gay men (Kwon, 2019). Shippers’ cultural production of male–male romance in the heterosexual idol groups are exploited by the entertainment industry. The cultural appropriation and re-appropriation between fans and the industry shapes the performances and meanings of pop culture (Kwon, 2015). Likewise, in Japan, fans negotiate with the idol media image of masculinities. More flexible and fluid sexual and gender roles of men and boys are produced by the fans. As Glasspool (2012) argues, such fan creation largely remains private within the fan community and hardly disrupts the heteronormative gender hierarchy.

The new idol–fan relations, along with the platformized online fandom culture, pose unprecedented challenges to the publicity, presence, and pleasure of the shipper community. The fantasized kinship between fans and idols allows fans to perceive that they have considerable responsibility for and influence on the idol’s career, and even the production of the television shows (Fung, 2019; Yan and Yang, 2021). Different from the previous idol–fan relationship, shippers keep their distance from the shipped celebrities and what they care the most about is the authenticity of the chemistry or the feelings of the pair (Dare-Edwards, 2014).

While scholars applaud that shipping fandom transgresses mainstream sexual and cultural norms, and affords political potentials for social change (Rajagopalan, 2015), shippers face counterforces from the extant social norms such as heteronormativity and traditional gender stereotypes. A content analysis of popular Chinese BL stories found that heteronormative gender roles are common in the depiction of homosexual relationships (Zhou et al., 2018).

Danmei and BL fandom have received abundant scholarly attention (Glasspool, 2012; Yang and Xu, 2017; Zhang, 2022). Yet, shipping fandom is drastically different from *danmei* fandom in several notable ways and thus needs updated tools to theorize and understand shippers’ practices, pleasure, and struggles under specific political and social-technological conditions. While the *danmei* practices contribute

to the visibility of homosexuality and the celebrated androgynous masculinity challenges the hegemonic hypermasculinity (Zhang, 2022), the expression of alternative gender and sexuality in real life is subject to much stricter control from the state.

In 2021, NRTA issued a guideline to “stop the abnormal aesthetics of effeminate men,” signaling a policy regulating media representations of masculinity and gender expression of idols (McDonald, 2021). On the other hand, *danmei* fans manipulate the bodies and sexualities of men to “best satisfy their own desire” (Zhang, 2022: 160) and avoid confrontations with real issues, such as institutionalized and everyday homophobia and discrimination toward non-heterosexual groups (Zhang, 2022). However, shippers would carefully navigate their pleasure such as prioritizing the interests of the “idol-couple.” If *danmei* fans can swiftly draw a line between the fantasy world and the reality, then shippers have to face the fact that what they are fantasizing or hopeful about is the reality.

Previous literature documented collective action of queer fans against media production in a Western context (Navar-Gill and Stanfill, 2018), and how sexual norms and the technologization of fan practices might transform the shipping culture (Gonzalez, 2016; Rajagopalan, 2015; Yin and Xie, 2021), but less is known about shipping two male idols in a society where the LGBTQ+ community is largely stigmatized and censored in the media. It is urgent to understand how these “abnormal” and “subversive” Chinese shippers negotiate desires and pleasures in a consistent framework to decipher the fan practices in relation to the various social forces, which are often paradoxical, fluid, and even intangible.

In this study, I borrow the concept of precariousness to understand the multitudes of insecurities, uncertainties, and risks that shippers have to cope with when seeking pleasure from pairing two male idols (Tang and Lee, 2020). Precarious work refers to employment that is unpredictable and risky for the worker, such as temporary employment, freelancing, and illegal work (Gill and Pratt, 2008). The booming of precarious work in the 1970s generated greater economic inequality and instability as well as new political struggles for the working class (Kalleberg, 2009). Media and cultural workers, in particular, experience extreme emotional attachment to their work, high levels of mobility, and informal working environments producing precarious work (Gill and Pratt, 2008), and their collective tactical negotiations and resistance have in turn rearranged the cultural economy (Salamon, 2016). More generally, precariousness captures the perceived insecurities especially with regard to financial and material gains in contemporary risk society (Tang and Lee, 2020).

Likewise, the participation of shippers in the fandom culture can be examined through the perspective of managing and negotiating precariousness. From the hidden pleasure of pairing two idols to create homoerotic fan works, shippers simultaneously face the political risk of anti-LGBTQ+ policies, the social risk of engaging solo fans and the public, and the technological risk of their affections and labor easily being transformed into traffic benefiting the platform (Zhang et al., 2023). For example, while data fans of a music idol try their very best to accumulate online traffic promoting their idols (Zhang and Negus, 2020), a high-profile online presence for shippers is dangerous as it could be seen as a form of collective support for same-sex marriage equality, a sensitive topic on the Chinese internet. To manage the precarity and perceived insecurity, shippers

create a set of norms that regulate the various forms of fandom behaviors within the community. Thus, precariousness theory allows one to see how calculative and strategic the fan community can be, while avoiding overgeneralizations of fandom as an irrational and immature mass. Probing the dynamic process of fans constantly negotiating these norms, this study aims to reveal the struggles, contestations, and barriers that are concrete for them in participatory shipping.

Research context

This study focuses on the popular shipping fandom in China on Wang Yibo and Xiao Zhan (Wang/Xiao for short) since they co-starred in *The Untamed*, one of the most successful 2019 TV series in China (Zuo, 2022). The original *danmei* fiction, *Modaozushi* (魔道祖师), describes the homoerotic relationship between the two leading characters. *The Untamed*, on the other hand, as an adapted television program, had to be completely compliant with the strict guidance of NRTA, where homosexual characters are defined as sexually abnormal and inappropriate to show in mass media (Liang, 2022). The producer Tencent Video claims the drama is merely about brotherhood and friendship between two young men who solve a series of murder mysteries and eventually defeat the evil villain. Regardless of this claim, the implicit same-sex relationship between the two male characters (and later between the two actors) stood as the largest selling point to many audiences.

Many of *The Untamed* fandom are readers of the original BL fiction, *Modaozushi*. After the release of the drama, the shipping fans who fantasize about the relationship between Wang Yibo and Xiao Zhan quickly formed into a unique community, outnumbering all the other real-person shipping communities in China. On the popular microblogging site Weibo, shippers create a designated Super Topic (超级话题), a specific hashtag page that allows users to gather around to share the latest information, their feelings, and fan works about the pair. Within the Super Topic, shippers called themselves “BXG” as it represents Bo Xiao Girls.² I note that BXG is mostly used to refer to the shippers who are active in the Wang/Xiao ship Super Topic on Weibo, therefore, I use shippers to refer to the whole real-person shipping fan community. It is worth noting that the BXG community is different from *The Untamed Girls*, a fandom that is limited within the TV series. While *The Untamed Girls* also share concerns, such as whether certain male–male romantic scenes would be censored (Liang, 2022), BXG is mostly concerned with the safety and career prospects of—and romantic interaction between—Wang and Xiao, two real idols, rather than Wei Wuixian and Lan Wangji, the television characters in *The Untamed*.

Based on the discussion above, I ask two research questions:

RQ1: How do shippers see the precariousness in their practices and community?

RQ2: How do shippers negotiate with the precariousness?

Methods

I used a mixed-methods approach to understand the negotiations of precariousness and norms in the Wang/Xiao fandom. First of all, I conducted a 16-month participatory

observation by becoming a shipper and engaging with other shippers both online and offline (see Supplementary Materials for participatory observation at length). I learned the coded language and community culture among the shippers and only started the interviews after I felt I could empathize with the shippers. Then, I conducted in-depth interviews with informants who identified or had identified themselves as a Wang/Xiao shipper. The strategy of triangulation allows me to enhance the validity of my interpretation of this particularly intricate, ambiguous, and fluid cultural space. Through this multimodal analytical approach, I simultaneously interrogate participants' discourse and lived experience. This project was approved by the Institutional Review Board of my home institution.

To goal of the interviews is to reveal the nuances and tensions of different fans' perceptions towards the community norms and personal experience. I sent out 60 interview invitations to various types of fans, including fansite managers, Super Topic administrators, influencer fans, fanfiction writers, fan artists, and fan-vidding producers. I used convenience sampling to ask friends and acquaintances if they were Wang/Xiao shippers and would like to have a conversation on this topic with me. These recruitment efforts yielded 12 informants who agreed to participate in an interview (see Table S1 for details of the interviewees).

After the participants had signed a consent form informing them of their rights and topics to be discussed, the interviews were carried out in a semi-structured fashion. I prepared a set of questions grouped into three major themes: (1) motivations and general feelings about being a real-person shipping fan of Wang Yibo and Xiao Zhan; (2) practices that are related to the shipping fandom; (3) attitudes of and perceptions of norms within the shipper community (see Supplementary Materials for the interview questions). I asked all the interviewees the same questions but allowed for impromptu conversations and follow-up questions that were pertinent to each specific interview. In addition, I delved into each case and revealed the uniqueness of different experiences, uncovered individuals' negotiations and struggles with their fan identities, and paid close attention to their individual context. In doing so, I adopted a co-constructed approach (Fontana and Frey, 2005) that led to negotiated and contextually based conversations focusing on the "hows" of their everyday life as a shipper.

The interviews took place during September and October of 2020. Considering the potential sensitivity of this topic, I did not aim at seeking absolute or complete truth; rather, I employed an analytic approach with a contextualized lens throughout the data analysis stage. All the interviews were transcribed, coded, and analyzed in ATLAS.ti (version 9.1.3). I ran two rounds of coding to extract the major themes from shippers' narratives. Table S2 (in the Supplementary Materials) lists the 15 most frequent codes in the analytic stage.

Findings

In this section, I first explicate the political, social, and technological risks that shape shippers' norms and practices, which are usually considered disturbing, troublesome, and even toxic to non-shippers. I then show how shippers of various positions negotiate their pleasure and identity, and the norms within the porous and heterogeneous shipper community.

Perceiving precariousness

Idol-oriented risks. Shippers are aware of a wide range of potential risks that can harm their ship or themselves. Indeed, the formulation and negotiation process of norms within the shipper community is closely tied with the precariousness that spans the social, technological, and political dimensions. “Do not harm the idol” is the bottom line when shippers think of the potential risks and how they should behave.

The social dimension includes fan–idol, fan–fan, and fan–public interaction. Although it is less common for shippers to have personal contact with Wang or Xiao in an offline setting, “digital contact” is considered the primary mode of fan–idol interaction. As introduced in the previous section, shippers are typically not encouraged to tag Wang or Xiao on social media as they are afraid such behaviors might “offend them.” Likewise, to “clean the square” (a collective data work that boosts positive associations with the idol in the search results) is to reduce the chance that the idol might see his name linked to negative comments. For fan–fan interaction, shippers usually try to avoid conflicts with solo fans of Wang or Xiao as either group of the solo fans might eventually turn against the other person in the pair. For example, if the shippers have conflicts with solo fans of Xiao Zhan, Xiao’s solo fans might become haters of Wang Yibo and target him as revenge against the shippers. This is related to the fan–public interaction, as shippers take great care of the public image of Wang and Xiao. Any conflict among the fans can incur an unfavorable public attitude toward the idols.

The technological dimension of the risks shows the knowledge and observations of shippers as to entertainment industry dynamics, as well as the economic and algorithmic logic of social media platforms. Many of the seemingly tedious data work by shippers involves their consideration of the technical risks. For example, the recommendation algorithm in the search engine on Weibo would automatically link words that have high co-occurrence. Therefore, to decouple any perceived negative element from Wang and Xiao in the suggested search terms, shippers would publish millions of posts that repeatedly relate Wang or Xiao to complimentary remarks so that positive word combinations will climb up and replace the negative word associations.

“We are tired of being listed in the Trending Topic,” the comment by Felicity³ (Interview 6) demonstrates the sentiments of shippers towards the Trending Topics (热搜), a similar function to the trending topic on Twitter. Once the volume of posts that involve a hashtag peaks, the hashtag would appear on the Trending Topic list, which will be visible for all Weibo users. For other idol fans, being on Trending Topic might be a great opportunity to promote the idol’s work to a wider audience. However, shippers worry that the public might dislike the fact that two male idols are fantasized as a homoerotic pair. In addition, it could be interpreted as a way of queerbaiting, leading to Wang and Xiao being ridiculed or humiliated.

For shippers, one of the most important dangerous groups of users on Weibo is traffic media (营销号), who tend to have a great number of followers and whose only goal is to post controversial content to accumulate retweets and comments. The more engagement a traffic media account has, the higher the price it can charge advertisers for publishing a post endorsing a product or a company. The fact that Wang/Xiao is a same-sex ship of two of the most popular idols makes the ship an easy target for traffic media to attract

attention. Therefore, shippers usually delete the “sweets” (any clue that suggests Wang and Xiao are in a romantic relationship) several minutes after they’ve posted it. Alternatively, shippers hide the real “sweets” in the editing record⁴ of the post so that it is more difficult for traffic media to copy their posts. Whenever a shipper makes “crazy” and irrational comments, other shippers would immediately advise the publisher to delete the comment as the “mad” shipper is often weaponized by traffic media to provoke a fight among fans. In sum, shippers are well aware of the intricate relationship among the platform, the traffic media, and the public, and they carefully navigate the risks induced by the datafied algorithmic culture.

Another great risk that shippers try to manage is the political risk. Same-sex marriage is far from legalization in China; the NRTA even categorizes the LGBTQ+ community as “sexual deviants” and has issued a ban on any mass media content that is related to non-heterosexual individuals. Shippers who fantasize about the romance between Wang and Xiao have to be extremely careful about what they post about them. As Carson suggests, “The topic [homosexuals] is very sensitive in China, and we do not want to get them [Wang and Xiao] into trouble” (Interview 12). Another shipper, Madelyn, who worked at a provincial TV channel, said “we would not dare say they are gay openly ... because in our internal review of special effects of the TV show, we will even remove the rainbow emoji as it could potentially be an LGBTQ+ symbol” (Interview 3). It is not surprising, then, to see that most of the shippers would avoid using terms such as gay or homosexual when describing Wang and Xiao.

Shippers are also cautious regarding other political risks that derived from any administrative ordinance that is meant to regulate the idol industry. For instance, the *Qinglang* operation is seen as a warning to fans to “behave well” online. In addition, the fact that celebrities with any misconduct are often quickly “erased” from the internet can easily deter shippers. To protect their ship, the fans are motivated to obey the rules.

Shipper-oriented risks. Shippers feel pressured not just because the idols might suffer from their misbehaviors. Serious consequences could occur if they fail to align the fannish practices with the norm. First of all, when solo fans pick a quarrel with the shippers, the latter often feel strong affective tensions. Conflicts with haters of Wang or Xiao are also common among shippers as they can easily be hurt emotionally as they feel a deep emotional attachment with the idols. Social pressure can occur within the shipper community. For instance, when an influencer fan fails in the duty of leadership or extra-purchase, they would be urged to spend more money and even satirized by other fans. When conflicts escalate, fans who are considered problematic villains can be cyberbullied and doxed.

Second, shippers’ social media accounts might be deactivated by the platform. If an account is reported by a large number of users, Weibo might directly deactivate the account without further investigation. Anna, a fan artist, remembered a previous online fight with solo fans of Xiao, “compared with feeling offended, what really scares me is that my account might get terminated” (Interview 7). It could take years to develop a social network of similar interests and friendship on the platform not to mention the way that timelines and posts serve as an archive of work for fan artists like Anna.

Third, as mentioned earlier, the *Qinglang* operation has proactively identified harmful information and behaviors among fans so that the offenders can face legal consequences. The idols and agents have also sued haters or fans who commit defamation.

Managing precariousness: tensions, norms, and identities

Alongside the uniformity of norms within the shipper community there are disagreements, controversies, and tensions. From these ruptures, norms are debated, contested, and iterated. Indeed, shippers are constantly negotiating their affection for the Wang/Xiao pair, their identities as shippers, and the norms in the community.

In general, the most frequently mentioned affect when discussing the pair include pleasure, authenticity, sweetness, empathy, and attachment. While other idol fans might share the majority of the intimate emotions with shippers, authenticity stands out as a unique affective experience for shippers. “The Wang/Xiao pair is real” (博君一肖是真的) is a popular slogan among the shippers, but that does not mean all the shippers believe that Wang and Xiao are in a relationship in the real life. In fact, different shippers have a distinctive understanding of the meaning of authenticity for the pair. The most attractive element of the pair for many is the authentic emotion and atmosphere between Wang and Xiao, as evidenced by various behind-the-scenes videos, interview clips, and public appearances. However, for some shippers, that emotion is viewed as absolutely romantic while it is understood as much more vague by others. It could be “brotherhood” or “friendship”, and it is an ongoing process to understand the dynamics between Wang and Xiao based on their latest appearance. Interestingly, even though shippers spare no efforts to find evidence from the “sweets” that show how intimate the pair is, some of the shippers insist on being “more rational” and are only willing to believe that “at best they are just good friends as long they do not announce it openly” (Tina, Interview 4).

Besides the various interpretations of authenticity, shippers struggle with the fan identity. For example, Lucy, a senior shipper, once was accused of being a “professional fan” hired by Wang’s agent company to boost Wang’s popularity among fans (Interview 2). She shared that she was extremely tired and upset from having to clarify she was not a professional fan. Claire, once a highly influential shipper in the community, eventually “played it low-key as I do not want to take the responsibility” (Interview 5). For her, being able to post whatever she wants is more important than influence. It was embarrassing for Kathy (Interview 1) to see other shippers unreasonably using the timestamp of Wang and Xiao’s social media posts to be indicative of their relationship, so much so that she eventually decided she would rather not be called a Wang/Xiao shipper. Lily summarized two types of Wang/Xiao shippers based on the extent to which they obey the rules:

those who would go to Super Topic every day and conform the rules such as “no feminization” and “no eroticism” are one type; another type of shippers is that they simply focusing on the “sweets” and do not want to follow the rules in Super Topic. (Interview 10)

Lily’s taxonomy points to the porous and heterogeneous praxis when shippers negotiate identities and norms. The ambiguities and complexities of shippers’ identity negotiation are intertwined with how norms are being strategically violated, amended, and



Figure 1. Fan arts example: Squirtle with commercials.

reappropriated. While fans such as Claire choose not to take the “responsibilities” as expected, other fans try to find a balance between the group norms and personal preferences. For instance, fanfiction writers will insert an external URL link to another site for the explicit scenes when they publish within the Super Topic on Weibo. Alternatively, content creators may simply switch to another platform such as Lofter, Douyin, or Bilibili to publish works of theirs that might violate the norms on Weibo. Some use a virtual private network (VPN), which is legally prohibited in China, to use Twitter and other overseas platforms to enjoy the content produced by foreign shippers.

Shippers also transform their tedious data work into fun activities. Those who have a programming background have created plug-in extensions for browsers so that they will automatically refresh the voting pages for Wang or Xiao in an online competition for awards such as “the most popular actor of the year.” When shippers need to promote the brands that are endorsed by Wang or Xiao, they creatively stuck the logos on a Squirtle (see Figure 1) as an avatar or sticker to be used on social media. These are just some of many examples of how shippers turn their “duties” into play moments of the fun-creation process.

When shippers feel the burdens are overwhelming or are tired of the peer pressure within the community, they might just drop out. Stella (Interview 9), a former shipper, noted, “I really hate that every time people post something within the Super Topic, they will end with ‘if this is not appropriate, I will delete it,’ how can it be inappropriate if that’s your own words?” For Stella, the rules within the community are neither reasonable for fans nor helpful for the idols, and she was not able to ship freely and happily as before.

Concluding discussion

As one of my informants sighed, “It’s just so difficult to be a Wang/Xiao shipper.” Indeed, the skyrocketing popularity of the pair has paradoxically transformed the discourses, practices, and culture within the shipping community. Theorizing shipping as a precarious fandom, this study examines the negotiation of the norms in the Wang/

Xiao shipper community. By focusing on the perceived risks, uncertainties, and insecurities among shippers, the analytical lens of precariousness negotiation allows one to see the specificities and contingencies in a unique fandom culture within a context of inter-related social forces. I argue that it is imperative to investigate the particular social, cultural, and technological context that co-shapes the intricate affections and practices of media fandom.

The precariousness shipping fans face in their everyday life reflects a situation that is no less than a rigorous working environment full of uncertainty, unpredictability, and insecurity (Gill and Pratt, 2008; Kalleberg, 2009). It's not a risk-free pleasure-seeking environment for the shipper community; rather, they have to adapt to the datafied online fandom culture where social, technological, and political forces are intertwined as the precarity (Salamon, 2016). The participation that leads to co-creation of the fandom exposes shippers to a variety of barriers so norms are created, enacted, and negotiated. Building on the article by Yin and Xie (2021), this study not only examines how fans talk but also includes multifarious forms of shipping that are characteristic of fans from different positions.

One significant difference in the shipping fandom compared with the previous *danmei* fandom and slash community (Jenkins, 2013; Zhang, 2016; Zhou et al., 2018) is that shippers are fantasizing about the relationship between two real people, who are influential and who attract a lot of publicity. Although shippers are careful to hide their desires and discussion, given the size of its population, their discourse and fanworks easily diffuse into other online and offline communities. In a society where the LGBTQ+ community is largely stigmatized and labeled as “sexual perverts” by the government (Zuo, 2022), performative and visible shipping constitutes a possibility to resist homophobia and transform sexual politics. Consistent with Zhang's (2022) findings on *danmei* fans, many shippers mentioned that it is common to assume a shipper is an LGBTQ+ ally, but it is too early to call the community open advocates of LGBTQ+ rights, as that could be seen as social activism against the status quo and hurt the idols. However, as K-pop consumption could enable LGBTQ+ individuals to reconstruct media representation and mitigate the harms from stigmatization (Kuo et al., 2022), the political potentials of shippers should be fully recognized.

The theorization of the shippers as precarious fans is partly consistent with the view that fans can be exploited in the fan–industry relation as a digital, affective, and powerless laborer (Stanfill, 2019; Stanfill and Condis, 2014). However, it also points to the broader socio-technological condition where fan–industry relations are embedded, a condition that I call a paradoxical site of fandom. The production of *The Untamed* is itself an effort of exploration or experiment with the boundary of a drama genre in China. The theme of same-sex romance, though implicitly depicted, challenges the mainstream homophobic culture, especially in the media industry, which is under tight control by the government (Cai, 2016). If we only focus on the tension between fans and the industry, we can ignore the momentum and potential for social change, from the media industry where fans play a significant role based on a rewarding and joyful social connection (Baruch, 2021; Rajagopalan, 2015). Additionally, the capitalist logic of the media industry can confront state-level regulation. Particularly in China, it seems that it is a political logic that dominates cultural production and the site of fandom. More than 10 *dangai* TV

series can no longer be released due to a recent ban and the industry will have lost millions of dollars as a result (Zuo, 2022).

Shipping in China is particularly precarious not simply because there are constraints, but more because those constraints are intertwined in a paradoxical site. Back in 2019 and 2020, *dangai* fans celebrated the popularity of *dangai* series and formed countless communities to share their fantasies and pleasure. However, only one year later, the whole genre of *dangai* was completely removed from the media repertoire, leaving shippers only a covert space to privately consume the self-made fan products. Similar uncertainty also comes from platform paternalism. Data fan practices, such as content trafficking and chart beating (Zhang and Negus, 2020), lost their infrastructural foundation as Weibo has shut down the chart ranking of Super Topics following a guideline from the Cyberspace Administration of China.

If previous literature (Liang, 2022; Yin, 2020; Yin and Xie, 2021; Zhang et al., 2023; Zhang and Negus, 2020) has documented a wide range of practices of idol fans and *dangai* fans (e.g. the Untamed Girls) on the platformized and datafied online fandom in China, the current study on shipping fandom showcases the precariousness of their unique praxis and desires in the paradoxical power relations which are the forces which shape the fandom's practices. What undergirds such precariousness is a mixture of the political structure, homophobia, and platformization in China, and the analysis of how shippers negotiate with the precariousness goes one step further than merely describing the fan practices which are the results of such precariousness. The precariousness theory may inform our understanding of shippers in other countries such as South Korea and Japan, as they share some of value- and technology-based constraints with China, such as homophobia and the platformization of online fandom.

To conclude, this article shows that the radical and disruptive practices within a Chinese shipping fandom are the result of tactical and calculative negotiations of shippers in relation to the social, technological, and political risks involved, driven by pleasure-seeking. The concept of precarious shipping points to the mechanisms and reasons behind fan practices, and offers a transferrable theoretical tool to understand collective agency and political potentials in other ever-changing online fandom cultures. Future research can apply the precariousness theory to understand other marginalized fandom communities in different social contexts to decipher various fan practices at the interface of pleasure and precariousness.


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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. On February 27 2020, many real-person slash fiction creators were banned on Lofter, a major fanfiction site in China. The supporters of free writing fought back against Xiao and his fans, therefore, the “227 incident” has been a shorthand for the “February 27 great solidarity”.
2. Female fans who love Xiao Zhan and Wang Yibo. “Bo Xiao” is composed of one character from each of their names. However, there also male shippers and one of my informants criticized the “sexism” in this fan name.
3. All names of interviewees are pseudonyms.
4. Weibo users can edit the published post, and the editing record is available to other users, but this requires an additional click to go into the editing record. The post will always show the latest version of the edition.

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