"We are snowflakes": Minor transnationalism and the cultural resilience of slash fanfiction community in China

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Abstract

This article examines the cultural resilience of the Chinese slash fanfiction subculture. Popular among Chinese youth, the writing and reading of slash are subjected to increasingly stringent regulations due to changes in the political environment. Drawing from the theoretical framework of minor transnationalism, the current study situates the development of the Chinese slash community in the context of post-socialist reform and globalization, arguing that slash fanfiction is a form of non-institutional, border-crossing cultural practice that challenges orthodox heteronormativity in nationalistic discourses. Foregrounding the double-edge-sword role of digital platforms, this article dissects the cultural resilience of the Chinese slash community—manifested as various strategies in keeping the viability of their cultural practices, including cultural enclosure, border-crossing platform-switching, and social media activism. This article contributes to the study of subcultures by bringing a transnational perspective that focuses on continuous, resilient cultural practices in negotiations of alternative cultural and political agendas. Methodologically, it also contributes to social media ethnographic research by testing out a comprehensive toolkit that combines close reading with computational text-mining and visual network analysis in the analysis of multimodal social media discourses.

Keywords

minor transnationalism, slash fanfiction, cultural resilience, multimodal text analysis, social media

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Feb 24, 2020, when MaLeDiDiDi, a Chinese slash fanfiction writer, shared the news of her lately finished chapter of *Xiazhui* (《下坠》) on Weibo, she could never predict what happened in the following days. This slash fiction appropriated two popular boy-band idols, Xiao Zhan (肖战) and Wang Yibo (王一博) in the depiction of a homoromantic encounter. Xiao was adapted as a street prostitute with gender dysphoria, who later fell in love with Wang, a high school student. While the treatment of two characters and the depiction of sex in the fiction is bold and sometimes transgressive, it was not unusual for slash fanfictions to experiment with unconventional sexual relationships, even those that might be considered morally flawed if happen in real life. However, *Xiazhui* was poked by Xiao Zhan's fans who were not slash fanfiction practitioners. They collectively reported the platform where MaLeDiDiDi deposited the novel—Archive of Our Own (AO3)—for "producing and disseminating pornographic content." Feb 27, 2020, Chinese slash fanfiction practitioners found that AO3 was no longer accessible.

Spurred by the blockage of AO3 by the Great Fire Wall (GFW), Chinese slash practitioners gathered on Weibo and expressed their resentment using hashtag #227solidarity (227大团结). While it is supposed to be a conflict between two fandom groups, this dispute amplified a longstanding tension between the Chinese slash subculture and the nationalistic discourse of heteronormativity and sexual conservatism. The development of Chinese slash fanfiction community in post-socialist China is a result of loosened ideological control, marketization of the media industry, and the advent of the Internet. Born out of online fan-translated pirated films and TV series, as my analysis shows, the Chinese slash subculture was inherently transnational. The popularization of slash subculture and the broader *danmei* community constructed a virtual space that challenged the orthodox heteronormativity and sexual conservatism, facilitating the development of an online queer sphere (Zou, 2022). However, the changing geopolitics and increasingly skillful Internet regulations of the Chinese government have resulted in an upsurge of nationalism and pro-authoritarian collective actions, posing serious challenges to the viability of subcultural practices.

Drawing from the theoretical framework of "minor transnationalism" (Lionnet & Shih, 2005b), this paper examines the cultural resilience of the Chinese slash community amid turbulent state censorship. Moving beyond a focus on first-world countries as the center of globalization studies (Portes et al., 1999; Smith, 1998; Tedeschi et al., 2022), this article adopts a bottom-up approach in the study of *horizontal border-crossing cultural exchanges* in post-socialist China and the formation of subcultural groups in an attempt to subvert the dominant construction of sexuality. Combining ethnographic social media research with computational text-mining and visual network analysis, this article pinpoints the social formation of the Chinese slash community and its subversive potential. Findings from this study suggest that, while facing a pro-authoritarian disciplinary network constituted by the state, digital platforms, and fan groups, Chinese slash practitioners were able to participate in resilient and creative resistance through cultural enclosure, border-crossing platform-switching, and social media activism. This article contributes to the study of subcultures by developing an analytical framework that relates horizontal transnational media flows to the formation of subcultural resilience. Methodologically, it also contributes to ethnographic social media research by testing out a comprehensive toolkit, which combines humanitarian and algorithmic methods, as well as organic and commercial analytic tools, in the analysis of multimodal social media discourses.

Globalization, minor transnationalism, and cultural resilience

Globalization has brought the global cultural economy to be in "a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order" (Appadurai, 1990, p. 2), and so does Chinese popular culture. China started its modernization

project in the late 1970s when the cultural revolution had ended. China in the post-Mao era, often referred to as post-socialist China, loosened its strong, sometimes obligatory association with socialism to embrace the marketization of the cultural industry supported by private capital. Amid this political and economic reform, the Chinese media landscape experienced a pluralization process, in which different genres of cultural products from foreign countries were imported through both official and pirated conduits (Li, 2012). During this period, socialist ideology and moralities were less prioritized, though some of them continued to appear in official propaganda as "Chinese characteristics" in torrents of strong influences from developed countries brought by globalization (Bao, 2020a). As the society became more and more fragmented by the enlarging gap of income in post-socialist China, cultural tastes of Chinese consumers also diversified, which characterized a modern consumer society (Thompson & Sharma, 1998).

The democratization of cultural consumption also nourished the multiplication of cultural identity and challenged the hegemony of one single dominant discourse (Rantanen, 2004). As pointed out by Joseph (1999), hybridity is "a democratic expression of multiple affiliations of cultural citizenship" (p.2). In the context of globalization, hybridization happens through processes whereby the cultural subject obtains resources from various fields for the negotiation of a unique cultural identity—manifested as vernaculars, practices, and articulated values, in which tensions between transnational and national political economy are constantly forged (Kraidy, 2002). The potential for cultural hybridity, as put forth by Bhabha (1994), lies in the development of alternative agendas that subverts and re-appropriate dominant discourses for the negotiation of minor perspectives. Countering the usual focus on first-world countries in globalization studies, a group of scholars advocates for a bottom-up approach, proposing the term "transnationalism" to study cross-border cultural, social and political exchanges "from below" (Portes et al., 1999; Smith, 1998; Tedeschi et al., 2022). Echoing this view, François Lionnet and Shumei Shih (2005a) criticize the over-emphasis on a "major-resistant" mode of globalization studies, in which hierarchy between subjects is implied in the differentiation between the "global" and the "local." They argue that transnationalism, instead, is "conceived as a space of exchange and participation wherever processes of hybridization occur and where it is still possible for cultures to be produced and performed without necessary mediation by the center" (p. 5). Adopting a Deleuzian approach, they define the minority as the opposite of the majority, or the dominant, but put the focus of analysis on exchanges happening directly and horizontally between the minor (Bao, 2020b), which they refers as "minor transnationalism" (Lionnet & Shih, 2005a).

The framework of minor transnationalism is very useful to the study of Chinese online subcultural communities. In the milieu of vibrant transnational media flows and changing political climate, Chinese consumers have been proactively seeking out cultural resources from foreign media to accommodate alternative imaginations of life and articulate discontent about the society (Xiao, 2018; Xiao & Stanyer, 2017) Horizontal transnational flows, as conceptualized by Lionnet and Shih (2005a), either intentionally or unintentionally, are not necessarily mediated by the "center," which means institutions or discourses produced by them. When the minor groups find more resonances from another culture than from the dominant discourse of one's own nation, their cultural practices naturally dissolve the politics of national boundaries (Bao, 2018). Besides, cultural resilience develops as cultural minors make the effort to resist regulations that try to reinforce the control of the hegemonic ideology. In response, nationalistic values such as sovereignty and unity are not only provoked in propaganda discourses to stir up antagonistic emotions against cultural others. But the upsurge of cyber nationalism, with the assistance of network technologies, has been weaved with popular culture to promote pro-authoritarian expressions and actions (Fang & Repnikova, 2018; Schneider, 2018). Liberal values, such as individuality and

freedom of expression are often susceptible to the oppressions of patriotism, with transnational subcultures being frequently confronted with nationalistic narratives and censorship.

Extant inquiries on Chinese subcultures and fandom tend to fall into a steep search for political potentials of deviant cultural consumption (e.g., Xing, 2012; Zhang & Mao, 2013). Discussions often revolve around the idea populated by Jenkins (2006, 2008) about the transferability of participatory cultural consumption to political engagement. This "major-resistant" perspective takes resistance as a result of oppression (Lionnet & Shih, 2005b), rendering analyses of subcultures rather discontinuous and periodic. It also fails to capture the capillary nature of disciplinary power. Recent studies begin to shed more light on the social formation of Chinese subculture (e.g., Yang et al., 2015) and the resilience of alternative cultural practices under turbulent political circumstances (Lionis, 2021; Lu & Steele, 2019; Wang, 2022). Findings from these studies suggest that research on subcultures is in need of a more comprehensive framework that can account for both resistant outbursts and mundane acts of rebellion. Moving beyond the narrow focus of the "major-resistant" model, this paper utilizes the framework of minor transnationalism to examine the online Chinese slash fanfiction community as a transnational minor who develops cultural resilience through homoromantic and homoerotic prosumption.

Transnational slash subculture: a brief history

Slash fanfiction refers to a subgenre of fan literature that focuses on romantic or erotic relationships between same-sex characters (Fathallah, 2017; Meyer, 2013). In China, the development of the slash subculture is closely related to the nation's economic reform and the gradual opening-up towards transnational cultural influences since the late 1970s. During this period, Chinese popular culture experienced a pluralization process in which Chinese audiences were greeted by different genres of cultural productions from other countries, with strong influences coming from developed countries, perceived as "the West." In the beginning, works from these countries were mainly imported and dubbed by state-owned media, displaying a strong filtering effect of national censorship over what can be consumed (Zhang & Mao, 2013). What's more, the structure of domestic production has been subjected to the administrative-ideological system of the state and the party (Zou, 2022). Dissatisfied with the limited and heavily controlled access to foreign productions, Chinese consumers, utilizing the uprising Internet, established various self-organized translation groups (*zimuzu*, 字幕组) to translate and disseminate foreign films and TV series to the broader Chinese audience. This alternative consumption conduit based on piracy had wide impacts on Chinese popular culture, which exposed Chinese Internet users to social systems that are drastically different from China, as well as bold discussions on gender and non-conventional sexual relationships. For example, American TV series such as *Friends* (1994–2004), *Sex and the City* (1998–2004), and *Modern Family* (2009–2020) were well-received by Chinese audiences. The representations of gay characters and queer relationships in these series also invoked Chinese audiences' interest in queer culture. Various fan sites were established for two interrelated functions: they not only served as the space for the audience to exchange ideas after watching but also served as the repository of translated media resources. This movement laid the ground for Chinese media consumers to use the Internet for alternative cultural resources and the booming of slash fanfiction culture.

Two main streams of foreign media influences co-exist and shape the Chinese popular culture: one from European (mainly British) and American production (commonly known as *Oumei*, 欧美); the other from Japan and Korea (commonly known as *Rihan*, 日韩). In the anglophone context, slash fanfiction originated from science fiction reader communities and popularized itself through

the *Star Trek* TV series (1966–present) (Meyer, 2013). The term "slash" refers to the "/" mark placed by fan writers to signify the two characters involved in the derivative romantic story (e.g., Kirk/Spock). In Japan, boy's love (BL) manga started to gain popularity in the 1970s (Bai, 2022) and gradually extended its impact to other neighboring countries such as China. *Funv* (腐女), or *fujoshi* in Japanese, is used to describe women audience who are obsessed with BL works. Different from slash works which are mainly fanfictions, the Japanese *fujoshi* culture features a wider variety of genres, including both original and derivative works (Zou, 2022). Though the two streams offer drastically different world-views and often divergent moral agendas, they converge in a shared interest in exploring non-normative romantic depictions through user-generated content or semi-professional publications and together shape the Chinese slash subculture (*Damei* or *Tongren* as called by Chinese, 耽美或同人).

In their conceptualization of minor transnationalism, Lionnet and Shih emphasize that "[m]inority cultural workers are transnational not because they transcend the national, but because their cultural orientations are by definition creolized" (Lionnet & Shih, 2005a, p. 9). The upsurge of slash subculture coincides with a broader development of queer consciousness in post-socialist China. This is not to say that queer identity did not appear in China before the reform and opening up. In fact, queer relationships appear as a frequent theme of Chinese traditional literature (Ruan & Tsai, 1987). But the opening up of Chinese culture to global influences has unprecedentedly transformed how Chinese people perceive sexuality and queerness. In the gradual adoption of neoliberalism, the cultural industry became more liberalized and market forces gained more say in what should be produced and consumed. The once-repressed narrations of personal pursuit and sexual desires were seen as "human nature" and in need of imperative liberation (Rofel, 2007). Queer topics appeared later, in the new millennium, mainly from imported films and TV series, and also NGO advocacies—with funding from Western countries—in fighting against HIV/AIDS transmission (Bao, 2020a). To post-socialist China, being modern means situating oneself in the fast-growing global economy, and the value system that is largely dominated by Western countries. Freedom to sexual desires and queer culture are juxtaposed with other tropes to signify economic success, personal achievement, and cosmopolitanism (Bao, 2020a). While physical border-crossing was still limited to small groups, Chinese Internet users had been participating in collective, cultural border-crossing activities. Their identities were inevitably creolized, especially for those who were deeply involved in cross-cultural prosumption activities, such as slash writing and reading.

Though with ambivalences in sexual politics, the popularization of slash fanfiction, and the broader *Danmei* subculture provide a space that challenges the orthodox heteronormativity in Chinese dominant discourse and the making of a queer online sphere. Writers of slash fanfictions often pair media characters into homosexual relationships without considering their sexuality in reality and sometimes fabricate background settings to complete the stories. Mainly written and consumed by women, slash fanfictions are famous and controversial for the frequent involvement of non-conventional sexual orientations and sexually violent plots (Green et al., 2006). Studies on slash fanfiction suggest that the non-normative, deviant treatments of media characters create a voyeuristic space for women to reverse the patriarchal male gaze on them (Zhang, 2016); and the polymorphous queer texts help deconstruct heteronormativity and gender performativity for transgressive sexual imaginaries (Fathallah, 2017; Nagaike, 2003). As indicated by Zou (2022), "BL enables female audiences to actively gaze upon men and to playfully deconstruct the patriarchal order from a more transcendent vantage point. It also allows for 'the public performance of queer identities and open discussion of non-normative sexualities.'" The popularity of BL works also spawned screen adaptations, for example, web TV series *Like Love* (2014), *Addicted* (2016), and *The Untamed* (2019). However, the Chinese government remains conservative in its moral agenda. While the Chinese government did not publicly ban homosexuality, media content depicting homosexual relationships is more susceptible to being accused of "vulgar content" (低俗内

容). Slash fanfictions, at the intersection of non-heterosexuality and eroticism, often become victims of media regulations.

Censorship and cultural enclosure

Regulation on the representation of sex in mass media is deeply intertwined with moral politics and competing value agendas within the society (Smith, 1999; Thompson & Sharma, 1998). On the one hand, queer culture and the "pink economy" targeting LGBTQ people boom in China as part of the urban lifestyle, with gay bars, *tongzhi* websites, and social media apps specialized for gay dating (e.g., Blued) becoming hot topics among urban citizens (Kong, 2020). On the other hand, reigning regulations on homosexuality still hover overhead and posit strong censorship on popular media productions with queer characteristics. Explicit and erotic content that is often involved in BL works and slash fanfictions becomes a target of regulatory actions. The reason for such stringent regulation on sexual politics can be attributed to the idea that unconventional depictions of sexual relationships in slash works challenge sexual conservatism and thus risk deconstructing the nationalistic agenda of "Chineseness." Post-socialist China has been keen to promote a nationalistic agenda to keep a symbolic unity of the geographically dispersed and ethnically diverse nation (Mitter, 2008). Manifested in official languages such as "the national pride" (民族自豪感), "socialist spiritual civilization" (社会主义精神文明) and the more recent notion of "positive energy" (正能量), nationalistic discourse is propagated by the authority as a way to keep the nation's "Chineseness" amid economic and cultural globalization. In this patriotic scheme, certain virtues are cherished to be more "Chinese" than others, and moral conduct promoted by Confucianism is picked and prioritized as "traditional merits" (传统美德), of which sexual conservatism is a constitutive part. Besides, the social activist characteristics of feminism and queer movements are also frowned upon by the Chinese government, leading the "Me Too" movement and queer rights advocacies to be heavily censored (Han, 2018). Representations of non-heterosexual relations are deemed as "abnormal" and condemned as "unhealthy" in official regulation documents (Zou, 2022). Self-censoring actions were taken by self-publishing novel sites such as Jinjiang Literature City (晋江文学城) and Qidian Chinese (起点中文网) under pressure from the Chinese Internet regulatory department with a large number of fanfictions being removed (2019). Popular BL writers were arrested and sentenced to jail for creating and disseminating obscene materials for profits or illegal business operations (Bai, 2022).

Subcultures in China exist in a turbulent environment closely related to the country's political climate. While tension persists, subcultural groups do not always get censored. In the early 2000s, China was eager to become part of the global economy, which was led by Western democratic countries. During this period, the Chinese government displayed a mild attitude towards political articulations and subcultural activities, especially those on the Internet. Direct criticism against the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) was unforgivingly censored while subcultural "infrapolitics" (Scott, 1992) were largely tolerated in the forms of humor, jokes, or inner-group rituals (Ding, 2013; Yang et al., 2015). Partnered with online anonymity, these low-profile resistances co-existed with the highly monopolized post-socialist ideology, characterizing the Chinese online sphere in the 2000s. This atmosphere gave birth to the *e-gao* culture, in which Internet users make fun of authorities using self-made parodic videos (Gong & Yang, 2010). In a series of e-gao videos made by Ge Hu (胡戈), a legal program produced by the China Central Television and blockbuster movies were appropriated through droll editing techniques and witty humor to express public grievances and resistance against cultural and political authorities (Rea, 2013).

However, this gray area of benign resistance has been shrinking as the Chinese leadership launched more aggressive cultural politics to strengthen the party's control over political ideology (Wang, 2022). On the one hand, the Chinese government has turned more assertive in the global system with strong questioning and opposition against Western gazes over China's human-right issues and inner governance. On the other hand, the national propaganda campaign has been enhanced and crafted in support of traditional Chinese values and conservative nationalism. Tough gestures of diplomacy imbued with hegemonic post-socialist ideology have led to an upsurge of cyber nationalism, in which young people constitute the main participants of nationalistic protests (Fang & Repnikova, 2018; Schneider, 2018). Moreover, cyber nationalism cohabitates and sometimes merges with fandom culture, spurring various patriotic movements, in which nationalists took joint actions in defending the nation as what fans do for idols (Liu, 2019; Yang, 2019).

Cultural enclosure (圈地自萌, literal meaning "immersing in one's own enclosed field"), originated from the slash community, has been developed as a rule of survival for Chinese subcultural communities. It refers to the strategic limitation on the visibility of subcultural activities to 1) avoid conflicts with other subcultural communities (which might draw attention from the regulator); 2) keep the subculture low-profile in exchange for the government's mercy on its existence. Fans of one "field" are supposed to not interfere with or judge other fan groups. However, this rule is rather idealistic, as the character appropriated by one group could also be worshiped by another group. And the uncertainty of censorship has triggered many fans to participate in accusatory reporting. In their study of an online discussion group of a *danmei*-adapted web series in production, Luo and Li (2022) found that pro-censorship accusatory reporting was used as a strategy to rule out potential risk factors of their fandom objects (e.g., anti-fans or negative comments, see also Yin, 2021). Such acts not only facilitate authoritarian hegemony over cultural practices but also reconfirm the national boundary of ideological control (Luo & Li, 2022).

Recent studies have noticed that transnational media consumption is able to challenge the hegemony of national identity and facilitate active participation in resistant cultural practices (Bao, 2020b; Wang, 2022; Zhang & Mao, 2013). Following this line of research, this paper examines the cultural resilience of the Chinese slash community developed as a result of transnational cultural consumption and production. Cultural resilience, manifested as various daily, mundane acts to preserve subcultural practices (de Valck, 2020; Lu & Steele, 2019), displays how transnational exchanges not only dissolve the authority of the dominant discourse but also foster confidence in articulating alternative political agendas. Situating the subcultural group in the broader context of post-socialist cultural and economic reform, globalization, and the changing political climate in China, this article contributes to the study of subcultures by bringing a transnational perspective that focuses on continuous, resilient cultural practices in negotiations of alternative cultural and political agendas.

Methodology

Data

The main source of data used for the current study is a corpus of social media posts collected from Weibo by searching the hashtag #227solidarity (227大团结) in 1 week starting from Feb 27, 2020, to March 5, 2020. All data were scraped using Python Web Crawler between Jan 20 to Jan 23, 2022, resulting in a corpus with 47,462 Weibo posts and 19,081 accompanying visuals. The selection of the endpoint of data collection does not mean that the community stopped responding to the blockage after March 5. This timeframe was picked to include the instant responses of the slash fanfiction community to the blockage of AO3, as well as to keep the whole dataset manageable. Data

cleaning was performed to remove empty posts and posts automatically generated by Weibo (e.g., "repost"). 47,446 posts remained in the final dataset for analysis, 48.09% ($n = 22,815$) of which are original posts and 51.91% ($n = 24,631$) of which are reposts (with original content). To protect the privacy of posters, quotes used in the paper were translated from simplified Chinese to English with posters' ids altered and thus not able to be identified by referencing the original posts.

Analysis

Ethnographic research on digital cultures faces multiple challenges due to the complex, ephemeral, and fluid nature of the online space, including but not limited to the huge amount of information circulated online, and the combination of different modes of communication on various platforms (Omena et al., 2020). However, social media also provides ethnographers with novel opportunities and tools to follow informants on multiple sites. Digital affordances not only shape the formation of virtual collectives but also ethnography in which activities in the digital space are no longer neglectable (Caliandro, 2018). In contrast to virtual methods which adapt offline methods for online research, digital methods advocate for research that could make use of digital affordances to inspect flows of communication and interaction mediated by these affordances (Rogers, 2019). For example, following hashtags is a digitally native method for the study of online subcultures. It repurposes a built-in device of social media that helps users identify relevant conversations and participate in a larger community with shared interests (Caliandro, 2018). Following hashtags not only helps the researcher locate the speech community of the interested subculture but also provides a technical anchor for data collection.

Research on online subcultural groups also needs to tackle the multimodality of social media content. Visual cues are widely used by social media users in assistance to textual messages. In some cases, the importance of visuals even surpasses textual content to convey sophisticated emotional messages or denote social belongings (Gal et al., 2016; Shifman, 2014). As a result, visual media analysis is gradually gaining prominence in social media research (Bainotti & Rogers, 2022). While there are various opportunities for repurposing digital affordances for the study of online subcultural communities, the traditional close reading approach has been challenged by the large amount of content produced by social media users (Hayles, 2010). In the current study, the analysis of online subcultural vernaculars is enabled by combining machine-aided distant reading with close reading by the researcher. Topic modeling and visual network analysis were used, respectively, to tackle textual and visual content collected from social media. Results from these two approaches were then put into close reading, comparing and contrasting with the author's ethnographic observation on the development and struggles of the community. Synthesis was done in a way that accounts for both persistent subcultural strategies and the spurt of pan-political expressions in reaction to the sudden blockage of AO3.

Topic modeling. Topic modeling is a series of unsupervised machine-learning algorithms that produces a set of interpretable topics from sizable collections of text documents (Tao et al., 2020). The current study used Latent Dirichlet allocation (LDA), one of the widely used topic models that generates topics by calculating word frequencies within and across documents (Jelodar et al., 2019). Before training topic models, the dataset was further cleaned to remove empty posts and automatically generated posts (e.g., "repost"), resulting in a final textual dataset of 37,149 posts. LDA requires researchers to provide the desired number of topics. After this, the alogrithm would automatically generate a set of topics with words allocated to each topic, and topic probabilities attributed to each document. There is no fixed standard for setting the number of topics. However,

scholars develop several metrics that could aid researchers' decisions. The determined number of topics should strike a balance between good model quality (statistically) and interpretability. To determine the number of topics for the current corpus, two metrics, respectively, proposed by Cao (2009) and Deveaud et al. (2014) were used to run 49 sets of topic models with numbers of topics ranging from 2 to 50 (Figure 1). The goal is to minimize CaoJuan2009 and to maximize Deveaud2014. Though a model of 2 topics reached the best balance between two metrics in the test, it would result in topics that have too many heterogeneous posts and thus difficult for the researcher to interpret. As a result, a model of 6 topics was chosen (the second optimal solution) for the current analysis.

After training the LDA model, each post was calculated for the probability of belonging to the six topics. The topic with the highest probability score was determined as the topic of the post. For each topic, I extracted 200 original posts (with author info and engagement metrics) and closely analyzed all of them (1,200 posts in total). To better understand the context of these posts, I cross examined posts with their authors, accompanying visuals and related posts. The six topics were then manually labeled as Boycott brands (16.50%), Boycott capital (15.93%), Stop cyberbullying (13.20%), Xiao Zhan is not innocent (12.65%), and We are snowflakes (9.38%). Associated terms, example posts, and summary of each topic can be found in Table 1.

Visual network analysis. This method was adapted from Omena et al. (2020, 2021) which utilizes computer vision algorithm (i.e., Google Vision API) in the classification and organization of large social media image corpora. The goal of this method is to discover visual discourses by identifying repeated use of similar visuals in the corpus, which is indicated by clusters of similar images in an image-label bi-partite network. Google Vision API is a pre-trained machine-learning model that can
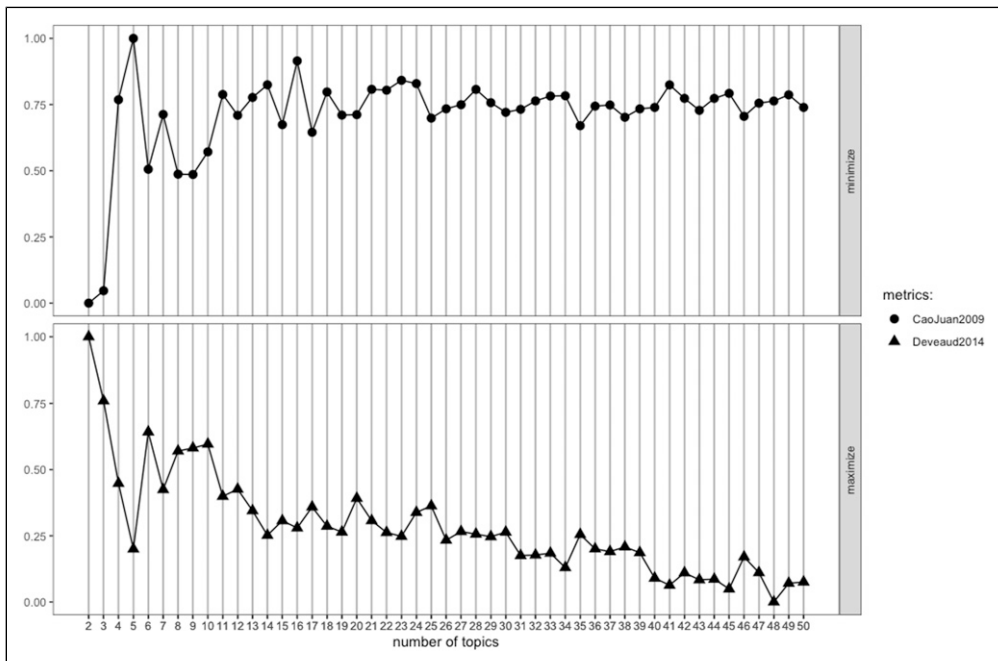

Figure 1. Topic estimation.

Table 1. Results of LDA topic modeling

Category	Topic Label	Associated Terms	Example Quotes	Topic Frequency (Percentage)
Activism	Boycott brands	抵制, 超话, 代言, 姐妹, 产品, xzf, 买, 不买, 恶心, 全网	Hello, I don't wanna buy any products that is endorsed or promoted by Xiao Zhan. If these products still associate with him later, I will mobilize my relatives and friends to refuse buying them. ✗ reject low-quality endorser ✗ reject low-quality endorser ✗ reject low-quality endorser	6131 (16.50%)
			@EsteeLauderChina although your products have been my all-time favorite, you brand ambassador Xiao Zhan displayed inappropriate acts, abusive language about women and inauthenticity. The recent behaviors of Xiao's fans has caused outrage across the internet. I Have decided not to buy many products that are endorsed by Xiao Zhan	
	Boycott capitals	ao3, 失声, 创作者, 热搜, 历史, 微博, 洗白, 时刻, 资本, 话题	OMG you are amazing…been able to cancel the hot topic. Awesome awesome… Cancel whatever you want remove whatever you can but you can't suppress everyone's anger!!	5919 (15.93%)
			With the efforts of Xiao's team, 600 thousand discussions with 400 million views on #227solidarity were held down from the public's view. However, his name was on hot topic everyday and now his apology was on top two with less than 100 million views, fyi	
Characterization	Stop cyberbullying	粉丝, 饭圈, 耻辱, 哈哈, 网络暴力, 哈哈哈, 哈哈哈哈, 停止	#XiaoZhanFansPlsStopCyberBullying #PleaseXiaoZhanFanAndPRTeamStopWhitewashing, pay for what had happened. Please Xiao Zhan fans and PR team stop whitewashing, pay for what had happened. Please Xiao Zhan fans and PR team stop whitewashing, pay for what had happened.Please Xiao Zhan fans and PR team stop whitewashing, pay for what had happened LMAO hahahahahahahha I feel very good hahahahahaha now is my turn	4904 (13.20%)

Table 1. (continued)

Category	Topic Label	Associated Terms	Example Quotes	Topic Frequency (Percentage)
	Xiao Zhan is not innocent	道歉, 工作室, 哥哥, 偶像, 粉, 行为, 无辜, 骂, 路人, 黑	Boycotting the idol might be inappropriate but we have no choice. So is Xiao Zhan innocent? I Think he at the same time is and isn't innocent. He's innocent because he didn't do anything. It's all his fans in the name of their "brother." He's not innocent also because he didn't do anything. I Have reason to believe as a big celebrity he knew it from the beginning but he and his team did nothing but let the fans did all sorts of things and led to this dispute	4700 (12.65%)
			Before some fans ruining the person I love, I also agree that celebrities should not be blamed for fans' misbehaviors. But then I witnessed my beloved, followed Taitai was forced to leave the community and my playground was ruined. I Changed my mind	
Identification	Freedom of subcultural creation	喜欢, 太太, 圈, 创作, 洗, 平台, 同人, 希望, 敬, 自由	What the 227 dispute made me realized was that subculture was being denied the right to exist and the space to survive being viciously squeezed. Some people think they have the righteousness and condescendingly tell us that you are wrong, you are problematic, and you shouldn't exist...What I want to appeal is that this culture that I like and people who practice it have legitimate rights. Our culture is not a rat in the dark gutter. We are meant to live in the sun	3490 (9.39%)
			Rule can never bind me. What leads can only be my anger, my sorrow, my joy, and my morality. Even if those who standing higher-up set the fire, I will shout in the midst of the blazing flame: Creation is immortal! creation is immortal!	
	"We are snowflakes"	粉丝, 举报, 老福特, lofter, 雪阁, 勇闯, 天涯, 别偷, 澄清	#XiaoZhanFansFandomDisgrace every snowflake is fighting❄️ Every snowflake is fighting❄️ Every snowflake is fighting❄️ Every snowflake is fighting❄️ Every snowflake is fighting❄️ Every snowflake is fighting❄️ Every snowflake is fighting❄️ Every snowflake is fighting❄️ Every snowflake is fighting❄️	3486 (9.38%)

assign labels to images with predefined categories (e.g., "buildings," "sky," "photograph," "fictional character") (Google, n.d.). Each image could have more than one label. All images collected from the Weibo dataset were entered into Google Vision API through memespector (Chao, 2021) and automatically labeled based on their content. These labels were then used to construct a bi-partite network of visuals and corresponding labels using a force-directed layout algorithm "OpenOrd" (Martin et al., 2011) and the "image preview" plug-in on Gephi. This image-label network enables the researcher to see clusters of similar images connected by their descriptive labels (Figure 2). I went over all clusters and identified four major clusters that are prominent in the dataset (thus can be considered as "major visual discourses"): Screenshot info board, textual memes, iconic memes, and creative arts. Images from these four major clusters were later scrutinized to summarize their visual and discursive characteristics. Similarities and differences between images were compared and contrasted, linking back to their original posts, to form contextual interpretations of these images and the development of final results.

Figure 2. Visual-label-network of all images collected from #227solidarity. Note: This is a simplified network in which images were represented by yellow dots (19,081 in total) with labels displayed by blue dots. Utilizing the Gephi "image preview" plug-in, all yellow dots were restored to their original images for the analysis of visual discourses. Clusters were identified with the help of Gephi forced layout algorithm "OpenOrd," which aims at minimizing distances between similar nodes (images) and maximizing distances between heterogeneous nodes.

Practice slash fanfiction as "cyber nomads"

Slash fanfiction is a part of the Chinese *Danmei* subculture. Similar to their counterparts in other countries, Chinese slash writers appropriate fictional media characters or popular celebrities to improvise homoromantic and homoerotic stories and disseminate them on digital platforms. The majority of Chinese slash content are novels, with comics constituting a smaller part. Popular slash writers are usually called by other fans *Taitai* (太太, literal meaning "wife"). Though not in all cases, a large part of slash involves erotic plots and explicit descriptions of sex, sometimes sexual violence. To avoid unexpected exposure, slash practitioners develop a labeling system to indicate different types of plots in titles. For example, in AO3, writers are encouraged to implement rating signs to signify content intensity, including but not limiting to death of main characters, involvement of rape/non-consensual sex, or graphic depiction of violence (Archive of Our Own, n.d.-b). The usage of a labeling system also conforms to the rule of cultural enclosure, in which readers are expected to evaluate their own tolerance and avoid unpleasant content.

As typical user-generated content, slash fanfiction relies heavily on digital platforms for its production and dissemination. While digital platforms offer fanfiction writers and readers opportunities to build creative commons for non-commercial, alternative cultural practices, erratic platform infrastructures and state censorship obstruct continuous growth of the slash community. In a personal communication with a veteran Chinese slash practitioner, Ada, she identified the slash community as "cyber nomads." This term describes the forced stray of slash practitioners in the digital space under structural constraints, in which slash writers and readers roam around different platforms to disseminate new works and connect. Before the rise of social media, fandom BBS used to host large corpora of slash fanfictions. Almost every fandom BBS offered a session dedicated to fan works. This early stage of slash fanfiction was documented by previous studies, which also noticed the avant-garde and sometimes transgressive portrayals of sex and violence (e.g., Bao, 2020a). Baidu Tieba, the largest forum website hosted by the Chinese search engine company Baidu, appeared later and became a comprehensive repository for fandom discussion and slash fanfiction. Different from BBS boards that operated rather isolated from each other with management mainly conducted by communal insiders, Baidu Tieba hosted different sub-forums dedicated to different topics and fan groups. Users can browse and post across forums and Baidu acts as a higher-level moderator monitoring the content of inhabiting sub-forums—which became the prototype of platform companies. Wielding its advanced computational resources, Baidu implemented automatic keyword-filtering in its posting system. Explicit content and swearing words were censored and thus could not be sent. The company also operated ad-hoc moderation, in which posts that were deemed inappropriate might "disappear" from the forum. To circumvent censorship, slash fanfiction writers and readers developed an evolving euphemism system to replace sensitive keywords with alphabet combinations or emojis (e.g.,🌶 or "jb" for "penis"). "Migration" also happened from time to time, which meant the (permanent or ephemeral) movement of sensitive content from one popular forum to a smaller, less popular one, thus reducing the possibility of being deleted.

Since Weibo's popularity in the late 2000s, slash fanfictions writers and readers have been using it as an important playground for distributing new works. The use of Weibo is paired with other self-publishing novel sites such as Lofter and Jinjiang Literature City, because Weibo originally only afforded posts with no more than 140 characters. Starting from 2013, the Internet regulation department displayed a less tolerant attitude (Shen, 2022), which led to platforms' exaggerated content moderation and filtering. Under the pressure of intermittent suspension of "misbehaved platforms" by the governement, (Cunningham et al., 2019), Chinese digital platforms took proactive

actions to regulate users' content. Censorship on queer-related content has also become more mature and stringent (Bao, 2021; Zou, 2022). The slash community was hit badly. Jinjiang Literature City, the largest Chinese self-published e-book site, announced a rule of "nothing below the neck" that aggressively suspended and removed user-created novels with explicit sex scenes, with which the platform also called for users' reporting of any "misbehaved content" (Zhang, 2019). This also happened to Lofter, which was hosted by Netease and branded itself as a "pan-interest community for subcultural youth" (小众文艺青年的泛兴趣社区). Massive slash fanfictions published on Lofter were put under review or even locked without specific reasons. At the same time, *danmei*-adapted web series (耽改剧) has become more and more popular among Chinese youth with homosexual characteristics being strategically camouflaged as "brotherhood" (Zou, 2022). This contradiction amplified the tension between ideological conservatism and the market-driven demand for more "refreshing," non-conventional content.

While slash fanfiction practitioners hopped over different platforms in order to circumvent censorship, AO3 stood in stark contrast to its Chinese counterparts. Physically hosted in the U.S, AO3 is run by a nonprofit organization (Organization for Transformative Works, OTW) established by a group of fans to "provid[e] access to and preserv[e] the history of fanworks and fan culture in its myriad forms." (Archive of Our Own, n.d.-a). Works published on AO3 are mainly in English and most of them derived from anglophobe media products. Thus, AO3 is mainly used by Chinese slash practitioners who belong to the *Oumei Circle* (欧美圈)—fans of anglophone cultural products and celebrities. Though language and cultural barriers exist, AO3 was considered by slash practitioners as a "spiritual wonderland" (@Yvonne) for its inclusive environment and the absence of censorship. To overcome the language barrier, some fans volunteered to translate works on AO3 for fans who find difficulties in reading English, and the platform has since become known to Chinese slash practitioners. Observing the escalating regulatory acts of Chinese platforms, some slash writers migrated to AO3. AO3 was not considered a main playground for Chinese slash fanfictions but many fans use it as a "parking lot." Links to these works were then shared on Weibo to disseminate them. Besides, some users also proactively migrate previous popular content to AO3 in the fear of their disappearance later.

The 227 incident amplified the tension between the popularity of queer-related content and the fear of censorship in Chinese popular culture. It all revolves around Xiao Zhan (肖战), a Chinese actor and boy-band singer. He rose to national fame by featuring a main character in *The Untamed* (陈情令, 2019), a *danmei*-adapted web series. Xiao's popularity is undoubtedly related to the popularity of *danmei* subculture. And he frequently appeared in slash works to be appropriated for various plots. However, not all real-person fans were happy about such treatment of their idol. And the increasingly stringent regulation over homosexual content cracked the nerves of these fans. In the accused novel, *Xiazhui*, Xiao was not only depicted as sexually non-binary but also involved in an illicit romantic relationship with a highschool student. Fans' discontent about the work quickly exaggerated to become discontent about the repository (i.e., AO3), and they organized a collective action to report AO3 to the Internet regulation department for disseminating pornography and obscene articles (传播淫秽物品罪). Rather than understanding this action as volunteer content moderation, the accusatory reporting of Xiao's fans resembles what Luo & Li (2022) has found in Chinese fandom communities—pro-authoritarian ruling-out. Such an act is motivated by fans' eagerness to protect their fandom object amid the high degree of uncertainty caused by censorship, in which accusatory reporting is used as a strategy to eliminate controversial elements. The hegemony of sexual conservatism was sustained by a network of worrying fans who try to navigate the uncertainty of state censorship and ensure the sustainability of their idol. While AO3 is not considered a main playground of the Chinese slash community, its connection with the global fanfiction culture makes it a beacon for

Chinese practitioners who dream of practicing slash legitimately, without censorship or backlashes. The blockage of AO3 thus carries a symbolic meaning of suspending this dream. The hashtag movement, gathering practitioners from various subfields of the slash community, displayed a creative resistance against the pro-authoritarian disciplinary network. In the next two sections, the textual and visual discourses of this movement will be further examined.

Textual discourses: buy/boycotts, cyberbullying, and the freedom of subcultural creation

Realizing the blockage of AO3, slash fanfiction practitioners started to post on Weibo with the hashtag #227solidarity to spread the news and express their grievances over the malicious reporting of Xiao Zhan fans. It started small (1120 posts in total on Feb 27), reached its peak on March 1 (12,252 posts), and gradually decreased in the following days (4102 posts on March 4). The hashtag does not die out soon, with discussions going on after months. The combination of date and "solidarity" indicates the date of AO3's blockage and the call for a union of slash practitioners. The average engagement metrics of the first-week corpus are 143 comments and 218 reposts, showing that the majority of posts are actively engaged and spread. Six topics emerge from LDA topic modeling. The author carefully examined, manually labeled all 6 topics and grouped them into three categories, which is displayed in Table 1, with respective proportion of each topic in the whole corpus.

The two largest topics are interconnected buy/boycotting messages, one targeting at brands that have sponsored the idol; another directing at "the capital" (资本), which generally refers to all commercial operations behind the celebrity. The boycotting of brands is strategic, indicating by highly organized and analogous messages spread on Weibo. Buy/Boycotting rises as a form of political consumerism practiced by citizen-consumer (Cohen, 2004) in which political intentions are expressed in actions of buying/not buying (Stolle & Micheletti, 2015; Verba & Nie, 1987). While predominantly practiced in the private sector, buy/boycotting opens up the space for maintaining solidarity ties and everyday political engagement in a repressive political environment (Poon & Tse, 2022). In the case of Xiao Zhan, as a contracted idol, his income largely relies on sponsorships. Thus, it is important for him to keep a favorable public image to demonstrate his ability to endorse products/brands. To disrupt this ecology, slash fanfiction practitioners called out brands to defund Xiao Zhan because he is a "low-quality endorser." The boycotting of Xiao Zhan and his sponsors was deemed as a powerful strategy to shadow the idol's public image and thus undermining his fans' long-term propagating endeavors in demonstrating the idol's public fame.

Besides, the buycotting act is also rationalized as a way to combat the social and economic capitals that have backed Xiao Zhan in this dispute. Weibo is known by Chinese Internet users to be working with celebrity companies to manipulate the visibility of hashtags and related content. The #227solidarity hashtag was once trending on Weibo but soon disappeared from the trending topic list (热搜). The reason behind this was speculated by slash practitioners to be Xiao Zhan's PR team ("With the efforts of Xiao's team, 600 thousand discussions with 400 million views on #227solidarity were held down from the public's view"). Given this situation, buycott is deemed as a more efficient way than merely condemning the idol and forcing him to respond to the dispute. When overt resistance is discouraged by techno-political circumstances, political dissidence can be reshuffled into an alternative social or cultural identity that functions as a sense-making device for the suppressed group to search for alternative narratives and uphold their resilience through convert counter-practices (Tse & Shum, 2023). The felt powerlessness of slash practitioners is transformed into a shared antagonism towards "the capital" as a powerful player. The intricate relationship between media capital and nationalist ideological control is ambiguously hinted at but never clearly

stated in the framed confrontation between the lucrative celebrity economy and non-profit slash subculture. Through boycotting the idol and media capital slash practitioners reinvent their cultural identity as conscientious prosumers in preserving their cultural resilience.

While the first category of topics (Activism) contains posts that are largely action-oriented and angry, posts in the second category (Characterization) include parodies and interrogations, indicating a collective characterization of Xiao Zhan fans' actions as cyberbullying and the idol's inescapable responsibility for the blockage. Slash fanfiction practitioners are well aware that the transgressive works they enjoy might piss off some people outside the group. This is also the reason why they volunteer to implement a labeling system and the rule of cultural enclosure. In fact, cultural enclosure is deemed as a basic common sense of subcultural and fandom communities. For most slash practitioners, it is common to encounter criticism from fans who are not slash practitioners but the collective report of Xiao Zhan's fans ostensibly goes beyond the bottom line of cultural enclosure. To them, the report of AO3 is clearly an act of cyberbullying and Xiao Zhan fans should be deemed as unethical and thus a "disgrace" to the fandom community (饭圈耻辱). Xiao Zhan, while being in the center of these fans, stayed silent for days in the dispute. His later diplomatic apology letter did not mention a word about the slash community or AO3 but simply apologized for "taking up public resources" (占用公共资源). Slash practitioners argued that idols should have taken the initiative to guide fans' actions and Xiao should be disqualified as a celebrity for his inaction during the conflict.

Relating to the cyberbullying characterization, a fan-made parody spread widely in the slash community. It appropriated a bullying scene from the Korean drama *Itaewon Class* (2020). The scene described a trio of mean girls who threatened the main character, *Jo Yi-seo* with abusive words and physcial aggression. A young man, who obviously knew both sides, tried to physically separate the trio and Jo without offending anyone. When Jo couldn't take it anymore, she raised her fist and beat up two of the trio. This three-minute cut was edited with new subtitles to mirror the controversy between slash practitioners (Jo) and Xiao Zhan fans (the bullying trio) and the diplomatic idol (the man). This parody was published on the video platform Bilibili on 29 February and reposted to Weibo by the creator @Jane ("I'm coming I coming let's see how I beat those little waste blind"). Her post received 40,571 reposts and 14,163 comments, most of which contained sarcastic mockery of Xiao Zhan fans and laughter ("Hahahahah LMAO"). On the one hand, slash practitioners celebrated their successful revenge on Xiao Zhan fans (many brands announced disassociation with Xiao Sohu (2020)) just like what Jo did in the video. On the other hand, slash practitioners reaffirm their shared experiences in enduring marginalization in the public sphere by identifying with the main character. The revenge on Xiao Zhan fans should not be seen as isolated, but a long-due outburst against structural oppressions.

The third category of topics constitutes a smaller portion of the whole corpus but contains posts that are generally longer, and more artistic in expression. In these posts, slash practitioners attempted to defend slash fanfiction and lamented about the difficult situation the community is facing:

> Slash fanfictions are not evil. Many actors I like have played characters like call girls, sex workers, drug addicts, street gangs, serial killers, psychiatric patients, transgenders, or gay people from different walks of life. These characters have brought them praises and trophies. Because a normal person would know clearly that these are stories… Stories exist not to humiliate these marginalized people, but to let more people know that there are places in the world where the sun doesn't shine, and people living there are also made of flesh and blood. Being protected by fans is never an honor for the actor, but fans' mysophobia in their narrow worldview….that's why most cultural productions nowadays are as dry as dust.

Toasting words appeared accompanying these lyrical posts or sometimes posted separately ("To freedom of creation, to immortal passion, to gay people, to sex, to love, to beauty, to freedom."). It constituted not only an emotional outlet for resisting the oppression of free expressions and queer culture but also a street corner where slash fanfiction practitioners toasted to each other and assured that they belong together. In the name of "freedom of subcultural creation," slash fanfiction practitioners aligned with a liberal ideology that was inclusive, non-coercive, and respecting artistic representations of marginalized groups ("To write for my human nature, to write for my passion" "Artistic creation is not an island. It is born among people. To literature, to passion, to freedom"). The collective identification delineated a cultural group that found resonances with subculture(s) beyond the national border, constructing in-group solidarity for collective actions. What's more, slash practitioners identify themselves as "snowflakes," which invoked the notion "no snowflake in an avalanche ever feels responsible," a quote originated from Polish poet Stanisław Jerzy Lec. This quote is popular in the Chinese Internet sphere as a political metaphor—apathetic public and the unbearable results of political turmoil. The use of "snowflake" in the 227 context renewed this metaphor with a subcultural imperative, articulating the resolution to rescue the room for alternative cultural practices.

Visual discourses: screenshot info board, memes, and creative arts

On social media platforms, visuals are of great importance because users' attention span is usually very short. Accompanying posts with memes and creative arts help writers to convey sophisticated emotions and feelings through visual language. In many cases, visuals such as memes, are not peripheral but the core of social media posts that function as "floating signifiers" (Laclau, 2007) for retrieving complex literal meanings and bonding with similar others (Tuters & Hagen, 2019). In #227solidarity, diverse usages of visuals successfully bypassed algorithmic filtering and became an important channel of emotional catharsis and political coalition. Wielding materials from various sources, including transnational platforms and personal connections, these visuals displayed how Chinese slash practitioners' creatively ridiculed the pro-authoritarian network and negotiated the legitimacy of their cultural practices.

Four major types of visuals are identified from the Weibo #227solidarity corpus. First is "screenshot info board," which refers to the wide use of screenshots for information dissemination. These screenshots served as public records of the dispute, including Xiao Zhan fans' attacks on the slash fanfiction community, Internet celebrities' open support to the community, and related discussions on other platforms (mainly Twitter). For example, in one of the most reposted posts (13,476 reposts, 761 comments), the posters uploaded two screenshots of Xiao Zhan fans talking about how they report AO3 to Internet regulation departments. Twitter was another main battlefield for the 227 dispute. Surveillance and censorship have long been one of the most concerned topics of Chinese human rights watchers on Twitter. The blockage of AO3 triggered a wave of discussions on Chinese censorship of LGBT-related topics. Xiao Zhan fans also went on Twitter, trying to dissociate the idol from the blockage and protect the idol's public image. Their posts were then captured and ridiculed by slash fanfiction practitioners on Weibo (Figure 3). In another screenshot, a student from an international boarding school shared a rumor her teacher heard in Canada—Xiao Zhan was alleged to be gay and his fans did not allow him to come out. So he wrote his experiences on AO3 which led to the blockage of the site. The contrast between the rumored story and what was actually happening was spread with a sense of black humor ("A picture my classmate sent me. LMAO hahahahahahhahaha"). Compared to the Chinese Internet, slash fanfiction practitioners found themselves more comfortable in English-speaking spheres during the conflict. Twitter was
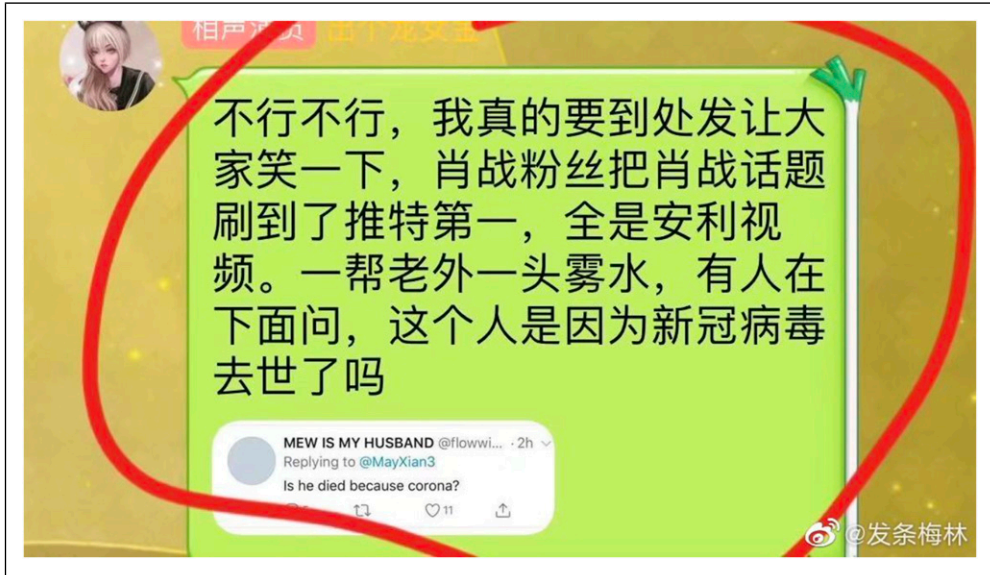
Figure 3. A screenshot circulated in the corpus. Note: Text in the picture: No way no way I need to spread this to all of you. Fans of Xiao Zhan made the Xiao Zhan topic trending #1 with all promotional videos. Foreigners are now totally confused. Someone asked: Is he died because corona?

considered a shelter and a comfort zone, in which they were able to find supporters for their cultural practices and political advocacy. Switching between Twitter and Weibo, slash practitioners circulated screenshots to inform peers about foreign social media users' reactions and thus boost the communal spirit.

Memes were also widely circulated in #227solidarity. There were two prominent types of memes: 1) textual memes. This type of memes was usually neat and simple, with eye-catching big Chinese characters and monochrome backgrounds, dominantly red or light blue. These memes resembled the style of Chinese big-character posters (大字报), which was widely used in the Cultural Revolution for denunciations (Ho, n.d.). Textual memes in the hashtag movement also performed a similar function. They exhibited slogans and important information, such as the principal appeal of the movement ("The focus is on the abuse of public power, intervening freedom of creation. Not the silence of the idol. Not a fandom dispute. Don't be misled!!!" Figure 4-left), mottos ("Freedom to creation. No guilt in literature," "!!!227 Snowflake!!!" Figure 4-right). In contrast to the political intention of textual memes, 2) iconic memes were more inclined towards emotional catharsis and deprecating mockery. Popular cute animal memes such as cats, dogs and comic pandas were appropriated to become cursing subjects ("So you can be so shameless," "Fuck off I can't wait to kill you," "I am fine. Fuck you," Figure 5). The combination of cuteness and profanity was not accidental. Similar to the global-sweeping LOLCat meme series, the banal black humor of deprecating memes was strategically forged by contrasting cute subjects with specific linguistic (mis)use, carrying a strong sense of in-group identification and entertainment (Miltner, 2014).

Creative arts were also created and shared. A set of twin pieces went viral during the movement (Figure 6). Created from the same sketch with different coloring and details, the artwork showed a group of standing, undressed individuals, each raising their right hand up in the air. Holding in their

Figure 4. Examples of textual memes.

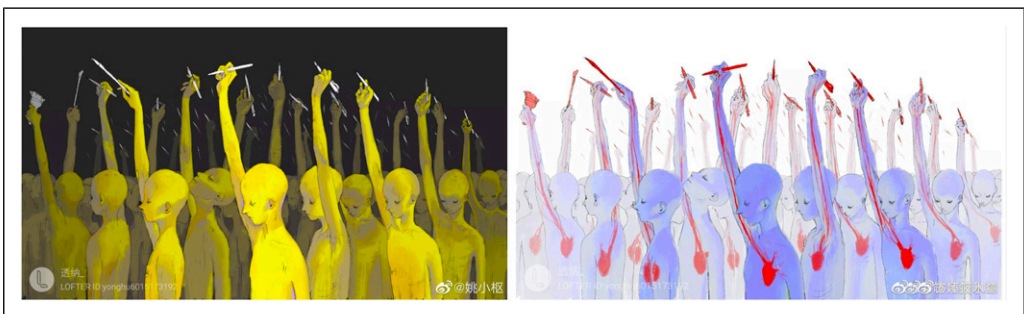**Figure 5.** Examples of iconic memes.

Figure 6. Examples of creative arts.

raised hand are pens, pencils, or painter's brushes, indicating their identity as "creators" (创作者). Rain drops from the sky and all creators in the picture close their eyes—a silent protest scene. In one version, human bodies were colored in yellow with black sky in the background; in the twin version, human bodies were transparent, in which a red heart can be seen with a vessel extending from the heart to the creator's tools they were holding. This resembled an old Chinese proverb in appreciation of writers' devotion to their works—"my hand writes my heart" (我手写我心). These two pieces were originally published on Lofter and later went viral on Weibo. It became a symbol of the 227 movement, with a strong identification with subcultural creators.

When examining the use of creative artworks and their accompanying text, a prominent characteristic was the length of these posts. Most of these posts were written in a very personal manner, like mini monologues of the narrators. For example, the following post borrowed Martin Luther King's famous speech quote "I have a dream" (shortened by the author):

> I have a dream that *Taitai* can create freely, and various works blossom like flowers. We retreated step by step and limited our space bit by bit, in exchange for the room to survive. The only creative common was reported by you. I heard the wailing sound from inside but I could do nothing. What did we do wrong? Why should we take on these? ... I don't know how long we can stay. We are very tired and weary…To literature, to passion, to freedom.

On the one hand, the cultural resilience of the Chinese slash community lies in its members' creative strategies to sustain slash practices. On the other hand, their resilience also manifested in practitioners' persistence in constructing a social imaginary with freedom of expression, as stated in the first sentence of the quote above. Subculture is not only about experimenting with alternative living or writing styles but a challenge to the hegemony in an oblique way (Hebdige, 1988). In the case of the Chinese slash community, such a challenge is fundamentally transnational. It took shape amid the globalization of unofficial cultural exchanges and continued to find resonances beyond the national border.

Discussion

Drawing from the theoretical framework of minor transnationalism (Lionnet & Shih, 2005b), this paper examines resilient cultural practices of the Chinese slash fanfiction community in the face of increasingly stringent censorship and the sudden blockage of AO3 by the GFW. The analysis shows that horizontal border-crossing cultural consumption in post-socialist China enables the development of a group of multilingual, culturally creolized, politically liberal-leaning prosumers who actively engage in the creation and reading of works that challenge heteronormativity and sexual conservatism in the dominant discourse. As a subcultural community, Chinese slash practitioners displayed their resilience by strategically adjusting the visibility of the community (cultural enclosure), switching platforms to keep the viability of works, and showing solidarity through hashtag activism when facing social sanctions. This study employs a Sino-centric approach—"China-as-method"—to explore the socio-historical context of queer-related cultural consumption in China influenced by both Western and Asian countries. Going beyond the conventional West/East dichotomy, it examines the intricate dynamics within Chinese popular culture and the power dynamics between China and other nations that contribute to its formation. Through this approach, this study facilitates a bottom-up theorization of the Chinese slash community as a "transnational minor," providing a more nuanced understanding of "horizontal cultural flows" (Lionnet & Shih, 2005a).

The analysis of the Chinese slash community reveals the situation of Chinese subcultural practitioners as "cyber nomads." This term indicates two aspects of Chinese transnational subcultural groups. On the one hand, the Internet and social media enables non-institutional, transnational media consumption, challenging the hegemonic, filtered discourse of "nation as culture." On the other hand, changing geopolitics and increasingly stringent and skillful Internet regulations in China posited serious challenges to the continuity of subcultural practices. This is observed in previous research on Chinese subcultures (e.g., Bai, 2022; Wang, 2022). In the current study, the mechanism of state censorship is further teased out by relating it to the Chinese platform economy. With commercial goals, digital platforms become a strong disciplining force in restricting subcultural expressions by automatic filtering and post-hoc reviews (Cunningham et al., 2019). While transnational nonprofit platforms such as AO3 offer a comfort zone for the exploration of multilingual resources and the deposition of sensitive materials, the national boundary was reinforced through the implementation of censorship (i.e., the Great Fire Wall). "Cyber nomads" describes a roaming condition in which subcultural practitioners are not only homeless in the sense of lacking a stable creative common but also the denial of the legitimacy of their cultural practices.

The cultural resilience of transnational subcultural groups not only lies in participants' creative strategies to sustain fringe cultural practices but is also manifested in their continued effort to seek resources in support of their cultural resistance. In the connection between Chinese and the international slash community, language presents the first barrier that confined transnational consumption to a group of users who have more social and cultural capital to navigate a multilingual environment. The flourishing of translation groups has played an important role in disseminating foreign productions and bridging this gap (Zhang & Mao, 2013). However, censorship infrastructure such as the GFW presents a second and stronger barrier to transnational horizontal exchanges because the blockage imposed political and legal burdens on the use of transnational sites. From the analysis of the visual corpus of #227solidarity, we found that slash practitioners actively transfer information from international social media (mainly Twitter) to Weibo using screenshots. This shows that Chinese slash practitioners were active in connecting the community with the larger, transnational communities of slash practitioners and other individuals/groups with similar political leaning. In fact, this connecting activity was not confined to the 227 movement but a continuous attempt of reaching-out by the Chinese slash community, which can be seen in their active participation in AO3 and other transnational media platforms. Findings from this study provide a critical case for the study of cross-border grassroot cultural exchanges and the formation of minor identities which subvert dominant discourse (Bhabha, 1994). This article also contributes to the study of subcultures by developing an analytical framework that relates horizontal transnational media flows to the formation of subcultural resilience.

Methodologically, the findings of this study further demonstrate the importance of social media research to examine multimodal content instead of texts only. Our analysis shows that textual and visual discourses, accompanying each other, functioned in slightly different ways. In textual discourses, given their flexibility in length (up to 5000 characters on Weibo), slash practitioners were able to post both concise arguments and lengthy, lyrical monologues. On the contrary, visual discourses are usually more cut-to-the-point, with a clear focal message (except screenshots inform board). But this did not exclude visuals' possibility in conveying layered, sophisticated feelings (creative arts). Screenshots, in this case, displayed a liminal role between textual and visual discourse. It alleviated the burden of posting for it only required one or several clicks on the phone but it required more labor from the reader's side to decode and interpret the information included. The dynamics between different modes of communication show how platform affordances and the "technicity" (Simondon, 2009; 2017) of digital content creation enable Internet users to design

social media messages in creative ways. Combining close reading with computer-aided distant reading (i.e., topic modeling and visual network analysis), this paper contributes to ethnographic social media research by testing a combined toolkit—that combines both humanitarian and algorithmic methods, as well as organic and commercial analytic tools—in the analysis of multimodal social media discourses.

However, the political intentions of Chinese subcultural practitioners, as demonstrated by the slash fanfiction writers and readers in this paper, shall not be exaggerated as aiming at social mobilization; and the obvious violence directed at the scapegoats needs to be considered carefully. It should be noted that Chinese subcultural groups tend to appease censorship instead of confronting it, in which they usually substitute sensitive terms to evade moderation, or simply endure the ephemeral survival of their works due to post-hoc censorship. Specifically, the 227 movement should be considered a long-due public moan against censorship. Xiao Zhan fans, as intermediaries and the actual labor of media censorship, became the main target of attacks, as well as the idol. It is beyond the scope of this paper to elaborate on the increasingly frequent cyber-attacks organized by fan clubs (e.g., Yang, 2019). Further study could be done to understand the widely spread notion of "fandom culture" (饭圈文化) in Chinese popular culture and the strong ability of social mobilization of fan clubs in both progressive and pro-authoritarian collective actions.

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