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Smouldering pornographies on the Chinese internet

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ABSTRACT

Mainland Chinese pornographies on the internet and social media platforms have emerged amidst hardline strategies of government surveillance and censorship. This article examines a new tide of government-sponsored surveillance technologies regarding how they affect new sex and porn industries, which are systematically being closed down and leave the industry, on the whole, in a perpetually 'smouldering' state. The Chinese Communist Party has, since its inception, involved a 'Mass Line' [*qunzhong luxian*, 群众路线] style of governance, or ordered 'the masses' and peer communities to set up mechanisms to report on sexual behaviours and underground porn circuits. Steyerl predicted in 2013 that online peer surveillance globally would encourage a new era of 'invisibility politics' or a paradoxical thrust towards sexual self-expressivity and self-annihilation. To query this point, the article highlights the impact of peer surveillance on Chinese pornographies and erotica since 2009. It includes a discussion of contemporary live-streaming sex industries and features an interview with an employee from a tech company closed down in 2017. The article ends with a discussion with queer artist and pornographer Fan Popo about the crackdown on his own work and the difficulties in producing and defending pornography under mainland Chinese surveillance.

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Introduction

An explosion of sexually explicit media on the Chinese internet since 2008 has caused a shift in awareness of surveillance culture, as intrusive methods of surveillance and censorship have become intermingled with the daily operations of netizen communities. Since its establishment in 1949, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has upheld a nationwide ban on sexually explicit media, imposing harsh punishments on those caught purchasing, producing, or distributing materials deemed a violation of public morality. The mechanisms of internet censorship have historically been reinforced by bombastic anti-pornography campaigns in the state media, but they also have been undermined by underground circuits for pirated pornography and the counter-cultures of home-made erotica and activism (Jacobs 2012). For instance, in 2009 Chinese netizens were proactive in defending their 'right to online pornography' by openly criticizing anti-pornography campaigns and incentives for internet censorship. Making use of a 'Grass Mud Horse' figure and meme, netizens playfully criticized the government policy to have all computers in the PRC fitted with

automated filtering software called Greendam. They shared codes to hack into the Greendam software and uninstall it, which led to the eventual demise of the policy itself. The Grass Mud Horse meme showed a peculiarly 'unsexy' animal whose Chinese name [*cao-ni-ma*] resembled that of a profanity that translates as 'f**k your mother'. This mascot of rebellion also extended beyond a critique of anti-porn filtering software and spurred people's affection and sense of humour. The meme became a larger statement against internet censorship, as was evidenced in thousands of image-collages and mockumentaries that appeared online. The popular theme song of the Grass Mud Horse, a humorous spoof of a well-known children song, was later banned by the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television, together with the entire meme itself. The fundamental absurdity of the decision to ban an animal figure was hotly debated online and it was later appropriated as a mascot in democracy movements in Hong Kong (Jacobs 2012).

In the period between 2010 and 2015 there were similar statements of anti-censorship humour and activism amongst women's erotica producers and fan circles. As early as 2008, Chinese women had started to participate in online platforms for homo-erotic slash fiction and animation based on the Japanese animation genre called Boys' Love (BL). BL fandoms were initially considered harmless and were even supported by local governments and information technology industries; however, over time an intensifying suppression of websites and fan forums began to take place (Liu 2008). Yi (2013) describes a 2010 crackdown of BL forums, in which fans responded with light-hearted comics about 'BL solidarity' in jail and fantasizing about love affairs between prison guards. More severe raids happened in 2012 and 2014, which resulted in 20 *fujoshis* (BL fans; literally, rotten girls) being jailed for supposedly spreading pornography. Wang describes how the editors of large BL-related websites started clamping down on internal rebellions and cooperating with government demands by following their new regulations. For instance, Jinjiang, one of the largest internet platforms for BL fictions, responded to these draconian regulations by strictly banning any content that depicted body parts below the neck. Many BL fictions were censored by the site itself, and it also introduced a strict keyword filter; as stated by a Jinjiang editor, 'Only "clear-water" (i.e. non-explicit) fictions are now accepted, while "meaty" (i.e. sexually explicit) fictions are strictly forbidden' (Wang 2019, 8). These tools of peer surveillance intensified further in 2018, when Liu, a writer of highly popular novels, was reported and received a jail sentence of 10 years together with her proofreader Lin. The couple had sold 7000 copies on the popular online shopping site Taobao and delivered them to her readers from a hotel room, and were arrested under China's latest obscenity laws for both distributing pornography and content depicting homosexual love (Morrissy 2018).

Looking back at this interplay between crackdown and rebellion since 2008, we can see a shifting attitude in social media users who tried to navigate the nationwide campaigns against 'spiritual pollution' and the targeted surveillance technologies set up by the China Anti-Pornography and Anti-Piracy Office (Huang 2017). The China Anti-Pornography and Anti-Piracy Office was originally set up to monitor cases of large-scale corporate crime, but the office also introduced a novel mass-media campaign against online pornography. An example of this is the televised trial in 2016 of the celebrity-entrepreneur Wang Xin, who was sentenced to three and a half years in prison after it was found that his online media player service QVOD was offering a large amount of pornographic content. The prosecutors showed that about 21,000 files of pornographic materials had been found on

three different servers run by QVOD (Horwitz 2016). Since these materials had been able to slip through the cracks of censorship, the QVOD player had become a 'must-have' for Chinese youth and the many *otaku*-derived subcultures in China.¹ The trial was broadcast live, generating heated online debates, while Wang Xin's adroit self-defence was applauded by netizens and even reported on in the state media (Wang 2016; Zhang 2016).

Wang tried to make a type of defence that is also often used by Western tech companies for user-generated content, such as YouTube, who argue that the technology itself is 'innocent' and that media users are responsible for objectionable content. He stated that QVOD was not a content provider but a technology that had been used or 'abused' by its users. As in the 2009 Grass Mud Horse movement, Wang's trial led to an upsurge of humorous anti-government memes. These included simple statements of support for Wang Xin but also more biting remarks, such as 'The most vulgar things that are broadcast in China are on CCTV' and 'The most ironic thing in this court hearing is that every person in that court has watched porn secretly with your media player.'² Whilst netizens were able to criticize government motives, the court case itself reinforced the government campaign against 'spiritual pollution' and led to much stricter regulations for internet companies.

The China Anti-Pornography and Anti-Piracy Office has since 2017 'domesticated' its war on pornography by asking netizens and tech administrators themselves to carry out surveillance of sexually explicit media. It became mandatory for online tech companies to set up their own in-house surveillance teams who would monitor all transactions on their platforms and report them to the government. The government also required administrators of small-group chatrooms or private messenger services such as Weibo, WeChat, and QQ to monitor all transactions. More specifically, web administrators became personally responsible for any sexually explicit content that might be traded on their platforms, and they could be reported to the police if they failed to comply with this ruling (Ni 2018). In October 2018, the Xinhua Agency reported that several WeChat administrators had been sentenced who had turned a blind eye on porn sharing amongst its 'libidinous members' (Ni 2018).

Wang observes that these methods of domestication and peer surveillance are a recurrence of Mao Zedong's idea of employing an 'invisible hand', referring to a Mass Line [*qunzhong luxian*, 群众路线] campaign-style governance that reinforces the idea that the entire community should be involved in spying on and reporting acts of criminality. The government of the Chinese Communist Party still uses its invisible hand in online communications by asking all administrators who manage platforms, as well as all social media users themselves, to cooperate in carrying out surveillance (Wang 2019). This strategy has wide-reaching implications and, in the words of surveillance theorist Siva Vaidhyanathan (2012), can be seen as part of a global shift in surveillance technologies towards a 'cryptopticon', as methods of disguised data tracking are developed by corporations and governments. In an earlier essay, Vaidhyanathan notes: 'We have a cryptopticon (for lack of a better word), Unlike Bentham's prisoners, we don't know the ways in which we are being watched or profiled – we simply know that we are' (2011, 112).

Similarly, Hito Steyerl talks about a new era of 'invisibility politics' when social media users are automatically tracked and their data are modified or rendered 'invisible'. According to Steyerl, this is also due to the fact that electronic devices are automatically pre-programmed to automatically track, capture, and transform data:

A device might be programmed to autapixelate, erase, or block secret, copyrighted, or sexual content. It might be fitted with a so-called dick algorithm to screen out NSFW (Not Suitable/Safe For Work) content, automodify pubic hair, stretch or omit bodies, exchange or collage context, or insert location-targeted advertising, pop-up windows, or live feeds. It might report you or someone from your network to the police. (Steyerl 2014)

This is a description of how social media platforms and electronic devices have what might be described as their formally embedded types of censorship and have thereby become inherently political in their policies on pornography. This is not only because they comply with government regulations to ban specific content, but because their in-built algorithms and scanning devices automatically easily detect and erase content according to 'porn grammars'. Steyerl borrows the term 'porn grammar' from Roland Barthes, who reflects on the Marquis de Sade's endless descriptions of repetitive sex acts. Steyerl shows that surveillance algorithms similarly rely on stratified databases of sex acts and body parts, which they have copied from porn industries themselves, and which they can easily detect in all of their variations (Steyerl 2014).

One light-hearted mode of contesting the invisible hand on the Chinese internet has been to produce sex scenes in which performers remain dressed. For instance, the activists of an organization called Lesbian Database, which was founded in Beijing in 2103, challenged the censorship routines of the video site Youku by posting highly sexual videos in which the performers kept their clothes on. Most of these videos were wiped out later, nonetheless, when the Chinese government came up with new measures to censor online same-sex content (Lin and Chen 2016). The Lesbian Database consisted of videos that aimed at portraying different aspects of the lesbian community in China, including personal testimonies, tender stories about same-sex first-love experiences, interviews with communities and the public at large, and a queer talk show.³ One series that caught the most attention on Youku was 'The Videos by Little S', an activist who uploaded humorous works about lesbian sex entitled 'LES Forever'. Little S introduced various lesbian porn 'grammars' to her audience, such as sex with fingers, oral sex, and sex with toys, and performed the process of having sex while remaining fully dressed. Little S explained in a personal interview that whilst clothed porn was indeed unusual, it was a way to playfully comment on censorship and was not in any way meant to be less sexy.⁴

De facto pornographies

The cryptoticon or invisible hand also determines the way in which the China Anti-Pornography and Anti-Piracy Office is targeting live-streaming sex industries that have come to function as 'de facto pornographies'. In these sex acts, live performers make use of an app to record and broadcast explicit sex acts from their cell phones for customers who pay for them (Channel NewsAsia 2018). As shown in the *People's Republic of Desire* documentary by Hao Wu (2018), live-streaming acts revolve around online performers or 'talents' who broadcast live shows for paying customers. But these live-streaming industries have also attracted a separate class of business managers named 'patrons' who develop longer-term business plans and maintain the fame of performers. In autumn 2018, some of these managers started developing apps specifically devoted to male talents who would perform live same-sex acts for customers. These gay sex apps were becoming

quite popular despite their illegality, and they were also routinely shut down, as was routinely announced on the website of the China Anti-Pornography and Piracy Office.⁵

In order to find out how surveillance methods are implemented and contested within gay sex industries, this article examines a tech company named Peepla by interviewing one of its employees, Niklas. Niklas is a mainland Chinese citizen who used to be employed by the company Peepla, running the promotional campaigns until it was shut down in 2017. The Peepla app was a side-investment of the much larger live-streaming platform Xiandanjia, a now discredited company that rose to fame in 2016. It was funded by Xiandanjia but indeed almost entirely focused on gay sex industries. Peepla's business offices were located in different cities outside China but many of the performers and customers were situated in China.

Niklas consented to an interview and explained that the company decided to live-stream sex acts because the business was very lucrative, the appetite for these sexually explicit performances amongst gay men was enormous, and, thus, the industry had spread exponentially. He explained that he enjoyed working for Peepla because he made good money and because the company excelled at providing a stimulating and innovative product. The sex app was trendy and stimulated a wide range of cell phone performances as sex acts, as he stated:

People were also creative in how they used their cellphone cameras and props like selfie-sticks to better show their bodies. They were doing all kinds of creative tricks and I have to say that they were actually very talented. And this was helped by the fact that it was a very-short-lived moment and so it was even more intense. (Personal interview, October 2018)

The company ran its campaigns by word of mouth, by befriending the 'leaders' of gay communities who would introduce the app to their networks. Niklas was aware of the fact that these sex acts were illegal, but the company had decided not to interfere nor censor sex acts unless they were what he called 'extreme':

We also had an in-house 'control team' but they would only stop talents when they were getting extreme, like when they saw acts of violence, for instance. Anyhow it was nearly impossible to control of the content of course, as we had hundreds of channels and 90% of them were genital sex acts. (Personal interview, October 2018)

Niklas explained that surveillance had become an in-house responsibility and that all companies were making up their own rules for these 'control-teams' as government censors had delegated their responsibility to the companies (personal interview, October 2018) This is not to suggest that the government campaigns were not also playing a part. The government was actively encouraging companies to spy on each other and report competitors to them. Peepla, for example, was competing with other popular live-streaming apps such as GB Live, and Niklas explains that this is the mostly likely reason why they were shut down:

We had a very good marketing team in China and in a few months time had managed to get very large audiences and win the market over from our competitors. Some of our colleagues in China were suddenly taken up by the police and we had to stop all our work immediately. We could not start up Peepla again later because we could not get enough financial support from our mother company. I think the reason we were shut down is likely because we were reported on to the censors by our competitors who were jealous of the income we were generating. (Personal interview, October 2018)

When Peepla was closed down in November 2017, the Anti-Pornography and Anti-Piracy Office website stated that this company had ‘given live-streaming a very bad name in China and overseas’ (China Anti-Pornography and Anti-Piracy Office 2017). Right after Peepla folded, a news article in Sina Tech featured the rival gay sex app GB Live that had attracted four million users. GB Live has meanwhile also folded, but according to the article it had allowed a wide range of sex acts that are illegal in China, such as group sex or cross-dressing acts. The article cites a middle-school student who confirms that he was a performer for GB Live and was gradually coerced into extreme types of sex, so in the end quit altogether (Zhang and Zhang 2018).

The live-streaming apps were able to support gay sex industries and unleash suppressed sex acts, but the industry on the whole was illegal and encouraged various hardcore sex acts that were uncomfortable for performers. Moreover, these illegal industries would not be able to offer any legal protection for the performers, many of whom were arrested and sentenced to jail terms by the China Anti-Pornography and Anti-Piracy Office. Finally, even though these new industries were highly popular, providing a social outlet for gay communities, they were highly fragile and did not come along with any attempt at anti-censorship activism in the public domain.

Fan Popo and the future of pornography

While witnessing the birth and demise of several of these illegal porn industries, how could we envision the future of pornography in the PRC. I held a dialogue with filmmaker Fan Popo, who had become famous in China for trying to speak back to hardline surveillance strategies regarding LGBTQ content and sexually explicit media. Popo was familiar with the live-streaming apps and believed that these industries were indeed still flourishing, but that it was also nearly impossible to openly produce and defend pornography for anybody living and working in the PRC. For Popo, to be an activist meant to cultivate a different type of pornography. It also meant that he had to produce his materials while moving in and out of the PRC and maintaining a balance between cultural mobility and loyalty to the homeland.

Popo expressed an attitude of anger about the Chinese censorship situation but he was eager to produce queer pornography even if he had to do this work underground and also whilst living abroad. In 2017 he produced *Hutong Vibe*, a lesbian porn movie set in a converted hutong apartment in Beijing. The porn narrative features sex scenes between two women who rent an Airbnb apartment there and is followed by an interview with the performers who reflect on the process of making the movie. With this indie porn movie, which was the first lesbian porn movie to be produced in China, Popo wanted to defend queer pornography as well the act of making porn within the Beijing urban environment. But the movie could only be shown at international film festivals such as the Berlin Porn Film Festival, while inside China it could only be screened in informal venues such as university classrooms.

Popo recognized that it had become very difficult to combine pornography and visibility politics in China since his work as a LGTBQ filmmaker was already under constant surveillance: ‘It was a very stressful situation and it was also becoming “tedious” to be a radical artist when events are constantly being shut down’ (personal interview, August 2018). A good indication that influential artists and online celebrities like Popo have become targets of surveillance was the complete removal in 2015 of his documentaries

about LGBTQ issues from various social media sites (Scheurs 2015). Being an activist, Popo decided to speak out about this by suing the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television and asking them to explain their reasons for censoring his work. The State Administration of Radio, Film and Television responded to his lawsuit in early 2016 by saying that they were not responsible for taking down the videos, which was a way of avoiding responsibility and a standard tactic of the Chinese state. Besides the removal of his documentaries, his written columns for Vice China had been deleted after he published an interview with the filmmaker Bruce La Bruce entitled 'We interviewed a porn director'.⁶ These columns for Vice magazine had been his way of coming out as a more sexualized person besides engaging with various types of LGBTQ politics.

Popo further explained that Beijing's art and film culture was changing after the government introduced an aggressive campaign to close down the city's 'holes in the wall', or to clean up small businesses and venues where sex industries or independent art galleries would typically be located. This campaign was more directly targeted towards migrant workers but also left its mark on the livelihood of artists and LGBTQ activists in different Beijing neighbourhoods (Myers 2017). Popo mentions that he was highly affected by this campaign that had transformed his own neighbourhood because he felt that it would become much more difficult to feel comfortable as a radical artist.

Besides this campaign, he had been deeply touched by the suicide of fellow-artist Ren Hang, whose unabashed use of nudity and sexuality in his work had somehow fallen through the cracks of the surveillance society. Popo wrote an emotional message on Facebook after Ren Hang's death, saying that 'The Golden Era of Beijing was closing down' (Xiang 2018). Ren Hang was an iconic person within the Chinese art scene and Popo was involved with Ren Hang's radical sexually explicit magazine *Cock*:

He would invite people to take their naked photographs and do an interview with them about their sexuality. If you look at the remaining issues, you can see that the pictures are very graphic and include genitals, yet the sexual reflection was included as well. He would issue open calls and ask amateur models to be involved. The website of *Cock* magazine was actually unblocked and open to the public until he died. He would sometimes repost these interviews on Sina Weibo and then they would be immediately deleted. (Popo, personal interview, 4 August 2018)

Ren Hang was able to upload his sexually explicit photography and it was perceived by people as being of artistic or activist value, and the work triggered much debate about the value of art to convey and moderate the sexually explicit. But as Popo suggested in his interview, there were only a few Chinese artists like Ren Hang and like himself willing to take the risk to openly define and defend gay sexually explicit media. He was afraid that Ren Hang's work and attitude epitomized an older type of sexual rebellion that was increasingly being wiped out.

From my dialogue with Popo and the outpouring of interest in Ren Hang after his death, I deduced that the invisible hand does not manage to fully erase the work of artists and activist producers. But neither is their work officially present nor does it get any kind of support in the public domain. Even though gay sexually explicit media are being produced within the newest social media and digital technologies, these platforms lack a basic sense of activist responsibility and ethics for their performers. As announced on the website of the China Anti-Pornography and Anti-Piracy Office in summer 2018, 'the golden age of

pornographic live streaming is over'. The apps are being cleaned up and removed, while many of the performers and administrators have been sent to jail (China Anti-Pornography and Anti-Piracy Office 2017). Some apps such as Peepla and GB Live, which managed to gather large crowds of users, had also been shut down by the government. A newer type of online pornography could still rise from the ashes of the golden age, but a basic defence of the very existence of pornography would always be lagging behind.

Notes

1. *Otaku* is Japanese word for a young nerd who grew up with computers and is literate in the technologies and languages of digital cultures or subcultures.
2. For an example of such comments, see: '播案中为什么大众持快播无罪态度?' 知乎['Why folks have a decriminalized attitude towards the Kuaibo case?'], January 19, 2016. <https://www.zhihu.com/topic/19576565> (accessed May 10, 2020).
3. Some traces of the non-governmental organization's videos can be found online: 广州女友组 [Our group-girl's friend], '为什么我是异性恋?' ['Why am I heterosexual?']. http://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XMzk2NjA0MzE2.html?firsttime=59 (accessed June 15, 2019).
4. See Little Les interview (in the mandarin language): <https://www.womenspornographies.com/lesbian-sex-videos> (accessed May 10, 2020).
5. To gain an overview of ongoing cases of censorship of live-streaming apps by the China Anti-Pornography and Piracy Office, see: <http://www.shdf.gov.cn/shdf/utills/search2.html?type=Title&word=直播> (accessed June 15, 2019).
6. Fan Popo, 'We Interviewed a Porn Director' [我们采访了一位色情片导演], Vice China Online, uploaded June 14, 2018, censored June 18, 2018. Fan Popo's remaining articles for Vice.com are located online: <http://www.vice.cn/author/%E8%8C%83%E5%9D%A1%E5%9D%A1> (accessed June 15, 2019).

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