Precarious But Active: A Look At Privacy Behaviors in Chinese Transformative Fandom on a Censored and Surveilled Internet

Anonymous Author(s)

Abstract

Chinese transformative fandom have had to adapt to increasing censorship and surveillance on the Chinese internet in recent years, working around censorship on domestic platforms in order to continue participating in fandom. To investigate how and why from a privacy perspective, we interviewed 10 overseas members of Chinese fandom about their experiences with privacy and censorship, and we supplemented this with 153 social media comments from Weibo and Xiaohongshu on the same topic. We found that fans discussed the current state of Chinese online fandom as, at best, frustrating, and at worst unsafe. Fans were discouraged as the platform prevented them from sharing their fanworks and within-fandom disagreements led fans to silence each other or even report other fans for violating government regulations. They responded to risks from both the state and their peers by leveraging precarious strategies of obscurity and anonymity. We identify three key takeaways for privacy scholarship: the harms of censorship were felt at a community level, which motivated fans' behaviors while creating a tension with expected privacy solutions; faced with inevitable surveillance, fans nonetheless actively modeled threats as a community to inform their behaviors; and the sociotechnical environment of fans seemed to influence how blocking and reporting other fans seemed necessary for curation, contributing to how they exposed each other to state-level harm.

Keywords

China, transformative fandom, censorship, surveillance, privacy in social networks, HCI

1 Introduction

Privacy and HCI scholars have become increasingly interested in transformative fandom, a community centered around the creation and discussion of fanworks[1]. This is particularly due to the vulnerability of fans as potentially stigmatized and as a female-dominated, disproportionately queer space [9, 10, 52, 60]. Although data is limited on the queer makeup of Chinese transformative fandom, literature on the community frequently highlights the prevalence of women in these spaces (e.g., [23, 56, 73, 74]) as well as the queer *content* created by these fans: "CP" (meaning "couple" or "character pairing" [74]) content imagines romance between two men while *nisu* content imagines idols with reversed gender roles [23], both of which leverage transformative fanworks to view characters or celebrities through a queer lens. This practice is far from niche; Neville [42] explains how even heterosexual women may have several reasons to be drawn toward queer content, including a lack of media centering the attractiveness of men and a need for non-normative spaces where they can safely explore sexuality beyond what women are expected to enjoy. While Neville [42] focuses on English-speaking fans, a significant body of women in China do seek out queer content [64] which may be important for similar reasons, especially considering China wholly prohibits explicit material [50].

This also means, however, that Chinese transformative fandom has been particularly impacted by China's censorship. Especially in recent years, the Chinese government has cracked down on explicit content [78] and queer content [46, 64] in fandom, as well as unofficial (i.e., illegal) publishing of fanworks that circumvent government restrictions [78]. The consequences of this can include heavy fines and even arrests, exemplified most recently by arrests of *danmei* authors who posted explicit works on a Taiwanese fiction website [76]. Additionally, China has banned access to the Archive of Our Own ("AO3," a US-based archival website for hosting fanworks) immediately after it was mass-reported by other fans hostile to certain fanworks on the site, most notably those depicting a celebrity as promiscuous and feminine [67].

Fans within China might access uncensored overseas sites through VPNs, namely AO3, but many choose not to due to a stigma associated with the platform [46]. VPN use can also be dangerous, as their use is prohibited for VPNs not approved by the Chinese government [13, 38]. Instead, many fans engage with censorship on China-based platforms, which have been shown to put extensive resources into monitoring and censoring content according to government directives [55]. Despite this, transformative fandom persists on these platforms, adapting to the situation without necessarily giving up prohibited activities or topics [46, 78].

In this paper, we ask what privacy researchers can learn from how transformative fandom continues to persist on a censored and surveilled internet. Prior HCI work has discussed how fans might have greater privacy concerns and sophisticated privacy behaviors due to stigma around fandom [11, 12, 36, 60], but expected challenges of fandom may manifest differently in China's censored environment. Moreover, state surveillance on the Chinese internet is ever-present [33, 62, 70], motivating us to explore whether and how fans are still able to achieve a sense of privacy that preserves the integrity of their fan activities.

We interviewed 10 members of Chinese transformative fandom about their privacy experiences as a fan and their understandings of censorship systems. We limited interviews to fans outside of China, as the sensitive nature of this topic could put our participants at risk should they be surveilled by the Chinese government. Subsequently, we collected 153 social media comments from Weibo and Xiaohongshu (also known as RedNote) to gather discussions

[1]Fanworks are fan-made works celebrating and reimagining the original media or reality, including fanfiction, fanart, fanvideos, etc.

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of privacy in transformative fandom by Chinese nationals. These two sources of data complemented each other, capturing the experiences of those "trapped" within China's internet ecosystem as well as more sensitive experiences that fans may not be willing to disclose online. We then used reflexive thematic analysis [4] to synthesize themes present throughout the dataset.

Our data illustrated how the privacy experiences of fans are contextualized by the overall "environment" the community existed within, which fans felt was getting progressively worse. Multiple factors caused fans to be silenced or driven away: frustrating algorithmic censors may prevent fans from posting works even if they had willingly self-censored their content, while the reporting and recommendation mechanisms present on domestic social media platforms enabled pervasive conflict between fans, including peer censorship. This environment was difficult to leave, as fans ran into multiple obstacles to accessing AO3; for many, the only truly uncensored avenue to engage in fandom seemed to be to publish fanbooks, which is actively targeted by the government. We describe how fans responded to state-level and peer-level threats simultaneously through strategies to reduce their visibility and keep their activities anonymous. Their protection was notably precarious, however, and fans may feel a tension between protecting themselves and engaging in fandom the way they would like.

This study provides new insights into the significance of the community as we study the privacy experiences of users. Engaging in the activities that mattered to them relied on a healthy fandom community, which could be suppressed and worsened even if fans are individually able to circumvent censorship. Investment in community can influence the threats users face, as the measures by which they attempt to keep their connection to community can expose them to new risks; at the same time, privacy solutions can impact the state of the community, as privacy behaviors may necessitate retreat or exclusion from a space. We also call attention to how our results contrast with an "apathetic" [21] response to overwhelming privacy threats, as fans instead actively modeled "red lines" as a community: the boundaries between what will definitely put them in danger and what exists in a more ambiguous gray area. Finally, we highlight how the sociotechnical environment of Chinese fandom systemically enables fan-on-fan reporting, prompting privacy scholars to interrogate how platforms shape communities and encourage members to expose each other to threats. We thus contribute to privacy scholarship by discussing the implications of privacy in the context of community, how users maintained active interest in privacy despite a lack of control over their data, and how platform design contributes to privacy and safety threats.

2 Background and Related Works

2.1 Chinese Transformative Fandom and State Censorship

We use "Chinese transformative fandom" in this paper to refer to Chinese-language communities who create, share, consume, and discuss fanworks, which is analogous to the Chinese term *tongren* (同人) [74]. We do not restrict this definition to Chinese nationals, as other Chinese-speaking fans may engage in fandom communities on Chinese platforms [78], nor do we restrict this definition to Chinese media as there are, for example, communities of Chinese fans for US media [68], Japanese media [66], and Korean idols [61].

Fans might identify themselves as a solo or *wei* (唯) fan, who is dedicated to a single celebrity or character, or a CP (meaning "couple" or "character pairing" [74]) fan, who loves an imagined romantic pairing, or CP, between celebrities or characters (which may often, but not always, involve two men) [67, 74]. Prior work has highlighted how solo and CP fans may come into conflict, exemplified by the "227 incident," where solo fans of a popular Chinese celebrity had mass-reported CP works on AO3 they found offensive [67]. Our interview participants are *tongren* and predominantly CP fans of male celebrities and/or fictional characters (See Section 3.1.3 for limitations). One of our participants was also a *nisu* (逆塑 or 泥塑) fan, referring to a subculture of celebrity fandom that reverses the gender roles of their idol, for example by imagining male idols to be traditionally feminine or imagining them as women outright [23]. Prior work has shown that celebrity CP fans and *nisu* fans may be especially secretive, feeling that their activities are self-indulgent, cause conflicts with other fans, and should be hidden from the celebrities they describe [23, 75].

Though not possible to characterize our social media data in the same way, that sample does discuss *tongren* concerns. It also highlighted divisions between *jiepi* (洁癖) fans, who enjoy content for a single CP, and *zashi* (杂食) fans, who enjoy content for multiple CPs. See Appendix A for a consolidated list of fandom terminology.

Chinese transformative fandom has been increasingly affected by censorship over the years. Zheng [78] described three major periods of online Chinese media fandoms receiving increased censorship: first, various fanfiction forums were shut down for explicit content (2007-2008); second, a government campaign called the Internet Cleansing Movement (净网行动) enforced a previously-lax ban on explicit content and began a reporting system for peer censorship (2014-2015); and third, fans began frequently reporting other fans, while Chinese platforms further tightened censorship and the state crackdowns on unofficially-published books (2018-present). Zheng observed in 2019 that fans were driven to AO3, which remained uncensored. However, AO3 was banned in 2020 [51, 67], and some fans may choose not to use a VPN to access AO3: Pang [46] explains that AO3 can carry the stigma of illicit activity, and use of unapproved VPNs is prohibited [13, 38].

Although fan studies literature has previously discussed the censorship experiences of Chinese fans, this study is the first we know of to call attention to their perspectives in privacy scholarship.

2.2 Chinese Perceptions of Censorship

Censorship on the Chinese internet may manifest on three different levels: governmental decisions block foreign platforms or shut down domestic platforms [55], platform-level decisions prohibit certain content as an execution of government demands [55], and individual-level decisions report prohibited content [30, 32, 63] or choose to self-censor [71].

Chinese internet users have varying opinions of censorship and may not even be aware of its existence, depending on their backgrounds such as income, location, personality, gender, and whether they were an early adopter of the internet [59]. Those who oppose China's implementation of censorship may desire more free

speech and believe that censorship is too strict, blocking innocuous content [27, 31]. Pro-censorship users, on the other hand, may see censorship as necessary to maintain stability in China and filter out unhealthy content, such as content inappropriate for children. They were wary of low-education Chinese citizens and saw the state as responsible for restricting information to appropriately guide the public [27, 31]. Some may even expressed that they trust censored content more, believing the state would censor misinformation [31].

Chinese internet users still circumvented censorship even when they held supportive views of it, however. Mou et al. found that use of tools to circumvent censorship, such as VPNs, varied by demographic but were *not* predicted by user attitudes towards censorship; instead, it was predicted by political trust, need to stay in touch with the outside world, and how much their internet experience was interrupted by blocked content [41]. Meanwhile, Kou et al. [27] explained how some Chinese users believed censorship was appropriate for blocking information from a less educated public, which did not include themselves.

This literature studies the perceptions of Chinese internet users in general, while users particularly affected by censorship, such as those in transformative fandom, may have different perspectives. Our study investigates negative consequences that China's censorship system has on a stigmatized community which some might see as producing inappropriate content.

2.3 Chinese Perceptions of Privacy and Surveillance

Our study investigates a Chinese context, where users may view privacy differently from those based in the West. Prior work on privacy in the Chinese context explains that the Western notion of privacy as an intrinsic good is a relatively recent idea introduced through globalization, in contrast with long-standing views of privacy as an instrumental good that allows one to maintain their reputation [70]. This perspective highlights interpersonal privacy, rather than privacy as protection against authority [33], which seems to be consistent with research that shows how China's pervasive state surveillance may be viewed positively by Chinese citizens; this depends on the type of surveillance, indicating that citizens can be bothered by government monitoring but may see it as acceptable next to concerns for public security and stability [26, 79]. Su et al. found that participants were largely supportive of China's video surveillance of public areas, but less strongly supportive of monitoring online activities, and only about half of participants were supportive of the state silently collecting intelligence on Chinese citizens [79]. Similarly, Kostka et al. found that facial recognition technology in public spaces was generally supported due to the security and stability it promotes [26], and Jiang found that Weibo users expressed either apathy or ambivalence towards the real-name identification that the site (and other Chinese platforms [29]) requires for registration, due to the tension between its effect on free speech and its role in enhancing public security [24].

2.4 Folk Theorization of Content Moderation

Our data showed fan behavior that resembles folk theorization. Folk theories are informal causal theories people develop to explain and intervene in the world around them, which in computer science can focus on how people navigate technological systems [8]. Shen and Haimson [53] analyzed the content moderation experiences of queer content creators on Douyin, on which folk theorization practices were surprisingly unnecessary. Participants would appeal censorship decisions and pay for "dou+," both of which would allow them to communicate with human reviewers who explicitly cited that queer content was not allowed. On the other hand, other work has studied how users develop content moderation folk theories on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter/X, TikTok, and YouTube. Social media users may see content moderation as biased against users with their group identity [37, 65], and may respond by avoiding identity-related vocabulary in their content or reducing use of the platform altogether [37]. Other studies investigated how heavily-moderated online communities, such as anti-vaccine communities [40] and pro-eating disorder communities [18], evaded content moderation by using emojis to replace targeted keywords [40] or using coded language that only in-group members understood [18, 40].

3 Methods

We collected data from two primary sources: interviews with fans and posts made on two Chinese social media platforms, Weibo and Xiaohongshu.

3.1 Interviews

3.1.1 Participants. The interview study was reviewed and approved by the [REDACTED FOR REVIEW] University IRB. We recruited participants who were at least 18 years old, members of a Chinese-language fandom community for at least 1 year, and outside of China at the time of the interview. We felt it was necessary to limit our participants to those who could interview without using a Chinese internet provider, as participants would be asked to discuss sensitive topics that could even be considered grounds for legal risks or even arrest in China. They also needed to be comfortable interviewing in either English or Mandarin Chinese, which were the languages our team was fluent in. Participant materials were written in both English and simplified Chinese.

Recruitment was done via snowball sampling (including using our own personal contacts), flyers around [REDACTED FOR REVIEW], and social media posts on Tumblr, Instagram, and X, which were chosen for being based outside of China. We concluded the study after exhausting these recruitment methods. All of these participants discussed and consumed fanworks, resulting in our focus on transformative fandom. Our final sample was 10 participants.

Seven of our participants spent the majority of their lives in China (ranging from 16–25 years in China), two spent most of their lives outside of China but had connection to it (ranging from 0–7 years in China), and one lived in Taiwan their whole life. Six participants fell in the 18–25 year old range and four were 26–35 years old. Additionally, all of the participants were women and five participants disclosed being queer. This was unsurprising, as surveys of transformative fandom [52], as well as work on Chinese *danmei* fans [34, 63], have noted the prevalence of female and queer fans, while studies on Chinese *danmei* [56, 73], *nisu* [23], idol [19], and CP [74] fandoms considered these female-dominated spaces.

Participants reported between 3–15 years in Chinese fandom communities, with the median and mode being 10 years. They conducted a variety of fan activities, including creating and consuming fanworks, publishing fanbooks , discussing fandom with other fans, doing fan translation, doing cosplay, text-based role-playing[2], attending concerts and fan meets, and buying merchandise or celebrity-endorsed products. All of our participants were CP fans, eight of whom were fans of fictional characters and six were fans of real people. Nine had created fanworks themselves.

Though we did not require usage of Chinese platforms in our recruitment materials, all of our participants used and were concerned with issues inherent to China-based platforms. In decreasing order of commonness, the platforms participants discussed included Lofter (10), Bilibili (7), Weibo (4), QQ (3), WeChat (3), Xiaohongshu (2), and Douban (2), as well as fandom forums on Baidu Tieba (5), Tianya (1), and Suiyuanju (1). Additionally, nearly all participants used the Archive of Our Own (9), a US-based platform, and a few participants mentioned other platforms banned by China including Discord, Instagram, Reddit, Twitter, Haitang, and PTT.

3.1.2 Data Collection. We conducted an exploratory interview study through semi-structured audio-only Zoom interviews. After demographics (Section 3.1.1), participants were asked to discuss their involvement in Chinese fandom communities, their privacy concerns and behaviors with respect to themselves, others, and their community as a whole, and why they participated in fandom despite any risks mentioned. Finally, we asked how the participants understood and navigated censorship on social media platforms.

Interviews were conducted in the participant's chosen language using our interview guide (Appendices B and C), which was developed through three pilot interviews, including one with a Chinese fan. Through those pilots, we saw the necessity of explicitly prompting for concerns beyond what they associated with the term "privacy," particularly in the Chinese interviews due to differing connotations of the term in English vs. Chinese [33].

Researchers took notes and recorded each interview, excepting one participant who requested no recording. A research assistant familiar with Chinese fandom terminology transcribed all Mandarin audio recordings and one of the authors transcribed all English audio. Additionally, the same research assistant translated all Chinese transcriptions and notes (except for the interview that was not recorded) into English. Mandarin transcriptions and translations were each reviewed and edited by at least one other Mandarin-speaking author for accuracy.

3.1.3 Limitations. To protect our participants, we avoided recruiting on Chinese platforms and required that participants interview from outside of China. This meant that fans who live and work exclusively in China could not participate. Further, traveling, working, or studying overseas could influence our participants' attitudes towards censorship and surveillance, and there is a possibility that Chinese platforms treat accounts with foreign IP addresses differently. Additionally, although online Chinese fandom communities include speakers of dialects other than Mandarin Chinese, our team's skillset meant that these fans were unable to participate. Certain marginal experiences of Chinese fandom communities were also missing, such as those of male fans and older fans (above 35 years old) or minors. Finally, due to the sensitive nature of the study topic, fans with particularly acute privacy concerns may have been unwilling to participate. We address some of these limitations by supplementing this study with the collection of public posts on social media sites, detailed below.

[2]Role-playing as characters with others via text.

3.2 Social Media Posts

3.2.1 Data Collection. We collected and analyzed a total of 47 posts from Weibo (24) and Xiaohongshu (23), alongside the top 10 responses to each post (if applicable), for a total of 153 comments. We selected these platforms because they are large social media sites based in China with a significant amount of public discussion of privacy and censorship in fandom. While other platforms such as Lofter may also host fan content, we determined that Weibo and Xiaohongshu had a greater focus on *discussion* between fans.

We used the platforms' native search features to manually find and collect posts that were (1) about Chinese fandom on online platforms and (2) related to privacy topics, including hiding or obfuscating information, keeping identities separate, and reducing attention to themselves or fandom as a whole. On Weibo, we searched for "tongren privacy" (同人隐私) in Chinese, and later "tongren repo[3]" (同人 repo) and "tongren mirror sites" (同人 镜像) as keywords that allowed us richer data on relevant fandom discussions, which yielded search results with these keywords sorted by recency. On Xiaohongshu, we searched for "tongren privacy" in Chinese, which yielded search results sorted by apparent relevance, updating periodically to present posts similar to our past activity; we also included posts serendipitously included on the researcher's "For You" page that met our inclusion criteria. We collected up to the top 10 replies to each post to enrich our dataset, as we noted during the collection process that replies added new layers of discussion on a given topic but often became repetitive by the 10th reply.

We conducted preliminary analysis alongside data collection and stopped collecting posts when our dataset was sufficiently rich and diverse for a well-supported thematic analysis [57]. Weibo posts dated between December 2024 and June 2025, clustered around December and June, while Xiaohongshu posts dated between August 2024 and June 2025, clustered around December, May, and June. This reflected increased privacy concerns following the arrests of authors of danmei who published to the website Haitang, with high-profile news stories following sentencing of the first wave in December 2024 [76] and a second wave of author arrests in May 2025 [6, 28]. All data was collected in June and July 2025.

3.2.2 Limitations. We may have missed key insights on privacy considerations in fandom due to censorship on Chinese social media platforms, which could have discouraged or directly removed highly-scrutinized discussion topics. Additionally, the two platforms we selected for data collection had their respective limitations: posts collected from Weibo tended to be recent posts defined by our data collection period, whereas Xiaohongshu was able to offer somewhat older posts but suggested posts algorithmically in a way that may have reduced the visibility of relevant posts that did not resemble what we already collected. We were able to analyze

[3]"Repo" in this context refers to detailed thoughts a reader may leave in response to a fanwork.

posts from both platforms, however, which somewhat mitigated the limitations of each individual platform.

3.3 Analysis

We selected reflexive thematic analysis for our analysis method, a flexible qualitative approach that highlights common patterns across a dataset while the researchers remain reflexive of how their positionality, prior experiences, and epistemological assumptions, actively shape the creation of knowledge [4]. The lead author coded the English interview transcripts with an inductive, semantic, and experientially-oriented approach [4] because of our exploratory research questions about the experiences and practices of fans as related to privacy. Then, he began analysis of the social media data, adding to the codebook developed from coding the interview data. The lead author first read and manually translated the posts in Chinese to develop English interpretations of data relating to privacy in Chinese fandom. When necessary, he consulted with the last author to clarify the meanings of fandom-specific Chinese terms. He similarly coded the social media data with an inductive, semantic, and experientially-oriented approach. The lead author then developed candidate themes, which he discussed with the last two authors, who had also familiarized themselves with the data. Themes are patterns of meaning across the dataset actively constructed by the researcher to make sense of the data [4], which were refined and iterated on in order to produce final themes.

3.4 Positionality

We acknowledge how our backgrounds shaped our research questions, interview protocol, and findings. We are conscious of the importance of understanding fandom within the context of its own norms [11], which our research team had experience with as four of the authors identify as fans and two are specifically part of Chinese fandom. Most interviews and all Chinese interviews were conducted by an author who is part of Chinese fandom, and authors part of Chinese fandom were either consulted for translation of fandom-specific terminology or directly involved in the translation process. Two authors have spent the majority of their lives in China and three have exclusively lived in the United States, including the lead author who is a second-generation Chinese American. The lead author is fluent in Chinese but the analysis was largely conducted in English, his native language and the working language of the research team. Finally, we largely came to the research from Western privacy research, human-computer interaction research, English-language fandom research, and/or research centering marginalized and queer perspectives, which shaped how we interpreted the data.

4 Ethics Considerations

In addition to IRB review, we took particular care to protect the privacy of our participants and of the fans in our social media data, as they discussed sensitive topics such as censorship circumvention and activities which could be grounds for legal risks in China.

For our interview participants, we required that they be outside of China during the interview and we did not advertise or communicate through Chinese platforms. After consideration of the risks, we chose not to compensate participants. The only PII we collected was their email address, which was replaced with a randomized identifier; original audio recordings were deleted after we verified our transcription. Participants were also given the option to decline audio recording, which one participant requested.

For our social media data collection, we were grounded in the work of the Association of Internet Research [35], which encourages researchers to consider multiple factors in determining ethical practices for their specific context. Though the data is publicly available and was not solicited by the research team, therefore not human subjects research, we consider the content of the posts to be sensitive and protect it by presenting only translated versions, which we believe cannot be perfectly reversed so as to search for the original posts and the people who made them. The risks of re-identification, in our opinion, are higher than the value of presenting these quotations in their original language.

In reporting the results of this study, we do not use unique IDs or individual demographic information that would reveal more about a person's identity or link together quotes from the same participant, which would increase the risk of re-identification. Instead, we indicate the data source each quote comes from and point out when consecutive quotes were said by the same person. We use they/them pronouns for all participants. Additionally, quotes are edited to omit exact details, such the names of specific fandoms.

Finally, in deciding to pursue and publish this research, we acknowledge that there could be concern over reporting participants' experiences circumventing censorship. As Chinese platforms already actively surveil and react to Chinese fandom activity, however, we believe that this paper would not provide new insights to Chinese institutions that would assist them in suppressing censorship circumvention. Moreover, to embody just research practices that potentially spur benefits to the population we studied, we presented in this paper issues that were meaningful to fans' engagement in fandom and approached this research with an understanding of the cultural context and community norms.

5 Results

Our findings highlighted the tension that fans felt between their need to protect themselves from peer and institutional threats and their desire to continue engaging in fandom as they know it. Below, we first report on the circumstances fans currently face, which leaves the community as a whole trapped within unfavorable conditions despite the fact that individuals may attempt to leave censored systems. As a result, how fans conduct fan activities may be restricted, and fans may be discouraged or driven away by the worsening fandom environment. However, some fans may still be determined to continue engaging in fandom. The second half of our findings describe how they may take on risk to do so while leveraging fragile protections from state and peer threats, in the forms of obscurity and varying forms of anonymity.

5.1 Current Platforms are Not Serving Fans

The interview and social media data illustrated an ecosystem of platforms affected by censorship, shaping—and perhaps even eroding—the Chinese fandom community. Fans are subject to both platform censorship and reporting by other fans, emboldened by the government to censor each other. Meanwhile, the community as a whole remains largely on domestic platforms, despite the fact that

certain individuals are able to access overseas platforms. Each of these difficulties either fragments the community or directly affects the drive of fan creators, an alarming outcome for a community centered around transformative works. Underneath this is the role of the platform, which shapes how users interact with each other and how government regulations are actually executed.

5.1.1 Platforms Censor Fan Content. Censorship of fanworks by the platform was highly salient to fans, as it meant "there are less and less places to post a fic in its entirety, [and] posting is more and more difficult." (Xiaohongshu Post [XHS]) This was only described obliquely by social media data, whereas our interview participants were able to discuss in detail. Participants universally recognized explicit content as prohibited by platforms, aligning with social media posts that highlighted explicit content as a risk factor for government action. "You know that highly explicit content won't get posted; everyone in mainland China understands this" (Chinese Interview [CN]). Three interviewees were directly affected by this, sharing that Lofter used to allow "somewhat borderline" (CN) content, but now they need to post explicit content on AO3 instead. In fact, one participant experienced their explicit posts getting hidden by Lofter, and another even had their Weibo account get banned—a punishment that is more difficult to evade than on non-Chinese platforms due to the fact that accounts must be uniquely linked to a Chinese phone number. In China, phone numbers are directly linked to an individual's legal identity and are tied to their accounts on most online services [29]. Furthermore, attempts to circumvent account bans even by creating an account on a different platform are obstructed [48]. High skin exposure may also be censored, as one participant observed non-explicit fanart with high skin exposure "quickly taken down" (CN) on Weibo, and another brought up an instance where a video game had run into "issues about showing skin for characters who are not wearing as much as maybe the government would like" (English Interview [EN]).

Additionally, interviewees described certain media or fandom topics that were censored. A *danmei* fan highlighted that queer content was suppressed, to the point that "it's not just about no kissing or anything below the neck, there's nothing at all. It's basically just brotherhood between the two, 'socialist brotherhood'[4]" (CN). They connected this to the Chinese government's goal of suppressing "what they consider 'unhealthy trends,' which they believe don't contribute to a stable society" (CN). Participants also described how political content is "a big taboo" (CN), which caused one interviewee to avoid creating fanworks about political figures.

Fans then frequently self-censor, despite how it "dampens my creative enthusiasm." (CN) However, even when participants avoided sensitive topics, they could still find themselves struggling with censorship on Chinese platforms. Many participants could share an experience where "I would post an article that I considered very clean, with nothing objectionable, but it would still fail to pass the review" (CN). For most participants, this was attributed to an unsophisticated censorship algorithm that "only filters out specific words" (CN) from a list of keywords, which may change over time. Keywords could be unpredictable to participants, requiring creators to blindly "go back, identify, and remove those keywords to get it approved. This process is quite cumbersome and tedious." (CN). For instance, one interviewee noted creators now have to "avoid using real locations and country names when writing backgrounds" (CN), which directly affected a different participant: "I still don't know why [city name] was considered a sensitive word. Just, ahhh! In the end, you find that for some inexplicable reasons, you might think you're a good citizen, so why, but you still get flagged" (CN). Both fans and Chinese netizens in general use coded language to circumvent censorship, but this could also contribute to the problem creators faced. One interviewee shared that "8 and 9 is a shorthand reference in some circles to the 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre" (EN), which became censored itself and resulted in situations where it is "really difficult [to] just say 89 as a number" (EN).

On the other hand, one participant "fought" (CN) Lofter's review process by submitting their work in pieces, which could produce outcomes inconsistent with a purely keyword-based system. Confusingly, "a whole article wouldn't get through, but if I split it into three parts, it would post without a single deletion" (CN). In another instance, "the first 4000-word half clearly posted without a problem, but if we split that into two 2000-word segments, then they're blocked again" (CN). To them, it seemed as if the algorithm was actively learning to recognize their work, and they were discouraged from testing the review process any further for fear of "feeding the AI" (CN). Additionally, they felt that one of their pieces was blocked not for a sensitive keyword but because "it detected the pervasive sense of death" (CN), aligning with the government's intention to only have "positive energy themes" on the internet [47].

While participants were not antagonistic toward the platforms they posted on, they identified how their requirements were opaque and likely more strict than necessary. "On the platform level they might be more conservative than the regulations themselves in order to limit their potential liability" (EN), and some platforms were described as stricter than others. They ultimately interpret how to enforce government intentions, as a *danmei* fan described:

> "With *danmei* audio dramas being taken down or rectified, it's often not due to direct government orders. The government doesn't have time for this. It's the platforms deciding that certain content is too sensitive and needs to be changed." (CN)

Platforms were often unhelpful in complying with their requirements. The above participant described how a *danmei* site would "highlight sensitive words by circling them," but "it's not always clear what they are referring to" (CN). All other platforms which participants noticed censorship on, including Weibo, Lofter, Xiaohongshu, and Douban, did not provide any indication of what caused the censorship. One participant even thought this could be intentional: "I don't think there are false positives. Even if [the review process] arbitrarily blocks some acceptable content and makes you doubt yourself, it serves its purpose" (CN).

An exception was that, "if you apply to become a creator [on Lofter], you get a dedicated reviewer who can expedite the review process" (CN). This could at least make the censorship clearer to participants, or even resolve false positives: "If it went to human review, my work shouldn't have been blocked, so I don't think it

[4]This refers to how *danmei* fans may cleverly mask their queer reading of the source material by using a term "normatively non-romantic and explicitly in line with official political ideology." [43]

went to human review" (CN). Participants identified human reviewers as a limited resource for the platform, however, and generally anticipated algorithmic censorship. Furthermore, one creator indicated that they strongly opposed Lofter's creator program, which monetizes fandom.

Platform censorship could impact the drive of participants, potentially losing fanworks that would have been shared with the wider community. The friction could deter fans upfront: "I replaced one or two words, but it still didn't pass review so I just gave up [...] I just didn't post that content again" (CN). However, even fans who invested significant time and effort to get past the review process could find themselves tiring over time. One participant was "too tired to keep fighting these battles" and expressed:

> "Last year, the censorship was so intense that just opening the posting interface on Lofter made me physically uncomfortable, to the point of feeling nauseated. [...] It certainly made me less inclined to write, as I felt that if what I wrote wouldn't get posted or had a high chance of being censored, then why bother writing at all?" (CN)

These experiences complement a sense of emptiness in our social media data, asking, "where are the authors who meticulously corrected their works when the platform was destroyed and you couldn't post anything?" (Weibo Post [WB]). These posts more often blamed a different reason for this outcome, however: "the Chinese *tongren* environment is too terrible," (XHS) referring to an environment of low reader engagement and intense conflicts.

5.1.2 Community Changes in Response to New Environment. Our data was filled with references to harassment between fans, which included insulting, blocking, and/or reporting other fans, potentially by many harassers at once. In fact, multiple posts we collected included edits that implied the poster was heavily criticized for their thoughts, such as one who pleaded, "I hope I can fearfully take it back and continue browsing as normal" (XHS). They described a chilling effect where "people don't even dare to like posts" (XHS) and "you really can't say a single word, lest you rub some fandom the wrong way" (XHS). Creating works, a necessary staple of transformative fandom, was no exception: one fan implied that they were harassed after they began to write fanworks, sarcastically commenting "writing that one time completely cured my urge to make fanworks" (XHS).

However, some fans felt like this was a new development, and were nostalgic for an older era of online fandom. "I feel like those doing fandom have been replaced with a different group of people" (XHS), describing how different ships, fandoms, and types of fans, who now seem to be in constant conflict, used to "just move on if they don't like something" (XHS). They even suggested that fandom was a haven for broad sexual acceptance in the past:

> "Will we ever get back to the world we had back then? A world where: people could freely talk about all kinds of kinks; different ships wrote holiday gift fics for each other; long debates were actually about character interpretation and canon writing; even when things got intense between factions, everyone knew to just take it to private forums..." (XHS)

In response, both our social media and interview data actively interrogated why the community had shifted, including changes to the technical environment which affected social behavior. Below, we first discuss how fan-on-fan reporting has become prevalent, and then we look toward how platform design could aggravate divisions between fans.

Weaponized Reporting. Both sources of data described other fans as the most likely perpetrators of their posts getting reported, especially after the "227 incident" where reports from fans seemed to lead to AO3 getting banned. One interviewee mentioned that fandom spaces have been reported and subsequently restricted in the past, "for example, the crazy person who reported Suiyuanju [...] [but] after 227, it became much more of a weaponized tool, and you start to really worry about potential reports" (CN). This breaks trust in other fans, as "*tongren* girls don't love each other, especially in this environment of reporting" (WB). In fact, many fans felt that the only way they would realistically receive any consequences for their activities was if they got reported by other fans.

In some cases, this acts as peer censorship in the Chinese government's interests. An interviewee discussed how CP and *nisu* content of celebrities will get reported by other fans, who "may report content they find offensive [...] [like] if, like in the 227 incident, they depict the idol as a transgender person" (CN). This interviewee thought that fans may be motivated by government policies, as "if a male artist in China shows more queer traits, femininity, or gender fluidity, fans feel that this is an unsafe path [for the idol] because the authorities don't like such an image" (CN).

Ultimately, though, reporting has also become a normalized part of online conflict between fans. "Nowadays any conflict ends in being reported" (WB). One interviewee shared how reports could lead to posts being censored without violating any regulations: "I once posted a story on Weibo without any sensitive content, and it got reported [...] it was [first] limited in reach, and [then] the post was removed" (CN). Behind this, fans described how reporting was easy to weaponize, as the officials responding to reports may not care about its justifiability.

> "Right now, any complaint or report that gets submitted will definitely be accepted and followed up on, even if you call the city hotline to complain that someone downstairs in your apartment complex is littering. [...] If someone reports something, it has to be processed." (WB)

Others assumed that action happens because of the number of reports, which is similarly easy for fans to leverage. An interviewee shared that there are "anti-hater groups" who will "share links to content they want to be reported, treating it like a daily quota" (CN). Whether reports are indiscriminately responded to or they are responded to based on quantity, however, the type of content being reported is imagined to be irrelevant.

Incendiary Social Media Algorithms. Fans on social media reminisced about better times on forums like Tianya and Baidu Tieba, which are now defunct [77]. Instead, Chinese fandom largely exists on social media platforms now, which some lamented were worse for their purposes. They critiqued how posting on Lofter was "unsatisfying" compared to posting on forums, because "I get over a

hundred likes but no comments, or just simple comments like 'hahaha' " (CN). This participant noted how, as a creator, they wanted "a living person to have a discussion [with]," which motivated them to continue writing despite the difficulties: "I take screenshots and save them [reader comments], and whenever I feel upset by the review process, I look at them" (CN). On the other hand, Lofter and other social media platforms show posts to their users based on metrics of engagement, which some fans were critical of. One user claimed that "toilets," a name for fan-moderated accounts that post content submitted to them anonymously, often posted aggressive content and "will attract traffic to each other and increase their popularity score" (XHS), whereas they got "zero traffic" when they attempted to open a "toilet" account that posts only mild content. It is notable that, ultimately, fans' perception of their own community is biased because high-traffic posts are more visible.

Fans were also significantly impacted by how social media collapsed space. One user said, "Tieba felt very clean in how it separated out different groups—it would just show you what you cared about" (XHS), which were even "well-moderated, there were volunteer mods and everything" (EN). Now, fans were concerned that "any person might see what you post" (XHS), as the platform may recommend their post to anyone. This has high potential to start conflicts: one interviewee discussed how solo fans who felt ownership over a space suppressed CP content, saying, "sometimes I see fans criticizing those who create CP content, saying things like, 'When did this culture start encroaching on our space? We should focus on their performance and not distort relationships' " (CN).

Additionally, fans on social media discussed a practice of harassing and blocking other fans in order to force a separation of space. This embodied conflict between *jiepi* (洁癖) fans, who like content for a single CP, and *zashi* (杂食) fans, who like content for multiple CPs. A *jiepi* user explained, "if I click on an author and see they're a *zashi* fan, it should be normal to block them, I have a right to dislike things" (XHS). However, others expressed, "*jiepi* fans will go overboard, checking authors' friend's likes and saved videos and potentially blocking both from the CP supertopic or toilet [...] If you go on Weibo and see you're getting dragged by association—it really feels like the sky is falling" (XHS). This would entail being unable to see fan content from accounts or community resources that have blocked them. This practice could thus produce a fear of engaging with other fans or liking posts: "all I can do is shut my mouth and be careful." (XHS) One *zashi* fan even decided to delete the feedback they were planning to leave for a *jiepi* author, concerned that "if they click into my account and see I'm a *zashi* fan, will they block me?" (XHS). Some *jiepi* fans were also critical of these behaviors, as the community may be " 'cleaned' to the point of having a terribly tiring environment" (XHS). These accounts highlighted that some *jiepi* fans might "clean" tags by "chas[ing] away some authors" (XHS), who were presumably *zashi* authors.

5.1.3 Challenges to Leaving Domestic Platforms. Platforms hosted outside of China offer numerous advantages over domestic Chinese websites. AO3 is the largest international host of fanfiction, and as an interviewee noted, "Many people used AO3, including myself, to publish content that other platforms, especially danmei creation platforms, wouldn't allow—such as explicit content" (CN). Additionally, "usually overseas companies won't cooperate with domestic law, unless they leak data or have domestic agents" (WB), which mitigates risk of government action. However, AO3 has been banned in China since 2020 [51], which proves a critical barrier to access. We detail below the necessity of domestic sites and the complications of getting to blocked platforms, which together contribute to a state wherein Chinese fans cannot abandon Chinese platforms, despite the risks and disincentives.

Domestic platforms provide a place for fans to find new fandoms and communities. "[I]f it's for TV dramas," one participant said, "there are [Weibo] communities, fan groups, and various social media platforms like Douban, which have groups, and Xiaohongshu where people will make posts. Additionally, things like algorithms will recommend content to me" (CN). This is a longstanding trend, with Chinese platforms being many fans' introduction to fandom: "In the early days, there was Baidu Tieba. So when you searched for related content in the browser, it would guide you to Baidu Tieba" (CN). Fandom communities on domestic platforms may gain new members because the Chinese platform ecosystem directed them there. Moreover, even with AO3 and others presenting alternatives to censored platforms, the continued existence of a Chinese fandom community on domestic platforms incentivizes their use.

Should a fan want to access AO3 or other banned sites, they're faced with a number of challenges. The first is purely knowledge, as communicating about AO3 requires coded language. "For AO3, I wouldn't write AO3; I would write 'the red and white website whose name cannot be mentioned' " (CN). Another participant noted how direct links to other platforms are obstructed: "now Lofter doesn't allow links in the comments. It seems like links to Weibo or other sites are not allowed either, so people in China often convert the link into a text password and then post it" (CN). Both of these examples require a viewer to recognize obscured content and how to use it. Simply knowing the URL for AO3 is not a given in these communities, as shown by a fan who posted, "if you can't find the original AO3 site it's whatever" (XHS).

Other actors have taken advantage of the lack of direct access. The blocking of AO3 has led to the rise of mirror sites, such as "the AO3 app" (XHS), which are 3rd-party alternatives that confuse or even scam users. One fan posted: "entering a mirror site, it threatened to shut down my computer if I didn't pay them money within 3 hours!" (XHS). It also seemed that they charged users money for fanworks, which could be a risk to the original authors; fans in our data widely agreed that the government was particularly wary of unofficial avenues for profit. "Works already uploaded to the AO3 app have pretty much all been taken down by it [...] since it costs money to download works on the AO3 app, creators get implicated" (XHS). This also implies that mirror sites are subject to government action, and another fan on social media indicated they will take down works in response to reports, which would be highly unlikely on the original AO3 site [45]: "Now my works on AO3 have also gotten deleted, though I don't understand why I was reported" (XHS). Mirror sites may be entrusted with identifiable personal information at the same time, which fans mistook as coming from the official site. Notably, AO3 only requires registration of an email address, but one fan on social media warned: "do NOT tie your domestic phone number to your AO3 account!" (XHS). Finally, mirror sites may prevent users from using certain features, as one

XHS poster noted that users thereof could not comment on works and therefore were not able to take part in the community.

Despite widespread awareness of VPNs as workarounds for blocked websites among technologists, they were not a sufficient solution for Chinese fans. Some fans seemed not to know about them, as with one person who thought that AO3 would be impossible to access after a mirror site was taken down: "don't worry, AO3 will live on, it's been going for many years now. It's just that we're separated from it for now" (WB). Among those aware of VPNs, trustworthiness could still be a significant concern: "I am considering whether the VPN might be under government surveillance. Some VPNs seem like they are fully monitored by the government, while others, which are more private, feel safer to use" (CN).

Thus, fans historically have physically published their works in order to circumvent censorship, which was one of the riskiest options. This carried the heaviest penalties by far, with both documented and rumored cases of creators and distributors being arrested. As one comment stated, "publishing fanbooks is a 'black' area after all. If you get caught producing/selling a fanbook in any way, you could be in serious legal trouble" (XHS). Another post shared a screenshot purporting to be a firsthand account of an apprehension when police confronted the person after buying a fanbook: "They asked if they could see what I bought, I said I needed to leave, and they wouldn't let me leave" (XHS). Our interview participants also viewed publishing as highly risky, with one who had done so even sharing, "I hadn't been in touch with the main organizer for a few years, and when I contacted her, she told me that the distributor had been arrested" (CN). However, even knowing the risk, fans may still consider this risk necessary for truly free expression:

> "This isn't the first time fans braved danger to make books. But why do we absolutely have to have books, it's because books are the only way to completely reveal creative content." (XHS)

5.2 Strategies for Safe Engagement

A key tension in our data was that fans wanted to avoid risk to themselves without discontinuing their fandom participation. Incidents such as the arrests of Haitang authors [76] made this more urgent, as they indicated that fan activities could be dangerous as well. Yet to cease engaging in fandom or erase the evidence of doing so was undesirable. "I feel heartbroken and helpless seeing authors beg their readers not to delete their feedback [...] the most important thing for fans has always been the confluence of emotions involved in reading and writing" (WB). In fact, some fans on social media were critical of speculative fear-mongering, which could drive creators to leave fandom or delete their works. In this context, fans are highly aware of the precarious position of the community, contextualized by the losses fandom has already taken from government censorship. Thus, many fans choose to continue engaging in fandom knowing "being a fan creator inherently makes you take some risk" (XHS).

Because of this, fans used obscurity and varying forms of anonymity as strategies to protect themselves while participating in fandom. Both are inherently precarious, however, leaving fans "forever in a mindset of trying our luck" (XHS). Further, our data highlights how obscurity and anonymity are undesirable when discoverability is important for community growth.

5.2.1 Obscurity. One way fans attempt to protect themselves is by keeping a low profile, avoiding attention from others. Individuals might do so to avoid harassment and reporting by other fans, behaviors discussed in 5.1.2. CP fans might "only use tags specific to that CP [...] [and] avoid using individual tags for the idols, as solo fans will see it and accuse you of exploiting their tags for attention" (CN). Identifiers for this "self-segmentation" (CN) may even appear nonsensical on the surface: "boyband CPs use numbers like 123456 to refer to them [...] it's completely unclear who's being paired with whom" (CN). Alternatively, fans may reduce their visibility by restricting their audience. They may "archive-lock" their works, a feature on AO3 that prevents works from being seen by non-registered users, or share content only with a trusted online group or trusted friends. As seen in Section 5.1.3, however, readers may not be able to register accounts on the original AO3 site. Additionally, closed online groups seem like "more of a private space" (CN), which multiple interviewees reported disliking for the purposes of fandom as "it often leads to cliques forming" (CN).

Moreover, the safety afforded by this obscurity is fragile, which fans viewed as unavoidable. One interviewee said, "as long as you're on a public platform, there's a chance others will see your content" (CN). This can even be true when audiences are restricted. One fan on social media said, "You joke around in a group chat, toss off a little drabble for fun, and next thing you know some random stranger's reposted it to their page, it's been shared ten thousand times, and you're literally the last person to find out" (XHS).

In addition to individual posts, though, fans were often worried about the visibility of the community as a whole. On social media, one fan explained how "everyone collectively protected" the fandom environment, keeping it obscure to avoid attention from authorities: "everyone would be extremely careful, existing in a self-enclosed state with the feeling it wouldn't be examined if no one calls attention to it" (XHS). On the other hand, one interviewee was particularly concerned about celebrities finding the fanfiction written about them, which might "mak[e] them unhappy" or even lead them to "come after me with legal issues" (CN). However, fans from both data sources expressed that fandom had already become "mainstream" (XHS), and ultimately, the visibility of a community was out of any individual fan's control.

> "If you like an IP [Intellectual Property], and it's a *danmei* IP, I often hear people saying, 'don't become too popular, don't become too popular' [...] People hope it will not become too popular because if it does, it will attract unwanted attention." (CN)

One interviewee shared a consequence of a fandom community attracting attention. When a CP in a sports fandom became popular, "many outsiders who didn't understand why we wrote stories about two athletes started heavily criticizing us," which caused the authorities to intervene and call even more attention to the issue. They ultimately "had to use gibberish to refer to this pairing" (CN).

Interestingly, some fans observed that they were able to share explicit content through direct messages, and one commenter used this strategy to share a "free, permanent, and reliable link" (XHS) to AO3. They theorized that the government might ignore DMs

because "the impact is limited" (CN), despite the fact that DMs are still surveilled, which is in line with their strategies of obscurity. This may not be a universal experience, however, as a different interviewee shared how their account was muted because "they thought I was trying to conduct a transaction in my DMs" (CN).

Our data also showed, however, that fans' attempts to stay obscure could have negative consequences for the community. Visibility is necessary to access the community in the first place, as one participant who has been inactive in fandom recently shared, "I don't even know where fanfiction is being written these days" (CN). Similarly, another interviewee stressed that total obscurity was harmful to fandom:

> "This kind of content can't be completely eradicated; it will just go further underground and onto more anonymous platforms, making it harder to find. I hope it doesn't come to that." (CN)

5.2.2 Anonymity. Another way fans sought to protect themselves was by anonymizing their activities. Below, we discuss their practices trying to hide personal information from other users and trying to hide their identity from the government.

Threats from Other Users. When we asked interviewees about their privacy, they often felt that using a pseudonym without disclosing personal information, "like my name, location, age, or appearance" (CN), was sufficient to stay anonymous to other users. One interviewee applied this strategy extremely meticulously, following firsthand experience using publicly-shared information to doxx[5] another fan: "since then, I've been very careful not to post anything on my fandom account that could trace back to my real-life identity" (CN).

> "I make sure the activities on my fan account and personal account don't overlap; there will always be a time gap. I don't post photos showing my face on my fan account, or pictures of my nails, the bag I'm carrying, or the accessories and clothes I'm wearing that day to locate me." (CN)

In a similar vein, some participants not only kept themselves anonymous but created a different account for each fandom they were in, because "if you express support for a different celebrity on your original account, fans might create private groups to criticize you, accusing you of trying to bring attention to the new celebrity" (CN). Notably, Chinese social media platforms now require that each account be uniquely tied to Chinese phone number, which poses a significant barrier to access: in order to legally create another account, users must purchase a new SIM card, which must be activated by tying it to their government identity [29].

On social media, fans also discussed the practice of using toilets to anonymously share their thoughts. Some fans, however, criticized them for "rationaliz[ing] doxxing and add[ing] entertainment value to [the doxxing]" (CN). Even if it was not the original intention, these accounts could be used to anonymously harm other users.

[5]This is an English neologism that refers to when a user's personal identity is investigated and publicized by another user as harassment [2]. We use this term as an English equivalent to 开盒, which has the same meaning.

The platforms may also inadvertently sabotage users' attempts at anonymity. Many Chinese platforms, in response to a government request, might show the province-level (within China) or country-level (outside of China) location of users based on their IP address [72]. Thus "if you create alternate accounts, it becomes easier to be discovered because they can track your IP changes and other details" (CN). Another fan hypothesized that the recommendation algorithm on social media platforms may quicken the doxxing process. "I knew you from [Suiyuanju], but since I view similar content on XHS, Bilibili, and Weibo, they recommended your posts; it's easy to be doxxed" (XHS).

Threats from The Government. On the whole, institutional surveillance from the platform or government seemed unavoidable. "If they [the government] want to know something, they can find it out" (CN). However, some fans on social media did share strategies to attempt to keep themselves unidentifiable to the government, particularly as they began to hear about the government arresting *danmei* authors and fans who unofficially (i.e., illegally) published their works, challenging their own feeling of safety.

One fan encouraged others to keep their AO3 accounts separate from their domestic social media accounts and phone number, which are identifying. "Anything done through domestic agents isn't really safe" (XHS). Fans instead put their trust in overseas platforms, such as overseas credit card companies, as they imagined overseas companies would not work with the Chinese government. On the other hand, an interviewee had the common misconception that "private browsing modes" can protect from institutional surveillance [69]. "I read on a Douban forum that if you browse Haitang, the police might find out and call you. [...] I pay attention to my VPN's privacy settings. I also use incognito mode while browsing. Then I will also double check whether I have left any other browsing history" (CN). While a trustworthy VPN could protect them from surveillance through their internet provider as well [49], still other avenues for surveillance remain [49, 69].

Fans also hoped for plausible deniability when it came to personal information that was not uniquely identifying. One said, "Haitang authors could be identified without a doubt, because their bank account was connected. AO3 is safe since you only register with an email, they can't prove you were really the one who wrote something" (XHS). This logic extended to fans illegally selling fanbooks, advising fans to "just say you traded for it instead of buying it" (XHS) if caught in possession of a purchased fanbook, or even to "directly refuse" (CN) a search of your person.

At the same time, though, attempts to truly keep themselves unidentifiable on overseas platforms can be difficult to navigate while still wishing to stay connected to the Chinese fandom community, which is largely on domestic platforms as discussed in Section 5.1.3. One interviewee explained:

> "Since I'm overseas, I have many ways to publish my work — but if you make the barriers too high, people inside the firewall won't be able to see it either. It's a dilemma because you want a lot of people to see your work, but you also don't want the wrong people to see it." (CN)

Thus, fans may deliberately use the same username for overseas and domestic accounts, "making it easy to find me" (CN), or discretely share their AO3 username on domestic platforms. One fan, though, described how they used the pseudonym feature on AO3 to link their accounts in a retractable way: "so my Lofter followers can find me, one of my pseudonyms on AO3 is my Lofter ID, but I can change those pseudonyms back into my AO3 ID" (XHS), which implied they would make it harder for others to connect their accounts once they sensed danger.

6 Discussion

6.1 Prioritizing Community

In our findings, fans repeatedly referenced a worsening "environment" for fandom. This encompassed not only censorship of prohibited topics, but increased friction and risk for creators, a lack of engagement from other fans, and increasingly visible conflict between "factions" within fandom. Ultimately, as scholars have already found (e.g., [14, 71]), Chinese netizens *can* evade censorship, and they *can* access banned websites; however, these strategies only seem to scratch the surface in terms of addressing fans' concerns. Transformative fandom has been described as a "gift economy" where the exchange of works and discussion between fans drive the continued investment of their labor [58], without which communities around transformative works could not exist. Indeed, the importance of positive discussion between fans was reiterated throughout our findings. Thus, the many ways in which fans may be deterred by their censored environment is concerning on an existential level for the community, even if individuals are still technically able to accomplish their goals.

Community-level considerations manifested in multiple ways. On one hand, our findings reiterated the importance for the community to stay visible to community members, which is needed for continued activity [36]. Fans simultaneously needed to be easy to find and hard to find, depending on who is trying to find them. To try to resolve this dilemma, fans leveraged obscurity and anonymity (Section 5.2), resulting in precarious solutions that may not hold up in the face of a concerted effort to harm them, such as we have seen from the Chinese government [6, 28, 51, 76]. Our data also prompts us to consider how fans' attempts to reduce their visibility can affect how they perceive their own community. Some participants highlighted that it will be difficult for fans to find the community if it becomes too obscure. For fans who remained on domestic platforms, the community appeared to have drastically changed, and it is ultimately unclear to what degree the community had been "replaced by a different group of people," to what degree it had been changed by its hostile environment, and to what degree the most *visible* groups in the community had changed.

Our study also highlighted how VPNs were of limited use for moving community away from a censored environment, despite the fact that online communities *can* migrate given the right conditions [15]. Pang [46] noted how fans may avoid using AO3 due to its English base and an association with stigmatized material that circumvents censorship; we further observe that its use is also limited by fans' ability to access the platform in the first place, especially when the censored environment restricts information flow (Section 5.1.3). Fans may be unaware how to access AO3 or use a mirror site to access AO3 (knowingly or unknowingly), which might mean that their fandom ultimately has a sparse Chinese presence. Even those who can access AO3 might not register an account, which requires fans to wait an indeterminate amount of time for an email invitation [44]. Without an account, they are unable to post works on the original site or see works that have been archive-locked in response to threats, contributing to low presence on AO3.

This context highlights how community-level risks matter to fans, which should motivate us to research how similar concerns affect design for vulnerable communities in general. How is the "environment" of a community threatened, unstable, or made worse, and in what ways are community members invested in its health? How do vulnerable individuals retain access to community? On the other hand, as privacy solutions often involve retreat or exclusion, how do such measures impact the space that is left behind? Answering these questions may be especially pertinent for marginalized individuals, who may be more likely to be left behind—e.g., fans with limited experience accessing banned websites—and for marginalized communities, whose spaces may be more frequently threatened. In fact, it is notable how Chinese transformative fandom and similar groups (e.g., *danmei* fans) exist as a curiously mainstream mode of engaging with queer content, which is a significant economic force [64] despite China's clear aims to suppress visible queerness [3, 7, 53]. Some participants suggested that the government concerns itself with large-scale trends, implying that suppressing a *community* is possible even if they do not censor all prohibited content, nor attempt to do so [55]. We thus call for further research on privacy solutions that are able to prioritize protection of the community as well as the individual.

6.2 Modeling "Red Lines" as an Active Response to State Threats

Even as participants felt that avoiding government surveillance would be impossible, our findings showed that they still made an effort to protect themselves as they engaged in fan activities. They reasoned about the obscurity and anonymity of their activities, and moreover shared information with the community to try to keep each other safe as they continued engaging in fandom. Regardless of how well these strategies work, it is curious that this should happen at all in a scenario where they see surveillance as so ubiquitous. Privacy scholars have reported on how users will fall to "apathy" [21] or "privacy cynicism" [22] as a "cognitive coping mechanism" [22] for privacy threats that seem out of their control, such as surveillance capitalism enacted by corporations [80]. Reasoning that their disclosure cannot be taken back once they expose their information, they may decide it is not meaningful to take measures to protect their privacy [21, 22].

Instead, Chinese fans seemed to actively model, as a community, a constantly-changing landscape of "red lines" (红线)–a term from the Chinese internet referring to the boundary between what the government will actively punish and what may get by, despite it not being explicitly allowed. Fans work in a space full of uncertainty, where the bounds of government restriction are frequently left ambiguous for other actors to define. Red lines, then, map out where risk is highest, based on what fans have seen thus far of government behavior. They are updated as new information is gained about

government action; thus, despite the fact that the arrests of *danmei* authors [76] was not about fan creators specifically, Chinese fandom saw a surge in discussions around their own privacy following those events, as *danmei* authors share the same risk factors.

This may not be for the purposes of *resisting* government control, but to find the openings in which they can pursue the activities that matter to them, while often trying to *avoid* a situation where they are engaging in targeted activity. Our findings highlighted how such a goal is not simple, such as how fans were still censored even when they tried to avoid sensitive topics (Section 5.1.1). Their focus on preserving fan activities is similar to the logic of folk theorization, which also shows users actively engaging with how a system works *in relation to* a specific goal they want to reach [8]. It also betrays a sense of hopefulness in how some fans may downplay the possibility of a worst-case scenario when it is uncertain if they will be in danger; however, unlike the idea of "hopeful trust" toward data collectors [25], this hopefulness drives fans to continue navigating an uncertain environment and continue trying to protect themselves, rather than give up on their privacy.

This points to a more active and purpose-driven approach to protecting their privacy than in other scenarios where users feel powerless to change their conditions. While fans would not see themselves as having the agency to change government policies or (for many, at least) avoid government surveillance, they appear to feel some agency in how they can reduce the level of risk for the activity they want to do, such as through obscurity or anonymity. This should inspire privacy scholars to dig deeper into users' privacy behaviors even when they lack control over their data.

6.3 Sociotechnical Motivations for Reporting

In Section 5.1.2, we described the frequent conflicts between fans, which affect fans' willingness to engage with transformative works. The phenomenon of Chinese fans reporting each other has been documented by prior work in other fields (e.g., [30, 32, 63]); fans may do this to keep the fandom "clean" in the eyes of the government—particularly for solo fans suppressing CP fans [30, 63]—in addition to silencing those they disagree with or are in conflict with, which any fan is empowered to do [32, 63].

Our results, however, identify curation as another possible motivator for fans to report others. In our findings, fans claimed that feed algorithms on social media platforms like Weibo recommended rival fan content to them, reflecting a lack of agency in how their content was curated. Subgroups of fans might instead turn toward the option of *removing the content from the platform*, something which platforms seemed all too willing to do in response to reports. Alternatively, fans blocked one another, which can escalate into exiling fans—and their friends—from the community.

While fans were not forced to punish others in this way, elements of their sociotechnical environment shaped how attempts at curation must simultaneously harm other fans. In some ways, this phenomenon is reminiscent of "critical infrastructuring," where users engage in a "bottom-up" effort to support needs left unfulfilled by the platform, requiring them to creatively bridge gaps in the online infrastructure provided to them [54]. However, the resulting behaviors negatively impact other users, and perhaps even themselves. While this is far from a universal explanation for fan-on-fan reporting, it is evocative that fans in our study described past iterations of the community where they did not fear peer censorship. Fans act upon their intentions within a sociotechnical environment that defines what aggravates them and the tradeoffs of using each feature. Blocking does not have to be symmetrical or absolute, for example [39]. Similarly, it is notable that AO3's explicit policy is to *not* take down fanworks based on "moral judgements" [45], encouraging users to resolve discomfort through other means such as by using their detailed search and tagging system [16, 45].

We particularly highlight that within-community conflicts in Chinese fandom can expose fans to state-level threats. It is important to understand that harassment between fans is not unfamiliar to fan studies: literature on English fandom has also documented how fans will be subject to harassment by other fans for having the "wrong" opinion [11], and personal grievances can even escalate into reporting [17]. However, in our context, users are leveraging features intended as punishments for those who violate state regulations, which the government and platform can easily tie to their personal identity. While the full consequences thereof can only be speculated, Sun et al.'s [55] investigation of political censorship suggests that "the state's approach is toleration" to new accounts, which they then differentiate between "the regime-challenging and the regime-supporting media" as activity grows; thus, it is entirely possible that accounts marked as transgressive from reporting could be censored more heavily. Meanwhile, fans' reports strengthen the government's censorship of fandom as a community by providing visibility to the behavior of fans, aligning with the government's stance on queer and explicit content [30, 63] as they suppress activities they view as annoying, distasteful, or disrespectful.

This example of how platform decisions can subtly endanger users prompts privacy scholars to further consider the role of technology in online privacy and safety risks. Beyond the user's direct ability to adjust privacy settings in response to threats [1, 5], further research is needed on how "scripts" of user behavior may be "embedded" in platform design [20], ultimately influencing the risks users are exposed to, and expose each other to.

7 Conclusion

This study analyzed interviews with 10 overseas members of Chinese transformative fandom, alongside 153 social media comments by fans on Chinese platforms. Fans discussed frustrations with the current fandom community, largely centered on how platforms enforce government-mandated censorship. They also shared their precarious strategies for protecting themselves while engaging in the gray area of fandom: reducing their visibility and that of the community, which is out of their control, and staying anonymous, which may be difficult if faced with determined state threats. We emphasize what privacy scholars can learn from communities like Chinese fans: that community itself can be a key component of privacy decision-making, that peoples' privacy practices are not always apathetic in response to overwhelming surveillance, and that the sociotechnical systems people operate on indelibly shape their behavior, up to and including enabling state-level harms.

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Appendix

A Fandom Terminology

See Table 1.

B English Interview Questions

B.1 Background Questions

We will start with some quick demographic questions, and then we will go into three sections of interview questions. Please feel free to skip any that you aren't comfortable answering.

(1) First, we would like to know your age range. For this question, we will list out age ranges in ascending order, and we would like you to indicate which one describes you.
   (a) 18-25 years old
   (b) 26-35 years old
   (c) 36-45 years old
   (d) 46-55 years old
   (e) 56-65 years old
   (f) 66 years old and older
(2) We have found that English-language fandom has a large queer presence, and we are curious to know how this compares to Chinese-language fandom. If you're comfortable sharing, do you identify as part of the LGBTQ community?
(3) What gender do you identify with?
(4) Have you ever visited or lived in mainland China?
   (a) How recently were you last in mainland China?
   (b) How much of your life has been spent in mainland China?

B.2 Questions About Participation in Fandom

Next, we would like to know more about how you find and participate in Chinese-language fan communities.

(1) What fan communities are you in?
(2) How did you come to find the fan communities you're in?
(3) How do you find new fan communities?

Term	Definition
tongren (同人)	Fans that belong to a community which shares and engages with fanworks. In this paper, we use this as a synonym for transformative fandom.
fensi (粉丝)	Fans in a general sense of the word.
CP ("couple" or "character pairing") fans	Fans who imagine characters or celebrities in an imagined romantic pairing or CP, which may include CPs with two men. In this paper, we consider this as part of transformative fandom.
Solo or *wei* (唯) fans	Fans who are dedicated to an individual character or celebrity, in contrast with CP fans.
nisu (逆塑 or 泥塑) fans	Fans who reverse the gender roles of their idol. In this paper, we consider this as part of transformative fandom.
jiepi (洁癖) fans	Fans who enjoy content for a single CP, who might not want to see content for other CPs.
zashi (杂食) fans	Fans who enjoy content for multiple CPs.
toilets (厕所)	These are fan-moderated social media accounts that anonymously share thoughts that fans submit to the account.
doxxing (开盒)	This refers to when a user's personal identity is investigated and publicized by another user as harassment.
227	This refers to the mass-reporting event that immediately preceded AO3 being banned by China's government, which many see as causally related.
Red line (红线)	This refers to the hard boundaries of China's government, distinguishing between activities that are known to be actively prohibited and activities that are prohibited without active enforcement.

Table 1: Fandom Terminology

(4) In the screening survey, you mentioned doing [blank]. Could you walk me through a typical experience doing [blank]?
  (a) Which online platforms do you use?
  (b) For things you don't do anymore, what factors influenced your decision to stop doing them?
  (c) For things you intend to do, what factors influenced your decision to wait on doing them?
(5) What do you enjoy about participating in fan communities?
(6) Who knows about your participation in fandom?

B.3 Questions About Privacy Experiences

Thank you. Next, we will get into your perspectives on privacy.

(1) What does privacy mean to you in the context of fandom? (Refer back to the activities they talked about earlier)
(2) Do you try to protect your privacy when you participate in fan communities? If so, how?
  (a) When you make a post or comment in fan communities, do you sometimes choose not to share what you were going to say to protect your own or others' privacy? If so, how do you make those decisions?
  (b) When you post a fanwork, are there certain aspects of it that you choose to censor before posting?
  (c) Are there any fan activities you avoid for privacy reasons?
  (d) Are there any websites you avoid for privacy reasons?
(3) What does privacy mean to you in general?
(4) What are you concerned might happen if your participation in fan communities becomes known by others, if you're concerned at all?
  (a) Who are you concerned about?
    (i) By the Chinese government?
    (ii) By family members?
    (iii) By co-workers or employers?
    (iv) By friends?
  (b) Why are you concerned about discovery by [group(s)]?
  (c) What activities are you most concerned about?
  (d) (if they are very concerned) You've described [some risks] that you're worried about when you participate in fandom. What keeps you involved in online fandom despite the risks?
(5) Do you do anything to try to protect the privacy of others? If so, what?
(6) Are you concerned about the Chinese government noticing fan communities?
  (a) What are you concerned would happen?
  (b) Why are you concerned?
  (c) How would these community consequences affect you personally?
  (d) Do you do anything to prevent the community from being noticed?
(7) Are you concerned about non-fans noticing fan communities?
  (a) What are you concerned would happen?
  (b) Why are you concerned?
  (c) How would these community consequences affect you personally?
  (d) Do you do anything to prevent the community from being noticed?
(8) What are your thoughts on social media platforms, such as Weibo and Bilibili, requiring users to publicly display information such as their real name and province?
  (a) Do you have different views on these policies depending on the platform? If so, how?
  (b) Do you have different views on it in a non-fandom context vs. in a fandom context? If so, how?
  (c) How does this affect how you plan to engage with fan communities in the future?

B.4 Questions About Censorship Folk Theorization

Now we're going to get into some questions about how you think censorship works, and how you've learned about how censorship

works. You are the expert here, and there are no wrong answers. We are interested in your unique perspective and experience as a fan.

(1) Could you describe how you think censorship of fan content works? Think about [activities defined previously as subject to censorship], as well as other activities you see people in the community doing like posting on social media or posting fanfiction [this can be shortened if they already said they do these].
   (a) Which activities do you think this censorship applies to?
   (b) What kinds of content do you think this censorship applies to?
   (c) How did you come to learn how [what they mentioned] works?
   (d) (If they say it's automated) How do you think the system decides what should be censored?
   (e) (If they say it's done manually) How do you think people choose what should be censored?
(2) Are there ways in which you get around censorship when participating in fan communities? If so, what are they?
   (a) Do you use a VPN? Why or why not?
      (i) (If they don't use a VPN) Have you ever considered getting a VPN? Why did you decide not to get one?
      (ii) (If they use a VPN) Do you use a VPN because of getting into fandom?
      (iii) (If they use a VPN) How did you get your VPN or choose which one?
      (iv) (If they use a VPN) Do you have any concerns about using a VPN?
   (b) (If they publish works) How do you avoid censorship when you publish your work?
   (c) (If they make posts/comments) How do you avoid censorship when you make posts or comments?
   (d) How did you come to learn how [what they mentioned] works?
(3) Which of your fandom activities, if any, do you think are unaffected by censorship? Why?
(4) Could you share who you think is responsible for censorship choices?
(5) What do you think the Chinese government knows about fan activities or communities?
   (a) Which level or which specific government agencies are you referring to?
   (b) What do you think they know about individuals in fandom?
   (c) Which fan activities do you think they're wary of or pay more attention to, if any?
(6) (If they say the Chinese government knows a lot about fan activities) You mentioned the Chinese government knowing a lot about fan activities. Do you think the Chinese government takes any action in response? Why?

C Chinese Interview Questions

Note that interviews conducted in Chinese contained the same pre-prepared questions as interviews conducted in English.

C.1 Background Questions

我们将问您一些年龄，性别等基本信息问题。请跳过您不想回答的问题。

(1) 首先，我们想知道您的大概年龄，请指出您所属的年龄范围。
   (a) 18-25岁
   (b) 26-35岁
   (c) 36-45岁
   (d) 46-55岁
   (e) 56-65岁
   (f) 66岁及以上
(2) 我们发现英语同人圈中有很多酷儿群体，因此想知道中文同人圈中酷儿群体的比例如何。如果您愿意分享，请问您是否自我认同为性少数群体的一员?
(3) 您自我认同的性别是?
(4) 您是否曾暂住或长期居住在中国大陆?
   (a) 您最近一次在中国大陆是什么时候?
   (b) 您在中国大陆居住了多久呢?

C.2 Questions About Participation in Fandom

接下来，我们想更多地了解您如何发现并加入中文同人圈。

(1) 您加入了哪些同人圈?
(2) 您是如何找到您目前所在的同人圈的?
(3) 您是如何找到新的同人圈的?
(4) 在筛查问卷中，您提到参与过（同人活动）。您能分享参与以下（同人活动）的常见/典型体验吗?
   (a) 您一般使用哪些网络平台?
   (b) 对于您不再参与的同人活动，您为什么停止了?
   (c) 对于您将要参与的同人活动，您为什么之前没有做过?
(5) 参与同人圈活动时，您最享受的是哪些部分?
(6) 有哪些人或者群体知道您在同人圈中?

C.3 Questions About Privacy Experiences

接下来，我们来探讨您对隐私的看法。

(1) 对您来说，隐私在同人圈意味着什么？（在您参加同人活动的时候，您有没有考虑过自己的隐私问题）（回顾他们之前谈到的活动），个人隐私，中国政府）
   (a) 回顾他们之前谈到的活动（个人隐私，中国政府）
   (b) 设置的边界，什么样的信息是敏感的，什么样的信息是公开的?
   (c) 不同的公开账号?
(2) 当您参与同人圈活动时，您有尝试保护您的隐私吗?如果是的话，您是如何尝试保护您的隐私的?
   (a) 当您在同人平台上发帖或评论时，您是否有时选择不分享您原本想说的内容以保护自己或他人的隐私?如果是这样，您是如何做出这些决定的?
   (b) 如果您发布过同人作品，或者发布评论时，您会选择在发布前会自我审查其中的某些方面吗?

(c) 有没有您避免参与的同人圈活动?
(d) 有没有您避免访问的网站?
(3) 广义语境下的隐私对您而言又意味着什么呢? 那如果不是同人活动，同人圈以外的其他情景下，您有没有考虑过隐私问题。
(4) 如果您参与的同人圈被一些非同人参与者发现，您会担心吗，您主要担心的是哪些方面?
(a) 您担心哪些群体发现呢?
(i) 由中国政府发现?
(ii) 由家庭成员发现?
(iii) 由同事或雇主发现?
(iv) 由朋友发现?
(b) 您为什么会担心被这些群体发现?
(c) 您最担心您参与的哪些活动被发现?
(d) （如果他们表示担心）您描述了一些您在参与粉丝活动时担心的风险。尽管有风险，您为何仍继续参与同人社区活动?
(5) 您有没有采取什么措施去保护他人的隐私呢? 有的话，请问您是怎么做的?
(6) 您会担心中国政府注意到同人社区吗?
(a) 您担心会发生什么?
(b) 您为什么会担心?
(c) 同人圈被中国政府注意到的后果会如何影响您本人?
(d) 您有没有采取什么措施以防止同人圈被中国政府注意到?
(7) 您会担心同人圈外群体注意到同人社区吗?
(a) 您担心会发生什么?
(b) 您为什么会担心?
(c) 同人圈被圈外人群注意到的后果会如何影响您本人?
(d) 您有没有采取什么措施以防止同人圈被圈外人注意到?
(8) 您如何看待社交媒体平台要求用户前台公示身份信息，如真实姓名和省份? 例如，全平台要求展示用户所在的省份，以及微博和哔哩哔哩开始要求大V在主页展示真实姓名。
(a) 您是否对不同平台实施相关政策有不同的看法，如果是的话，请谈谈对各平台的不同看法?
(b) 作为一个同人圈内人与作为一个日常上网的普通人，角色不同会让您对这些政策产生不同的看法吗? 如果是，请谈谈您处于不同角色时的不同看法?
(c) 这会如何影响您未来参与同人圈活动的计划?

C.4 Questions About Censorship Folk Theorization

接下来，我们来讨论审查机制如何运作的问题。对此，我们并不想要得出一个正确的结论，也或许不存在正确结论，我们主要是想了解您作为一个同人圈参与者所有的独特视角和经验。

(1) 您能描述您认为同人内容审查是如何运作的吗? 想想之前我们聊过的可能受审查的活动，以及您知道的同人圈中其他人所做的活动，如在社交媒体上发帖或发表同人小说（如果他们已经描述过，可以跳过问题或减少相关讨论时间）。
(a) （如果他们没有具体说明）这种审查适用于哪些活动?
(b) 您觉得哪些内容会受到审查?
(c) 您是如何了解到这种审查机制的运作方式的?
(d) （如果他们说这其中有机器筛选部分）您认为系统是怎么决定哪些内容应该被审查的?
(e) （如果他们说这其中有人工审查部分）您认为人们是怎么筛查哪些部分可以通过哪些不可以的?
(2) 您在参与同人圈活动时，有没有什么绕过审查的方法，可以详谈一下这些方法吗?
(a) 您是否使用或考虑过获取VPN? 为什么或为什么不?
(i) （如果他们没有使用过VPN）您有考虑过使用VPN吗? 如果有的话，是什么让您最后决定不用?
(ii) （如果他们使用或使用过VPN）您是因为同人圈活动才使用VPN的吗?
(iii) （如果他们使用或使用过VPN）您是怎么找到目前使用的或使用过的VPN的，为什么选择了这个VPN?
(iv) （如果他们使用或使用过VPN）您在使用VPN时，有什么担心吗?
(b) （如果他们发布同人作品）您在发布作品时是如何绕过审查的?
(c) （如果他们评论同人作品）您在发布评论时是如何绕过审查的?
(d) 您是怎么知道这些方法可以帮助您绕过审查的?
(3) 如果有的话，您认为您参与的哪些同人活动不受审查影响? 为什么不受审查影响/都受影响?
(4) 您认为网站的审查标准是由哪些人，或哪些群体建立的? （如需要提示：是否受到政府影响，或是网站内部自行建立）
(5) 您认为政府对同人圈活动了解多少?
(a) 您指的是政府的哪一层级，哪个机构?
(b) 您认为他们知道同人圈整体或个人的哪些信息?
(c) 您认为他们特别关注或警惕哪些同人活动?
(6) （如果他们说政府对同人活动了解很多）您认为针对他们知情的同人活动，他们会采取行动吗?
(a) （如果会）他们具体会采取什么行动，如何采取行动?
(b) （如果不会）他们为什么不?
(c) （如果视情况而定）他们在什么情况下会采取行动?