

## **‘Sissy capital’ and the governance of non-normative genders in China’s platform economy**

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### **Abstract:**

This article examines Chinese government censorship in the intersection between queer and fan cultures and its regulation of big tech companies and platform economies in the 2020s conjuncture. In the context of booming platform industries and proliferating queer representations, the government issued explicit directives to censor the representation of ‘sissy men’, or androgynous and effeminate male celebrities, on video-streaming platforms in 2021. Accused of encouraging ‘sissy capital’, the digital platforms that produce or host these videos have also been closely scrutinized. Focusing on the discourse of sissy capital, this article traces how the term has been used in state policies and mainstream media to discern the power relations that produce such a discourse. It argues that in the context of China’s fast-developing digital platform economy in which the pink economy plays a part, the governance of non-normative sexualities and platform industries has converged in the government’s efforts to define and regulate culture in an era of digital capitalism. The term sissy capital points to the gendered dimension of capital

as well as the political economy of queerness; it also contributes to a more nuanced understanding of contemporary governing rationalities and techniques in a digital, non-Western, and illiberal context.

**Keywords:**

gender, big tech, platform economy, celebrity, censorship, governmentality

In September 2021, 娘炮, (literally ‘sissy pants’) a derogatory term for gender nonconforming and sexually ambiguous young men – appeared in an industry directive issued by the National Radio and Television Administration. Pitching ‘sissy men’ and its associated fan culture against China’s ‘traditional culture, revolutionary culture and advanced socialist culture’, the directive urges the entertainment industry to resolutely resist the ‘abnormal aesthetic’.<sup>1</sup> Although male celebrities who fall short of traditional norms of masculinity have received a torrent of reproach from state media in recent years, using the gender slur 娘炮 in a government policy document was a first. Notably, 娘炮 does not exclusively denote gender and sexual minorities in the Chinese language, but the term has often been used as a shorthand for and an indirect reference to LGBTQ people in policy documents and mainstream media in recent years. This directive therefore has profound implications for the future of gender and sexual minorities in China in an already hostile social environment.

In the same year, an article published in *China Economic Weekly*, a magazine run by China’s national newspaper *People’s Daily*, coined the term sissy capital (娘炮资本) to instigate an agenda of ‘resolutely eradicating the sissy capital that ruins our national blood’.<sup>2</sup> Its purpose was to ‘strengthen anti-monopoly work and prevent the disorderly expansion of capital’, a mission launched by the Central Economic Work Conference (convened by the Chinese Communist Party’s Central Committee and the State Council) in December 2020.<sup>3</sup> Although the opinion of this article is neither new nor unique, the gendered inscription of capital and the capitalist association of gender warrant critical attention. In such a

framing, gender expressions are explicitly politicized. Instead of being seen merely as an issue of media and cultural representation, gender and sexuality also assume the significance of political economy and national security.

From banning sissy pants to curbing sissy capital, China's regulation of cultural production seems to have reached a new level. The policy has also received much criticism in media, popular culture and scholarly research.<sup>4</sup> Scholarly discussions to date have primarily focused on issues of representation: that is, how particular types of gender expressions and cultural representations are censored. Writing about 'sissyphobia' in Chinese media and popular culture, Geng Song points out that the policy manifests the 'entangled interconnection between manhood and nationhood' in contemporary China.<sup>5</sup> This is a particularly important insight with which we agree, but a sole focus on producing a hegemonic masculinity to serve the nationalist agenda does not sufficiently account for the fact why big tech must be involved, and what is 'digital' and 'platform' about such a mode of governance. In other words, we must develop an understanding of why gender and capital are discussed in tandem and why the convergence, or coming together, of gender and capital is seen as problematic in the current government discourse.<sup>6</sup> This article aims to address these questions.

In this article, we argue that in contemporary China, nonconforming gender and sexuality have been used as a means of culture and internet governance to control the ever-expanding power of big tech. We ask: How have non-normative genders and sexualities become an object of regulation in China's media and cultural industries? Why do China's internet and culture regulators see queer cultures as problematic? How has the media production of non-normative genders and sexualities become intertwined with the state regulation of big tech? We suggest that culture should not only be seen as a vehicle for representation, a conduit of nationalism, or a site where freedom of expression manifests itself; rather, culture has become a battleground in which power, economy, gender, and sexuality intersect in contemporary China. In other words, gender and sexuality cannot be studied in isolation from the political economic structures in which they are embedded. Indeed, expressions of nonconforming gender and sexuality in media and cultural industries have long become part of China's political processes and

governing techniques in the party-state's constant push for political control, social consensus, and the regulation of the private sector. It is therefore crucial to understand these processes, protocols and rationalities.

In what follows, we will first provide the historical context of China's queer digital media industry from 2012 to 2022. The focus is on how gender and sexuality have become part of China's campaign against big tech in recent years. We will then analyse two aspects of state policies – anti-pornography and anti-monopoly, which are also seen as two types of governing rationality and technique vis-à-vis LGBTQ people – to trace the trajectory of the convergence of the two policies in the contemporary Chinese context. This is followed by a discussion of the rationale of such governance, highlighting the crucial role of culture for social governance. We use the analysis of state policies and mainstream media discourses to illustrate what Michel Foucault calls governmentality, or the 'art of government' – that is, governing rationalities and techniques – in a contemporary, digital, and Chinese context.<sup>7</sup>

### **China's Queer Digital Media Industry in the 2010s**

Since the mid-2000s, on-demand video streaming platforms, such as Youku, Tudou, iQiyi, Bilibili and Tencent Video, have facilitated a lenient space for nonconforming gender and sexual expressions and subsequently a proliferating queer media industry in China.<sup>8</sup> This has coincided with the rapid development of queer identities, communities, and political activism in urban China. This emergence of non-normative or queer popular cultures was made possible largely owing to these video streaming sites' private ownership, economic imperative, participatory culture, and above all, the temporary absence of government interference from the mid-2000s to the mid-2010s. Together, these sites ushered in new media forms such as short films, web dramas (i.e. television series made specifically for online streaming), and live streaming. These new media forms allowed for a variety of borderline sexual content; they also gave rise to a queer media industry that was of considerable economic and cultural significance.<sup>9</sup>

In facilitating diverse gender and sexual expressions, the novel media forms and the participatory nature of video streaming sites have inspired a cohort of young people including college students and young professionals to create online queer content such as fan fiction and short films.<sup>10</sup> China's nascent queer media cultures have been engendered by grassroots creativity and initiatives. They were first circulated within subcultural communities such as Boys' Love communities, music fan communities and LGBTQ communities. This origin makes the queer media industry highly dependent on the niche market and media fans. This partly explains why fans can become highly organized online in manipulating social media popularity metrics to support their idols. We will expand on this continuing linkage between media fandom and queer digital industry in the following sections.

The combined forces of queer fans and young people's online creation activities have led to the establishment of start-up media studios specialising in the production of queer themed dramas. According to our rough count, between 2012 and 2016, 22 gay and queer themed web dramas/films were widely circulated on China's video streaming sites. These online series range from short film/web dramas (of 5-30 minutes' long on average) to feature length films (of 60-140 minutes' long), from sitcoms to youth/teen and period dramas. In these web dramas/films, personal expressions of gender and sexual identity and same-sex romantic mishap are prominent whereas length, storylines, and camerawork (many of which were produced on a shoestring budget and with home digital video cameras) are side-lined due to insufficient financing and the lack of an established genre precedent. However, this would soon change with the involvement of big industry players.

To compete with more established and highly controlled television channels and cinema chains, online video platforms were craving for new formats and themes. Since 2014, investors, producers, and distributors have come together to create a systematic content supply and distribution chain. Capitalizing on the emerging market, producers and video sites alike opted for non-normative gender and sexual content to foster the growth of their subscribed membership. This contributed to the rapid development of a queer popular culture which cannot be accessed through traditional television or movie theatres. The market success of a handful of queer-themed web dramas at the early stage accelerated the

professionalization of production in financing and distribution. This market force helped streamline the queer content industry from the standardization of the length of each episode to the professionalization of marketing and distribution.

Blued and ZANK, two major gay social network companies, were pioneer funders of the nascent queer dramas between 2012 and 2018. To brand their dating apps, the two companies funded the production of gay-themed web series *Hi My X Man* (我和 X 先生) and *The Rainbow Family* (一屋赞客) respectively. With the market success of the two series, the queer theme quickly rose to significance through the popular genres of web drama and internet film, as opposed to traditional television dramas and cinema movies, gaining potency in China's entertainment market.

Bolstered by the state promotion of the internet industry and an overall dearth of regulatory oversight, big tech companies and their entertainment platforms significantly expanded the boundaries of gender and sexual expressions in China. In exploring new media formats, content themes, and business models, queer popular cultures proliferate in the forms of web drama, mobile live streaming, online reality show, and online fan group. Such examples include the Boys' Love web series *Addiction* (上瘾) and the men focused, online reality show *Youth with You* (青春有你). Thanks to the fast-growing queer media industry, appearing in queer-themed web dramas and live streaming reality shows emerged as one of the easiest ways for actors to gain instant stardom in the past decade. To entertain the increasing fanbase in which LGBTQ and queer-friendly young people played a significant part, male idols became increasingly expressive in terms of their appearance, style, and behaviour: they don unisex clothing and wear heavy makeup and noticeable jewellery. Despite these celebrities' delicate appearance and unorthodox wardrobe, fans expressed fondness of their idols with the endearing term 'brother' (哥哥). The emotional bond between the celebrities and their fans led to highly organized idol-supporting activities (such as fundraising) and inflated popularity metrics (i.e., counts of view, like, share, and comment on social media). As such, a celebrity's popularity became increasingly determined by algorithmic techniques such as trending topics and celebrity ranking lists produced by big tech platforms.

This development gave rise to two interrelated media phenomena: first, manipulating popularity algorithms through highly organized fan activities to increase the visibility of idols became commonplace; second, these idols came to be known as ‘data traffic stars’ (流量明星) – a buzzword referring to celebrities who can generate a large amount of digital engagement.

### **Sissy capital, media fandom, and China’s campaign against big tech**

The rapid development of Chinese queer media was soon put to a halt by new government policies. Since 2016, same-sex romance has been banned on TV shows: ‘no television drama shall show abnormal sexual relationships and behaviours, such as incest, same-sex relationships, sexual perversion, sexual assault, sexual abuse, sexual violence, and so on’.<sup>11</sup> China’s culture and internet regulators has also started to censor web drama using the same criteria for television.<sup>12</sup> In May 2022, the National Radio and Television Administration enforced the license rule – one that had previously been used for television dramas and cinema movies – on online streaming dramas and films.<sup>13</sup> In consequence, videos without a license are not allowed to stream online. These rules forced several start-up studios specializing in queer themes to the brink of bankruptcy: Already produced series were unable to be streamed and investors promptly withdrew their funds. ‘No [government] interference is the best support,’ the director of *Hi My X Man* told us in an interview (conducted in Beijing, December 2016), commenting on the deteriorating environment for queer media producers.

Despite the expanding control over online streaming, China’s queer digital media industry continued to thrive as mobile live streaming platforms and online streaming reality shows emerged as new sites of fast growth. According to our observation, at least two online idol producing shows (*Youth with You* and *CHUANG*) on the list below have achieved unprecedented market success. Male contestants of online shows tended to be younger and more expressive of their gender and sexuality: they often wore orange-red eye shadow, lipstick, pearl necklace, and ear pendants. Many of them were queer or queer friendly. Having only enjoyed a short half-year period of relatively relaxed regulation, live streaming quickly fell in line with China’s ‘sexual normalization’ projects. Streaming sites had to regulate the

behaviours and wardrobes of their male streamers: flirting is no longer allowed; topless displays and above-the-knee shorts are strictly forbidden.<sup>14</sup> In regulating these online streaming reality shows, 娘炮, a gender slur that mixes nationalistic sentiments with hostility towards gender and sexual minorities, was used for regulatory justification.

Seeing these male contestants' unorthodox appearance and style as abnormal aesthetics, China's culture and internet regulators suggested that the worship of data traffic and the disorderly expansion of capital are the underlying causes of this culture.<sup>15</sup> Alarmed by the impact of social media popularity metrics on society, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism issued a notice urging an urgent review of the work ethics of cultural workers. The notice severely criticizes online fan cultures, sissy men imageries, and the worship of data traffic. It calls for urgent, proactive, and collective actions against the unregulated growth and disorderly expansion of capital in the entertainment sector; it also invites expert, policy and industry interventions to reinstate artistic values and the public good.<sup>16</sup>

This top-down criticism initiated a wave of media censorship on non-gender conforming celebrities in state media and social media. In some cases, sensational, patriotic slogans such as 'sissy men lead to a sissy nation' (少年娘则国娘) were used in state media, blaming sissy men for misrepresenting the nation and misleading the country's youth.<sup>17</sup> In this context, the term sissy pants is used both as a target and a means of the country's regulation of big tech. Gender and sexuality have now been made a frontline in China's culture and internet governance.

Two high-profile cases in 2021 came to the fore in which the discourses of sissy men and their online persona of data traffic stars were used in the service of China's campaign against big tech power in the entertainment industry. In May 2021, the iQiyi-produced online streaming competition show *Youth with You* prompted an immediate government response when the show's fans poured a large amount of milk down the drain to obtain the QR codes printed inside the bottle caps to cast votes for their male idols. The incident triggered a torrent of media criticism, and media critics held the androgynous and effeminate-looking male contestants on the show accountable for this fan behaviour.<sup>18</sup> In response,

Beijing's television regulators ordered an immediate suspension of the show. The repercussion of this event continued into September 2021 when the National Radio and Television Administration led a wave of national crackdowns on sissy culture, online fan clubs, and idol-led reality shows.

In the same year, another organized fan activity took place following the arrest of Kris Wu (吴亦凡), one of the most-followed celebrities on Weibo with more than 50 million followers. In July 2021, Wu was held in custody on suspicion of rape that might have involved someone underage. Shocked fans expressed their disbelief on social media. Some called for the launch of a fundraising campaign to restore their idol's reputation, and others defended Wu by insisting that 'our brother went to prison simply for practicing his rap techniques'. State media and media critics immediately intervened. Some commentators used sensational headlines such as 'sissy man Kris Wu and the capital ecology behind him must be resolutely eradicated'.<sup>19</sup>

In Chinese media, Wu was criticized for being an example of data traffic star; that is, social media celebrity who has the capacity of generating many online activities surrounding them. Xinhua News Agency, for example, suggested how the capital hidden behind the sissy male idols should be held accountable for this phenomenon:

Misled by the worship of data and personal gains, capital and its organization jointly fuel the chaotic fan culture. From creating hashtags in the name of love to inciting media hype, from managing click farms to faking social media accounts, from manipulating online comments to trapping fans into debts for organized idol-supporting and fundraising activities, there is a grey trade chain behind most-followed celebrities. Driven by economic gains, some unworthy and unethical celebrities have been over-branded, and fan cultures have become a site for massive profits.<sup>20</sup>

Following these events, the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) launched a special campaign to curb online fan clubs and their organized idol-supporting activities, such as fundraising and

organizing click farms where fans are coordinated to click and comment on news or shows of their idols to increase these celebrities' online visibility. Although Wu was not gay identified, he was often seen as a queer icon and a large proportion of his fan base included queer and LGBTQ-friendly youth. The media reports surrounding Wu soon made a convenient connection between celebrity culture, fan culture and queer culture.<sup>21</sup> From the regulator's perspective, techno-capital, fan groups, online data traffic, and sissy men idols constitute an interconnected, mutually dependent, and self-reproductive ecosystem (which we illustrate in Figure 1); together, they erode Chinese society and expose the country's teenagers to a 'toxic' media environment. The regulation of the disorderly capital of big techs must therefore go hand in hand with the regulation of gender norms and fan culture.

*[figure 1 about here]*

Figure 1: The production of sissy capital

The above two cases suggest that both the government regulators and the state media have been concerned about the algorithmic manipulation of cultural metrics by techniques produced by privately-owned big tech platforms, such as trending topics and ranking lists. These technologies have given rise to a new participatory culture in which fan groups perform data labour as they manipulate these cultural metrics in a highly organized manner.<sup>22</sup> Fans of data traffic stars proactively generate data traffic by creating trending hashtags and sharing their idols' news on social media to inflate the view counts of their idols. Often, fans organized themselves to troll negative comments on their idols to steer public opinion. Under these circumstances, the data traffic surrounding these celebrities has become an indicator of their commercial value.

Before the anti-sissy men sentiment became a national sensation in the context of recent culture and internet regulation, Chinese's state media had already voiced their disapproval of this phenomenon. When men-focused online streaming reality shows led China's digital entertainment industry, an editorial published by Xinhua News Agency in September 2018 initiated the media campaign against sissy men.

This widely circulated article describes ‘little fresh meat’ and sissy men who claimed fame on web dramas, online reality shows, and internet platforms as ‘an eyesore’ (辣眼睛), ‘sick aesthetics’ (病态审美) and ‘weirdos’ (奇葩和怪咖).<sup>23</sup> Provocatively labelling nonconforming gender and sexual cultures as a matter concerning national security, the article even used the sensational phrase ‘sissy men lead to a sissy nation’ (少年娘则国娘) to condemn the capital behind it:

From ‘fresh’ to ‘beautiful,’ and then ‘sissy,’ the transition of this sick aesthetics is intriguing. Sissy men have not come into being in one day. They are outcome of derailed consumption on the appearance and the attention economy; they index a new variant of extravagance and vanity commonly found in the culture and entertainment sector. Fostered by various freakish idol production activities, metrosexual men are branded as ‘data traffic young men’ and good looks have become something people are proud of. Capital fuels the trend.<sup>24</sup>

The Xinhua News Agency’s criticism of sissy men culture created a hostile environment for celebrity and fan cultures. Denouncing sissy men with sensational news headlines, misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy theories have become increasing common and even politically correct. The conspiracy theory surrounding sissy men reached its culmination in October 2019 when the Torch of Thought, a Weibo account run by the Research Centre for National Cultural Security and Ideology Building, reposted a widely circulated social media article titled ‘Do you know how hard the American CIA is working to make you like sissy men?’ (为了让你喜欢娘炮, 你知道美国中情局多努力吗?). The article caught media attention because of the research centre’s affiliation to the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences – a government thinktank responsible for the interpretation of government policies. In this article, the author used an unverified case from Japan to argue that sissy men culture was an US government initiative in the post-World War II era to brainwash the Japanese people through the entertainment industry. By deliberately weakening Japanese masculinity and making Japanese men look weak and unconfident, this initiative effectively reduced the resistance of the Japanese against their American counterparts.<sup>25</sup>

These articles and state policies show that the Chinese authorities are now pandering to, and sometimes even actively leading, the anti-sissy men sentiment by advocating reductive views on nonconforming gender and sexual cultures. This style of disinformation – considering its misleading use of facts to frame an issue – received a backlash from feminists in the comment threads on social media. Despite the outpour of discontent with the use of gender slurs in government documents and mainstream media discourses, the intrusive narratives on sissy men have nonetheless gained potency in Chinese society. In these narratives, anti-sissy and homophobic sentiments have been infused with nationalistic pride; increasingly, they provide a powerful emotional source to mobilize public and popular support for stricter cultural and internet governance.

### **From anti-pornography to anti-monopoly: The expansion of regulatory language**

This section aims to explain the governing rationalities lying behind the censorship of queer culture and the regulation of big tech in contemporary China; it also accounts for their convergence in the contemporary, digital and platform context. Based on selected government documents and their official interpretations and dissemination through state media, we have identified two interrelated discourses – which can also be seen as two types of governing rationality and technique – through which queer sexualities and their media representations have come to be regulated: anti-pornography and anti-monopoly. In the past, non-normative genders and sexualities were primarily censored through the anti-pornography discourse. In recent years, they have also been closely scrutinized under anti-monopoly regulations. In the crackdown on online fandom, for instance, the anti-sissy men sentiment has conveniently become part of the anti-monopoly campaign due to the controversial nature of the sissy men image and the ability of celebrity cultures and media fans to rapidly galvanize public support. Focusing on the official discourses of anti-pornography and anti-monopoly, this section aims to illustrate how gender, sexuality and capital have come to intersect in China's contemporary governing rationalities and techniques.

It is important to recognise the complexity of China's regulatory system. In contemporary China, government departmental directives, industrial guidelines, and state laws constitute an interlocking regulatory system, and their boundaries are often blurred. In regulating the media industry, notices, rules, and orders from relevant government departments are used more frequently than state laws. These departmental directives serve as convenient means of regulation because they do not need to go through elaborate political deliberation to seek approval from the National People's Congress, China's legislative body. The lines between departmental directives and laws are deliberately unclear, and these notices, rules, and orders often operate in similar way as the law does due to the strong control that government regulators exert over the media industry. In China's regulatory regime, trade associations also constitute an important part of the government's surveillance network because they oversee the techno-entertainment sector through a membership system that consists of almost all privately-owned video streaming platforms and film production companies. Working through trade associations, these directives are often able to make quick and efficient regulatory interventions in a rapidly changing media industry. Failing to comply with these directives can lead to administrative penalties including the closure of business.

***Anti-pornography: non-normative sexualities as an indication of pornography***

China's anti-pornography campaign has a long history. Homosexuality was not instituted as a regulatory subject in the culture sector until 1988 when a directive from the Press and Publication Administration listed homosexuality as one of the defining elements of pornographic and obscene materials.<sup>26</sup> The principle that homosexuality serves as an indication of obscenity and pornography has been in place ever since despite the removal of 'hooliganism' (流氓罪) from China's Criminal Law in 1997. This directive regained public attention in 2016 when China Television Drama Production Industry Association (and China Netcasting Services Association openly categorized homosexuality as 'abnormal sexual content' that should be banned under the anti-pornography policy.<sup>27</sup> Both trade associations put homosexuality in

the same category as incest, sexual deviance, sexual assault, sexual abuse, and sexual violence, all of which fall under the umbrellas of pornography, obscenity, and vulgarity.<sup>28</sup>

It is widely acknowledged that the internet serves as a conduit for obscene and pornographic material. There is, however, a lack of consensus concerning what content should be regarded as obscene and pornographic. Official documents and published interviews often make vague claims about the prevalence of obscenity and pornography, but rarely do they explain why homosexuality is categorized as such. In a 2016 media interview, You Xiaogang, president of the China Television Drama Production Industry Association, described the implementation of the anti-pornography rule in the following way:

This has nothing to do with whether homosexuality is socially or legally permissible. This guideline simply states that the distribution of homosexual content is not allowed. It only targets the industry; there is no need to extend this beyond the industry. Could it be said that it is not discrimination if producers insist on making homosexual content when they are fully aware that there is no way to broadcast it? Why does anyone still want to squander money this way? Why does anyone still want to waste valuable creative resources on this?<sup>29</sup>

As You's speech suggests, although content censorship primarily targets the dissemination end, it also negatively impacts on the production end of queer media and culture. Cutting off the financing, creation, and dissemination of queer content effectively means banning queer media all together. Also, the criteria for content censorship are often extremely unclear, and the deliberately vague censorship criteria allow convenient content regulation. It is known that the Chinese government strategically utilizes 'opaque' terms as regulatory rules to increase its influence on the internet.<sup>30</sup> After all, vague language allows for a wide range of interpretation, providing ample flexibility for policy implementation while making it harder for producers to pin down the boundary of acceptability. This boundary is of crucial importance for queer media producers because the precarious nature of their work. In their deliberately blurred boundaries, the discourses of pornography, obscenity, and vulgarity have become a technology of control that offers

queer media producers both opportunities and restrictions, although these opportunities are often fraught with serious risks.<sup>31</sup>

***Anti-monopoly: ‘sissy pop’ and the disorderly expansion of capital***

The regulation of digital media industry has recently become entangled in China’s anti-monopoly campaign since 2020, primarily through the discourses of sissy men, data traffic stars, and disorderly capital. Since a Politburo readout in December 2020, the phrase ‘disorderly expansion of capital’ has been frequently mentioned in government meetings, official documents, and state media. ‘Strengthening anti-monopoly work and preventing the disorderly expansion of capital’ was officially made a government agenda at the 2020 Central Economic Work Conference convened by the CCP’s Central Committee and the State Council.<sup>32</sup> Since then, the mission of preventing the disorderly expansion of capital was quickly adopted by country’s culture and internet regulators and used to justify actions against internet conglomerates, celebrities, and fan economies.

*Banyuetan*, the CCP’s propaganda magazine, for example, warned against the capitalist manipulation of the idol economy, recommending the exercise of more regulatory oversight to stop the capital from contaminating teenage fans.<sup>33</sup> China’s economic mouthpieces *Economic Daily* and *China Economic Weekly* coined the term ‘sissy capital’, linking the rise of sissy men culture to the disorderly expansion of capital, recommending that ‘to cleanse the poisonous sissy men culture, the nation must eradicate the capital that provides the fertile ground for its growth’.<sup>34</sup> In August 2021, the CCP-led China Federation of Literary and Art Circles organized a meeting to improve the work ethics of literary and entertainment workers, in which the high-profile celebrities Zhou Dongyu and Du Jiang read out a proposal calling for action against online fan cultures and sissy men imageries.<sup>35</sup>

In the view of China’s cultural and internet regulators, effeminate male idols are a data-construct intimately linked to techno-capital. What is problematic for the government is not simply the massive popularity of sissy men in terms of their ability of accruing large online followings, but that such idols and the platforms they depend on have been generating excessive economic power that is increasingly

outside control of the government. In many cases, sissy male idols have become synonymous with data traffic stars – a buzzword referring to celebrities who can generate a large amount of online data through social media followings. Labelling the issue as the ‘worship of data traffic’, regulatory bodies including the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC), the National Radio and Television Administration, and the Ministry of Culture and Tourism have jointly launched campaigns against the disorderly expansion of capital in the culture and entertainment sector. In August 2021, the CAC launched a special campaign called ‘Clean-up Operation: Rectifying Chaotic Fan Cultures’ (清朗 :‘饭圈’乱象整治专项行动). This campaign brought big tech and their increasing influence on the entertainment industry to the regulatory front. In this operation, online fan clubs and data traffic celebrities were criticized for cheating on social media ranking lists and trending topics. As a result of the campaign, 814 hashtags and 39 mini programmes dedicated to channelling data flows to selected celebrities were removed from the internet.<sup>36</sup>

This was far from a one-off operation. More dedicated campaigns followed under the name of ‘Clean-up Operation’, and more government departments including the Ministry of Culture and Tourism and the National Radio and Television Administration got involved. By using the discourse of anti-pornography and anti-vulgarity, these Clean-up Operations have expanded the ways in which nonconforming gender and sexual cultures are made either unlawful or nefarious within state policies and dominant social norms. In recent departmental notices, rules, and guidelines, not only are the ‘disorderly capital’ held accountable for misleading cultural trends and consumer behaviours; it is also accused of disrupting the order of the culture market. Altogether, data traffic stars, the worship of data traffic, and sissy men have become both objects of regulation and a discursive framework through which the regulation of culture and entertainment industry is justified.

Containing the disorderly expansion of capital has also contributed to China’s anti-monopoly campaign. In April 2021, China’s tech giant Alibaba, which owns Taobao and Alipay, was fined a record amount of 18,282 billion RMB for forbidding shop owners to operate businesses on its competitor’s platforms.<sup>37</sup> In the same year, the Anti-Monopoly Bureau was established.<sup>38</sup> According to *The Beijing*

*News*, between August 2008 (when China's Anti-Monopoly Law came into effect) and November 2020, 58 anti-monopoly cases were prosecuted but none of them involved internet companies.<sup>39</sup> In contrast, between 1 January 2020 and 14 December 2021, 89 anti-monopoly investigations took place in the internet sector, accounting for 75.42% of the total number of all the investigations.<sup>40</sup> These anti-monopoly cases involved almost all of China's leading tech giants such as Alibaba, Tencent, and Baidu. Obviously, the 'internet capital' has become the focal point of the Chinese government's campaign against the expansion of capital. The State Administration of Market Regulation even issued a guideline to specifically direct anti-monopoly investigations in platform economies. According to the guideline, the misuse and abuse of platform rules, data, and algorithms to achieve platform dominance and industry monopoly, which had previously been widely practiced by online fan groups, are now outlawed.<sup>41</sup>

Although Alibaba's anti-monopoly violations were found in its online retailing business, the internet conglomerate nonetheless accelerated its exit from the culture and entertainment sector by selling its media assets accumulated over the past few years. This included its stock shares in Mango Excellent Media – a company operated by China's leading television channel Hunan TV.<sup>42</sup> This action was taken in response to the warning against the disorderly expansion of capital, which allegedly accounted for the permeation of sissy men and data traffic stars from the internet to the national broadcasting system.<sup>43</sup> Amid tightening regulations in China's culture sector, Alibaba also reorganized its entertainment business by handing over Youku – one of China's leading video streaming platforms – to one of its subsidiaries. In this way, Alibaba was able to maintain some distance from the operation of Youku through indirect ownership.

These cases indicate that anti-monopoly, anti-capital, and anti-sissy men have become increasingly entangled in China's big tech sector. The discourses of sissy men and data traffic stars have emerged as yet another technology of control in addition to the past discourses of pornography, obscenity, and vulgarity. Altogether, they suggest that, in contemporary China, the governance of culture and the internet goes in tandem with each other, and that it has quickly unfolded through the establishment and reinforcement of new gender and sexual norms.

## **Governing queer culture and consolidating postsocialist hegemony**

It is well known that gender and sexuality are highly regulated subjects in China. What is needed is a more nuanced understanding of how the regulatory methods, perspectives, and procedures of gender and sexuality work, and how they have shifted over time with changing technological, market, and political conditions. In the contemporary era when digital media and platform economies play a crucial role in society, gender and sexuality have become significant components in, if not primary additions to, the regulatory framework in China's campaign against big tech. This is a genuine concern for the Chinese government because big tech's economic and cultural influence has grown to a point where their private ownership is increasingly seen as a threat to the cultural order that the CCP seeks to maintain. The CCP has had a complex and even ambivalent relationship with big tech since the latter's emergence. On the one hand, the party-state relies on big tech to consolidate its governance and to expand its wealth and influence; on the other, it keeps big tech in close rein so its power can be contained. This is done through a range of measures including maintaining a stakeholder position in stock market shares, co-opting key management positions into the CCP bureaucracy, as well as through media regulation and cultural policy.

The convergence of big tech and nonnormative genders and sexualities illustrates the vital role of culture in the CCP governance. The CCP has placed a strong emphasis on the importance of culture for social governance and nation building. It understands the importance of culture in gaining hegemony, consolidating control, creating social consensus, and creating a new political and economic order.<sup>44</sup> In 2014, Chinese president Xi Jinping reiterated the importance of culture for the country on several occasions, stating that 'the arts must serve the people and serve socialism' and artists should implement 'the party's policies on the arts'.<sup>45</sup>

Who defines culture and how culture is defined are important issues to consider. The CCP's understanding of culture is underpinned by culture as mass culture (大众文化) for ordinary people for revolutionary purposes. But there is a slippage between mass culture and popular culture (流行文化).<sup>46</sup> The CCP sees popular culture as represented by Hollywood films, Korean pop, celebrity culture, fan

culture and queer culture, all of which are transient, foreign, and even harmful to the national culture and polity; they need to be constantly monitored and carefully contained to minimize their negative impact on society. To some extent, the CCP sees queer culture and fan culture as the fashionable lifestyle of those young people influenced by Western popular and bourgeois culture; it therefore adopts a hostile attitude towards queer culture and media fandom. In doing so, it ignores the needs and desires of a younger and urban generation to express their identities and cultural tastes. Thinking of gender and sexual expressions in a rigid Chinese/Western dichotomy misses the transnational nature of gender variance, sexual diversity, and popular cultural flows.

The CCP's campaigns against youth culture and popular culture purports to bridge the widening social gaps between different classes, regions, ethnicities, and rural/urban divides. These huge gaps in Chinese society are a result of China's decade-long neoliberal economic reforms in the post-Mao era. To counter the negative impacts of neoliberal reforms, together with the political and social unrests produced as a result of these policies, the CCP has turned to the realm of culture as an antidote, a quick and easy fix, to social problems. But culture alone cannot solve problems of political economy and resource distribution. A unified national culture is not only unattainable but also unwelcome in a divided society where people from different strata of society do not share the same cultural vocabulary and aesthetic tastes. Without addressing social inequalities in wealth and resource redistribution, a cultural solution is bound to be insufficient.

What is happening in China today not only demonstrates the CCP's continued attempts to define culture to consolidate its hegemony in a top-down manner at a time when China is facing a difficult international environment as it is navigating through a global pandemic; it also demonstrates the gendered (and queer) nature of capital and the capitalist co-optation of gender and sexual cultures in an era where digital media and technologies are perpetuating social inequalities. Reductive in its understanding of queer culture and fan culture, these regulatory policies show the need to address issues of resource distribution and political economy in an age of platform capitalism. In a global context where culture is often seen as autonomous and independent of politics and economy, it is important to underline the

complex relationship between cultural representation and political economy in a neoliberal, postsocialist, and digital world. In a global platform industry where money and fame are desired, profit and identity are entwined, and gender and sexuality are capitalized, it is crucial to ask what a regulatory authority can and should do, and what are the limits of such regulation.

## **Conclusion**

In recent years, queer media and fan culture have become a convenient forefront for the state to mobilize mass support for political aims, resulting in queer media being constantly monitored and its associated culture market being routinely regulated. The regulation of cultural industry and big tech is immanently present in and exercised through the production of gender and sexual norms. Together, the two mechanisms have established the importance of culture – and the CCP’s hegemonic understanding of Chinese socialist culture – for more effective state governance. But such governance is deeply flawed: while it imagines a hegemonic form of mass culture for the people, it neglects the needs of young people, many of whom are queer-identified or queer-friendly, for more diverse and dynamic forms of cultural expression; while it purports to promote a more public and egalitarian socialist economy, it neglects the entangled and ambivalent relationship between capital, popular culture, pleasure and youth agency. We therefore need a critical understanding of the entwined relationship between culture and political economy, as well as a more nuanced account of queer and fan culture as both cultural representation and political economy. After all, queer culture, fan culture and platform economy should not be seen as antithetical to a Chinese and socialist political economy; they should be seen as an integral part of it, and the negotiations of power relations and social meanings surrounding them are constant and never-ending.

In conclusion, this article has analysed the rationale and techniques of how gender expressions and queer culture have become part of China’s governance of big tech and platform industries. Through the analysis of government policies and mainstream media discourses, this article suggests that, in contemporary China, the censorship of queer culture and fan culture and the control of big tech have become increasingly intertwined, both of which are based on the need to define and govern culture in

order to consolidate a socialist hegemony in the CCP's eyes as well as a reductionist understanding of Chinese culture and socialist culture. Despite the limitations of such an understanding, the convergence of gender, sexuality and capital reminds us of the crucial role of culture and its close relationship with political economy. In this sense, the Chinese government's containment of sissy capital is not only a sign of the party-state's attempt to produce a hegemonic masculinity for the nationalist agenda, but also an issue pertaining to what Chinese socialism can be in the government vision as well as whether, and how, newly emerged human subjectivities, technological affordances, cultural expressions and economic forms can be situated within such a vision.

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<sup>4</sup> Geng Song, ‘Little fresh meat’: The politics of sissiness and sissyphobia in contemporary China, *Men and Masculinities*, 25(1), 2022: 68–86.

<sup>5</sup> Song, ‘Little fresh meat’, 82.

<sup>6</sup> This article uses the literal meaning of the term ‘convergence’; that is, ‘the act of converging and especially moving toward union or uniformity’ (Merriam Webster) in this article. Although this definition has also informed what Henry Jenkins calls ‘media convergence’, i.e. the coming together of old and new forms of media, the article does not refer to media convergence in the Jenkinsian sense.

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