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The Netherlands

Pop-cultural representation of non-conforming genders and sexualities on Chinese social media

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Citation

Peng, W. (2026, September 4). *Pop-cultural representation of non-conforming genders and sexualities on Chinese social media*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4309231>

Version: Publisher's Version

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Summary

This dissertation examines the commodification of “queerness” as a pop-cultural product on Chinese social media platforms. Focusing on Sina Weibo, Bilibili, and Douyin, it investigates how non-normative gender and sexual representations are produced, circulated, consumed, and interpreted within China’s distinctive digital, political, and cultural environment. The central questions guiding the research are: How are non-conforming gender and sexuality representations presented on Chinese social media platforms, why is this so, and how do these representations relate to actual queer identities and lived experiences?

The dissertation presents a paradox. Chinese social media platforms have become sites of vibrant experimentation and expression concerning gender and sexuality. Danmei cultures, baihe narratives, homoerotic celebrity pairings, and “cross-dressing” performances appear to push traditional gender and sexual boundaries. Yet the visibility of these representations does not necessarily amount to a genuine challenge to the dominant order. Rather, a significant portion of queer symbol consumption on Chinese social media platforms, while ostensibly subversive and transgressive, holds only a limited connection to the diverse lived experiences and struggles of queer populations in China. In many cases, queer aesthetics and narratives are strategically appropriated as cultural products with strong monetisation potential and the ability to attract attention.

This research argues that non-conforming gender and sexual representations circulate within a tightly bounded space shaped by state regulation, mainstream cultural norms, platform capitalism, and the attention economy. The Chinese state’s emphasis on positivity, legibility, social harmony, and political harmlessness works together with platform capitalism’s demand for traffic, data, and profit, as well as users’ desires for consumption and emotional expression. As a result, desire and imagination can circulate widely, but mainly when they are monetisable, visually pleasing, politically safe, and compatible with dominant social values. Difference may become attractive and saleable before it becomes socially acceptable.

The dissertation does not reduce this process to simple top-down control. Instead, it shows that pop-cultural gender and sexual fantasy is shaped through the interaction of multiple human and non-human actors: state regulations, platform design, algorithmic recommendation, interface affordances, content moderation, market pressures, peer norms, users, fans, creators, audience expectations and so on. Chinese social media platforms are therefore understood as heterogeneous socio-technical assemblages rather than neutral channels of communication. Their algorithms, rankings, recommendation systems, comment functions, and monetisation mechanisms actively shape which forms of gender and sexual non-normativity become visible and which are pushed to the margins.

The theoretical framework of the dissertation draws on political economy, actor-network theory, affordance theory, and gender and queer studies. From the perspective of political economy, Chinese platforms operate within a model of state-led digital capitalism. They must balance economic growth, market competition, user demand, and regulatory compliance. From the perspective of actor-network and affordance theories, platforms are active participants in the construction, curation, and interpretation of cultural symbols and meanings. From the perspective of gender and queer theory, gender and sexuality are treated as performative and socially constructed, shaped by individual agency, cultural norms, and structural power relations.

The first case study examines danmei culture and the 2020 “227 Incident” on Weibo. It analyses how male homoerotic fantasy, celebrity pairing, and commodified masculinity circulate through Weibo’s fan economy. Danmei, literally meaning “indulging in beauty”, privileges idealised male beauty, and platform-networked circulation intensifies and filters this bias. Weibo’s ranking mechanisms, reposting practices, and fan metrics encourage users to generate traffic and visibility as forms of digital labour. In this process, sexualised fantasy and non-conforming gender presentation become aestheticised selling points. Although female fans may use danmei to project desire, reinterpret masculinity, exercise growing cultural influence through their consumer power, and open up spaces for new forms of gender experimentation and affective imagination, these practices often remain embedded in heteronormative frameworks and are largely divorced from lived gay politics. Less polished, less idealised, or less commercially useful representations are pushed to the margins.

The second case study focuses on baihe cultural products on Bilibili. It examines lesbian-themed narratives, ACGN cultures, and linguistic memes such as “citrus-like” and the “ji” series reproduced in bullet comments. The chapter argues that baihe, like danmei, is often organised around idealised beauty, affective intensity, and stylised intimacy. Bilibili’s highly interactive affordances enable users to participate in shared affective spaces, repurpose lesbian-themed narratives for aspirational engagements with women’s intimacy and the “lesbian continuum”, and consume and articulate representations of female empowerment. However, mainstream consumption of baihe is frequently driven more by aesthetic fascination with genre tropes than by political alignment with lesbian identity. Platform mechanisms privilege pleasing, recognisable, and hyperreal narratives over the socio-political depth of women-identified and queer lived experiences.

The third case study investigates the popularity of gender performances on Douyin that are popularly framed and consumed as “male cross-dressing”. It argues that this particular framing of gender performance emerges through the platform’s socio-technical network, although its categorisation as “cross-dressing” is questionable and reflects only one of many possible interpretations of such expression. Douyin’s short-video format, algorithmic curation, and attention economy reward content that is visually striking, novel, interactive, and metric-legible. Although these performances may appear transgressive, they are often consumed for their spectacular and novelty value rather than for their capacity to subvert or destabilise gender norms. Where the chapter further considers gendered modes of consumption and expression, it shows that audience pleasure, fantasy, and identification do not simply liberate non-normative gender performance, but can also reinscribe the binary logic through which viewers search for the performer’s “true gender”. In this process, the performer’s own identity and intentions may become less important than algorithmic visibility, audience expectations, and platform profitability.

Across the three case studies, the dissertation shows that Chinese platforms turn non-normative visibility into a product through safe and pleasing styles rather than overt political branding. This resembles Western cases of queer commodification, where LGBTQ+ signs and symbols are incorporated into consumer culture, but it also differs from them. In the Chinese context, queer commodification is shaped by regulatory ambiguity, platform governance, political sensitivity, and the specific logic of state-led digital capitalism. Theories of queer commodification therefore need to be adapted to the Chinese context rather than directly imported from Western frameworks.

The dissertation also examines how, as women's consumer power grows, they gain greater cultural influence and emotional authority in subcultural spaces. These spaces can allow women to explore desire, intimacy, and alternatives to conventional heterosexual romance and cisgender expressions. Yet they can also reproduce heteronormative norms, idealised beauty standards, gender essentialism, and even misogyny. Women's agency in these spaces is therefore real but constrained by platform economies, market pressures, and dominant gender politics.

Ultimately, this dissertation argues that gender and sexual non-normativity on Chinese social media often circulates as recognisable, novel, and interactive content. It functions as simulated transgression rather than lived experience, exceeding simple binaries such as resistance and compliance, authenticity and inauthenticity, or subversion and co-optation. Non-conforming representations are not simply suppressed, nor are they straightforwardly liberated. They are enabled, filtered, aestheticised, commercialised, and contained.

By analysing danmei on Weibo, baihe on Bilibili, and "cross-dressing" performances on Douyin, this dissertation contributes to Chinese studies, platform studies, and gender and queer studies. It demonstrates that Chinese social media platforms operate as complex actor networks in which users, creators, algorithms, platform affordances, state regulations, market imperatives, and cultural norms jointly shape the production and consumption of queer symbols. The dissertation therefore provides a context-sensitive account of commodified "queerness" in contemporary China: one in which non-normative visibility becomes possible, but often only when it is aestheticised or stylised, legible, affectively engaging, monetisable, and politically harmless.