

Assessing the Chinese Censorship System: The Case of LGBTQ Representations in Entertainment

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Abstract

This research paper presents a case study of LGBTQ representations in entertainment in China to assess the Chinese censorship system, which is imperfect yet sophisticated. Censorship in China, which is translated in Chinese as “ShenCha,” meaning to “check and refine” your work, has been causing heated discussion, primarily as the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT) exerts more power over the entertainment industry. In this paper, the writer compared the example of the film “Farewell My Concubine” in 1993 and the online TV show “Addicted” in 2016, which both contained LGBTQ contents, highlighting the complexity of the censorship system in China and addressing the content, target audience and censorship decisions of both works. This leads us to the preliminary conclusion, which provides a possible explanation of how the complicated relationship between SARFT, the officials, and feedback from audiences influences the censorship system.

Keywords: Media studies, censorship system, censorship policy, LGBTQ+ representation, movies and TV, entertainment

Introduction

Many observers question whether the sophisticated film censorship system in China, carried out by the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (known as SARFT), allows little to no flexibility to incorporate non-mainstream artistic elements or represent specific groups of people such as the Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Trans, and Queer (LGBTQ) people, or even to portray the lifestyles of people with tattoos and colored hair. For example, in 2017, there were two reality shows, *Idol Producer and Rap of China*, that consisted of young idols where many participants had dyed hair or tattoos, mostly small ones on their arms or fingers. After being aired and viewed by the government officials of the SARFT, the show's depictions were deemed inappropriate for the teenagers who were the primary audience of the shows. Future reality show participants with dyed hair were forced to dye their hair back to their natural colors and cover up any tattoos. This event changed future content and added another regulation change to content moderation despite not being listed in the law itself. This provides an example of how the SARFT can censor without listing it in the rules and regulations.

In addition, the movie rating system is still in its infancy in China, meaning that scenes that would make a film R-rated might be directly cut out to be released in Chinese cinemas. The complex system of censorship, which reaches beyond laws and regulations listed in Regulations on the Administration of Movies, is intertwined with elements such as perceived national honor and dignity, officials' preference in the SARFT, traditional Chinese values of the family system, and even socioeconomic factors. Under these circumstances, films and TV series may be banned in China for reasons not listed among the regulations carried out by the SARFT, for example, themes around the representation of the LGBTQ community.

Meanwhile, in recent years LGBTQ issues have been less of a taboo in Chinese society, yet the government maintains a hostile attitude towards its representation in art. LGBTQ activities, such as communities, parades, or singing groups, have been legal since 1997 (Wang, Belair-Gagnon, and Holton 2020). LGBTQ movements were recognized by the Chinese government in October 2017 through

same-sex couples' legal rights, including medical and property management through the guardianship system, meaning that they became each other's guardians instead of a married couple so that they still can have legal obligations to each other. In this context, one question to ask is: how is censorship represented in Chinese movies? The following sections will describe the research proposal.

Censorship in China

The Chinese film censorship system, translated in Chinese as “ShenCha,” which means to “check and refine” your work, has become a heated topic in recent years in Western and Chinese media, especially since the Western filming industry began to reach the Chinese audience.⁴⁴ With the rise of various video platforms on the internet, the ability of Chinese audiences to watch American television shows and movies, whether through Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) or traditional Chinese broadcasters or websites, has substantially increased. In online discussion communities, such as WeChat--a Chinese owned multimedia social platform, and DouBan--a Chinese owned social networking service website that allows registered users to record information and create content related to film, books, music, recent events, and activities in Chinese cities, people are commenting whether the censorship system was appropriate and tailored to a globalized era where information is more free-floating.⁴⁵

Chinese censorship checks, analyzes, and recreates parts of media content for national unity purposes.⁴⁶ To achieve this purpose, the Chinese

⁴⁴ Wang, Yidong, Valerie Belair-Gagnon, and Avery E. Holton. 2020. “The Technologization of News Acts in Networked News Participation: LGBT Self-Media in China.” *International Journal of Communication Systems* 14 (0): 19.

⁴⁵ W”Douban - Crunchbase Company Profile & Funding,” Crunchbase, [PAGE], accessed May 11, 2021, <https://www.crunchbase.com/organization/douban>

⁴⁶ Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts, “How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression,” *American Political Science Review*, [PAGE], accessed May 11, 2021, <https://gking.harvard.edu/publications/how-censorship-china-allows-government-criticism-silences-collective-expression>

government organized the SARFT to control all forms of media directly by dividing the bureau into the following departments: the General Office (the Legal Department), the General Editorial Office, the Film Bureau, the Broadcasting Affairs Supervision Department, the Personnel & Education Department, and the Planning and Finance Department. The SARFT is in charge of China's radio, television and film industry and directly supervises China National Radio, China Radio International, and China Central television.⁴⁷ Despite negative impacts that will be discussed later, the SARFT filters out films that are not of high quality, exerts control over copyrights of movies and other media while preventing plagiarism and infringement of intellectual property. However, China's strict censorship system currently faces challenges as well. For example, the establishment of online streaming media such as Chinese Netflix and iQiyi, as well as the sheer quantity of content compared to the government's limited resources, impacts the extent to which government censors can check the content on such streaming media.

According to the Regulations on Administration of Films that was promulgated in 1996, films are forbidden from having the following content:

1. Those endangering the unity, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of the state;
2. Those harming the security, honor, and interests of the state;
3. Those inciting national splitism and disrupting the unity of nationalities;
4. Those divulging state secrets;
5. Those publicizing obscenity or superstitions or playing up violence;
6. Those libeling or insulting other people;
7. Other contents prohibited by the state.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ "State Administration of Radio, Film and Television," State Administration of Radio, Film and Television, accessed May 11, 2021, <https://in.china-embassy.org/eng/mt/jyjs/t61109.html>.

⁴⁸ Jeremy Geltzer, "Censoring the Silk Screen: China's Precarious Balance Between State Regulation and a Global Film Market," [PAGE], accessed May 11, 2021, [https://www.swlaw.edu/sites/default/files/2017-04/JIMEL_V6_N2_6-Censoring the Silk Screen-Geltzer.pdf](https://www.swlaw.edu/sites/default/files/2017-04/JIMEL_V6_N2_6-Censoring%20the%20Silk%20Screen-Geltzer.pdf).

Methods

The main goal of this project is to analyze the complexity of censorship. Thus, using two case studies that represent diversity in censorship applications is helpful. A multiple case study enables the researcher to explore differences within and between cases. The goal is to replicate findings across cases. Because comparisons will be drawn, it is imperative that the cases are chosen carefully so that the researcher can predict similar results across cases, or predict contrasting results based on a theory. In the project, a comparative case study will be conducted between the film "Farewell My Concubine" and the phenomenal online TV show, "Addicted", to reflect on the complexity of censorship as they received different treatments from the government by looking closely at their contents, social context, achievements, and the different ways they were censored by the SARFT. Meanwhile, a descriptive case study, which is a type of case study that is normally used to describe an intervention or phenomenon and the real-life context in which it occurred, was also incorporated into the research as both examples were analyzed thoroughly. In addition, the project plans to utilize empirical data to come up with themes around politics of the SARFT, public attention, and engagement.

Censorship in LGBTQ as a case study

The development cases below will allow for a consistent description of how films are censored in China.

Case #1: The film "Farewell My Concubine" in 1993

As Chinese society develops rapidly while being influenced by Western culture, there has been an increasing demand for representation of the LGBTQ community in films and other media. Homosexual behaviors are not criminalized in China, but they are not legally recognized.⁴⁹ In recent years, activists have

⁴⁹ Rebecca Davis, "China's Gay Rights Stance Can't Derail Demand for LGBT Films," Variety, June 06, 2020, [PAGE], accessed May 11, 2021, <https://variety.com/2020/film/asia/lgbt-movies-china-gay-rights-1234625634/>

focused on promoting a more tolerant environment for LGBTQ elements in Chinese media and foreign movies, such as the award-winning Italian coming-of-age movie with a gay theme, “Call Me By Your Name.” This film has accumulated a sizable Chinese fan base without ever being screened in China and was removed from screening one day before appearing in various movie festivals. While there are still no explicit regulations that mention the censorship of LGBTQ elements, movies with homosexual themes are still banned from appearing on any streaming platforms. There are exceptions, which makes censorship in LGBTQ theme films and other media more complex. The cases analyzed below show how the context of each case is different, making it interesting to compare and showing the depth of the censorship system. Other types of content have different outcomes.

Historically, movies that revolve around LGBTQ themes were usually censored completely from screening in China, and the SARFT would remove any mention of homosexuality from screening as well. As mentioned before, there are exceptions. The film “Farewell My Concubine” by Kaige Chen in 1993 was one of the examples. Based on the parallel stories of two Beijing opera performers through twentieth-century China, the director weaved in hints of homosexuality, political influences, and even the Cultural Revolution theme that was particularly sensitive.⁵⁰ At the same time, elements of traditional Chinese culture, such as Beijing Opera, were also incorporated, which was strongly encouraged by the government at the time. This phenomenal film received significant international attention as it received La Palme d’Or from the Cannes Film Festival in 1993.

The mentioning of these themes led to the prohibition of screening this movie after its release in China. However, it was only temporarily banned for two months before it was screened again after being slightly modified to tone down its indication of homosexual behaviors and suicide.⁵¹ This government reaction was influenced by the massive success of this movie internationally and due to public pressure as the film soon became popular across the

country. Its box office performance was outstanding as it achieved a remarkable statistic of \$5,985,074 worldwide, including \$5,216,888 domestically (87.2%) and \$768,186 (12.8%) internationally, a great success in the year 1993.⁵² The audience reaction and the international feedback largely influenced the government’s decision in terms of the film’s screening. However, the film was eventually shortened by 14 minutes after numerous cuts made by the censors, who hold a prestigious position in Chinese society, and who are often graduate students and high-level administrators. Conclusively, the factors that led to this unique case of censorship include the Chinese opera culture and the international feedback that the film received, which was supported by the Chinese government, as well as its award-winning experience and audience reactions.

Case #2 The online TV show “Addicted” in 2016

The public’s acceptance of diversity in China has gradually increased in recent years, with foreign and domestic films and TV shows containing brief mentions of similar content no longer being censored. However, Chinese media still undergoes a strict and complex censorship system despite the increasing popularity of the “Boys’ Love” theme (known as BL culture) among Chinese fangirls and the significant influence of LGBTQ civil rights movements worldwide. The blocking of the popular gay drama, “Addicted,” directed by Ding Wei and based on a novel written by Chaijidan, reflects how the explicit mention of homosexual themes remains taboo in the Chinese censorship system. Although it was highly successful nationwide (according to The Guardian, it garnered 10 million views the day after its initial release. It was the second most-watched show on iQiyi) and caused a fanatic fan culture, the censors still banned this show completely during a movement against “vulgar, immoral and unhealthy content.”⁵³

⁵⁰ “Farewell My Concubine,” IMDb, January 01, 1993, [PAGE], accessed May 11, 2021, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0106332/>

⁵¹ “Farewell My Concubine,” The Censorship Files, April 27, 2018, [PAGE], accessed May 11, 2021, <https://thecensorshipfiles.wordpress.com/farewell-my-concubine/>

⁵² “Farewell My Concubine,” Box Office Mojo, [PAGE], accessed May 11, 2021, <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/release/r13612378625/weekly/>

⁵³ “Farewell My Concubine,” The Censorship Files, April 27, 2018, [PAGE], accessed May 11, 2021, <https://thecensorshipfiles.wordpress.com/farewell-my-concubine/>

With reference to the Regulations on Administration of Films promulgated in 1996, listed in the previous section, the 15-episode-show “Addicted,” featuring a simple romance story between two teenage boys, neither formed a threat to the political system nor included obscene, violent scenes. Meanwhile, except for the homosexuality-based storyline, this show had no government forbidden content since its target audience was teenagers, especially teenage girls who were fascinated by the four young, good-looking rising stars featured as main characters. Yet, the SARFT still took it down from major Chinese video streaming sites along with other similarly themed online shows at the time.⁵⁴ Similar to the classic film “Farewell My Concubine” mentioned above, “Addicted” received national attention, and viewers were highly dissatisfied after the SARFT took the show off. “Why did they take away this drama? There are millions of reasons to cover their move, but the truth is that they are afraid of gay [issues].” one Weibo user commented, quoted by the *South China Morning Post*.⁵⁵

However, there are reasons why this specific show was removed entirely from streaming platforms even in 2016. First of all, the drug-related nickname of this show, “Heroin,” which was derived from the two main characters’ names, could mislead the young audience it was targeting, especially as most of its viewers were teenagers in middle or high schools. Secondly, the simple, broadly criticized soap-opera plot reflected little artistic aesthetic compared with the award-winning film mentioned before. Last but not least, many argued that the handsome young actors in the show reflected a lack of diversity or misrepresentation of the gay community. It mainly served to please the heterosexual female audience attracted to the delicate appearance and bodies of the actors. Therefore, there were few excuses for the government officials not to demonstrate their discomfort towards homosexuality by taking down this show.

Preliminary observations and conclusion

Although the degree of complexity of the Chinese censorship system, patterns, and routines can be concluded from comparing the cases above, censorship can be retroactive, meaning that shows and films taken down initially might be re-screened under public demand or international achievements, such as the “Farewell my Concubine” case illustrated above. Despite the retroactive process, these shows and films had to make changes by making cuts or by refilming certain scenes. Many censorship decisions were spontaneous and primarily based on the preference of censors and officials in the SARFT and national government. As noted above, LGBTQ themes were not mentioned before in the seven articles of the regulation on the administration of films.

From the case study, a series of reasons might lead to the situation that LGBTQ scenes are banned or cut out. For example, older audiences would not approve of the kind of content, leading to a loss of audiences and fan base.⁵⁶ Also, the idea of maintaining Chinese traditional culture, which emphasizes marriage and reproduction, remains a critical element of filial piety in China despite the only recently modified one-child policy. Meanwhile, content and artistic factors also affect the censors’ decisions as there are exceptions for domestic and international award-winning shows. It is also worth mentioning that popular TV series and films such as “Call Me by Your Name” still received significant attention in China due to the fanbase of the leading actor, Timothy Chalamet, even though it was taken down a day before its release at a film festival. However, officials working at the SARFT who generally belong to the older generations feel challenged in accepting LGBTQ themes since they contradict their traditional beliefs. Even if they have neutral opinions, they consider the majority of

⁵⁴ “China’s Censors Take Another Gay-Themed Web Drama Offline,” *The Wall Street Journal*, February 24, 2016, [PAGE], accessed May 11, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/BL-CJB-28737>

⁵⁵ Charlie Campbell, “China: Censors Pull Gay Drama ‘Addiction’, Sparking Outcry,” *Time*, February 25, 2016, [PAGE], accessed May 11, 2021, <https://time.com/4236864/china-gay-drama-homosexuality/>

⁵⁶ Jean K. Chalaby, “The Format Age: Television’s Entertainment Revolution,” Amazon, 2015, [PAGE], accessed May 11, 2021, <https://www.amazon.com/Format-Age-Televisions-Entertainment-Communication/dp/1509502599>

the audience and how they might feel. Many people in China, particularly the older generations, are homophobic due to the traditional cultures they were raised in. At the same time, younger generations are more fully educated because life conditions have improved, and they have access to international news and Western media. Therefore, it is easier for younger people to accept the diversity of people and generating widespread support for LGBTQ issues in China still needs time.

To conclude, using comparative and descriptive case studies of the different situations that two LGBTQ-themed film and TV shows faced, this research potentially will show the complexity of the Chinese censorship system and provide a possible explanation as to how the relationship between SARFT, officials, and feedback from audiences influences the censorship system. However, artistic creations shall not be the victim of the automatic censorship system. The fact is that this censorship system is yet to be fully developed, and a more sophisticated, unbiased censorship system based on a strict rating system should be applied in the future to promote a more appropriate artistic creation environment that fits national conditions, which will be beneficial for both the artists and the audiences.

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