

Analysis of the Flourish of RPS in China

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Abstract: Recently, natural person slash(RPS) has become popular in China. RPS is female fans form homoerotic fantasies based on two real men. They are regarded as a kind of fujoshi who gain their pleasure through derivative works. It does not have a long history but has a significant social influence in today's China. The study aims to analyze the flourishing of RPS in China, mainly focusing on consumer society and the symbolic exchange theory and how they are connected with the flourishing of RPS fan culture. The study also analyzes the rebellion of the culture industry and the mainstream. The relationship between RPS fans and gender inequality is also explored in the study. The author suggests that the government pay attention to the RPS fan's situation and help them gain more rights and live freer instead of escaping reality through RPS.

Keywords: real person slash, gender inequality, fujoshi, gaze, culture industry

1. Introduction

Recently, a group of fans that enjoys real person slash appeared on the internet, and the number of them has increased rapidly. There are two existing concepts of Real Person Slash (RPS). The first concept refers to the fandom in which female fans form homoerotic fantasies based on two real men, such as actors, politicians, and historical figures [1]. The second concept refers to fan fiction describing homosexual romantic relationships [2-4]. Here uses the first concept to study RPS fans. They are the women enjoying boy's love(BL) based on a natural person, and their amount increased dramatically in China this decade.

The RPS fans have four main characters. Firstly, they gain their gay content mainly through imagination and the process of producing and consuming derivative works. Secondly, the RPS fans are mostly teenage straight girls below the age of 26. Thirdly, most of them only enjoy handsome RPS couples [5]. Lastly, they selectively ignore some truth to enjoy the RPS couples better. For example, even though they know that a man is a straight guy, it does not stop them from creating a romantic homosexual story him. They can still gain pleasure from it even though they know the couples are not real.

It is worth considering the difference between RPS and other subcultures. There are two types of different relationships between RPS and other subcultures. The first one is the relationship between fujoshi and the RPS fans. RPS fan is a kind of fujoshi. Fujoshi is a group of girls who enjoy all kinds of boys' love(BL) works. BL is a Japanese genre, which portrays the romantic love of two men, often in a sexually explicit form, and appears in anime, manga, video games, and textual and visual pieces created by fans [6]. The difference is that fujoshi loves all kinds of boys' love works, including comics,

novels, movies, etc [1], while the RPS fans only enjoy boys' love happening in the real world, who are, in most cases, actors or superstars. The second type of relationship is the relationship between derivative works of RPS and tanbi. Tanbi is a work that describes homosexual relationships of men [7]. The derivative works of the RPS are a kind of tanbi. However, the derivative works of RPS are based on a real person, while characters in tanbi can be original or from other sources such as movies and comics.

The history of RPS fans is not long but rugged. Since 1998, young Chinese women have begun to be fascinated by the content of BL, mainly from Japan. Moreover, this phenomenon becomes more and more apparent as time passes; around the 2000s was the glorious time of fujoshi. However, it was suppressed by the government during 2007-2011[5]. It flourished again with RPS in 2018 but was suppressed after the beginning of 2022.

2. The Flourish of RPS and Symbolic Exchange

RPS fan is active on China's network because of the symbolic exchange. The symbolic exchange theory can be simply understood as goods and actions that have no intrinsic value being exchanged for purely symbolic reasons. It is performative in this respect because it is a fact of the exchange being made that is socially significant in symbolic exchange, not the nature of the substance of what is exchanged [8].

The flourish of RPS can be connected to symbolic exchange because no object is exchanged. However, the power changes. For example, Most RPS fans gather on social media, which is popular in China, called Weibo. On Weibo, there is a place to gather people with the same interest called "Chao Hua". There are millions of "Chaohua" on Weibo, each of which is like a micro-society. People in each Chaohua have different levels, and level means status. To be specific, the higher level, the more powerful. For example, if a user is in level six, he can become one of the managers of the Chaohua, which means he can delete others' words and ban others' accounts, and others have to listen to him. Moreover, if the user wants to get to level six, he needs to make efforts such as signing daily.

The contact between the Chaohua system and symbolic exchange is that in the Chaohua system, there is no real substance being exchanged. The RPS fan spends their time signing in and forwarding others' blogs. Moreover, the RPS fan does not get substantial awards; they get their status and power in the Chaohua instead. There are no physical rewards, but the RPS fan is still willing to spend their time on Chaohua and be active to be powerful. So, the symbolic exchange theory explains why RPS fans can remain active in China.

3. The flourish of RPS and the Rebellion

3.1. Against the Culture Industry

3.1.1. Creative instead of Passive

The RPS is against the culture industry. Because in the culture industry, audiences passively accept all the product sent by the culture industry. This will decline their concern about politics. However, the RPS fan is not passive. Instead, they are on their initiative and creativity. They create a large number of Derivative works. These works not only built up their imaginary utopia but also have literary merit. When derivative works were firstly born, they mainly described the sex between two men. However, as time passed, derivative works began to develop, and now it is just like other fiction [9]. Moreover, sometimes, their derivative works can even change the script that the culture industry writes to make the culture industry conform to their will [10].

For example, in 2018, the second flourish of the RPS fan culture, a teleplay called Zhenhun, came out. This teleplay quickly became popular, and It got over a billion views in its first month's broadcast

[11]. The teleplay is about the secret love between two men. After that, the population of RPS fans increased intensively, and many derivative works appeared on social media. Before 2018, there were few boy's love stories in the culture industry. However, to confirm to the RPS fans will, many male couples come out right after the flourishing of the RPS fans. The male couples are mostly fake. The cultural industry asks them to pretend like secret lovers since public figures are not allowed to behave like gay in China.

As mentioned above, even though the RPS fans know the couple is not valid, it does not affect their pleasure gained. Thus, the RPS developed quickly during the next few years. This is an example of how RPS influences the culture industry. The power of fans and the power of the culture industry intersect. The want of the producer and the want of the consumer is different. One is eager to profit, while the other is eager to gain pleasure. Sometimes they cooperate, and sometimes they fight. However, the point is that their relationship is hard to predict [12].

3.1.2. Volunteering Derivative Work

The RPS fans produce derivative works not based on their desire to make a profit but on their interest and sense of achievement in contributing to their community. Thus, they rely less on the materials given by the culture industry and have more freedom in their creation. Moreover, since they can earn pleasure from their work, they do not rely on the culture industry to gain pleasure. So they are less passive and more initiative and free. For example, one famous derivative works producer once said: "I enjoy photoshopping pictures to make it have different senses of story. I have learned some professional skills and I am practiced at it. I enjoy the process of creating pictures, I do it for my pleasure, not the money [11]. Since this is purely voluntary labor, it is not controlled by capitalism."

Sometimes RPS fans will become Textual Poachers [10]. As Henry Jenkins mentioned in the textual poachers: television fans and Participatory culture, television fans are not foolish and blind. Instead, they are initiative consumers and expert participants. They make up their culture through poached texts. They are poachers. They fight for their right to culture [13]. This theory can be used to explain RPS fans. For example, China has a popular video website called Bilibili. There are many derivative works on it. The RPS fans cut different videos into pieces and splice them together to produce a different plot they want. This is a kind of textual poaching.

Moreover, sometimes they will even poach sentences and plots from other derivative works, putting in new characters but retaining the original meaning and structure. They will even poach the whole sentence sometimes. Doing so can gain a sense of group identity and the thrill of being a thief [10]. This is a type of textual poacher which opposes the culture industry.

3.1.3. In Contact with Politics

Also, the RPS gives its fans a chance to get to know and get in contact with politics. Since most RPS fans are under age 26, they lack a voice in social events and seldom have access to political things. However, the RPS opens the door to politics for them, which leads them to be more concerned about politics. For example, by being an RPS fan, they can get to know the Gay Pride and take part in some polls about LGBTQ. Thus, being an RPS fan can make the girls more concerned about politics. From this perspective, being an RPS fan obeys the culture industry's will that people be less concerned about politics.

However, although the RPS fans are concerned about the LGBTQ people and their rights, their original of their support is not about it. The reason why they support the LGBTQ people is because of rationalization, not because they care. Rationalization is when people find a reasonable answer for their unconscious instinctual impulses [13]. Because even though the attitude of society toward gay people tends to be positive, gay people are still seen as deformed. Thus, admitting oneself enjoys

derivative works is a shame to most RPS fans. Moreover, the way they deal with the sense of shame is to make a rationalization of their behavior. Moreover, they chose rationalization to support LGBTQ people and advocate equality. Thus, they beat the drum for “love is love,” for “equality”, but they never really know how is gay people’s situations and how they live in real life. Their derivative works are only based on their imagination and poor observation, and they only like handsome gay couples. However, gay people, in reality, cannot always fit their aesthetic, so they cannot help gay people very much in reality. The main reason for their support is rationalization [12].

3.2. Against the Main Stream

Nowadays, homosexuality is not legal in China, and most of the public does not accept it. Moreover, public figures are not allowed to perform like gays in front of the camera. Thus, being an RPS fan is a rebellion by the girls. It is a rebellion against the mainstream and gender stereotype. Many derivative works advocate the idea of “freedom” and “against the mainstream”, For example, the “227” event in 2020 happened because an idol’s fans informed the biggest tanbi website “achieve of our own 3” and the most prominent app of tanbi “lofter”, then, both the platforms are banned during 2020. After this event, many tanbi appear on the internet, many of which are about “the freedom of creation” and “love is love “This is an example of rebellion.

4. The Relationship between RPS Fan and Gender Inequality

Although it seems that the RPS fans are against gender inequality, the essence of their behavior, or the basic logic, is in obedience to gender inequality. The author will analyze from three perspectives.

4.1. Gaze, Female Gaze, and Male Beauty Consumption

The first perspective is gaze, female gaze, and male beauty consumption [20]. Michel Foucault’s theory indicates a power relationship. In this relationship, the people who gaze at others have higher power than the people being gazed [14]. Moreover, the male gaze means that in men’s artwork and literature, they represent women as sexual objects to heterosexual males for pleasure [15-17]. The female gaze is to change the direction of male and female in the male gaze, which means to abuse males.

The RPS fan’s behavior is the female gaze because they love handsome male and enjoys sexual portrayal in derivative works. Moreover, RPS is popular in China because compared to other RPS fans, such as those who love gay anime, their level of the female gaze is higher, which brings them a higher sense of power and pleasure. This is because male public figures are not allowed to perform like gay in front of the camera in China, so they cannot directly gain gay contexts. Thus, the RPS fans need to excavate the details of the couple’s movement. For example, a glance or a smile. By doing this, they gaze at the couple’s every movement to gain evidence and material for their derivative works. In this process, the number and length of stares have never been higher, so the level of the female gaze is exceptionally high. The RPS fans gain a higher sense of power, Superiority, and achievement. This motivates them to gaze more at males and produce more derivative works. They enjoy being powerful and seeing males as sexual objects.

They seem to be rebelling the gender inequality, but they are not. The nature of their behavior is not divorced from gender inequality. They still Comply with the basic logic of gender inequality: one gender is more powerful than the other.

From the male beauty consumption, although the male and female identity in the male gaze has changed, and it seems that it is the rise of the female right, the truth is different. The image of females consumes differently from what the patriarchy demands. In patriarchy, a male should be firm and rough, but a woman tends to like an image of a young and tender male. Research shows that six of

the seven most popular male idol is Karry Wang, Jackson Yee, Andy Lu, and Roy Wang [18]. Moreover, none of the six men fit the traditional patriarchal aesthetic of men. Instead, they are tender and delicate, which relates to the traditional patriarchal aesthetic of women. Thus, even as a gazer, the RPS fan's aesthetics are also influenced by the patriarchal aesthetics: "white, young and slim" What's worse, sometimes, even though the RPS fan is consuming male beauty, patriarchal thinking makes these consumed men "deified", which means the RPS fan admires the consumed male and demean themselves [19].

4.2. Male Image in Derivative Works

The second perspective is the male image in derivative works. The difference between "top" and "bottom" is evident in the derivative works. This even affects the naming of the couple. The author will analyze it from two perspectives. The first perspective is text analysis. Being "top" means the male who tends to insert others, which is relevant to the character of a male in a heterosexual relationship. In contrast, "bottom" means the male who tends to be inserted, which is relevant to the character of a female in a heterosexual relationship [19]. In these derivative works, the description of the "top" is mostly in line with patriarchal demands for "straight" men to be physically more muscular, more "secure," and to be sexually active when they have sex. On the other hand, their depiction of the "bottom" is the opposite, in line with patriarchal expectations of heterosexual women. These "bottom" are physically and mentally vulnerable, more in need of protection, and usually passive when engaging in sexual activity.

The influence of patriarchal thinking on the derivative works of RPS fans has been evident. The derivative works from RPS fans are more like two men having a romantic relationship in a traditional heterosexual relationship pattern than what gay people live like. It can be evident that most RPS fans did not break away from the patriarchal thinking when creating derivative works. Instead, they reinforced it under the guise of male homosexuality.

From the perspective of naming, the person at the "top" usually has their name at the front of the couple's name. Moreover, the "bottom's" name usually follows the "top's" name. This Naming convention represents the idea of the patriarchy that the female is always following the male as an appendant.

The author believes there is one explanation for this phenomenon that the RPS fan put men in a weak position, that is, to change the position of the traditional male and female in a heterosexual relationship and patriarchal aesthetic, to obtain the pleasure, the thrill of revenge and the sense of security [19]. However, the reason why they feel these feelings is that they believe in a sexual relationship. The person being inserted is vulnerable, so they feel the thrill of revenge and a sense of security. This logic is conforming to patriarchy, even though the behavior of RPS fans does not seem like it.

4.3. RPS and Patriarchy

The RPS fan appears mostly in developing countries with strict patriarchal moral rules. The girls there are not allowed to have sexual fantasies or porn contexts. However, the girls are affected by the developed country and are dissatisfied with the current relationship between girls and patriarchal morals. RPS is the only ethical way to satisfy their sexual fantasies. They cut themselves entirely out of the sexual behavior, thereby avoiding the guilt of violating morality and satisfying the pleasure and excitement of sexual fantasies [20]. However, this causes them to Escape from the real world and escape from the moral striction added by the patriarchy and their tragic reality. They stay in their utopia and stop fighting for their right.

5. Conclusion

This essay mainly argues how and why RPS flourishes in China. The author mainly argues about the rebellion of RPS fans and the relationship between RPS fans and gender inequality. The author suggests seeing RPS as a subculture, neither supporting nor forbidding it. However, we should learn from the phenomenon that girls, especially those in developing countries, are suffering from the constrain of patriarchy, and the RPS is the reflection of their suffering: a utopia they built to escape reality. The author suggests focusing more on the girl's situation and helping them solve it.

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