

Exploring Intersectionality in Digital Anti-Fandom of the “Women-Centered” China’s TV Series *Ruyi’s Royal Love in the Palace*

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, there has been a growing body of research on women representations in China’s media products. However, there is a dearth of studies about women representations in digital anti-fans. This gap leads to a limited understanding of the audience’s participation in discussing women-centered media content and gender issues in China’s society. Within this context, this study investigates China’s digital TV fandom, focusing on the anti-fans’ discourse of a women-centered TV series *Ruyi’s Royal Love in the Palace*. The research questions are: What are power dynamics in the anti-fans discourse? To what extent does the anti-fan discourse reflect women empowerment? We analyzed 5 roasting videos from anti-fans and related posts and comments as our data. Using intersectionality and Critical Discourse Analysis as the theoretical framework, the data is analyzed thematically. The analysis unveils that multiple oppression is reflected in the anti-fans’ discourse, which shows resistance against hegemony and changes in power relations. This anti-fans discourse is an alternative form of women’s empowerment of discussing multiple inequalities in China’s society under a politically sensitive online environment. This research uncovers the intersection of gender, class, and power dynamics within anti-fandom spaces as a critical ideological battleground where female marginalization is actively contested. By highlighting the anti-fan’s criticism of women representations in China’s media content, this study significantly contributes to both fan studies and the broader discourse on women empowerment. It underscores the transformative potential of anti-fandom in challenging entrenched social norms and promoting gender equity in digital media.

Keywords: Multiple inequalities, digital culture, multiple identities, women representation, discourse analysis.

INTRODUCTION

Women empowerment is a crucial concept in global gender studies. Moreover, it is crucial to achieve gender equality (Reshi & Sudha, 2022). In previous studies, women empowerment was frequently related to political practices such as global women’s movements and practices of non-governmental organizations advocating for women’s rights (Gupta, 2021; Reshi & Sudha, 2021; Sakhiyya et al., 2023). Besides, media representations portrayed by mass media can influence the process of promoting women empowerment (Müller & Camia, 2022). Based on this correlation between women empowerment and media, scholars focused on specific media products, such as films and TV series, to explore the potential of women empowerment in women representations (Aziz et al., 2022; Brannon Donoghue, 2022; Dewi et al., 2022; Merdeka, 2023).

Since media products are important data for studies investigating gender issues such as women empowerment, the audience of media products also plays a vital role in these studies. For example, many studies considered the audience’s identity and reaction to media products (Couture & Harrison, 2024; Pichanot, 2021). Since the meaning of media content is

attached to the audience’s interpretations and re-creation (Santos, 2022), the audience’s consumption of women’s representations in media products can be a form of empowerment through the audience’s interaction with the text. Therefore, to some extent, audience analysis is crucial when we research media products and women empowerment. Particularly, in audience analysis, fans play an important role.

Fans as Unique Audience

Fans are defined as unique audiences in fan studies because of their special consumption of media products compared to ordinary audiences. In Lewis’s (2003) book *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, significant figures of fan studies tried to distinguish fans from general audiences. Lewis paraphrased one of the most important figures in fan studies, Henry Jenkins, arguing that fans have “distinctive interpretations, evaluative criteria, and alternative identities made manifest in the texts that fans themselves produce” (Lewis, 2003, p. 5). The characteristics of fans provide insights into the diversity of audience research. Especially in the digital era, fans have been seen as pioneers of technical advances in media for decades, so they can easily find each other and establish communities by utilizing the features of media platforms (Liao & Fu, 2022). Moreover, previous studies proved that fans’ participation on social media platforms can be heard and then help the promotion of fan objects (Guo, 2023; Peng, 2023; Sands, 2023). Thus, compared to general audiences, fans are more familiar with channels that can empower them.

Referring to women’s representations in media products, fans, especially female fans, are dedicated audiences showing their agency in consumption. Previous studies imply that fans’ consumption of women’s representations can be an empowerment process, reflected in fans’ interpretation (Dimri, 2023). For example, Dimri (2023), in her research on K-pop, demonstrated fans’ feelings of empowerment without direct indications of feminist sentiments in media products. Thus, it can be concluded that fan studies fill the gap of over-broad audience research on audiences’ participation in women empowerment. However, as the form of exploring fandom and women empowerment became defaulted in previous studies, research focusing on anti-fans is insufficient.

The Important Anti-fans

Anti-fans relate to negative discussions about fan objects. According to Gray (2021), anti-fans are audiences who express their negative reaction by criticizing fan objects instead of leaving the fandom. Scholars emphasized the diversity of fan communities on social media and indicated the complicated relationship between anti-fans and media context (Chin & Huang, 2023; Mardon et al., 2023). Regarding women’s representations in media products, anti-fans’ reaction is an intertwined reflection of personal aesthetics and social gender issues (Burkhardt et al., 2022; Van Den Haak et al., 2023). Therefore, anti-fans are also important audiences of women’s representations as fans, and their reaction to media products provides an alternative lens for interpreting gender issues such as women empowerment.

A China’s Lens on Gender Issues in Anti-Fans’ Reaction

Apart from the insufficient studies of anti-fans’ reactions, previous studies have shown that women empowerment in media products has defaulted to a Western-centered lens, which limits understanding of forms of women empowerment. Scholars focusing on fandom and women empowerment emphasized the importance of local context (Yang & Kavka, 2024; Yin,

2022), which can fill the gap of lacking diversity in feminist and fan studies (Jenkins, 2014; Spierings, 2012). Therefore, we will locate our research in contemporary China to enrich the diversity of women empowerment and fan studies.

Referring to previous studies in China's context, scholars explored anti-fans' reaction to media products and various factors in China's society from ancient to contemporary, which causes gender issues (Bai, 2022; Huang, 2023; Yin, 2022); however, there is still insufficient research on anti-fans' discourse of women-related media products, which reflects multiple inequalities and power dynamics in China's society. This research gap will lead to a limited understanding of women empowerment in China's anti-fandom in the digital era. Thus, we focus on the anti-fans' discourse of media products and related gender issues to bridge the gap.

This research applies Fairclough's (2013) Critical Discourse Analysis (henceforth CDA) to analyze the anti-fans' discourse about a Chinese women-centered TV series, *Ruyi's Royal Love in the Palace* (*Ruyi Zhuan/如懿传*). Based on the combined analytical framework of intersectionality and CDA, this research aims to answer these questions: What are power dynamics in the anti-fans discourse? To what extent does the anti-fan discourse reflect women's empowerment? This research underscores the transformative potential of anti-fandom in challenging entrenched social norms and promoting gender equity in digital media.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Global Fan Studies and Feminist Studies

A large body of studies investigated fans' consumption of media productions and their discussions on women's representations, which show the connection between fan studies and feminist studies. Fans are dedicated consumers who spend much time consuming media products (Pearson, 2010). In the digital era, fans actively participate in the consuming and co-creating process of media production (Santos, 2022). Therefore, scholars emphasized participatory culture as a context of today's fan studies (Jenkins, 2015; Sun et al., 2023; Tang, 2023). When investigating female fans' reactions to media products, scholars explored the possibilities of fan studies' contribution to feminist studies (Hunting & Hains, 2022; Pratiwi & Primasita, 2022; Sun et al., 2023). For example, Pratiwi and Primasita (2022) investigated the audience discourse of the film *Mulan* on Twitter and analyzed their different perspectives on women's empowerment of women representation in the film.

However, the default Western context in previous studies limited the understanding of fans' reactions based on specific sociocultural factors, which requires a non-Western context or a transcultural lens in this field (Li, 2020; Zheng, 2023). The investigation on the intersection of women and Chinese fandom with the media text hopefully contributes to the theorization of fan and feminist media studies in China. In this research, we locate the context of the research as digital space in Mainland China, which was regarded as "something of a golden ring for Anglo-American media industries" (Morimoto, 2018, p. 280), which cements the importance of Chinese as a global superpower. In addition, this "golden ring" is also a place where the media industry and fandom have boomed in recent years (Xu & Yang, 2021).

Fan Studies and Feminist Studies in China

Due to Western scholars' tendency to universalize findings, there is a new interest in the uniqueness of fans' consumption of media content in the digital space of Mainland China using a feminist lens and exploring the socio-cultural factors behind online fandom

phenomena. In China’s context, there is an inevitable fact that media content and fan culture in digital space are facing strict censorship, which reflects the mainstream values endorsed by the government (Wang & Ge, 2022; Zhao, 2024). Chinese scholars argued that some of the mainstream values encourage the epidemic of misogyny and stigmatizing feminists (Yin, 2022; Huang, 2023). For example, Huang (2023) indicated that feminism in China was seen as a threat to political stability because of the Western grounding and revolutionary characteristics of feminism. Therefore, feminist media content is restricted by state surveillance and digital censorship (Yin & Sun, 2021). The hostile environment for feminists explains why many online consumers deny feminist identity.

Although Chinese online fans may not identify themselves as feminists, they show concern for gender issues in their consumption of media products (Ye, 2023; Zhang & Riley, 2024). As active social media users, they have various tactics to express their opinions meanwhile trying to avoid being reported (Ye & Zhao, 2023), which constructs their unique discourse. Previous studies affirmed the opportunities that fans could contribute to feminism in China because their discussions reflect gender issues in China’s society and open a new space for progressive discourse (Mao, 2020; Yin & Xu, 2023). Therefore, focusing on fans’ discourse of women’s representations in media products, this study significantly contributes to China’s digital fandom.

Anti-fan Studies and Gender Issues

Even though previous studies show the variety of contexts and participants in the intersection of fan studies and feminist studies, studies of the intersection of anti-fans and women issues are insufficient. Anti-fans are people “who actively and vocally hates, or dislikes a given text, personality, or genre”, according to Gray (2005, p. 841). Unlike haters who are related to “a destructive process” (Giuffre, 2016, p. 53), anti-fandom was defined as a “constructive, intricate, and articulative” process of response (Gray, 2021, p. 14). And sometimes, anti-fans and fans’ behaviors overlap (Gray, 2021). For example, they even have the same behavior as fans, such as being deeply engaged in consuming media products and spending much time judging them (Mardon et al., 2023). Dramatically, as a virtual role in the consuming process of the products, anti-fans get less attention (Gray, 2021). Some studies noticed the research gap and demonstrated the contribution of anti-fans studies on marketing strategies and revealing complicated social power relationships (Jones et al., 2022; Mardon et al., 2023; Wang & Ge, 2023).

However, previous anti-fan studies easily fell into the dichotomy of hegemony and the marginalized, especially when it relates to gender issues. Anti-fans are usually categorized as a generalized group, such as supporters of hegemony and the fans are marginalized, or vice versa (Burkhardt et al., 2022; Griffin, 2023; Wang & Ge, 2023), which shows insufficient research on the multi-identities of anti-fans and possible multiple inequalities in the process of consuming media products. This research gap leads to a limited understanding of anti-fans and the possible multiple oppression reflected in their discussion on gender issues based on media contents, as well as the power dynamics behind their reactions. Therefore, this research aims to explore the power dynamics behind the discourse of anti-fans with multiple identities and reveal the multiple oppression reflected in anti-fans’ discourse.

METHODOLOGY

This study applies Critical Discourse Analysis (henceforth CDA) as a methodology. According to Fairclough (2001, p. 123), CDA is “the analysis of the dialectic relationships between discourse and other elements of social practices.” In more detail, the elements include “activities, discourse, social relations, values, forms of consciousness, attitudes, and beliefs” (Burnett et al., 2015, p. 9). Since cultural prescriptions about gender norms are reflected in everyday discourse (Sheldon, 1997), CDA is a suitable tool to investigate the complexity of gender issue-related discourse practices. In this digital era, CDA should consider audience discourse analysis and multimodal (Bouvier & Machin, 2018). These considerations have been proven credible in studies of gender issues and online audience discourse (Burkhardt et al., 2022; Ho, 2022; Nabono Martins, 2023; Zhang, 2024), such as the research area of youth empowerment, feminism, and fans (Beijbom et al., 2023; Burnett et al., 2015; Nartey, 2021; Zhang, 2024). Therefore, CDA is a credible method for this research to explore anti-fans’ discourse about women’s representations of media products in China. We conduct CDA through these steps: 1) Contextualizing the data, analyzing linguistic characteristics of text, 2) examining discursive practices, and 3) analyzing socio-cultural implications.

The sampling method is a purposive sampling method. Purposive sampling relies on researchers’ judgment when choosing information (Tongco, 2007), and it is often applied to samples of population characteristics of interest, which can answer specific research questions (Rai & Thapa, 2015). Indeed, purposive sampling is criticized as biased because of its subjectivity (Obilor, 2023). However, the most important data in qualitative research is a specific population that can provide “biased or information-rich perspectives” (Patton, 2002, p. 237). Therefore, as a qualitative research focusing on the discourse of a particular online community, we applied purposive sampling to locate specific anti-fans’ discourse. Based on research questions, we chose samples following the criteria: 1) hot media content, including anti-fans’ discourse about female representations in media products, and 2) anti-fans’ discussion about women’s issues in media content and reality.

Based on recent search trends on different online platforms where anti-fans actively participate in the discussion, we chose the roasting videos made by anti-fans of a Chinese women-centered TV series, *Ruyi’s Royal Love in the Palace* (Huang & Wang, 2018), and its related comments. The TV series is a women-centered TV series, a popular genre that boomed from the 2010s (Zhao & Ng, 2022) to China nowadays, focusing on women’s stories and targeting female audiences. *Ruyi’s Royal Love in the Palace* tried to construct a tragedy of palace marriage and represent the tragic destiny of women in the Feudal palace. However, controversy accompanied the TV series until it was pulled in 2020 (Chan, 2020). Dramatically, a trend of criticizing this TV series boomed at the end of 2023, which shows anti-fans’ various interpretations of women’s representations. We focus on this TV series because this hit women-centered TV series aroused wide controversial discussion about women’s representation. Also, the anti-fan-edited roasting videos of the TV series with high playback volume on Bilibili.com aroused more discussions on different social media platforms, which have become very popular slang in Chinese online space. The broadcasting and discussion of the TV series greatly influence women’s issues in China’s digital space, which shows the complicated power relations between various participants such as fans, anti-fans and creators. Therefore, samples based on the TV series are appropriate for our research.

We selected roasting videos criticizing women’s representation in *Ruyi’s Royal Love in the Palace* with high volumes of play and interactions on Bilibili.com and related real-time screen comments as samples. The roasting videos are re-creations involving active engagement of the video-makers, which can exclude duplicate and meaningless content in the big data era, such as texts produced by the Internet water army (Wang, 2024). Also, as one of the unique functions of Bilibili.com, the real-time screen (*danmu*/ 弹幕) provides the audience’s anonymous comments for each second of the video (Teng & Chan, 2022), which shows the discursive interactions in anti-fandom and protects the audience’s privacy. We conducted two steps to sample the roasting videos. First, based on the criteria, we utilized the website’s functions of keyword searching, ordering, and related video recommendations to collect the initial videos. Second, we selected videos that are closely related to our research topics with a relatively high volume of playback, likes, *danmu*, and comments. Eventually, we collected 12 uploaders’ posts, 15 videos, 258 real-time screen comments, and 67 comments on videos and posts for analysis.

The analytical procedures are two steps. First, the textual content of the videos and comments will be thematically categorized. Then, we follow the procedure proposed by Norman Fairclough (2013) to analyze the text, discourse practice, and sociocultural practices (Chang & Tian, 2021) of anti-fans discourse, aiming to explore how the discourse reflects power dynamics and ideologies in society. Additionally, to delve into the complexity of identities and power dynamics, we apply the analytical framework of intersectionality to analyze data.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Intersectionality is a concept of feminist theory that describes the effect of multiple axes, such as gender, class, and ethnicity, on people’s identities and the interplay among them (Christoffersen & Emejulu, 2023; Falconer Al-Hindi & Eaves, 2023; Zerbe Enns et al., 2021). The origin of intersectionality is from Black feminism, showing the commitment of feminism and anti-racism in the 1980s, which is usually regarded as a contribution of Kimberlé Crenshaw’s legal work (Crenshaw, 2013; Zimmerman, 2017). The statement “A Black Feminist Statement” published by Combahee River Collective claimed that systems of oppression are intertwined with each other and women of color experience inequalities involving issues such as gender, class, race, and sexuality (Collins, 2015). Based on this history and assertion, intersectionality pointed out the importance of co-operating multiple axes, which challenges previous forms that only focus on single aspects of power in oppression systems (Ruiz et al., 2021). Therefore, by focusing on intersectionality, we investigate the complexity and diversity of oppression and how it shapes marginalized people in society (Mohammed, 2023). In the past decades, intersectionality has been widely accepted in feminist studies and has proved to be an interdisciplinary approach providing a theory of creative comprehension of societal inequalities (Falconer Al-Hindi & Eaves, 2023; Kanai, 2021; Mohammed, 2023).

Intersectionality emphasizes the diversity and inescapability of inequalities even though long-term debates exist (Christoffersen & Emejulu, 2023; Muñoz-Puig, 2024). The paradigm of intersectionality originates from Crenshaw’s (1994) crossroads image, which concluded the double or triple marginalization experienced by some categories of women. The crossroads image was criticized as a solid way of dividing mobilizations into fixed positions (Garneau, 2018). Therefore, later scholars pointed to the possibility of intersectionality to shift the predefined categories to the represented unequal power

dynamics among the groups by emphasizing the simultaneous power operation by different groups (Woods et al., 2022; Muñoz-Puig, 2024). Another debate doubted intersectionality as it tends to be fragmented since numerous categories are based on identities (Garneau, 2018; Montoya, 2021), which leads to too much focus on identities and the lack of understanding at the macro level (Mohammed, 2023).

Therefore, when applying intersectionality as an analytical tool, scholars enriched the intersectionality framework by considering more marginalized groups and multiple axes leading to inequalities (Mohammed, 2023; Muñoz-Puig, 2024; Thomas et al., 2021) and emphasizing the contextualization of intersectionality (Garneau, 2018; Yin & Sun, 2021). In other words, researchers should consider intersectionality in specific environments at different levels of lenses. Indeed, intersectionality is not omnipotent. Nevertheless, it is a proper analytical tool in today's environment to explore the multiple inequalities experienced by contextualized groups with multiple identities and the socio-cultural factors shaping them, which overlap with CDA but are complementary.

This research applied the complementary CDA and intersectionality as analytical approaches to investigate the social inequalities reflected in anti-fans' discourse and the power dynamics behind it. As a traveling theory (Kanai, 2021), intersectionality is compatible with this research since this research is at the intersection of fan studies and feminism studies. A dynamic and multiple-factors-driven lens helps explore the complexity of anti-fans' identities and power in their discourse. First, we contextualize the intersectionality in the specific digital space in Mainland China and explore the multiple inequalities in anti-fans' discourse and the collective influence of factors constructing the inequalities. Second, to avoid the fragmentation of categorizing, we regard the anti-fans as holistic instead of dividing them into single or fixed categories of identities as in previous studies with a pre-existing attitude or single expression (Burkhardt et al., 2022; Hunting & Hains, 2022; Mardon et al., 2023), because, in the digital era, anti-fans have the opportunities to travel through different texts and interpret texts in different ways with changing identities (Jones et al., 2022) which can be holistically reflected in their discourse. Therefore, we focus on the discourse and analyze possible positions that can produce the discourse. Thus, our data analysis is based on the combined analytical framework of CDA and intersectionality. Diagram 1 below is the theoretical framework combining CDA with intersectionality:

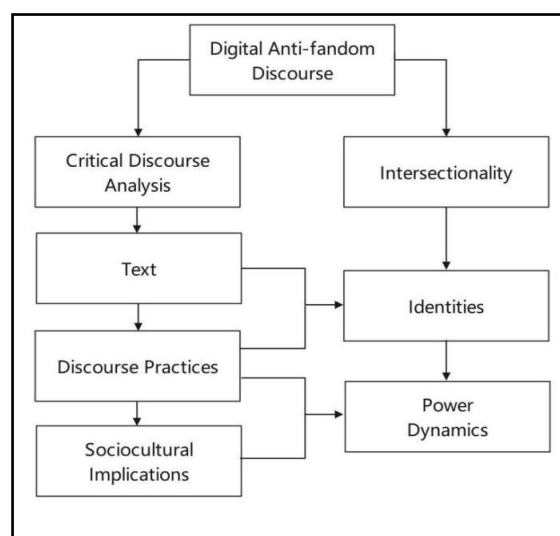


Diagram 1: Theoretical framework

RESULTS

The promotional content of *Ruyi’s Royal Love in the Palace* hopes to reveal the inequality and oppression women suffered during China’s feudal Qing dynasty through the tragic marriage of the eponymous Ruyi and resonate with the audience. However, in the anti-fans’ roasting videos and related interactions, we found that the anti-fans questioned and denied the female protagonist Ruyi and her supporters, who are shared and promoted as righteous and compassionate women representations in the TV series by standing in marginalized roles in the TV series and in real society to criticize the plots and characters of the TV series. These criticisms and sarcasm show the multiple social inequalities in the TV series and the power dynamics in China’s society. We thematically analyze the intersectionality reflected in anti-fans discourse. Eventually, in this research, we present discourse analysis from 5 videos uploaded in 2024, with average of 242,800 playback volumes, 21 minutes in length, 4558 likes, 2672 *danmu*, and 697 comments. Also, this study presents the analysis of 6 typical *danmu* and comments with many likes from videos and the uploaders’ posts.

Criticism of Gender Oppression

The anti-fans’ fierce criticism of gender inequality mostly relates to the criticisms and tribulations suffered by the female antagonist Yanwan. One of the plots discussed frequently is Yanwan’s meeting the emperor, which is the story background of the extract of Video 1. At that time, Yanwan was nearly in the Palace’s lowest position, and the emperor encouraged her and teased her with a poem. Hailan, Ruyi’s close friend, was in a higher position and thought Yanwan was seducing the emperor. The story of Yanwan’s “inappropriate” behavior quickly spreads among imperial concubines. Then Yanwan was deployed to a worse position and experienced bullying by other palace maids and imperial concubines because of being unruly. Ironically, the emperor proactively teased Yanwan, and she was passive, so she could not disobey the emperor, but she was the one who was punished. The uploader of Video 1 expresses sympathy towards Yanwan and dislike towards the protagonist, Ruyi, and her companions by accusing them of pushing the antagonist to the edge by using feudalistic rites on women. Moreover, the use of “《》” in the related Comment 1 is a Chinese guillemet that means irony in today’s online culture. The commentator uses 《unruly》 to satirize self-discipline as a requirement for women in ancient China (Yuan & Tian, 2023):

Video 1 (4:03): 太恶心了，海兰小天使给人家造黄谣，如懿跟海兰共同
开启了嫔妃的悲惨之旅

(It’s disgusting; Hailan is making up pornographic rumors about her. Ruyi and Hailan caused Yanwan’s miserable life).

Comment 1: 《不安分》
(《unruly》).

By using “making up pornographic rumors,” the uploader compared the plot and what happens in contemporary China and this action is applied to humiliate women (Liu & Du, 2024), especially in the workplace. At this level, the anti-fans chose to identify as working women who sympathize with Yanwan and speak for women with the same experience. Additionally, Yanwan’s being accused of being unruly was seen as a gender inequality by the anti-fans. However, this inequality based on patriarchal discipline for women (Yu, 2021) was

endorsed by Ruyi and her companions, who defaulted to sympathetic or resonant images in the TV series. Thus, the anti-fans advocated for gender equality by criticizing them.

Criticism of Class Oppression

The anti-fans also fiercely criticize Ruyi and her group of supporters for their discrimination towards other female characters from families of the lower class. For example, as one of the most important antagonists in the TV series, Yanwan is often criticized by Ruyi and her friends, who represent the values of the TV series, which shows the TV series's objective of persuading the audience that Yanwan should be criticized and punished. However, the anti-fans argued that sometimes the guided criticism is unreasonable because Yanwan suffered from the oppression from Ruyi's group.

In the extract of Video 5, two imperial concubines from powerful Mongolian clans who are Ruyi's supporters show their archery skills to please the emperor and laugh at Yanwan that she is not good at archery but can sing Kunqu Opera. Indeed, Ruyi's group frequently ridiculed Yanwan's skill in singing Kunqu Opera because they regarded the behavior of singing Kunqu Opera to please the emperor as shabby. The uploader defined their mocking towards Yanwan as discrimination by analogizing the concubines' behavior with the behavior that local people discriminate against strangers who cannot speak the local dialect:

Video 5 (2:12): 俩草原人嘲笑别人不会射箭，好比本地人嘲笑外地人不会说本地方言，搞地域歧视啊。昆曲本就以高雅著称，怎么在大如传里就变成个嘲笑点了？意欢当众唱曲跳舞勾引阿龙，倒是没人笑话她。主角团家世好的不敢惹，家世差的使劲踩

(The two coming from the prairie laugh at others for not knowing how to shoot, just like the locals laugh at the strangers for not being able to speak the local dialect, which is regional discrimination. Kunqu Opera is known for its elegance, so why is it being ridiculed in TV series? Yihuan sang and danced publicly to seduce the emperor, but no one laughed at her. The protagonist and her friends do not dare to offend those who have noble parentage and belittle those who do not).

The uploader made rhetorical questions to talk to the TV series, arguing that Kunqu Opera should not be discriminated against, which leads to another plot that reveals the reality of the discrimination: Ruyi's group laughed at Yanwan only because she does not have noble parentage as Yihuan, another concubine with powerful family. In the uploader's view, Yihuan's dancing and Yanwan's singing are the same behavior to please the emperor, but Ruyi's group did not laugh at Yihuan, showing their double standards towards women from different classes.

Similarly, in Video 6, the commentators express their resistance to discrimination based on class distinction by mentioning current issues in Chinese society. Comment 21 analogized and satirized a social phenomenon: In some situations, skillful people cannot compete with people who have noble parentage. Comment 22 compared the two concubines as rich second generations and Yanwan as ordinary laborers to reveal the oppression from the upper class:

Comment 21 in Video 6 (3:47): 太典了，有技术的比不过有家境的

(It is too typical. The skilled ones cannot compete with the ones with a noble parentage).

Comment 22 in Video 6 (3:48): 富二代嘲笑打工仔

(The rich second generations laugh at ordinary laborers).

The uploaders and commentators advocate for skilled women who do not have rich or powerful parentage by standing by ordinary women in today’s society in China. They imply that Yanwan, as a woman in the Feudal era, suffered not only from the strict discipline of women in the patriarchal society in ancient China (Yu, 2021) but also from class discrimination from women in the same society. Thus, the protagonist, Ruyi, and her group become supporters of class oppression towards women.

Resistance to Discourse Oppression

We also found that inequality in fan communities and the relationship between fan producers is reflected in anti-fan discourse, which includes two aspects. One is about the producers’ promotion and fans’ support for aesthetics and values based on the TV series, and the other is about the behavior of bullying and reporting anti-fans. First, the resistance to the promotion of *Ruyi’s Royal Love in the Palace* in anti-fans’ discourse shows anti-fans’ battle for the right to express their dislike:

Video 8 (9:45): 如懿传是部细节的电视剧，如懿传纪录片也很细节哦，一定要细细品，觉得不好看的都是山猪~

(*Ruyi’s Royal Love in the Palace* is a detail-oriented TV series, and so is its documentary. You must watch it intensively. Those who dislike the TV series are swine ~)

In the extract of Video 8, the uploader satirized the TV series’ promotion by citing “detailed-oriented” by the director, meaning the creators’ expectation of the audience’s intensive watching. The word “swines” is frequently applied by the fans of *Ruyi’s Royal Love in the Palace* to rebut the anti-fans’ criticism, which is from a Chinese proverb that describes vulgar people who cannot appreciate elegant work. However, while watching and appreciating the TV series carefully, the uploader found many plot flaws and values he/she cannot agree with, implying that this is not worth watching intensively as the director persuaded. The promotion of TV series and the disparagement of fans are seen as “aesthetic bullying” (Comment 137 in Video 15) by anti-fans, and the activism of roasting this TV series is a form of anti-fans’ resistance.

The extract of Video 10 shows one of the reasons why the anti-fans roast *Ruyi’s Royal Love in the Palace* based on an identity of the audience who were limited to express dislike:

Video 10 (21:51): 为什么大家对如懿传恶意那么大？因为这完全就是自作自受。当初过度营销如今被反噬是迟早的事
(Why do people hate *Ruyi's love in the Palace* so much? It completely deserves the hate because it was overly promoted in the past).

“Overly promoted” implies that stakeholders of the TV series had more control of media discourse when the TV series was broadcast, which is regarded as an imposed marketing strategy. Additionally, endorsed by the powerful discourse, the TV series fans criticized and stigmatized the audience who disliked the TV series, leading to the anti-fans’ feeling of being limited and disfranchised the right to express dislike. The uploader thought the TV series “deserved” the roasting, indicating that now the anti-fans have recaptured the right to criticize, and the criticism has spread to many platforms, which is the karma of the TV series.

As analyzed in previous sections, the anti-fans focus on criticizing women’s representations and related values in the TV series through the lens of women or people who advocate for women. Thus, fighting for discourse rights shows anti-fans as people who pointed out the oppression in women-experienced discourse from the TV series stakeholders. Indeed, the discourse of oppression does not disappear as the anti-fans retake the right to express dislike because the anti-fans are still facing difficulties in being reported. As a result, many roasting videos and discussions were reported to be removed and deleted from online platforms. Moreover, some of the uploaders are experiencing cyber violence. For example, the personal information of the uploader of Post 3 was disclosed on public platforms by suspected fans of the TV series or Ruyi (Comment 142) who disagreed with the roasting videos. The uploader thought the cyber violence was despicable behavior and implied that the way of making videos to refute the anti-fans’ roasting is acceptable, which is the way of empowering anti-fans. Consequently, the cyber violence hindered the uploader’s roasting, but the commentators thought this behavior could also motivate more roasting (Comment 142):

Post 3: 你是个正常人就像我一样发视频反驳我们吐槽的点，而不是用这种下作手段。

(If you were a sane person, you should post a video refuting us as I did instead of the despicable behavior).

Comment 142: 懿粉越疯只会让群众越逆反

(The crazier Ruyi’s fans are, the more rebellious the audience becomes).

Additionally, the copyright holder’s reporting also led to the removal of roasting videos. In April 2024, many uploaders made the statement as Post 7, indicating they could do nothing about it:

Post 7: 抱歉，辜负了一直喜欢我的观众朋友们，不过版权原因，这个确实没办法，加上我最近有很多个人的事要处理，吐槽系列就到此为止了，对不起

(Sorry for disappointing my fans who have been liking me. There is nothing I can do about being reported for copyright infringement. Also, I have had a lot of personal stuff to do recently, so this is the end of the roasting series. Sorry).

Although statements indicate it is only about copyright issues, the same discourse simultaneously arouses other speculations:

Comment 148: 大家也不用太悲观，现在这部剧在抖已经彻底大翻车了，想要捂嘴没那么容易

(We do not have to be too pessimistic. The reputation of this TV series has completely collapsed in Douyin. It is not that easy to shut the audience up).

Comment 152: 吐槽其他演员的都没被举报下架，咋就吐槽女主的被举报版权问题下架了

(The roasting videos of other actors and actresses have not been reported and have been deleted. Why were only the roasting videos of the female protagonist reported and deleted for copyright infringement?)

For example, comment 152 reveals that the reporting only focuses on roasting videos about the female protagonist (Ruyi). Roasting videos criticizing other characters, most uploaded before the recent trend of roasting the TV series, have not been removed. The comment questions whether the purpose of reporting is to protect copyright. Indeed, the anti-fans were reported and oppressed by different stakeholders for different reasons based on online censorship; however, as comment 148 indicated, they are trying to get empowered from other platforms.

DISCUSSION

This research proved the multiple oppression experienced by women in previous studies. In anti-fans discourse, we found criticism and personal experience about gender oppression and class oppression, which proved in previous feminist studies, especially those located in China (Shi & Liu, 2023; Yang & Hu, 2023; Yin, 2022) and the oppression of hegemonic discourse in the communication process between anti-fans and fans, as well as anti-fans and the creator groups (Burkhardt et al., 2022; Kim, 2021; Wang & Ge, 2023). The three themes of oppression in anti-fans discourse are closely related to women’s difficulties in contemporary China. On the one hand, influenced by global feminist movements, online users in China actively participate in discussions on gender issues, which is not only reflected in online feminist movements relating to social news but also in users’ consumption of entertainment products (Han, 2021; Hu & Wang, 2021; Yin & Xu, 2023). On the other hand, due to the existing social structures and traditional culture in China, localized feminist ideologies are facing challenges such as anti-feminism and misogyny (Huang, 2023). These two aspects construct the unique

and complex discourse in different online cultural groups where the users' practices of voicing for women are facing multiple oppression.

Based on the context of online anti-fandom, we found that complex struggles between identity and power are embedded in discourse practices, reflecting multiple oppressions that allude to the question of the dynamics of power. This can be understood by understanding their multiple identities - an audience and a woman, for example - and how this multiplicity intersects. First, the anti-fans utilized roasting videos and sarcastic comments as discourse tactics to criticize China's traditional patriarchal values and gender stereotypes, as indicated by this sign: "《unruly》" (Comment 1 of Video 1). This shows their resistance against multiple inequalities, such as gender and class oppression in society: "Hailan is making up pornographic rumors about her" (Video 1, the uploader's line).

Second, the anti-fans' discourse practices show their subversion of the fans' and the creators' privilege of voice. When the fans and creators of media products are in charge of the media, the anti-fans' voices are hardly heard. However, as anti-fans' roasting videos spread on multiple online platforms, the privileged flattering voice of fans is suppressed. This happens when the promotional content of the TV series is deconstructed and criticized, resulting in the reversal of public opinion of the TV series. Meanwhile, the creators and fans can limit the anti-fans' discourse. For example, the copyright holders can utilize online censorship to remove anti-fans' discourse, and the fans internalize (Wang & Ge, 2023) the power endorsed by producers and censorship to hinder anti-fans' roasting. Therefore, the anti-fans' discourse shows the resistance against sociocultural ideologies and the complex dynamics and changes in power relations between anti-fans, fans, and creators.

Moreover, the anti-fans' discourse practices imply the empowerment of online users (most are female users), helping them resist multiple inequalities in an alternative way. Unlike directly getting involved in political digital feminist movements such as #MeToo (Han, 2021), digital anti-fans reveal the multiple oppression that women experienced through creating roasting videos of women representations in TV series and actively participating in related discussions on various social media platforms, which shows women empowerment challenges the privileged voices. This form of women empowerment helps anti-fans create an alternative space to discuss multiple inequalities in a politically sensitive Chinese digital environment (Ye & Zhao, 2023). Even though media-empowered women or people who focus on women's issues have experienced oppression from fans and creators, such as being bullied online and reported, this non-radical, more entertainment than political discourse shows its potential to frequently participate in the process of women empowerment in China's online space, which can be proved by the great influence of the roasting videos: "The reputation of this TV series has completely collapsed in Douyin. It is not that easy to shut the audience up" (Comment 148).

The results from the data analysis are significant because they help the study explore the intersectionality in anti-fans discourse and show the potential of women's empowerment in anti-fandom. As a result, this study fills the gap of insufficient study of anti-fans discourse, meanwhile enriching previous studies of intersectionality (Hu & Wang, 2021; Yin, 2022; Yin & Sun, 2021) by emphasizing the power dynamics within anti-fandom as alternative axes. Also, the combination of CDA and intersectionality theory reduces the possibility of fragmentation in analyzing intersectionality, as it was criticized (Garneau, 2018). Therefore, this study contributes to fan studies and studies of women empowerment.

Additionally, there are two aspects that need further research. First, an anti-fan can be a fan of a competitor of the TV series or celebrities as competitors of the criticizing object, which leads to different purposes of their roasting behavior. The complexity of multiple identities within anti-fandom and whether their purposes cause other inequalities are worth exploring in the future. Second, as the anti-fans discourse becomes homogenized, it leads to an information cocoon and the fans’ discourse encounters a great deal of homogeneous discursive repression, which limits the possibility of different interpretations and discussions. Thus, whether the information cocoon would cause conflicts and oppression is also worth exploring.

CONCLUSION

This research illustrates the intersectionality reflected in anti-fans’ discourse, showing their multiple identities and power dynamics. From the perspectives of women who are the non-privileged class in the workplace and the users who express their dislike, the anti-fans criticized the multiple oppression of gender, class, and power dynamics when consuming the media product *Ruyi’s Royal Love in Palace*. The anti-fans’ discourse practices are based on creating roasting videos and participating in discussions. These practices show their demands for expressing resistance as women in society and the resonance with female characters in media products without aesthetic hegemony and discourse oppression, which reflect the complicated women issues in China’s society. Additionally, power dynamics are embedded in anti-fans’ discourse from the roasting videos and related discussions. By actively participating in criticizing the TV series on various social media platforms, the empowered anti-fans constructed the discourse that shows their resistance against gender and class inequalities, and they subverted the privileged voice of fans and creators when they were in charge of media. However, the development of anti-fans discourse can be hindered by fans and creators as copyright holders. Nevertheless, even though anti-fans’ discourse, in this case, could not politically, fiercely, and deeply debate gender issues in Chinese society, it is one of the women empowerment forms in China online where political issues are sensitive and facing censorship endorsed by mainstream patriarchal ideologies (Ye & Zhao, 2023; Zhang, 2023).

In particular, by applying the combined framework of CDA and intersectionality, we discovered the complexity of intersectionality as multiple oppression in online anti-fandom. First, the multiple oppression experienced by women in anti-fans discourse is not limited to feminist movements or media products about women that are emphasized in previous studies in China (Hu & Gu, 2023; Hu & Wang, 2021; Yin & Sun, 2021) but is reflected in the audience’s reaction towards media products. Second, analyzing the multiple oppression is not only based on the demographic characteristics such as gender, age, and race, but can refer to multiple identities and power dynamics in a specific context. In this research, we discussed the oppression in an online anti-fandom context by focusing on the discourse of anti-fans, a group rarely noticed in previous studies (Gray, 2021). Therefore, this research extended the scope and dimension of intersectionality while insisting on the integrity of multiple identities, which responds to the criticism of intersectionality for the fragmentation of identities and solidification of categories (Garneau, 2018). This research contributes to the area of fan studies and the intersection of fandom and women empowerment. Also, practically, this research may provide the producers with insights into creating and promoting later media products about women’s topics. Nevertheless, themes about other types of

media products, fandoms, and anti-fandoms need further research to compare different discourses, the complexity of identities within a specific group and related social relations that shaped the identities.

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