CHINESE TEEN DIGITAL ENTERTAINMENT
Rethinking Censorship and Commercialisation in Short Video and Online Fiction

Xiang Ren

Introduction
The state censors in China use various reasons and rationales for content censorship in media and cultural industries and the protection of children from harmful content is a key one. However, China’s restrictive censorship system has not fully protected children (including teenagers) from unsuitable content such as sex, violence, and profanity in practice. China has not established a content rating system to classify media content as to its suitability for children or teenagers, resulting in a censorship paradox of “restricted content and unrestricted access” (Tsui, 2017). As children and adults in China legally have the same access to all kinds of media content, censorship laws, including many specific guidelines, require most content to be suitable for children (Grealy et al., 2019). However, there is arbitrariness in practical implementation as the management of these censorship guidelines is sometimes open to interpretation. This provides certain space for media professionals to play the so-called ‘edge ball game’, producing the commercially appealing mature content without crossing the red lines of censorship, such as politics and nudity, to which children are exposed.

The internet further complicates censorship in China. While digital disruption has liberalised media in some ways since the 2000s, it brings new threats to children as both content viewers and participatory creators. As censorship normally lags behind technological innovation, many previously tightly controlled content areas turned into open markets for digital media industries, for example foreign novels, films, animations, and games that contain porn, violence, and politically sensitive or morally controversial content, which would otherwise hardly pass the official censorship. The rise of self-media (zi mei ti), or “social media entertainment” (Cunningham & Craig, 2017) in the platforms like Qidian for online fiction and Douyin (Tik Tok) for short video, led to a flood of uncensored digital content created by domestic amateur creators. Online writers, video bloggers, and live streamers often use mature and even controversial content to attract attention, increase popularity, and aggregate their fan communities.

Such content sometimes turns into a key selling point in many self-media outlets and digital entertainment platforms where no effective age restriction is in place. While Western scholars
studying children and the internet pay much attention to online risks like online bullying, commercial exploitation of creative labour, and commodification of adolescence (Deutsch & Theodorou, 2010; Ko et al., 2007; McGuigan, 2010), it is a pressing problem in China that children and teenagers are exposed to a vast amount of harmful and unhealthy content online, as well as the competing values embedded in digital entertainment, which has been controlled and censored more effectively in the pre-digital age.

This chapter focuses on two popular areas of teen digital entertainment: short video and online fiction. These areas provide Chinese teenagers with opportunities to freely create and access digital content, and interact with social networks to express their identities, feelings, voices, and concerns. Many teenagers even become rich and popular by creating trendy content that attracts millions of fans. Digital teen entertainment has indeed achieved tremendous commercial success and formed strong influence over popular culture in China. However, it attracts wide public criticisms as well. Some parents, educators, and academics in China are concerned about the negative impact of unsuitable content on children, internet addiction, the poor cultural and aesthetic value of digital content, and the time spent (or wasted) on digital entertainment (Wang & Qi, 2017). These public discourses in both online and mainstream media tend to justify government censorship and regulation in digital entertainment in China, in the name of child protection.

Through two case studies of short video and online fiction, this chapter analyses Chinese teenagers’ cultural participation in digital entertainment, the effectiveness, failure, and controversies of internet regulation in protecting teenagers from unsuitable content and other threats, and the role of censors, platforms, and publics in teens’ online safety. It also discusses the evolving tension between censorship and commercialisation in the emergent context of China’s teen digital entertainment, and concludes by commenting on the impact of a politically controlled but commercially (and sometimes morally) deregulated system on teenagers’ cultural engagement and civic participation online.

**Teen Digital Entertainment: Global Dynamics and Chinese Characteristics**

New technologies allow teenagers to freely publish content, express themselves, share ideas, and interact with each other in social media, as well as collaborate massively for activism and social movements (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2017). However, the dynamic cultural participation does not exist in a vacuum or a tech-utopia. Henry Jenkins (2006) articulates ‘participatory culture’ as an emergent paradigm and believes that the bottom-up participatory cultures and creative fans/citizens are taking control of cultural production from corporate media. In contrast to optimistic views, scholars like Jim McGuigan (2009) and Srnicek (2017) understand digital innovation as a new ‘cool’ face of capitalism, in which platforms become a designed core architecture that mediates and governs human connections and interactions including cultural participation.

The tension between top-down corporate control and bottom-up participatory culture is more complicated in China’s internet sphere due to its tight political restriction on the one hand, and relaxed regulations on platform monopoly on the other. This leads to a depoliticised internet sphere where platform-mediated entertainment becomes the most dynamic space for innovation and creativity. The commercialisation of participatory cultural production is one of the most noticeable trends. In 2011 the Chinese internet giant Tencent coined a concept, ‘pan-entertainment’, aiming to define digital entertainment and creative economy in the platform age. Huang Bin uses the Western idea of the Creator Economy to theorise China’s digital entertainment industries, referring to a new-born digital model of cultural production that is totally dependent on internet intermediaries (platforms) to connect creators, producers, and users (Sohu.com, 2017). Huang and Xiang (2017) employ the term ‘creators’ network’ to further explain the
importance of internet giants’ ecosystems in increasing the economic efficiency of participatory cultural production, in which platforms function as a combination of industrial operations, social communications, and governmental regulations. However, while the Chinese scholars cheer for platforms’ powerful roles, they have not fully discussed the corresponding social responsibilities of platforms in the creator economy.

Censorship is evolving as well in platform-based digital entertainment. Since the rule of Xi Jinping in 2012, the interplay between commercial imperatives and Party control is becoming more complex (Tong, 2019). The space for cultural creation was extended for commercial exploitation based on entertainment platforms, though ideological control and news censorship are being tightened. As Curtin (2017, pp. 1390–1) observes, the government loosens the reins on content creators and distributors, and allows “trusted commercial enterprises to grow influence and achieve commercial ambitions, and passes out media control into their hands”. Guo (2017, p. 487) further argues that the rise of digital publics and the increasingly central role of platforms in the internet led to “mutually reconfiguring relationships between official, commercial, and mainstream forces” in regulating digital entertainment. As a result, while political control is increasingly tight, emergent entertainment media such as short video and online fiction enjoy comparatively relaxed censorship. In the first years after launch, partially because technologies generally outpace regulation, these platforms even have a certain freedom in creating otherwise forbidden content types.

The platforms’ power without responsibility and regulatory constraints in digital entertainment resulted in the problem that Chinese teenagers are exposed to the proliferation of controversial and vulgar content online. It is thus understandable that public discourses call for strong regulation aimed at reducing or removing the perceived threat. However, as Staksrud (2016, p. 1) argues, good intentions in internet regulations for child protection “might embed unintended consequences and hidden agendas”. In China, child protection helps justify already tight internet censorship and could potentially be used to control and discourage youth online activism and protest.

Tao and Donald (2015, p. 40) believe that Asian young people’s new media practices are “globally familiar but also fascinatingly uncommon due to the socio-cultural specificity”. While Chinese teen digital entertainment is familiar in aspects like participatory culture and platform capitalism, it has unique cultural, economic, and political features largely resulting from the complex negotiation between commercialisation and censorship in China. Very few studies have been conducted to analyse the regulation of Chinese digital entertainment for protecting teenagers under such a special context. In the following sections, two case studies of short video and online fiction explore teenagers’ cultural participation and the multidimensional regulatory issues in China’s platform-mediated digital entertainment sphere.

**Short Video and Chinese Teenagers**

Online short video is one of the most rapidly growing digital entertainment industries in China and extremely popular among teenagers. In 2017 there were 240 million active users of short video apps in China and the total industry revenue reached a staggering RMB 5.73 billion ($913 million) (iMedia Research, 2018). The report on Chinese teenagers’ internet uses and online safety suggests that, among 13–18-year-olds, short video has bypassed online games and movies and become the most frequent online activity; about 20% of teenagers watch short video with all their play time (China National Radio, 2018). This case study examines one of the most popular short video apps, Douyin (Tik Tok), as an example to analyse the defining features of short video as a new form of digital entertainment, as well as its impact, controversy, and regulation relating to teens’ safety and well-being.
Douyin was launched in 2016 and, within just one year, it became the most popular short
video app in China, with 150 million daily active viewers (Clegg, 2018). Its international version,
Tik Tok, also became the most downloaded app in the global Apple App Store in the first quar-
ter of 2018. Douyin enables users to create and upload 15-second clips, offering them a series of
editing tools, filters, and special visual effects. Starting with girl dancing, short-video content in
Douyin soon became diverse, ranging from silly stunts to comedy skits and interesting snapshots
of everyday life. Popular vloggers receive tips directly paid by users and commissions from online
advertising. Some even run their own e-commerce business by adding online shopping links
alongside video content. High economic rewards drive content creators in Douyin to do any-
thing that could make them popular online.

To viewers, the design of Tik Tok is ‘dangerously addictive’ (Newby, 2018). The app shows
viewers an endless feed of video automatically, which means, unlike YouTube, viewers do not
need to hit a ‘play’ button to continue. If they are not interested in a video clip, viewers can
easily move to the next with a quick flick of the screen. Douyin’s interface design was very ori-
ginal and innovative in 2016, though it has been widely copied by competitors since launch.
Furthermore, powered by its own patent-protected machine learning technology, the content-
recommending algorithm in Douyin is very accurate based on viewing histories. All this makes
Douyin so popular and addictive that its seven-day retention rate is as high as 73.8%, which
means over 70% of users keep this app in their phones seven days after they initially installed it
(Jiguang Big Data, 2018).

Apart from technological innovation, Douyin’s commercial success could also be attributed to
its taking advantage of lagging censorship in the emergent short-video industry. Controversial,
pornographic, and vulgar content prevails in Douyin, created and uploaded by individual vloggers
with a thirst for popularity. The potential harmful impact on children captures public attention.
In a widespread article titled “Douyin, please stay away from our children!”, the author listed
eight major types of unsuitable and unhealthy content for children, ranging from soft porn, to
swear words, flaunting wealth, immoral or dangerous pranks, animal cruelty, and self-harm (Fast
Microcourse, 2018).

Moreover, a large amount of controversial content is created or performed by teenagers them-
selves. The widespread videos of teen pregnancy and teen mothers could be a telling example,
which even became a popular genre in short video. The popularity of such videos ceased after
the closure of numerous vlogger accounts and a few platforms due to wide public criticism.
Another controversial phenomenon is that some teachers inappropriately filmed students without
parents’ authorisation. In some short-video clips, students were filmed sleeping in the classroom,
or embarrassed by learning difficulties; some teachers even played a prank on students or forced
them to perform controversially.

Zhu Wei from China University of Political Science and Law points out in a media interview
that some short-video creators love to do something immoral or unacceptable to please their
fans, blurring the boundaries between ugliness and beauty, and between kindness and evil.
“While content creators doing whatever to attract attention and become popular”, he further
argues, “watching such content is harmful for teenagers in many aspects ranging from mental
health to moral/value systems” (Du & Chen, 2018). His view is representative in public criti-
cisms of the out-of-control controversial content in short video, which usually concludes by call-
ing for tight government control and censorship. According to a survey, 63.8% of respondents
support the government to enhance regulation and censorship in short-video platforms; 61.9%
urge short-video platforms to establish protective mechanisms for teenagers, restricting their regis-
tration, viewing time, and ability to watch unsuitable content (Du & Chen, 2018).

The Chinese government has issued some policies to protect children in digital entertainment,
especially in online video. For instance, the National Internet Regulating Institute (wang xin ban)
issued a regulatory note that banned child presenters and performers in the online video industry on 1 December 2016. The government also demands that short-video platforms like Douyin set age restrictions for users and send all users a notification after 90 minutes’ continuous watching. The identity checks nowadays even involve advanced facial recognition, making it hard for the underage to take advantage of some loopholes. However, these regulations are poorly enforced in practice. For example, an investigation by South China Morning Post found that it is still easy to circumvent age restrictions in most platforms (Zhang, 2018).

Interestingly, Douyin was first banned by the Indonesian government because it “has a lot of negative and harmful content, especially for children” (Reuters Staff, 2018). Why does the Chinese censorship system respond to harmful content so slowly? Technically this could be attributed to the practical mechanism of digital censorship in China. The Chinese censor usually orders platforms to self-censor and delete their vulgar content before banning or closing down the apps. For instance, the Chinese government ordered a major short-video platform to self-check their content in 2017, partially because of the pressure from wide public criticism, and in part because of the growth of politically sensitive video spoofs that make fun of some heroes in Communist propaganda. In this censorship campaign, the major platforms closed over 40,000 accounts, banned 2,083 video presenters, and deleted over 13.5 million messages (Cheng, 2018).

However, the combination of platform self-censorship and top-down censorship campaigns has not ‘cleaned’ the online sphere, but turns digital censorship into “a tougher game of cat and mouse” (Mozur, 2017), an upgraded version of the edge-ball game in the platform age. It is crucial nowadays for the quick-fire, user-driven short-video apps like Douyin to “balance its exploding popularity with avoiding further interference from the censors” (Newby, 2018).

Online Fiction and Teen Readership

Online fiction started to boom in China in the mid-1990s. In the past 20 years or so it has evolved from amateur writing and fan-fiction into a digital entertainment industry with an economic scale of over RMB 9 billion yuan ($1.43 billion) in 2018. There are over 13 million registered online writers who publish 150 million words each day; among them, 600,000 become contracted authors who earn a stable income from platforms.¹

Like short video, the online-fiction industry is based on commercialising armature creativity and participatory culture. Its commercial success largely results from a coincidence of the inability of China’s print publishing sector to respond effectively to popular demand for entertaining works of fiction and the ability of the internet to enable every netizen to become an author. As online writers enjoy “a level of creative autonomy that could scarcely have been dreamed of before” (Ren and Montgomery, 2012, p. 121), it is unavoidable that many take advantage of censorship failure and attract readers by publishing vulgar content, pulp fiction, porn, and other traditionally unpublishable content, just like what happens in short video. This has certainly attracted similar public criticism from its very early age in the 1990s.

On the other hand, with over 20 years’ development, online fiction as a digital entertainment industry has evolved and entered a mature stage with established genres, sustainable models, and a stable readership and fan-base. While self-publishing liberalises Chinese literature, it has also led to the prevalence of popular genre fiction and turned literature into an entertainment industry in China. Fantasy, romance, thrillers, crime stories, ghost stories, and Chinese martial arts fiction (wuxia), as well as some new-born digital genres like grave robbers’ stories, time travel romance, and alternate history have become the mainstream in the online literary sphere, which, however, attracted very limited attention and interest from traditional writers and literary publishers in the print age.

The online fiction industry has been deeply integrated into the pan-entertainment ecosystem, characterised by IP franchising, fandom, and transmedia storytelling. Mainstream online authors
nowadays intentionally avoid writing controversial content that challenges censorship lines (Ren, 2019) because they expect much more revenue from film/TV adaptations and franchising than from selling appealing content directly to readers. For this purpose, they self-censor to accommodate more restrictive censorship in the film and TV industries. In other words, the exposure to vulgar and unsuitable content remains a concern, but not a central issue, in teenagers’ engagement in online fiction. Instead, the impact of online popular literature, and the benefits and harms of teens’ writing and reading online fiction particularly, become the focus of public debates.

The freedom of online writing and publishing certainly encourages teenagers’ participation in literature and this is important in the formation and self-expression of their cultural identities. For example, Jiu Yehui, a popular young novelist, described her motivation for writing as a wish to express herself on behalf of China’s one-child generation who feel lonely and lost during their adolescence. Academics like Associate Professor Shao Yanjun from Beijing University also hold positive attitudes towards teen readers’ reading of popular online fiction. She found those who grew up reading fantasy and online genre fiction were more imaginative and had higher emotional intelligence and better communication and writing skills (Du, 2017). Mr Jin Tao, a PhD student of Shao, examines middle-school students’ participation in the social media discussions of online fiction and argues that social reading experience is beneficial for them in developing relevant skills and is valuable as a cultural memory of adolescence (Du, 2017).

On the other hand, the rise of online literature has divided China’s literary realm, particularly between the so-called ‘serious literature’ and popular literature (Wang, 2015). It is thus understandable that some literary critics, scholars, and parents are resistant to children’s participation in online fiction, either as writers or as participatory readers and fans. The time spent on digital entertainment especially concerns parents and educators given China’s highly exam-oriented educational system, in which teens are expected to spend most of their time studying, while digital entertainment is regarded as nothing but a waste of time (Ren, 2017). Chinese parents and teachers expect teenagers to spend their precious spare time reading the books with approved cultural and intellectual value like classic literature and popular science, rather than self-published fantasy, time-travel romance, ghost stories, Chinese martial arts fiction, and other ‘literary fast food’. Just as a parent criticises, there is nothing in this fiction but sexual and material demands and unrealistic imagination (Wang, 2013).

Deeper concerns and worries exist in the potential negative influences of online fiction on children’s value systems, cultural tastes, and even mental health, as some works present controversial values against the mainstream, fake histories, low cultural and literary tastes, and money-worship, which is believed to be possibly imparted into teen readers’ minds through entertaining and interesting storytelling (Todd, 1986). Public attention is also captured by some misleading industry narratives of creative entrepreneurship, illustrated by some school dropouts becoming quick-rich teen writers.²

The Chinese government has mixed but evolving attitudes towards online fiction. On the one hand, the control over digital content and online writing has become tighter and tighter, ranging from regular “Clean the Pornographic, Strike the Illegal” campaigns that close down numerous online fiction sites, to the requirement for real-name verification for registered online writers. On the other hand, the Chinese government increasingly recognises the economic value of online fiction as a digital creative industry and its value as an exemplar inspiring other media industries in digital innovation and upgrade, particularly relating to government–proposed themes like “Internet plus Arts and Literature”, “Publishing/Culture Going Out”, and “Mass Entrepreneurship, Mass Innovation” (Keane & Chen, 2019). In other words, due to its apolitical nature and huge economic scale, the Chinese government approves of and even encourages the commercialisation of online fiction and armature writing and the concentration of platforms’ market
power in digital entertainment. The policy agenda of protecting children from unsuitable and potentially harmful content is being discussed, but obviously has not been given a priority.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

In 2018 *The New York Times* published an article concerning a generation of Chinese young people who grow up without Google, Facebook, and Twitter. It argues that, “accustomed to the homegrown apps and online services”, they are “uninterested in knowing what has been censored online, allowing Beijing to build an alternative value system that competes with Western liberal democracy” (Yuan, 2018). However, building such a value system is more complex and uncertain in reality. Authoritarian government and political censorship have led to depoliticisation of youth digital space in China, where entertainment, rather than politics, is the focus. However, digital entertainment is not totally under government control because platforms are able to circumvent regulation for commercial interests, even within a walled garden of internet. While censorship failure might grow the seeds for youth activism in digital entertainment, it also means big threats to teens’ online safety and well-being.

Internet censorship in China is aimed at “preventing the spread of illegal information”. In practice, censorship is implemented by pushing the burden of content monitoring and controls down to the lowest level possible, i.e., to platforms and individual content creators (Ruan, 2017). Unsurprisingly, priority is given to political control at all levels. Even for children’s content, censorship of politically problematic content is extremely tight and effective. For example, the British animated children’s programme Peppa Pig was banned because the main character became a ‘subculture icon’ on social media increasingly associated with cultural resistance and protests by grassroots young netizens (Walsh, 2018). Platforms are unwilling to challenge the political red line even for commercial interests.

Within apolitical entertainment areas, however, many platforms deliberately defy censorship rules and provide otherwise censored content like porn, controversial and vulgar content. Thus children are exposed to the flood of unsuitable and potentially harmful content due to censorship failure in practice, which has not attracted enough attention from Western researchers who study Chinese internet regulation.

Apart from unsuitable content, the threats to teenagers also include addiction and online bullying. For instance, an independent investigation found that many children use fake ID (over-18 identifications) in online entertainment platforms to avoid the protective measures against addition (Mozur, 2017). Over one third of Chinese teenagers experienced online bullying, scams, and sexual harassment in social media, online forums, and short video communities and only 10–15% told their parents (China National Radio, 2018).

The role of platforms in the less regulated digital entertainment areas is controversial. Though Facebook, Twitter, and Google cannot enter the Chinese market, China has its own internet giants like Tencent (owning the largest social media platforms WeChat and QQ), Baidu (the Chinese search engine), Alibaba (the e-commerce giant), and Toutiao (owning Douyin). There are similar communicative and social problems caused by the monopoly of platforms and digital capitalism in China, which deeply influence the regulation of teen digital entertainment.

Playbour, or the rapid commodification of informal creative labour, is one of the important issues in China’s platform-mediated digital sphere for teens. In the field of short video, armature teen creators originally share videos for fun, but their creative labour has been commercially exploited by platforms and their creative practices are being shaped by the overall commercial atmosphere in entertainment platforms. As discussed earlier, some school teachers even forced their students to perform in short videos. In online fiction, internet platforms purposefully portray online creative writing as a fun and rewarding career through the appealing stories of quick-rich
writers, sometimes school dropouts, who luckily made a fortune from an enjoyable and nice hobby. However, the commercialisation of online writing in practice is augmented precarity for most writers, including “risks of higher work intensity, diluted creative autonomy, dubious contract terms and less negotiation power against publishers” (Zhao, 2017, p. 1248). The issues around creative labour in China’s teen digital entertainment sphere demands more attention from academics and policy makers, and more actions in platform governance and regulation for teenagers’ rights as participatory creators.

Chinese scholars usually attribute the failure of regulation or censorship to the communicative model of participatory media, where no filters and gatekeepers stand in the way of the creation of content and children’s access to content (China News, 2018). In the author’s view, the fusion of state power and market power in China’s internet industries is an important yet neglected perspective to understand the ‘surprisingly’ relaxed internet regulation in teen digital entertainment. In China, digital entertainment is valued as a pillar industry in the emergent digital economy because of its economic scale and potential. Such views dominate policy discourses and even academic publications in China. Chinese internet platforms thus operate with less pressure from government, academics, and even the general public than their Western counterparts. For these commercial platforms, implementing restrictive control for child protection would significantly increase operational cost and reduce commercial benefits. Therefore, it sounds like a mutually acceptable situation between state and capital that, while political control remains tight, platforms enjoy more relaxed regulations in terms of entertainment content, industrial monopoly, user privacy, and moral responsibilities, which enable them to explore more commercial opportunities and benefits. Despite some dynamics of teenagers’ cultural participation, self-expression, and activism, children are largely unprotected in digital entertainment and the consequences could be serious.

In conclusion, while the Chinese internet regulations and censorship are effective in political control, they are much less effective in protecting children’s safety and rights from the wide dissemination of unsuitable content and platforms’ capitalising on teen creative labour. Further, the prevalence of digital entertainment reduces the space for youth activism and civic participation, and the less-regulated entertainment areas like online fiction and short video serve as a mechanism for strengthening the apolitical public sphere, spreading consumerism and capitalist values, and discouraging teen citizens’ political interests in China.

Notes

1 These figures are from Mr Yijun Zhang, the head of the Digital Publishing Department of China’s State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television, see relevant news report at www.xinhuanet.com/fortune/2017-8/14/c_1121481917.htm; there are other articles that provide similar statistics, for example, see www.xinhuanet.com/book/2018-01/31/c_129802946.htm; 333 million Chinese people are active readers in online fiction, accounting for 45.6% of total internet users. Several different sources of information estimate that the overall scale of online literature readership is over 300 million, between 300–400 million. See, for example, http://news.cctv.com/2017/03/29/ARTI4lmUyaPZPwEJ7B4m1C0fI70329.shtml or http://tech.sina.com.cn/i/2018-01-31/doc-ifyqyhn7671103.shtml.


References


Children’s Participation in Television


Xiang Ren


