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From Brotherhood to Homo-Desire: The (Im)Moral Production of Unfulfilled Romance in Chinese Bromance

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Abstract

This article examines how Chinese bromance dramas produce and circulate homo-desire under a regime of moral censorship. Existing commentary often treats bromance as a strategic substitute for boys' love (BL): a compromised form that compensates for the absence of explicit same-sex romance. Challenging this assumption, we draw on Deleuze and Guattari's concept of desiring-production to argue that bromance is not defined by what it cannot show, but by what it actively generates through aesthetic form and participatory spectatorship. Focusing on *Justice in the Dark* (*Guangyuan*, 2023), we combine textual analysis with online observation of viewer discussions, screenshots, and fan edits on RedNote. We identify two interlocking mechanisms through which homo-desire becomes legible without explicit naming. First, a widely cited "sense of atmosphere" (*fenwei gan*) emerges through viewers' capture and interpretation of lighting, touch, objects, and eye-acting, by means of which forms of male–male intimacy "taken away" by moral censorship are re-produced and made desirable precisely because of their unspoken mutuality. Second, viewers' reinterpretations of the character Luo Wenzhou, remaking an authoritative police figure into an erotically appealing beagle-husband, queering state-aligned masculinity. By reframing bromance as a productive genre rather than a deficient substitute for BL, this article contributes to debates on censorship, queer visibility, and the politics of spectatorship in contemporary Chinese screen culture.

Keywords

boys' love; censorship; Chinese bromance; *dangai*; desire

1. Introduction

This article begins with a paradox. In 2024, the Korean drama *High School Return of a Gangster*, adapted from a boys' love (BL) novel, was not produced as BL. In Chinese online discussions, however, many viewers argued that its appeal lay precisely in its bromance form. This raises a broader question: Why might bromance, rather than explicit BL, be experienced as especially affectively satisfying? The question is particularly significant in China, where homosexuality is censored as "immoral" and therefore bromance often framed in scholarship as a compromised substitute for what cannot be represented directly. Over the past decade, Chinese bromance dramas have become highly visible in mainstream media and online discourse, with *dangai* (boys' love-adapted) dramas being one of the most prominent forms. One of the popular *dangai* dramas, *The Untamed* (*Chen Qing Ling*), released on Tencent Video in 2019, already surpassed 10 billion cumulative plays in January 2022, according to platform-reported metrics from Maoyan. On Chinese social media platform Douyin, as of February 2026, posts tagged "Chen Qing Ling" had accumulated 7.48 billion views, demonstrating its long afterlife in fan-led recirculation. *Dangai* has since emerged as a significant screen-cultural phenomenon. It has attracted sustained scholarly attention in fields including fan studies, queer and gender studies, platform and industry studies, censorship and governance research, and studies of digital nationalism (e.g., Ge, 2022; T. Hu & Wang, 2021; Ng & Li, 2020; E. N. Wang & Ge, 2023; Xiao, 2023; Ye, 2023). *Dangai* series are typically adapted from, or inspired by, BL or *danmei* (literally "addicted to beauty," referring here to Chinese male–male romance fiction) novels, a body of works rooted in romantic and/or sexually intimate male–male relationships. At the level of representation, however, they rely on a systematic modification of character relations to comply with state censorship: on the one hand, mobilising intense male–male intimacy between protagonists; on the other hand, disavowing the existence of homosexual desire. In contrast to Western bromance series, which have been read as part of a de-pathologisation of homosexual representation in popular culture (DeAngelis, 2014), Chinese bromance constitutes a distinctive "dangerous pleasure of consuming something that could be censored at any time" (Ye, 2023, p. 1594) produced through the contested interplay between state censorship and homosexuality (T. Hu et al., 2024).

Chinese state censorship of *dangai* operates within a broader discourse of moral governance that treats screen culture as a site of moral cultivation, value guidance, and social regulation. In the Chinese context, morality is deeply implicated in the making of social norms, values, and personhood (Yan, 2017). In this article, the term "morality" refers more specifically to a state-mediated normative order centred on public propriety, nation building, and the protection of a heteronormative familial-marital structure. This order has long been articulated through discourses of sexual morality. As Jeffreys (2006) shows, sexual morality has been central to Chinese nation-building, and in the early post-Mao period was mobilised to police non-procreative sexual relations, including homosexuality, premarital sex, and pornography. When this tradition enters media governance, it takes the form of moral censorship. R. Bai (2014) argues that the Chinese state repeatedly links a "healthy" moral order to national progress and socio-political stability, while positioning television as the guardian of dominant morality. Screen culture may therefore function as a "moral laboratory" (Krijnen & Verboord, 2016), a space in which viewers practise moral reflection through mediated narratives. In China, however, this laboratory is already structured by a state-led pedagogical project that disciplines visibility and intimacy through sanctioned norms. Zhao's (2020) analysis of *The Rap of China* makes this particularly clear: The crackdown on rap was a wider moral panic over sexual morality, triggered by a heterosexual adultery scandal and articulated through the defence of public morality and the

ideal Chinese family. For Zhao, this reveals the state's construction of an imaginary of Chineseness through mass media and public culture, organised around a nationalist, patriarchal, and heteronormative familial order. Moral censorship in China, then, is not simply about suppressing improper content; it regulates which forms of desire, intimacy, and relationality can become publicly legible, and which must be marked as morally suspect.

The popularity of bromance series is shaped, among other factors, by this regime of moral censorship, within which representations of homosexuality, as well as other sexual minorities, are considered challenging "public morality" (Rofel, 2007, p. 96). As early as 2016, the General Rules of TV Drama Production, jointly issued by the China Federation of Radio and Television Associations and the China Television Drama Production Industry Association, explicitly listed homosexuality under the category of "abnormal sexual relations and behaviours" that cannot be depicted (China Federation of Radio and Television Associations & China Television Drama Production Industry Association, 2016). In 2021, at a meeting convened by China's National Radio and Television Administration, the regulator called for resistance of the *dangai* trend in screen productions, claiming it "distorted aesthetic taste" and was an "undesirable phenomenon" (Y. Bai, 2021). After BL and explicit same-sex desire were positioned as immoral or even harmful, they became subject to heightened censorship. Since the 2021 crackdown on *dangai*, most bromance series circulating in China have cut ties with original *danmei* novels and turned to original bromance scripts, such as *Under the Skin* (*Liezui Tujian*, 2022), *Snow Maze* (*Xue Migong*, 2024), and *Unnatural Fire* (*Ran Zui*, 2025).

On this basis, existing scholarship has focused on the dynamics and struggles of producing and consuming homosexual intimacy. Mapping the shifting censorship trajectory around *danmei*, T. Hu et al. (2024) show how adaptation practices have been repeatedly pushed to disarticulate BL's sexual explicitness while retaining marketable intimacy. In this context, bromance is often read as a strategically deniable arrangement: It re-routes same-sex attachment into the idiom of "socialist brotherhood" and other morally acceptable relational frames, enabling both state-aligned legibility and fan investment (Ng & Li, 2020). At the level of form, these strategies have been conceptualised as "bromance-as-masquerade," where intimacy is sustained through indirection and plausible deniability (T. Hu & Wang, 2021). Such strategies consolidate a new regime of visibility, in which what cannot be stated is managed through controlled cues and selective speech. Therefore, a common thread in these studies is that bromance functions as a strategy derived from BL, allowing viewers to enjoy male–male eroticism using their active imaginations (Ge, 2022).

While this scholarship usefully highlights ambiguity, it still risks treating bromance as a substitute for "real" BL. Rather than asking how bromance compensates for missing male–male eroticism, we ask how it produces new erotic forms under moral censorship. Here, Deleuze and Guattari's (2009) concept of desiring-production is useful for two reasons. First, it shifts the analytic focus from what bromance supposedly lacks to what bromance produces, and it foregrounds the broader social and cultural conditions within which such production takes place. Whereas "productive audiences" is often theorised through a capitalist tension between audiences and texts (Jenkins, 1992), our case requires taking censorship and moral governance as constitutive conditions of production. Second, in the Chinese context, "productive" fan practices under censorship are frequently discussed in terms of strategic concealment or limited visibility. While such survival-oriented tactics are important, a desiring-production approach allows us to ask a different question: How do these practices also blur and reconfigure the very boundaries of censorship, and the objects and subjects to which censorship is applied? As in Dyer's (2013) discussion of gay and lesbian

cinema, strategies such as bromance do not merely hide homosexuality under the guise of straightness; they can also queer straightness itself. As we will show, this approach helps us move beyond a binary in which the homo and the straight appear as pure, mutually exclusive categories.

Justice in the Dark (*Guangyuan*, 2023) is an important case. Adapted from Priest's BL novel *Mo Du* (*Silent Reading*), the series tells the story of detective Luo Weizhao and civilian Pei Su, who collaborate to investigate a series of interconnected crimes in a speculative future, gradually uncovering deeper layers of corruption within the justice system. It is widely regarded as the only *dangai* adaptation to enter official domestic distribution after the ban became a matter of explicit regulatory concern in 2021. It was removed after eight episodes aired on Youku, and the complete series (30 episodes in total) subsequently circulated through an overseas release in Japan. Combining close reading of *Guangyuan* with analysis of discussions on RedNote, we identify two interlocking sites of desiring-production: the affective force of undefined intimacy through a "sense of atmosphere," and the queering of an authoritative masculine figure. Together, these show how male–male eroticism is created, recognised, and circulated without explicit naming, and how it unsettles moral censorship.

2. Producing Homo-Desire

The assumption that bromance functions as a substitute for BL, when the desired object cannot be attained, risks treating desire as lack, thereby reinstating a moral regime that suppresses desire. Caught between the impossibility of release and the intensity of affect, this logic resembles Freud's Oedipus in a structural sense: Desire is organised around a prohibited object and managed through a familialised triangle of regulation. However, as Deleuze and Guattari (2009) argue, this constitution of desire as lack is a misconception because "it presupposes a fantastic repression of desiring-machines" (p. 3). The problem is that Oedipus creates a dualism that "restricts desire (the libido) to either Eros or Thanatos, the pleasure principle or the death drive" (Kubala, 2023, p. 485). It confines desire within the bourgeois family triangle of "mommy–daddy–me." Thinking of desire as lack obscures its subversive potential. For instance, reading bromance primarily as a substitute presumes an original, authentic desire that moral censorship deprives. Under a logic of lack, bromance becomes a product of censorship, with audience desire channelled into a familial structure guarded by the state-father, which stabilises BL as both immoral and desirable.

Bromance practices are not simply compliant; they can be disruptive. To reveal the possibilities of subverting the state-as-father morality system and rebelling against the censorship of BL in bromance, we draw on Deleuze and Guattari's concept of desiring-production to explore bromance's potential to produce, rather than suppress, desire. In *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari (2009) propose a schizophrenic mode of analysis. With desiring-production, they reframe desire not as what one wants, nor as a form of pleasure, but as the process that produces worlds, bodies, relations, and affects. They write: "Everywhere it is machines—real ones…machines driving other machines" (p. 1). Desire is continual creation, "causing the current to flow, itself flowing in turn, and breaking the flows" (p. 5). Their concept of desire differs from affective desires (such as homo-desire in our case). Rather, it describes a process in which the subject of desire is not an owner but a network of production. This is useful for our article not because it directly describes bromance's affective desire, but because it urges us to attend to productive force—what is produced through the lens of desiring.

Production is, in fact, not a new concept in bromance studies. The practice of slashing has been widely discussed in television fandom culture. Slashing refers to a subgenre of fan fiction centred on imagined romantic or erotic relationships between same-sex characters (Meyer, 2013). In China, one of the most prominent recent examples of how slashing generates imaginaries of intimacy between male characters—and even between actors' public personas—is the slash fandom surrounding *The Untamed* (2019). However, similar frameworks describe fans as "productive audiences," blurring the boundary between production and consumption (Jenkins, 1992). The discussions are often articulated through a capitalist, text-centred logic. They tend to foreground interactions between fans and texts, and to frame "rebellion" and "compliance" primarily as dynamics internal to interpretation and circulation. In the case of bromance, as we suggested in the Introduction, moral politics is not only unavoidable but central. Fandom studies have therefore called for moving beyond abstract notions of cultural resistance, and for attending to the specific ways fan practices intervene in debates around law and public policy (Jenkins & Shresthova, 2012). *The Untamed* (2019) offers a clear example: After some solo fans of Xiao Zhan (one of the actors) became unhappy with a slash fanfiction that portrayed him in a feminised and sexually explicit way, they organised a mass-reporting campaign against the global fanfiction platform AO3. AO3 was subsequently blocked in China, infuriating a broad community of BL and fanfiction fans and triggering a large-scale controversy over CP (shipping)/fanfiction freedom, fandom policing, and censorship (Huang et al., 2023; Xiao, 2023). Such cases make it crucial to "be sensitive to the structural and cultural conditions that both produce and contain fan cultures" (De Kloet & Van Zoonen, 2007, p. 337).

This article extends that line of enquiry by arguing that "productiveness" does not fully capture bromance's disruptive force. When scholarship turns to censorship, it often emphasises survival strategies under constraint—for instance, concealment, evasion, and other ways of "getting by." Such strategies matter, but audience re-creation can also feed back into censorship itself. As P. Hu (2025) shows in his analysis of how "ghosts" re-emerge in Chinese cinema after "real" ghosts are removed, censorship does not simply eliminate an object; it can redistribute interpretive authority over what may count as a ghost to audiences and filmmakers, enabling them to generate new ghosts and, in turn, to unsettle censorship's efficacy. In this article, likewise, our interest is not primarily in audiences producing a hidden code under censorship. Rather, we examine how their production renders the "just," the "moral," and the "censorable" ambiguous—thereby blurring the boundaries of moral judgement on which censorship depends.

It is in this sense that Deleuze and Guattari's notion of desiring-production—at once destructive and productive, and capable of destabilising existing orders—offers a more suitable analytic than "productive audiences." In *Anti-Oedipus*, schizophrenic desire is not treated as a clinical character type, but as a metaphor for "the universal producer": an existence that presents itself as "pure production" (Deleuze & Guattari, 2009, p. 7). If schizophrenia is reduced to a clinical figure, one risks reaffirming discipline and repression, where "passing" as normal (for instance, hiding one's madness—or, in this article, one's queerness) ends up confirming the system's righteousness. What matters instead is "pure production": There is no need to distinguish between producing and its product, because any product is immediately reintegrated into further production—"the pure 'thisness' of the object produced is carried over into a new act of producing" (Deleuze & Guattari, 2009, p. 7).

This indeterminacy has the potential to blur the boundaries of censorship. Deleuze and Guattari (2009) illustrate this logic with Henri Michaux's "schizophrenic table." As it is made, the table is continually

"desimplified": It becomes "a table of additions," an accumulation that is "less and less a table," and finally "a dehumanised table…a stalled engine" (Deleuze & Guattari, 2009, p. 6), the crystallised trace of desiring-production. Here the table is not a predefined object but an unstable form, continually appended to, torn apart, and reassembled. Likewise, bromance should not be treated as a stable substitute for an absent BL object; it is continually reworked through production practices and audience engagements, while also blurring not only censorship's boundaries but the very categories of censorable subjects through which it operates.

This destructive force of desiring-production could render morally sanctioned, censorship-approved subjects into objects of desire. It resonates with Dyer's (2013) discussion of gay and lesbian cinema. In Chapter 1 of *Now You See It*, in his reading of *Vingarne* (*The Wings*, 1916), Dyer shows how the film queers authority through a narrative that is "at once blatant and covert" (Dyer, 2013, p. 12). In this film, the intense romantic bond between a sculptor and his male model is framed within a heterosexual narrative. Dyer shows that the film mirrors the survival strategies of homosexual men at the time, balancing flamboyance and caution: "It spread wings for all to see and so hid gay love in plain sight" (Dyer, 2013, p. 22). For Dyer, in a way similar to the mode of desiring-production, the "blatant and covert" are not merely forms of hiding, nor simply the expression of a lack; rather, the sculpture in *The Wings* and the film produce an ambiguity: Is the youth seized by the eagle, or reaching upward towards it? As Dyer writes, "the implication of rape allows for representations suggesting that it is happening against his will or…that desire is stronger than will" (Dyer, 2013, p. 20). In the final chapter by Pidduck (2013), which reviews gay and lesbian films since the 1980s, this ambiguity further becomes a form of queering, as the space between gay/lesbian and straight dissolves into a more fluid queer zone in which hetero and homo are no longer mutually exclusive.

There is no pure gay man, nor a pure straight man, in a Chinese bromance series like *Guangyuan*. Seen through desiring-production, there is only ambiguity, only the queer. Our question, therefore, is not what is lacking, but how straight men are produced as queer, and how bromance is produced as homo-desire. As in Dyer's and Pidduck's discussion, we will also locate a disruptive force of desire beneath the censored object—both in bromance's handling of authority figures and in its cultivation of an atmosphere of intimacy. When authority is undone and reconfigured, and when the cinematic atmosphere is rendered queer, we can better account for audiences' attachment to bromance. What audiences love is not an unspeakable same-sex desire supposedly hidden behind "brotherhood," but the way "brotherhood" itself is produced as homo-desire.

3. Method

Since *Guangyuan*'s re-broadcast in Japan on 7 March 2025, we conducted online observation from March to December 2025, covering both the re-release period (March–June 2025) and its post-release circulation (July–December 2025). Our primary fieldsite was RedNote, an influential social media platform in China for video, images, and text. We selected RedNote because, despite extensive keyword censorship surrounding *Guangyuan* across Chinese social media platforms, related discussions and fan productions continued to circulate there under more oblique keywords such as "Yuan," "Guang dot Yuan," or the protagonists' names. We archived 87 widely circulated posts, including all comments and discussions in their discussion threads, as well as 264 fan-made videos, images, and screenshots.

It is important to note that censorship operated at two distinct levels. First, at the level of adaptation, the original novel's explicit portrayal of same-sex love was transformed into a bromance narrative in the television adaptation. Second, at the level of reception, audiences were compelled to adopt indirect and coded language to discuss the series online. While the second layer of censorship posed methodological challenges, it simultaneously suggests how successfully the bromance is queered. Therefore, our analytical focus centres on how viewers reconstruct homoerotic affect rather than their censorship avoidance tactics on social media.

Furthermore, we carried out a close reading of key episodes and scenes in the television series alongside selective reference to the original novel. By close reading, we mean repeated viewing and scene-based analysis of dialogue, bodily proximity, gesture, touch, lighting, objects, costume, camera framing, and the visual staging of masculine authority, especially in scenes centred on Luo Weizhao and his relationship with Pei Su. Our aim was not to assess fidelity to the source text as such, but to identify how intimacy, desire, and masculine legitimacy were reorganised in the bromance adaptation.

We also adopted a qualitative inductive approach to identify and interpret dominant themes in the collected materials (Terry et al., 2017). Drawing on our familiarity with the dataset, we used masculinity as the initial coding lens, focusing particularly on fan productions and comments concerning Luo Weizhao. Initial codes included recurring motifs such as atmosphere, gaze, references to a "beagle-like" temperament, the trope of "burglary-style romance," the label "da zong gong" (top), and the notion of a "disciplinary aura." After reviewing these patterns, we re-coded the materials using two broader analytical categories: (a) the continuum between homosociality and homoeroticism, and (b) eroticised visibility. This second round of coding reveals how the legitimised body of authoritative masculinity becomes a new site onto which queer desire is attached and articulated.

4. A Sense of Atmosphere: Queering Place-Making

As a *dangai* adaptation, *Guangyuan* was forced to remove or repurpose those elements most likely to be marked by moral censorship as "immoral," especially forms of same-sex intimacy that violate the heteronormative familial order, in which legitimate sexuality is tied to male–female coupling, marriage, and reproductive continuity. Most visibly, the reciprocal love between Luo and Pei in the novel is recoded in the series as deep trust and tacit brotherhood, while explicit bodily intimacy, such as hand-holding, kissing, and sex, disappears. However, in this section, we suggest that atmosphere is a key mechanism through which viewers recover what censorship removes by capturing and interpreting arrangements of lighting, objects, touch, and domestic space. Meanwhile, viewers' apprehension of atmosphere is also shaped by the source novel and its BL coordinates, which provide an interpretive ground for recognising these cues as charged with intimacy. Atmosphere becomes a site where censored intimacy is re-produced and censorship's boundaries are reconfigured.

In fan discussions of *Guangyuan*, viewers repeatedly describe the two male leads' relationship as having "a sense of atmosphere" (*fenwei gan*). In film studies, atmosphere can be understood as an aesthetic configuration that arises between subject and environment, which can be perceived yet is difficult to fully materialise (Böhme, 1993, 2017). Shyldkrot (2018) reads Böhme's account of atmosphere as "production" (p. 132), which can be produced "through sound, light, object arrangements" (p. 132), depending on the

subject who perceives and experiences it. Building on this understanding, we extend accounts that treat atmosphere as an affective quality co-produced by performers and the set (Prokopic, 2022) by foregrounding reception. Atmosphere is not only a property of the scene but also an event of viewing, emerging through spectatorship as something sensed and patterned by the viewer. While this overlaps with what film studies conventionally call mise-en-scène, our emphasis is different: Mise-en-scène refers more narrowly to the arrangement of lighting, framing, editing rhythm, and space within the frame, whereas atmosphere names the felt relational effect that such arrangements shape in the act of viewing, generating particular relational tensions and affective intensities (Hven, 2022; Spadoni, 2020). This is where viewers are allowed to articulate what remains absent at the level of plot and dialogue, especially forms of man–man desire removed or softened by censorship. Atmosphere can thus be approached as an organised sense of presence that shapes how viewers enter a scene and experience relations between characters.

On RedNote, viewers often locate an intimate atmosphere in *Guangyuan* through lighting in domestic spaces, which becomes a key site for recoding censored traces of homo-intimacy between Luo and Pei. One widely discussed example is a flashback in which the teenage Pei witnesses his mother's suicide at home, just as young Luo rushes in and covers his eyes. Right when the image should turn dark, both literally and symbolically, a sudden halo of white light emerges behind Luo's hand. Rather than plunging Pei into blindness, the gesture becomes paradoxically luminous, turning Luo's touch into a source of light. Viewers interpret this contradiction as deeply symbolic, reframing a moment of trauma into one of rescue and hope, and casting Luo as Pei's light—his destined saviour. At the same time, Luo's act of covering Pei's eyes is also read as an unusually intimate form of bodily contact. Although the more explicit gestures of male–male intimacy found in the source novel have been removed, this touch is invested by viewers with a comparable affective charge: protective, enveloping, and exclusive. Here, light is not simply part of mise-en-scène; it functions atmospherically to materialise the emergence of an enduring bond, while the gesture itself allows censored intimacy to return in re-coded form (Figure 1).

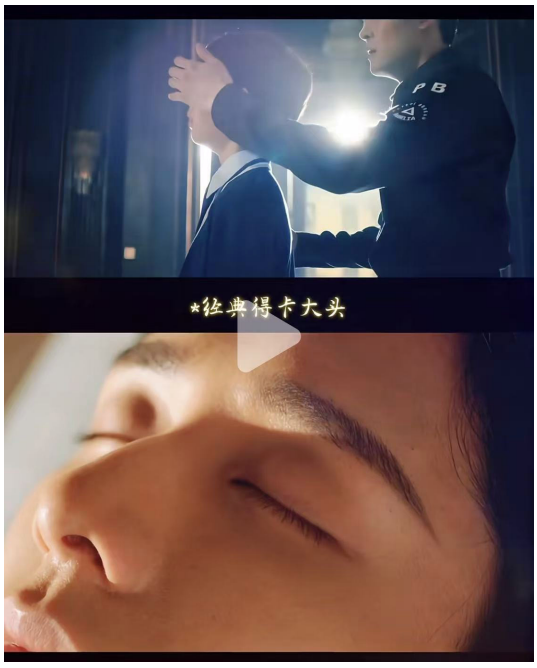

Figure 1. Luo's palm eclipses Pei's vision while leading the key light.

Light as a relational atmosphere also recurs in more mundane transition shots. For instance, viewers on RedNote compare nighttime exterior views of Pei's villa (Figure 2), treating near-identical framings as a deliberate visual test. In scenes where Pei hosts guests, the house appears engulfed in shadow—cold, isolated, and inscrutable. Yet when Luo is inside the villa, the same establishing view renders the structure visibly lit, warm-toned, and inviting. What matters is not only brightness but the altered meaning of space: Under Luo's presence, the villa is reimagined less as a house than as a home. The contrast does not advance the plot directly; rather, it functions as an encoded atmospheric cue that depends on viewers' uptake. Only when viewers recognise and circulate this cue, through side-by-side screenshots and captioned comparisons, does Luo's presence become legible as rewiring the emotional architecture of the space. Atmosphere thus becomes a visual grammar of domestic intimacy: Light reorganises Pei's space in a way that allows viewers to imagine Luo as the one who makes it feel like home.

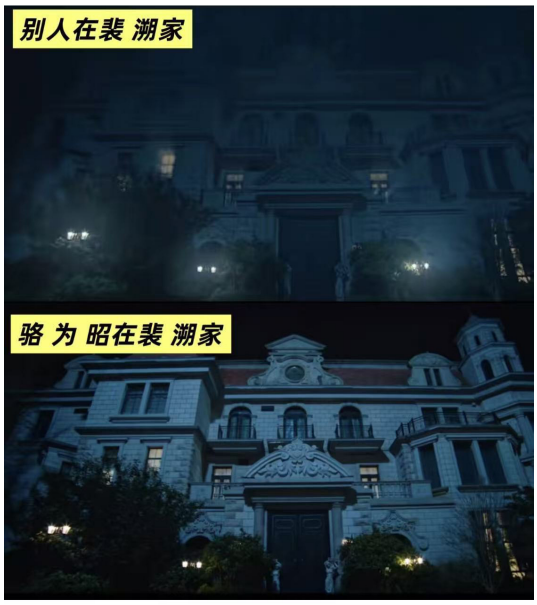

Figure 2. RedNote fan edit comparing two near-identical nighttime exterior shots of Pei Su's villa.

Similarly, this lighting-based design occurs in Luo's apartment. Although the space is generally cool-toned and dim, viewers on RedNote note a recurring exception: Whenever Pei and Luo engage in quiet conversation, a small desk lamp casts a warm yellow pool of light near their bodies. One example occurs when Luo hands Pei a glass of warm milk (Figure 3). The light falls on their touching hands and the milky liquid, drawing attention to contact, texture, and exchange. Commenters read this convergence of warm light, touch, and milk as erotically charged. Some even interpret the milk as a metaphor for semen. More than a symbol, however, the milk also mediates bodily contact, as both men hold the same glass. An ordinary gesture of care becomes a re-coded scene of intimacy, displacing censored intimacy onto an ordinary object without diminishing its erotic charge. Viewers thus re-read a mundane act of care as a tactile, sexualised moment.

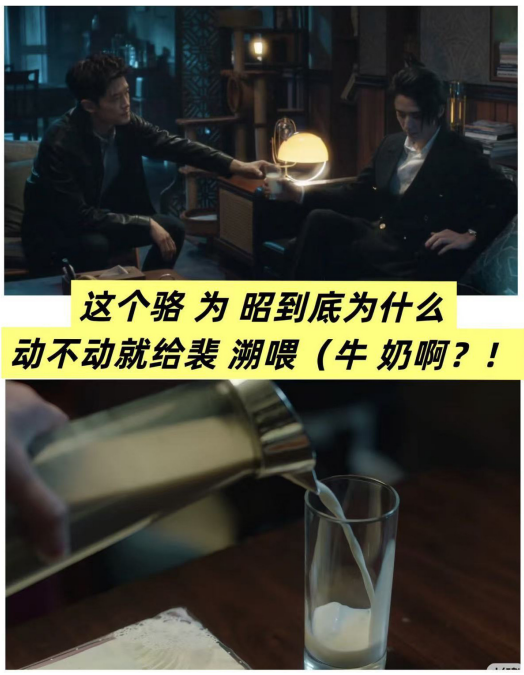

Figure 3. A still from RedNote shows that the light focuses precisely on their touching hands and the milk.

Atmosphere is also generated through the body itself, especially through eye-acting, which viewers on RedNote repeatedly treat as signs of intimacy. One of the most celebrated scenes in the novel follows an argument between Luo and Pei at Luo's home at night. A long and emotionally charged conversation culminates in Luo's confession of love and the confirmation of their relationship. Episode 21 retains much of this structure: The conflict still centres on trust, the setting remains Luo's home, and the exchange lasts nearly 30 minutes, roughly three-quarters of the episode. Yet the decisive element is removed, as the scene resolves into renewed trust and Pei's return to Luo's home. For viewers, however, it still plays as a confession. This reading rests on the convergence of two interpretive grounds: the actors' performances in the scene, and viewers' awareness of its correspondence to the novel. As this exchange echoes Luo's actions in the novel, the dialogue, gestures, and micro-expressions performed in the adaptation are not read as neutral signs of trust alone, but as the atmospheric residue of a confession that censorship no longer allows to be spoken aloud. As one comment puts it, "not a single mouth is kissed in this drama, but every look is a kiss." Eye-acting thus becomes another atmospheric medium through which viewers turn censored dialogue into visible affect.

Besides lighting and body, viewers on RedNote also read queer intimacy through objects, especially where censorship has removed more explicit ways of identification. One recurring example is a sign spelling Family Waiting Area, which features in a hospital scene in Episode 15 circulated on RedNote (Figure 4). After Pei pushes Luo away from a bomb and both are severely injured, Pei remains in critical condition while Luo, himself wounded and on crutches, waits outside through the night. In the novel, the same scene culminates in Luo naming Pei as "my lover" inside the emergency room, a line that cannot be spoken in the drama. On RedNote, viewers paste this original text over screenshots from the drama, and they repeatedly highlight the atmosphere of the scene itself: the hospital corridor, Luo's forlorn figure, the long vigil, and above all the conspicuous Family Waiting Area sign on the wall. Within this affective arrangement, "family" becomes the displaced return of the unspeakable "my lover." What censorship removes at the level of dialogue is thus re-produced atmospherically,

as the scene's spatial and visual cues allow viewers to read Luo and Pei's bond through a familial frame. Where moral censorship seeks to establish a heteronormative family order, viewers create a frame for recognising and confirming the intimacy between the two male leads.

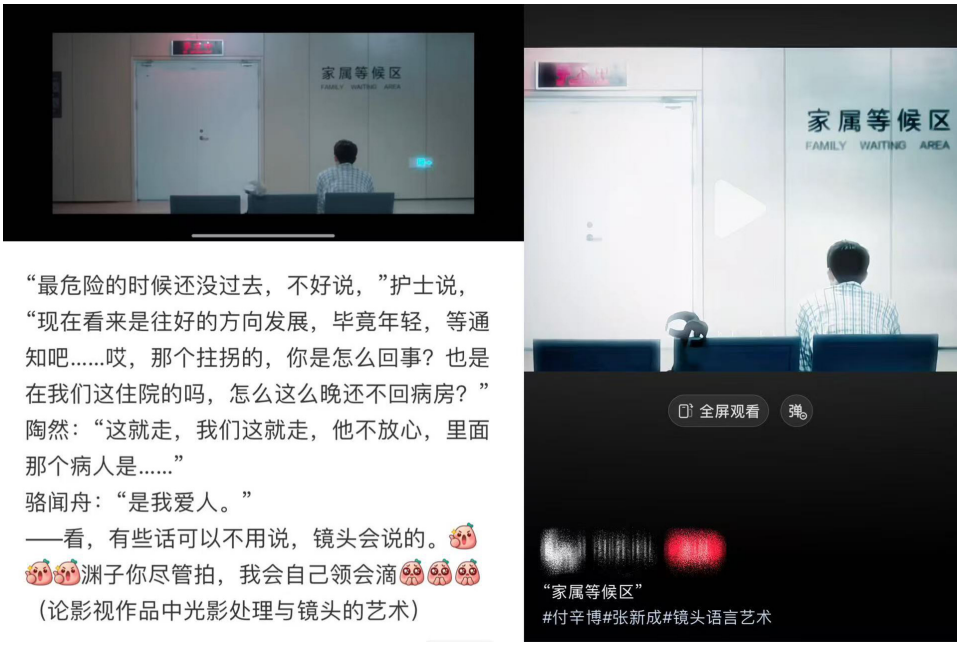

Figure 4. RedNote posts juxtapose the novel's line "my lover" with the words "Family Waiting Area" in the corresponding scene from the drama, adding "You [*Guangyuan*] just go ahead and film it, I'll get the message myself!" at the end.

Another example is the "wish cigarette," introduced in Episode 5. The first cigarette from a new pack is used to make a wish, placed back upside-down, and smoked last, when the wish may come true. Significantly, this motif is used in the adaptation rather than drawn from the novel, showing how the series itself generates new material and ritual forms that viewers then recognise as coded carriers of intimacy under censorship. Luo explains the custom to Pei in an alleyway outside a funeral home. Although their dialogue ostensibly concerns the case, viewers seize on the spatial subtext: One side of the alley is lined with paper funeral flowers, signifying death, and the other with fresh blooms, signifying life. As Pei walks away, Luo closes his eyes, holds the cigarette, and makes a silent wish before looking after him (Figure 5).

On RedNote, fans insist that "everyone knows who the wish is for," even though the script never confirms it. The wish cigarette thus becomes a medium of desire, re-coding intimacy into ritual, gesture, and object. One RedNote user comments on a screenshot of this scene:

> The funeral and fresh flowers stand on either side of Pei, who walks alone between life and death. Luo's wish, unspoken but understood, is this: "Do not stray. I will be here watching over you. May your future path be one of fresh flowers."

In this sense, the wish cigarette functions as an atmospheric hinge, binding gesture, space, and desire into a single ritualised moment. Crucially, the scene sustains productive desire, precisely because it does not contain explicit male–male romance. Desire does not point towards a future clarification, such as an explicit

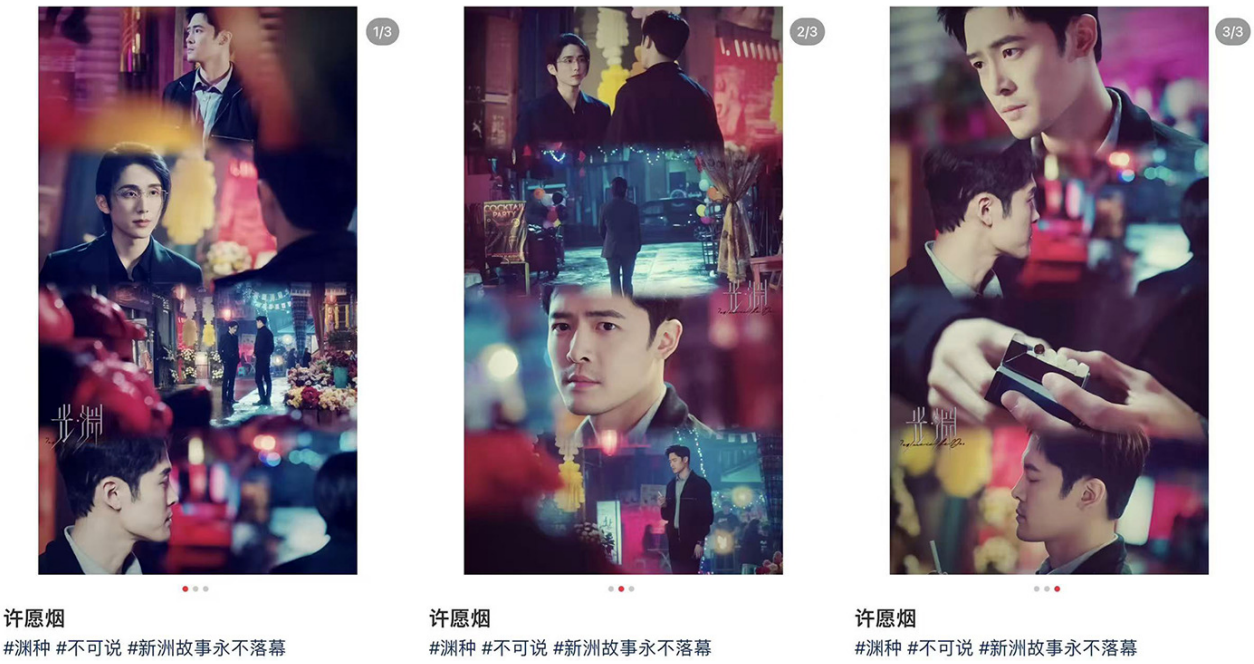

Figure 5. Fan-edit stills from RedNote of the "wish cigarette" scene.

confirmation of whom the wish is for, but takes shape through the unspoken that animates viewers' affective investment.

As the examples above suggest, viewers do not simply experience removals and censored content as absence. Through their close attention to lighting, touch, objects, and eye-acting, they re-create what can no longer be directly spoken or shown, turning atmospheric cues into shared interpretive resources for sensing queer intimacy. What becomes desirable, then, is not merely a hidden romance waiting to be uncovered, but a mode of relation that is affectively palpable precisely through indirection.

Meanwhile, these atmospheric scenes are not organised randomly. Across the examples discussed here, they repeatedly coalesce around one central structure: home. Whether in Luo's apartment or Pei's villa, whether conflict and deep conversation in domestic space, or viewers' readings of warmth, care, and protection, queer intimacy is imagined through the making of a home between the two men. In this sense, atmosphere does more than sustain unspoken mutuality. It also performs queer place-making, allowing viewers to assemble the sense that Luo and Pei build a shared domestic world. This reflects that if moral censorship seeks to defend a heteronormative familial order, viewers respond not only by reading around it, but by reworking one of its key forms: the home itself. This does not mean that such practices fully escape normative structures. Rather, they may also draw on the affective norms of home, intimacy, and mutual belonging that have long been central to familial legitimacy (Luo et al., 2022; Yan, 2003). However, this is precisely what makes them productive: Queer desire here is not produced outside moral norms, but through their partial appropriation, rearrangement, and re-signification. The drama thus remains within the bounds of what can be shown while the viewers produce, through atmospheric reading, not a substitute for "real" BL, but a desirable male–male intimacy that the drama itself cannot name directly.

5. Eroticising the Police Man

This queering can be further complicated—and its potential to subvert moral censorship more clearly demonstrated—by demonstrating how a state-legible masculinity is itself queered. Over the past decade, political rhetoric around masculinity in China has hardened. Official interventions in gender and sexuality have taken a more explicitly patriarchal turn, and regulations on "acceptable" gender presentation have furnished "morally legitimate" actors with discursive resources for shaming and discipline, including the derogatory labelling of mild or gentle men as *niangpao* ("sissy men"; Louie, 2024). As Louie (2024) argues, this shift is driven by at least two intertwined dynamics. First, it is fuelled by anxieties about rapidly changing gender roles, crystallised in claims that the "feminisation" of men signals national decline. The coupling of masculinity with national strength provides both political legitimacy and affective momentum for crackdowns on "effeminacy." Second, the family is reiterated as the moral foundation of civilisation: The patriarchal family and the state are imagined to sustain each other's authority, with the father figure reinstated at the centre of both household governance and national reproduction. In this discourse, masculinity is repeatedly mobilised as a normative counter-figure, alongside explicit calls for fathers to prevent sons from becoming *niangpao*.

Within this ideological climate, what Song (2021) calls "the hegemonic mode of masculinity, defined by political loyalty to the state, adherence to Confucian values such as homosocial brotherhood, and a repudiation of femininity and queerness," helps structure a patriarchal order that links state and society, and that legitimises the censorship and stigmatisation of effeminate men. In September 2021, for example, the National Radio and Television Administration issued a directive calling on broadcasters to "decisively end the warped aesthetic of the '*niangpao*'" (Y. Bai & Wang, 2021). In digital spaces, too, regulatory language surrounding non-normative gender and sexual content has proliferated. As Wang and Bao argue in their discussion of "sissy capital" and the governance of queer digital media in China's platform economy, governance logics have expanded beyond an earlier anti-pornography framework and become increasingly entangled with the regulation of platform capital and internet governance, including anti-monopoly discourse (S. Wang & Bao, 2023).

Against this backdrop, Luo appears, at first glance, to fit a state-approved masculine template. Luo is presented as a police officer with a strong sense of justice and a seemingly careless, slightly unruly appearance. In Episode 1, a short sequence efficiently introduces his persona. The scene opens with a close-up of a ringing phone in Luo's office. A colleague walks into the empty room, picks it up, and hears an angry voice on the other end: "Does this brat still remember what this place is? He's late every single day." The series then cuts to Luo. Wearing a leather jacket and sporting stubble, he hums as he pedals a battered bicycle, a plastic breakfast bag hanging from the handlebars, accompanied by playful background music. On the way, he witnesses a robbery; he intervenes and ties the criminal with a rope to the back of his bike. Through this humorous sequence, the drama establishes Luo as a righteous officer who intervenes in wrongdoing even on his commute, while his broken bicycle and perpetually unshaven face underscore a rough-edged masculinity and an indifference to trivialities. Crucially, however, this morally legitimised, authority-bearing masculine body does not make homo-desire disappear, nor does it merely mask it. Instead, Luo's state-legible masculinity becomes a new attachment point for homoerotic desire—an emergent site through which desire is reproduced.

5.1. Tenderness Under the Uniform: Repairing the Broken Continuum

Sedgwick's (2015) account of modern masculinity is useful here. In her formulation, the male homosocial/homosexual continuum in modern societies is interrupted by "structural barriers": Male alliances and interest politics are highly visible, yet "men loving men" is forcibly severed by homophobic regulation and stigma. In contemporary China, the removal of "sissy men" and queer content operates as precisely such a severing mechanism. Yet it is important to note that what performs this cut is not only homophobia in a narrow sense, but a broader, nationwide anxiety premised on the fantasy that the nation must be masculinised: Effeminate men are framed as signs of national weakness, and "de-feminisation" is demanded as a civilisational task (Louie, 2024; Song, 2021). Under these conditions, audiences' reinterpretations of Luo, especially their contrastive reading of affect against state-approved masculinity, work to repair the broken continuum, re-opening a space in which homosocial intimacy can slide towards the homoerotic.

On social media, Luo is often called a "beagle." One popular comment writes: "He barks loudly, runs coolly, hates fiercely, and cries 'wa-wa' when he's angry." Like a beagle that looks sturdy but is actually sensitive, Luo is repeatedly reconstructed through sharp contrasts between appearance and affect. This contrast-making is pervasive and works to undo both conventional masculinity and police authority.

A key focus, for example, is Luo's tears. Searching "Luo Weizhao" on RedNote, the most frequently circulated fan edits repeatedly return to crying scenes. One is the explosion sequence in which Pei Su is used as bait by the police and is seriously injured at the blast site. Luo rushes to the scene and holds Pei in his arms; the camera foregrounds his devastation and distress. In a widely circulated fan cut titled "Laughing one moment, crying the next," the editor first selects a playful scene in which Luo teases Pei like a mischievous schoolboy teasing the person he likes, accompanied by upbeat music and carefree laughter. The edit then abruptly cuts to the explosion sequence, re-edited in slow motion with reframed shots that amplify Luo's panic, anguish, and tears. A second frequently edited scene occurs when Luo discovers a collection of "instruments" in Pei's home and calls a colleague to identify them. Over the phone, he hears: "You didn't sneak into some illegal detox workshop, did you? From the photos you sent, these are electric devices; those medicinal liquors are used as emetics or sedatives, plus some other psychiatric drugs…" Luo gradually realises that Pei has been using these devices to brutally "treat" himself in order to suppress his impulses. Luo then breaks down and cries. In the novel, this sequence leads to an explicit naming of the relationship and Luo later identifies Pei as "my lover," a line removed in the bromance adaptation. Nevertheless, the scene remains a crucial resource for fans' contrast-building: Luo is not as "iron-faced" as he appears; his toughness masks an extremely tender interior. Through tears, embraces, and trauma-centred intimacy, a stable affective structure persists to repair the continuum, even in the absence of explicit relationship naming, continually furnishing resources for queer readings.

5.2. Gazing at the Body: Erotics of the Disciplinary Uniform

Moreover, the erotics does not stop at tenderness under the uniform. As a state-recognised bodily template, the police uniform and the disciplined body are highly visible, displayable, and aesthetic; through social-media gazes, screenshots, edits, and recirculation, the authority-bearing body also becomes eroticised and thereby converted into an object of desire.

Many RedNote posts construct a direct gaze at Luo's body. One of the most frequently recycled clips is the rubbish bin scene, composed of three shots: first, a close-up of Luo's badge lying inside the bin; second, a close-up of his face as he reaches in; and third, a rear-framed shot starting between his thighs at the bin and zooming out to show his awkward, bent posture as he rummages inside. The camera movement highlights his prominent buttocks. Although the scene is accompanied by comedic music, viewers find it not only funny but also sexy; comments and edits repeatedly fixate on his "sexy body," turning the clip into micro-videos that circulate widely online.

The gaze is not confined to the fictional character but extends to the actor Fu Xinbo. In behind-the-scenes clips, viewers notice how Fu's tight jeans make his crotch conspicuously bulge, triggering fantasies about both the character and the actor's sexual appeal. Some RedNote posts even dig up images of Fu in swimming trunks from a diving reality show to further fuel imaginations of Luo/Fu's bodily and sexual desirability.

Once the homosocial/homosexual continuum is repaired through such affective and erotic remakings, authority becomes available for profanation. The police uniform may be a disciplinary form imposed on audiences as a "legitimate" embodiment, yet it can be turned into a playful and erotic surface, rendering the authority-bearing body increasingly unstable and queer.

5.3. The Policeman's Lure: State Participation and Blurred Boundaries

We understand this remaking as a form of character-setting production that follows the logic of desiring-production for two reasons. First, the series constructs Luo as a righteous police officer not only because such a figure more easily passes censorship, but also because this righteous role can then be converted into a component in audiences' homoerotic play. Second, production is a continuous process without a fixed endpoint; as we argued earlier, desiring-production is not only productive but also disruptive. One striking outcome of this ongoing process is that a straight, authoritative role becomes increasingly undefinable—and increasingly queered.

This process does not remain confined to grassroots fan practices. Under certain conditions, state or official institutions may also participate in producing authority-bearing bodies as objects of desire, further blurring the boundary of moral censorship by moving beyond a binary in which the homo and the straight appear as pure, mutually exclusive categories. For example, under one post on the official RedNote account of the China Police Web Portal, a user jokes that the page feels like an "official brothel." This tongue-in-cheek remark is revealing in that it received thousands of likes. Scrolling through the account's home page, one finds bare-chested SWAT officers showing off muscles, "cute" and shy policemen being teased, and police officers wearing aprons—strategies closely resembling those used by fans to queer Luo's image. One widely circulated post features a cute young policeman stamping his feet as he magically changes from casual clothes into uniform. The video covers his face with a Hello Kitty sticker, adopts a top-down POV gaze, and uses kawaii anime music while overlaying anti-fraud subtitles. This video queers the police in a different register from hyper-masculine muscle displays, yet both illustrate how authority figures can be turned into objects of homoerotic desire (Figure 6).

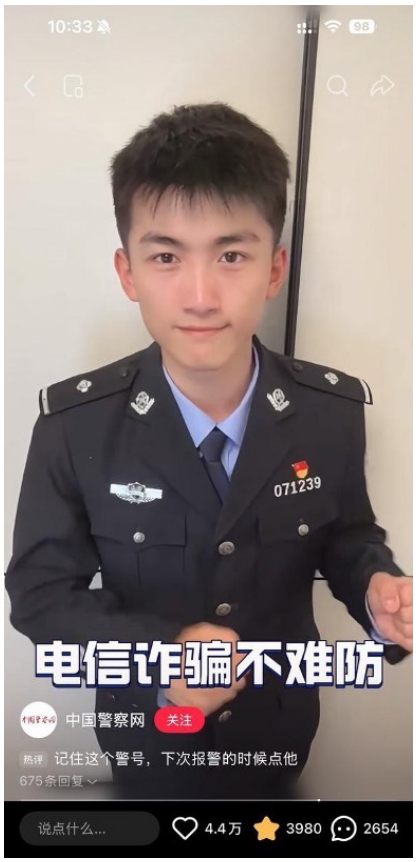

Figure 6. One of the popular posts on the China Police Web Portal's official RedNote account.

6. Conclusion

Why would bromance, rather than explicit BL, be experienced as satisfying? To address this puzzle, the article mobilised Deleuze and Guattari's (2009) notion of desiring-production. Rather than a compensatory container for a missing object, bromance emerges here as a generative genre that can produce an especially intense form of homo-desire. This shift allows us to move beyond lack-based readings that quietly mirror the censor's own moral taxonomy, in which same-sex desire is positioned as the unsayable "real" and bromance as mere compromise.

Empirically, our analysis highlights two dynamics. First, by identifying and interpreting atmosphere through light, touch, objects, and eye-acting, viewers assemble a shared sense of home, through which censored male–male desire is re-produced. Second, under moral regulation, bromance dramas frequently rely on normatively "proper" masculine figures, such as police officers and other agents of justice, because such characters align with acceptable moral narratives on masculinity. Yet these very figures become eroticised and queered through viewers' creative reinterpretations, turning authoritative masculinity into an object of homo-affective longing.

Finally, we recognise that moral censorship generates real harm for creators and viewers alike. This article does not minimise those constraints. Rather, it argues that tracing creativity and resilience under censorship matters precisely because it makes visible how audiences derive satisfaction through desiring-production. In our case, this shows how such practices generate new homoerotic desire and destabilise what counts as censorable.

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