

**Working with Uncertainty: Censorship, Inductive Reasoning, and Creative Practice in Chinese
Tongren Communities**

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Introduction

Digital censorship in the People's Republic of China operates as a condition of uncertainty: posts disappear without warning, visibility shifts without explanation, and creators are left to infer boundaries from outcomes rather than articulated standards. This thesis argues that such uncertainty is not a secondary effect of censorship but one of its central mechanisms. By withholding clear criteria while enforcing content restrictions, platforms compel creators to reason inductively, anticipate sanctions, and revise expression in advance, reshaping creative practice from within rather than through overt prohibition.¹

For online creators, censorship is therefore experienced less as the application of known rules than as an epistemic problem: how to act, create, and communicate in an environment where the limits of permissible expression remain opaque and unstable. Scholars of digital governance have noted that such indeterminacy amplifies regulatory power by shifting the burden of interpretation onto users themselves, encouraging precautionary self-restraint in the absence of explicit guidance.² What emerges under these conditions is not compliance with clearly stated norms, but a field of anticipatory adjustment in which creators learn to infer what is “safe” or “risky” through repeated encounters with deletion, warning, and survival.

Tongren (同人) communities offer a particularly revealing field site for examining censorship as lived uncertainty. Organized around shared creative engagement, circulation, and interaction, *tongren* practices depend on visibility and response: stories, illustrations, and collaborative events gain meaning through comments, reposts, and collective participation. As a result, the disappearance of a post disrupts not only a single work but a broader ecology of interaction. Because *tongren* creators frequently experiment with form, language, and affect, they encounter platform moderation not as an abstract policy but as an everyday condition that must be navigated through experience. Their practices make visible how censorship is learned, reasoned through, and internalized in the absence of explicit rules.

To analyze this process, this thesis introduces the concept of lawlikeness without law. Borrowed from the philosophy of science, lawlikeness refers not to formal legality or universal truth, but to the capacity of certain regularities to support expectation and projection.³ Under opaque censorship, creators treat recurring enforcement outcomes as if they developed expectations that guide future action even while acknowledging that these expectations remain provisional and revisable. In this way, censorship acquires a lawlike character without ever being clearly articulated as law.

This thesis develops its argument across four chapters. **Chapter 1** introduces *tongren* as a community of interaction shaped by platform affordances and migration across digital spaces, tracing how creative practice depends on circulation, visibility, and shared participation. By situating *tongren* within specific platforms such as LOFTER, Weibo, and AO3, the chapter establishes why censorship intervenes not only in content but in the social and collaborative structures that sustain creative life.

Chapter 2 develops the conceptual framework of the thesis. It examines how regulatory language produces uncertainty, how creators reason inductively from enforcement outcomes, and how repeated experience stabilizes into lawlike expectations despite the absence of explicit rules. This chapter

¹ Peter Lorentzen, “China’s Strategic Censorship,” *American Journal of Political Science* 58, no. 2 (2014): 402-414.

² Rachel E. Stern and Jonathan Hassid, “Amplifying Silence: Uncertainty and Control Parables in Contemporary China,” *Comparative Political Studies* 45, no. 10 (2012): 1230-1254.

³ Carl G. Hempel, “Laws and Their Role in Scientific Explanation,” in *The Philosophy of Science*, ed. Richard Boyd, Philip Gasper, and J. D. Trout (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 299–316; see also Nelson Goodman, *Fact, Fiction, and Forecast*, 4th ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983).

articulates the notion of lawlikeness without law as a way of understanding how censorship comes to feel predictable through practice rather than transparency.

Chapter 3 turns to method, outlining the oral history approach that makes this analysis possible. It discusses interview design, researcher positionality, ethical commitments, translation, and security, emphasizing listening and care as methodological orientations suited to documenting censorship as lived experience rather than formal policy. The chapter also introduces the accompanying digital project as an extension of the thesis's methodological concerns.

Chapter 4 presents the interview-based analysis. Drawing on narrators' accounts, it traces how creators experience deletion and instability, how they revise and adapt their work, and how shared tactics circulate within communities. Through these narratives, the chapter shows how uncertainty is transformed into internalized self-regulation and collective knowledge, completing the movement from opaque enforcement to lawlike experience.

Taken together, this thesis argues that digital censorship operates as an epistemic condition that reorganizes how creators reason about, anticipate, and regulate their own expression under uncertainty. By combining a conceptual account of lawlikeness with oral history methods attentive to listening, care, and lived experience, the project shows how opaque moderation produces patterned expectations and shared tactics without ever fully articulating its standards. *Tongren* communities make this process visible precisely because creativity in these spaces depends on circulation, interaction, and mutual recognition, rendering uncertainty both consequential and narratable. Understanding censorship in this way shifts attention from what is forbidden to how governance is internalized through everyday practice, setting the stage for the historical and community-centered analysis that follows.

Chapter 1

Communities of Interaction: *Tongren* Participation and Platform-Shaped Practice

Over the past decade, *tongren* (同人) has come to describe a range of participatory practices in the People's Republic of China through which online communities have formed around shared creative engagement. The term *tongren*, literally meaning “of the same person,” originated from Japanese *dōjin* culture and came to describe a wide range of fan-produced works in mainland China, including fiction, illustration, and multimedia adaptations. Within these circles, creators rework a wide range of sources, from fictional worlds to historical figures, into new narratives that foreground personal interpretation and affective engagement. Importantly, these communities operate within a digital environment shaped by both state and platform regulation.

As *tongren* practices grew and diversified, creators moved across digital spaces that shaped both what they produced and how their works circulated. Over time, *tongren* practice migrated to cyber spaces such as Baidu Tieba, Lofter, and Weibo, each platform influencing not only how fanworks circulated but also how they were produced. During certain periods, creators also turned to AO3 (Archive of Our Own) as an alternative archive.

Because platform movement shapes how visibility, interaction, and risk are experienced, it is important to examine the specific platforms through which *tongren* practices have circulated and the functions they support:

- Baidu Tieba (百度贴吧):

This forum-based platform, launched in 2003, played a critical role in the early formation of Chinese fandom and *tongren* communities. It is organized around topic-specific “bars” (贴吧), each of which functions as a dedicated community centered on a single subject or interest. For example, a “banana bar” would bring together users who share an interest in bananas, providing a common space for discussion, posting, and exchange. Within fandom contexts, bars devoted to specific characters, pairings, or series operated as micro-forums that supported long discussion threads, serialized fanfiction, character analysis, and collective interpretation. This structure encouraged sustained interaction, making the platform a major site for early *tongren* writing, discussion, and community-building.

- LOFTER:

This Tumblr-like visual blogging platform, operated by NetEase, became a central hub for *tongren* creators in the 2010s, particularly writers and illustrators. Its interface is organized around interests and tags that users choose to follow, so the main feed displays ongoing updates related to those specific topics. Texts and images appear in uniform rectangular layouts, allowing written posts and visual works to circulate side by side without one format dominating the other. By minimizing the visibility of usernames and profiles, which appear only in the corner of each post, the platform foregrounds creative output over user identity. This design supports a work-centered mode of participation in which readers are more likely to follow projects, themes, or folders than individual creators.

- Weibo (微博):

As China's dominant microblogging platform, it is often compared to X/Twitter, though its features and modes of interaction differ in important ways. While Weibo emphasizes short posts

with strict character limits (typically around 140 characters) and image-based sharing, it also hosts Super Topics (超话), which function as interest-based communities organized around specific celebrities, fictional characters, events, or pairings. In this sense, Super Topics resemble the “bars” found on forum-based platforms, but they are embedded within a fast-moving, image-centered environment. Posts within Super Topics circulate quickly through likes, reposts, and comments, encouraging frequent interaction.

- AO3 (Archive of Our Own):

An international, non-profit fanfiction archive valued by Chinese creators for its permissive content policies, flexible tagging system, and stable long-form hosting. In early 2020, AO3 became inaccessible in mainland China following a mass-reporting campaign initiated by a faction of actor Xiao Zhan’s fans, who targeted fanworks that depicted the celebrity in non-heterosexual or erotic scenarios. Their coordinated reports framed such works as harmful or inappropriate, triggering heightened platform scrutiny and culminating in the site’s being blocked around the end of February 2020.⁴

Tongren creation is marked by its diversity of forms. While written fanfiction remains one of its most recognizable genres, the practice extends far beyond texts. Artists produce illustrations, comics, character studies, and visual redraws; video editors make AMV-style (anime music video) remixes; and *shoushu* (手书) creators craft hand-drawn animations that blend music, voice acting, and imagined scenes. Many of these works involve extensive creative labor, from world-building to character readapting. In this sense, fanworks foreground personal engagement and affective investment, positioning derivative creativity as a form of individualized reading, aesthetic exploration, and emotional articulation.⁵

Yet *tongren* practice, though often motivated by personal interest, rarely remains a solitary endeavor. Once posted, a fanwork becomes part of a shared communicative space sustained by a layered ecology of participation. At the most fundamental level are fellow fans (同好, *tonghao*), whose shared affection for specific characters, narratives, or pairings forms the social ground of the community. Within this environment, content creators—writers, illustrators, video editors, and *shoushu* artists—initiate conversations by posting new works that others gather around. A single story or illustration can become an anchor for ongoing exchange: readers comment to express support or interpretation, creators reply or quietly read these responses, and visibility is measured as much by conversation as by numbers of likes or reposts.

These patterns of participation unfold across and within the structures of specific platforms. *Lofter*, for instance, focuses on creative work rather than user identity: its tag-based navigation, long-form friendly layout, and folder-subscription system allow readers to follow specific works without following their creators. This structure supports serialized fiction and enables sustained conversations in comment threads, creating a sense of ongoing engagement around individual projects.

Weibo, by contrast, emphasizes rapid interaction: its short posts, image-driven updates, and highly active repost culture create fast-moving exchanges that can broaden visibility. Within this high-

⁴ Isaac Zeitlin, “China’s new internet censorship laws ban fanfiction site Archive of Our Own,” *Vox*, March 1, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/2020/3/1/21159275/china-ao3-archive-of-our-own-banned-censorship>.

⁵ F. Silberstein-Bamford, “Fan Writing’s Impact on Media Consumption”, *Participations* 19, no. 2 (March 2023).

traffic environment, Super Topics function as relatively safer, community-like spaces where fans gather around to share interests with more consistency.

For many creators, AO3 functioned as a comparatively stable archive prior to its 2020 ban, largely because its servers operated outside mainland China's censorship system. Each platform's design shapes not only the form of *tongren* works but also the social environments that grow around them: tags guide how works are found, platform suggestions can increase a creator's visibility, and group chats, message threads, and Super Topics offer smaller spaces where interactions feel more steady and personal.

Beyond these public spaces, participants convene in group chats (a relatively smaller, but still public space) organized mostly around particular "ships," that is, romantic pairings between specific fictional characters, coordinating relay events in which multiple contributors produce artworks, fiction, edits, or animations under a shared theme.⁶ These smaller collectives often function like informal sketch workshops. Unlike Weibo's Super Topics, which serve as semi-public spaces that anyone can browse, group chats usually require a code or invitation to enter, making them more private to open brainstorming. Within these chats, participants share draft snippets, test out ideas, and exchange technical advice in ways that feel freer than in public comment threads. They also serve as organizing spaces for relay events, where creators coordinate themes, recruit contributors, and decide posting orders. Much of this coordination unfolds through spontaneity: members volunteer to start a relay, nominate themselves as organizers, or step in as informal supervisors simply because they were present at the right moment. Many participants move between several group chats or platforms at once, carrying ideas, drafts, and techniques from one space to another.

Within such a structure, certain individuals temporarily function as "key players," whose activity can shape collective behavior by introducing new interpretive trends, sustaining group-chat environments, or circulating strategies for navigating censorship.⁷ Thus, *tongren* communities demonstrate how influence emerges from participation itself: it is shared, shifting, and sustained through ongoing interaction. As creators respond to one another, shared habits of interpretation and strategy take shape, producing informal ways of navigating posts and interactions when external restrictions intervene.

Because of these dynamics, *Tongren* communities offer a particularly revealing field site for examining how censorship is experienced as uncertainty. Unlike professional publishing or mainstream social media, *tongren* spaces operate in a hybrid zone where creativity depends on circulation, interaction, and networks of informal exchange. These conditions make participants highly sensitive to the fragility of visibility: a single deletion can disrupt not only a piece of work, but an entire sequence of comments, reposts, relay events, and collaborative planning. In addition, since *tongren* practice often includes experimenting with form, language, and interpretation, creators sometimes push against platform limits without meaning to.

In this sense, *tongren* communities reveal how participants learn to navigate censorship by recognizing and adjusting to patterns of restriction through experience, becoming aware that their interactions are always filtered through the platforms they use. Moving between platforms is often a compromise, since *tongren* creators attempt to find a space that feels stable enough for sharing while still allowing the kind of interaction they want. This creates a dual awareness that allows creators to

⁶ A "ship" (from "relationship") is a specific character pairing that fans interpret or imagine together. In *tongren* culture, ship-based groups form the basis for most activities, including relay events, collaborative projects, and shared discussion spaces.

⁷ On "key players" as structurally influential nodes in a distributed network, see Ballester, Calvó-Armengol, and Zenou, *Who's Who in Networks?* (2006). They define key players as individuals "whose removal results in the maximal decrease in overall activity," emphasizing both their own centrality and their contribution to others' behavior.

collaborate with one another, while constantly adjusting themselves to the rules and the limits of the platform regulations.

This tension that *tongren* communities encounter stem, in part, from a larger logic of governance that treats expression as a site of ideological risk. Within this logic, policymakers have framed the governance of the Internet as an issue of sovereignty and security, presenting content control as essential to the preservation of national stability and ideological cohesion.⁸ While this policy language describes censorship as a function of protection, *tongren* participants experience it as an everyday condition of uncertainty. Posts often disappear without warning, accompanied only by the message that they have “violated community guidelines.” No explanation follows. Deprived of explicit rules, these writers learn through repetition and adjustment—testing words, revising phrasing, and inferring from experience which expressions are permitted and which will be flagged. These cycles of deletion and adjustment suggest that the system follows an underlying logic, one that is never explicitly stated but gradually discerned through practice. *Tongren* creators come to recognize its contours empirically: by revising, reposting, and drawing on the shared experiences of others to infer what kinds of expressions are more likely to avoid being flagged and stay visible to readers. This perception of order, produced through repetition rather than transparency, can be understood through the philosophical concept of lawlikeness.

To understand how these expectations take shape, it is useful to turn to Carl Hempel’s account of probabilistic explanation. In the philosophy of science, lawlikeness denotes the quality that distinguishes genuine laws of nature from accidental regularities. In Hempel’s Deductive-Nomological model, a lawlike statement is one that allows explanation and prediction: it subsumes particular events under general principles and makes them intelligible as outcomes that were “to be expected.”⁹ Such statements, exemplified by “all metals expand when heated,” provide the foundation for how science explains and predicts phenomena. Later philosophers complicated this view. Nelson Goodman observed that lawlikeness is not purely a matter of syntax or truth but of projectability: our willingness to treat certain regularities as stable enough to guide future inference.¹⁰ Marc Lange extended this idea by emphasizing its normative dimension: to call a statement “*lawlike*” is to prescribe how reasoning ought to proceed. A law thus not only describes the world but also instructs those who seek to understand it in how to think within it.¹¹

Reconsidered in the context of digital regulation, lawlikeness offers a framework for understanding how censorship appears rule-bound even in the absence of explicit laws. Each removal or suppression functions as feedback: writers interpret the outcome, revise their work, and incorporate the lesson into future attempts. In the case of *tongren* writers, countless revisions and repostings accumulate into a body of empirical experience that reveals a pattern appearing to follow an implicit regularity.

Philosophers of science provide useful language for describing this effect. Hempel distinguishes between deductive-nomological explanation, which appeals to universal laws, and probabilistic explanation, which appeals to generalizations that support an outcome only with high probability rather

⁸ Erik Schia and Lars Gjesvik, *China’s Cyber Sovereignty*, NUPI Report 1/2017, Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, 2017, pp. 4-6.

⁹ Hempel, “Laws and Their Role in Scientific Explanation,” 301.

¹⁰ Goodman, *Fact, Fiction, and Forecast*, 59-83.

¹¹ Marc Lange, “Natural Laws and the Problem of Provisos,” *Nous*, vol. 27, no. 4, 1993, pp. 459-77.

than certainty. In probabilistic explanation, the explanans does not guarantee the explanandum; instead, it renders the explanandum highly likely.¹²

This distinction between strict lawfulness and probabilistic regularity offers a useful framework for understanding how Chinese *tongren* writers navigate an implicit digital censorship. Hempel notes that probabilistic laws are not discovered through explicit statements but through repeated experience. He illustrates this with examples of random processes: urn drawings, coin tosses, radioactive decay. In these cases, no single trial reveals a law, but as the number of trials increases, the “relative frequencies” of outcomes tend toward a more stable pattern.¹³ These stable tendencies, once recognized, allow agents to form expectations and guide their actions despite the absence of universal rules.

Tongren creators face a similar epistemic situation: some posts stay online while others disappear; some keywords are harmless once but flagged the next time. Each deletion functions like one more “trial”: an empirical datapoint that contributes to the community’s evolving sense of what outcomes are probable under given conditions. Hence, Hempel’s account helps clarify how these creators treat takedowns as inductive evidence rather than as applications of known rules. Just as Hempel’s statistical examples involve inferring a probability distribution from repeated observations, *tongren* writers learn what is permissible through cycles of posting, deletion, revision, and reposting. Over time, creators begin to form expectations: particular terms are consistently removed soon after posting; some phrasings tend to remain intact; and work associated with particular tags has a relatively lower chance of survival. These expectations are not certainties, rather, they function as a “practical certainty,” where a high-probability pattern is treated as reliable enough to guide action.¹⁴

Moreover, Hempel argues that probabilistic laws are explanatory because they support “what would happen if” reasoning: if a similar case occurred again, the same outcome would be expected with high probability.¹⁵ *Tongren* creators rely on this kind of counterfactual reasoning in everyday practice. Each time they choose a phrasing or substitute a homophone, they act on expectations formed from prior experience: certain formulations are more likely to remain online, whereas others tend to trigger deletion. These expectations are inductive generalizations built from the cumulative frequency of past removals. Thus, the notion of probabilistic explanation provides a conceptual vocabulary for understanding how content creators infer a “lawlike” sense of order from patterns the platform fails to articulate. Censorship in this sense acquires lawlikeness without law: an empirically grounded expectation about a post’s likelihood of survival on the platform, produced through repeated practice.

¹² Hempel, “Laws and Their Role in Scientific Explanation,” 311-312.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 309.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 249 (Hempel’s discussion of “practical certainty” in probabilistic accounts).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 244-245 (Hempel’s comparison of probabilistic and universal laws in supporting subjunctive conditionals).

Chapter 2

Lawlikeness Without Law: Uncertainty, Induction, and Platform Censorship

2.1 Regulatory Language and the Production of Uncertainty

Platform regulations on Chinese creative-writing sites such as LOFTER often adopt the tone and structure of legal language. Their phrasing carries the tone of authority, often comprehensive and universal, yet offers little specificity. In practice, this vagueness places users in a position of continual interpretation. The following clause, excerpted from LOFTER's official User Agreement and Regulations, illustrates the pattern:

您在使用LOFTER的过程中，不得利用LOFTER制作、上传、复制、传送、传播或转载如下内容：...(7) 散布淫秽、色情、赌博、暴力、凶杀、恐怖或者教唆犯罪的；

(In the course of using LOFTER, you must not use the platform to produce, upload, copy, transmit, distribute, or repost the following content: ... (7) Spreading obscenity, pornography, gambling, violence, murder, terrorism, or inciting crime.)¹⁶

At first glance, LOFTER's regulations resemble statutory prohibition: they enumerate categories of forbidden content in broad, authoritative terms, much as explicit censorship laws often do. China's *Cybersecurity Law*, for example, prohibits network users from engaging in activities that "endanger national security," "advocate terrorism or extremism," "disseminate violent or pornographic information," or "fabricate or disseminate false information to disrupt economic and social order," among other capacious categories (Art. 12).¹⁷ The difference, however, is not that platform regulation exerts influence beyond particular cases while law does not—law *qua* law is precisely designed to govern conduct generally, well beyond the specific instances to which it is directly applied. Rather, what distinguishes lawlikeness from law is the absence of interpretive institutions that normally stabilize meaning. Platform governance provides no comparable process of adjudication. In this sense, ambiguity is not resolved but sustained, and users are left to infer operational standards retroactively from enforcement outcomes rather than from publicly articulated rules.

In the absence of operational criteria, rules written in the language of law often fail to provide concrete guidance for action. This epistemic gap, in which the authority of regulatory language precedes any clear understanding of its application, calls for a conceptual framework for reasoning under uncertainty.

This condition of uncertainty is not merely a byproduct of poor drafting or technological limitation, but a constitutive feature of contemporary censorship practices. Uncertainty surrounding the boundaries of permissible expression magnifies the regulatory effect of enforcement, allowing isolated acts of deletion or sanction to exert influence far beyond their immediate targets. Rather than providing stable or exhaustive rules, regulatory authority operates through indeterminacy. In online contexts, the absence of clearly articulated standards leaves users unable to determine in advance which actions will be

¹⁶ “网易LOFTER服务协议 (NetEase LOFTER Service Agreement),” *LOFTER*, NetEase (网易公司), 14 May 2024, <https://www.lofter.com/cms/152446/ServiceAgreement.html>. Accessed October 27, 2025.

¹⁷ *Cybersecurity Law of the People's Republic of China* (effective June 1, 2017), art. 12, English translation via LawInfoChina.

sanctioned, producing what has been described as a “complete absence of clear-cut rules.”¹⁸ Such uncertainty therefore actively amplifies the effects of censorship, encouraging individuals to regulate their own behavior in anticipation of unclear limits.¹⁹

This reliance on indeterminate boundaries reflects a broader logic in which opacity itself functions as a mechanism of control. Regulatory systems benefit from leaving thresholds of permissibility difficult to infer, shifting across contexts and moments. Under such conditions, users are kept “in the dark” about the precise limits of acceptable expression, ensuring that authority retains flexibility while preventing systematic testing of its boundaries.²⁰ The boundaries of what is permitted are thus experienced as unstable and unpredictable, “continually and unpredictably in flux,” producing a regulatory environment in which authority is clearly asserted while its application remains opaque, variable, and resistant to rule-based reasoning.²¹

2.2 Empirical Encounters and Inductive Reasoning Under Uncertainty

In the absence of operational guidance, censorship is often first encountered by *tongren* creators as an unexpected interruption rather than a predictable outcome. Posts disappear, visibility is restricted, or warnings are issued without accompanying explanation. Because such enforcement events are not linked to clearly articulated standards, creators frequently find themselves unable to identify what aspect of their work triggered the response. The experience is not simply one of prohibition, but of disorientation: an action has been restricted or removed, yet the grounds for that decision remain inaccessible.

Under these conditions, *tongren* creators often turn to their community in search of information, posting specific discussion threads on social media to seek clarification from peers rather than from the platform itself. A post titled “what are the sensitive words on LOFTER?” exemplifies this practice, inviting other creators to share experiences and advice in an attempt to reconstruct the boundaries of permissible expression. In the discussion section, participants offer tentative observations drawn from their experience. For example, some suggest that descriptions of certain body parts, such as areas above the neck, the waist, or the legs, tend to remain permissible, while uncertainty surrounds references to other parts, including the feet, which some report having avoided entirely. Participants also speculate about lexical triggers, suggesting that certain terms function as prohibited keywords, including words associated with moral admonishment and moral transgression. Such claims are typically framed with hesitation and qualification, marked by phrases such as “it seems,” “I haven’t tried,” or “based on what I’ve seen,” reflecting both the fragmentary nature of available evidence and participants’ awareness of its uncertainty.²²

Faced with enforcement outcomes that are observable yet unexplained, creators begin to compare cases, identify recurring features, and draw provisional inferences about what kinds of content are likely to attract sanction. Individual encounters with deletion or restriction are treated as data points, which gain significance only when placed alongside others’ experiences. Through this process, creators attempt to

¹⁸ Stern and Hassid, “Amplifying Silence,” 1239.

¹⁹ Stern and Hassid, “Amplifying Silence,” 1231.

²⁰ Lorentzen, “China’s Strategic Censorship,” 413.

²¹ Lorentzen, “China’s Strategic Censorship,” 412-413.

²² Discussion thread, “求助一下各位老师 老福特(LOFTER) 上违禁词有哪些啊,” *Xiaohongshu*, accessed December 18, 2025, <http://xhslink.com/o/1vuLuWPwdwi>.

move from isolated events to generalized expectations, even while recognizing that such expectations remain uncertain and revisable.

This mode of sense-making can be understood as inductive reasoning under uncertainty. Rather than following explicit rules or applying known criteria, creators infer patterns from prior instances of content removal or survival and project those patterns forward to guide future action. The conclusions reached through this process are necessarily probabilistic: they do not claim to identify definitive boundaries of permissibility, but to estimate relative risk. Here, induction thus emerges as a practical necessity. In the absence of transparent standards, reasoning from experience becomes the only available means of navigating censorship, however unstable or incomplete its results may be.

The reasoning practices that emerge in response to opaque enforcement can be understood more precisely through the concept of induction as developed in the philosophy of science. Induction refers to forms of reasoning which operate under uncertainty, yielding expectations that are provisional, probabilistic, and subject to revision. Carl Hempel emphasizes that inductive reasoning becomes necessary precisely when outcomes must be anticipated in the absence of complete information. In such contexts, past instances are treated as relevant to future cases, not because they logically entail those outcomes, but because they support expectations about what is likely to occur.²³ Crucially, this relevance is not guaranteed by formal rules alone. As Hempel notes, many generalizations may be universally true yet fail to guide expectation, while others acquire predictive force because they are treated as non-accidental.²⁴ Induction in this sense becomes a deciding factor which observed regularities warrant projection.

Nelson Goodman's distinction between lawlike and accidental generalizations further clarifies this point. A generalization such as "all the coins in my pocket are silver" may be true, yet it does not support expectations about unexamined cases; it is accepted only after all instances are known. By contrast, a lawlike generalization is one that is "acceptable prior to the determination of all its instances," precisely because it is taken to reflect a stable regularity rather than a coincidence.²⁵ Therefore, what distinguishes these two kinds of generalization is not their logical form, but their role in guiding expectation under uncertainty.

In the context of platform censorship, creators engage in inductive reasoning without access to stable or authoritative generalizations. Enforcement events—deletions, warnings, visibility restrictions—serve as isolated instances from which creators attempt to infer broader patterns. These inferences are necessarily tentative: a word that appears to trigger deletion in one case may not do so in another, and contextual factors remain opaque. Yet the absence of certainty does not prevent induction from operating. On the contrary, it makes inductive reasoning unavoidable. Creators must decide which observed outcomes are likely to recur and which may be accidental, even though the criteria distinguishing the two are never fully disclosed.

What emerges, then, is a form of inductive reasoning under radical uncertainty. Rather than inferring universal rules, creators construct expectations about relative risk of deletion. These expectations do not claim necessity, nor do they aspire to completeness. Instead, they function as practical guides for action in an environment where rule-based reasoning is impossible. As Marc Lange observes, lawlikeness is not simply a descriptive property of statements, but a feature of how agents treat certain

²³ Hempel, "Laws and Their Role in Scientific Explanation," 299-304.

²⁴ Hempel, "Laws and Their Role in Scientific Explanation," 303-306. Hempel emphasizes that universal truth alone is insufficient for explanatory or predictive relevance.

²⁵ Goodman, *Fact, Fiction, and Forecast*, 24.

generalizations as warranting projection and reliance.²⁶ In this sense, the inductive practices surrounding platform censorship do not uncover genuine laws, but they nonetheless generate experiences that closely resemble law-governed constraint.

2.3 Lawlike Experience Without Law

Over time, inductive reasoning under conditions of opaque enforcement does more than guide isolated decisions. As *tongren* creators repeatedly encounter deletion, restriction, or survival of their work and adjust their practices accordingly, certain expectations begin to stabilize. Some forms of expression come to be treated as predictably risky, others as tentatively safe, even though the criteria underlying these judgments remain unclear and subject to change. These expectations thus exert a durable constraining force on creative practice, producing an experience of regulation that increasingly resembles a law-governed order.

As noted earlier, this phenomenon can be described as lawlike experience without law. The term lawlikeness is used here in a limited sense. In the philosophy of science, lawlike generalizations are distinguished from accidental ones by their capacity to support projection and expectation across cases. They are treated as non-accidental regularities that guide anticipation even when all instances have not been observed.²⁷ In the context of platform censorship, creators' expectations function in an analogous way, despite lacking the ontological grounding, explanatory power, or necessity associated with genuine laws. What is lawlike, in this case, is not the rule itself but the mode of expectation it generates.

Crucially, this form of lawlikeness is epistemic as it does not depend on legal authority. Instead, it arises from repeated inductive engagement with enforcement outcomes under conditions of uncertainty. As certain inferences are reinforced through recurrence—whether through personal experience or collective discussion—they acquire a degree of practical reliability. Creators begin to act as if certain constraints were lawlike, even while recognizing that these constraints are provisional and may be overturned without warning. This understanding aligns with philosophical accounts that treat lawlikeness as a feature of how agents treat certain generalizations as warranting reliance and projection.²⁸

This form of lawlike expectations under opaque censorship remain underspecified and retrospective. They do not tell creators what is permitted; they tell them what is likely to occur. *Tongren* creators' adaptation thus emerges from anticipation under conditions of uncertainty. As discussions of scientific explanation have long emphasized, the capacity to support expectation, rather than explicit formulation, is what gives lawlike statements their epistemic role.

Therefore, platform censorship operates through a distinctive mode of governance. Rather than enforcing clearly articulated norms, it produces a field of expectations shaped by empirical encounter and inductive reasoning. These expectations stabilize behavior not by resolving uncertainty, but by rendering it actionable. Lawlike experience emerges precisely because creators must act despite not knowing, projecting from shared experience to navigate an unpredictable future.

²⁶ Lange, "Lawlikeness," 13-14.

²⁷ Goodman, *Fact, Fiction, and Forecast*, 72-73.

²⁸ Lange, "Lawlikeness," 8-10.

Chapter 3

Listening, Care, and Method: An Oral History Approach to Digital Censorship

3.1 Listening in the Landscape of Uncertainty

Digital censorship in *tongren* communities in mainland China is rarely encountered as a clearly defined rule or policy. Instead, it is experienced as a form of uncertainty, one that is often invisible and frequently felt before it is articulated. Posts disappear without warning; notices appear without explanation. *Tongren* creators learn through trial and error, through collective memory, and through the shared stories that circulate in group chats, comment threads, and private messages. This makes censorship an experiential process, shaped by repetition, interpretation, and the small adjustments creators make each time their work is flagged or removed.

As discussed earlier, what matters, however, is not merely what was deleted, but how creators understood those deletions, how they adapted, and how they narrated the experience of moving through structures designed to remain indistinct. As Eve Tuck reminds us, research involving marginalized or precarious communities should resist reducing people to narratives of harm alone.²⁹ *Tongren* creators are not simply subjects of censorship; they are individuals who step into the roles of writers, artists, organizers, and participants who actively make sense of the systems around them. Their accounts reveal not only the pressure of constraint but also the creativity and, at times, the ambivalence that shapes their responses.

Oral history offers a way to document this lived experience as it attends to how individuals describe navigating it: the emotions, doubts, improvisations, and small negotiations that structure everyday participation. In this chapter, I outline the oral history methods I used to conduct interviews with *tongren* creators, describe the ethical and relational considerations guiding this work, and reflect on the design of the accompanying digital project, a website named Can You Get the 饭(fan)?³⁰. The chapter also situates my role as a long-term participant in *tongren* communities, acknowledging how my insider experience shaped both the interviews and their interpretation. Together, these components establish the methodological foundation for the project as a whole.

3.2 Researcher Positionality: Participation, Experience, and Reflexive Listening

My positionality in this project is shaped by more than a decade of participation in *tongren* communities in mainland China. Before approaching this project as a researcher, I was an illustrator, writer, and reader within these spaces. I followed artists, joined group chats, learned the rhythms of different platforms, and experienced the same uncertainties many of my narrators described: sudden disruptions to what once felt like a creative haven, including posts disappearing with only a warning notice left behind, tags becoming unsafe overnight, or entire folders of writing suddenly becoming inaccessible. This long-term participation gives me fluency in the everyday practices, vocabulary, and emotional landscape of *tongren* communities.

At the same time, participation does not exempt me from reflecting on my role as a researcher, as researchers who work within communities they belong to must be alert to the interpretive power they hold, even when they share background or experience with participants.³¹ Shared familiarity can create

²⁹ Eve Tuck, "Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities," *Harvard Educational Review* 79, no. 3 (2009): 409-427.

³⁰ Cleo Cui, *can you get the 饭(fan)*, 2025, <https://www.getthefan.com/>.

³¹ Sharryn Kasimir, "Precarity", Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology, 2018.

trust, but it can also lead to assumptions about similarity or equivalence. Throughout this project, I worked to remain attentive to the differences between my experiences and those of my narrators and to listen without collapsing their stories into my own.

Within this stance, many participants spoke with an openness that emerged from recognizing me as someone who understood the rhythms of *tongren* creation: how it feels to wait for comments, how tense a posting moment can be, how discouraging a deletion becomes. But my responsibility was to listen carefully rather than to assume common ground. In line with Tuck's argument for "suspending damage," I approached narrators not as victims, but as creators who chose to share their experiences and extend trust to me, even when their own words had been hindered or erased by platform moderation.³² They spoke with agency, humor, ambivalence, and insight, offering interpretations of censorship grounded in practice, emotion, and lived creativity. My role was to make room for their stories to emerge on their own terms and to represent them as faithfully as possible—without steering the conversation, narrowing their accounts to a single interpretation, or reshaping their experiences into narratives of harm alone.

My position as a long-term participant therefore shaped the methodological approach of this project in two ways: it enabled conversations that might not have been possible with a researcher who is not familiar with *tongren* communities, and it required persistent reflexivity to ensure that my closeness did not disturb the diversity of experiences shared with me.

3.3 Methodology: Interview Design, Recruitment, and Ethical Considerations

The oral history interviews that ground this project were designed to illustrate how *tongren* creators experience, interpret, and adapt to digital censorship in everyday practice. Because platform moderation operates through uncertainty rather than explicit rules, oral history offered a method capable of attending to emotion, memory, improvisation, and the subtle adjustments that shape creative life online, allowing narrators to guide the shape of their own stories.

Recruitment and Narrator Selection

I conducted interviews with ten *tongren* creators who write or organize events within fandom communities across platforms such as LOFTER, Weibo, and AO3. Most participants were recruited through direct outreach, including private messages on platforms where I had previously participated as a creator, and through a friend who was herself a creator and had experienced post deletions. Recruitment relied on trust: participants agreed to speak because they recognized me as part of the same creative ecosystem rather than as an external researcher.

Narrators must meet two criteria. First, all participants had to be over the age of eighteen, in accordance with mainland China's legal restrictions on minors' access to sexual or adult-themed content. Second, I prioritized creators who had experienced a post being flagged, deleted, or warned, or who were closely familiar with such incidents through their own participation in *tongren* communities. Together, these conditions ensured that narrators could speak willingly about their encounters with platform moderation, in ways they often felt unable to express elsewhere.

All narrators are identified with pseudonyms. They were given the option to choose their own pseudonym, to let me select one, or to remain unnamed altogether in the thesis. One narrator chose to share a censored work publicly and requested that the piece be included in the digital project accompanying this thesis. All other participants opted for anonymity due to the politically sensitive nature of speaking about censorship in mainland China. I also clarified that all interview audio recordings would be heard and stored only by me, both to preserve their voices and to ensure their privacy. While all interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, only translated English transcripts appear on the public website, allowing participants' experiences to be shared without exposing identifiable vocal details.

³² Tuck, "Suspending Damage," 415.

Interview Format and Process

All interviews were conducted remotely through voice calls rather than video. This format served both practical and ethical purposes: it protected narrator anonymity and allowed participants to speak from familiar environments that aligned with the norms of *tongren* communities, where creators interact primarily through their chosen cyber identities rather than real-life names or appearances. Each interview lasted between thirty minutes and two hours.

I used a semi-structured format: interviews began with one or two guiding questions to provide direction, but conversations were allowed to unfold organically. This narrator-centered approach gave participants the freedom to dwell on memories, examples, or frustrations that felt most urgent at the moment, allowing them to construct their own accounts rather than fitting their experiences into a rigid question-and-answer structure.

Interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed afterward. When narrators moved between Mandarin, regional dialects, and fandom-specific slang, I transcribed these shifts directly. Moments of hesitation, humor, or dissatisfaction were retained as they appeared. All English translations were produced by me with the goal of preserving rhythm, tone, and emotional nuance. I recognize, however, that translation inevitably narrows the expressive range of the original speech. Prioritizing narrator privacy, I chose not to share audio publicly; the digital project publishes only the English translations, while the Mandarin recordings remain stored securely and accessed only by me.

Ethical Commitments: Care, Vulnerability, and Trust

The ethical stance of this project is informed by scholarship on the aesthetics of care, which emphasizes relational, attentive, and context-specific listening when working in politically sensitive or precarious environments. Hence, care is not measured as sentimental but methodological: it is a commitment to listen without extraction, to remain responsive to moments of uncertainty or fear, and to recognize narrators as co-constructors of the historical record rather than passive informants.

Drawing on care-based approaches to memory and representation, particularly work that foregrounds attentive relationality and mnemonic openness, I designed the interview process to support rather than constrain participants' storytelling. In this sense, care becomes an ethical orientation, one that resists reductive narratives and instead cultivates conditions in which complexity can be expressed and held.³³ It is also a way to honor the trust narrators extend when speaking about censorship, vulnerability, and creation under constraint. By prioritizing their privacy and safeguarding their words, the interview process sought to create a space in which narrators could speak as fully and freely as they wished.

3.4 Digital Project Design: The Website as Method and Archive

The accompanying digital project, *Can You Get the 饭(fan)?*, functions as a methodological extension of this thesis and as an archive that documents one reality of *tongren* communities during a moment when many creators felt unable to write what they wanted. Designed as an interactive website, it mirrors the participatory structure of *tongren* spaces while presenting interview material in a form that foregrounds creativity, care, and audience engagement. The website invites readers to encounter narrators' words in ways that reflect how fan communities circulate and reinterpret information across fragmented and platform-dependent environments.

A central purpose of the site is to make the emotional texture of censorship legible to audiences outside *tongren* communities. Many creators described the frustration of encountering vague or

³³ Mihaela Mihai, "The Aesthetics of Care," in *Political Memory and the Aesthetics of Care: The Art of Complicity and Resistance* (Stanford University Press, 2022), 46-58.

unpredictable takedowns. The website recreates this uncertainty by inviting visitors to navigate the same opacity that creators face daily. Through interactive elements, users must guess which word triggered a deletion and are then shown partial, non-specific explanations that resemble the ambiguous notifications provided by Chinese platforms. This experiential approach allows visitors to directly feel the instability that shapes *tongren* creators' everyday practices.

Structure of the Website

The site is organized into four main sections:

1. Introduction

This section introduces the concept of “饭(fan)” and its role within *tongren* culture, emphasizing how the term refers to the works that creators “cook” for their communities. It also introduces the metaphor of “cooks,” situating narrators as active makers whose labor, creativity, and agency structure the community.

2. The Dining Menu (Interactive Quiz)

The interactive quiz presents real excerpts from interviewees' experiences and invites users to guess which specific word or element was flagged by a platform. Upon completing each question, users receive only a vague explanation of what they “missed”—a design choice meant to echo the ambiguity of real platform moderation. As users progress through multiple questions, they begin to infer patterns about what kinds of language appear risky or permissible, gradually constructing informal “rules” from repeated encounters with opaque enforcement. This process mirrors the way creators themselves learn to anticipate moderation, developing practical understandings of platform constraints through experience rather than explicit guidelines.

3. “Chefs” Blogs (Transcripts)

This section presents translated interview excerpts in a blog-style format. Each narrator selected a cooking utensil or tool as a symbolic avatar representing themselves, reinforcing the metaphor of creation-as-cooking. Although all interviews were originally conducted in Mandarin Chinese, I aimed to preserve the rhythms, tone, and emotional character of each narrator's voice in translation. This design allows each storyteller to “speak” in a way that reflects both their individuality and the shared practices of the *tongren* community.

4. Special Dining

One narrator contributed a work that was entirely removed from its original platform. After its removal, she revised the piece and later reposted a modified version. For this project, she requested that the unrevised version, though presented in translation, be made publicly available. This section honors her request and restores visibility to a version of the work that no longer circulates in its original form. By presenting this version with her permission, this archive demonstrates how digital collections can function as spaces of recovery, recognition, and care.

3.4 Translation, Security, and the Ethics of Protecting Narrators

Because *tongren* communities rely on pseudonymity as core norms of participation, protecting narrators' identities was essential to every stage of this project. In mainland China's digital environment, even minimal personal information can be weaponized through what is colloquially known as “开盒”

(“opening the box”), a practice in which an individual's private data—such as name, address, or phone number—is illegally obtained and circulated online by other users. Once exposed, this information is frequently used by strangers or coordinated groups to carry out sustained harassment, including spam

calls, malicious account registrations, and other forms of offline disruption that may extend to family members. In such a landscape, even the smallest linguistic detail can become a clue. This reality informed my decision to withhold all audio recordings from public circulation and to publish English translations only, creating a protective buffer between narrators' voices and the environments that might expose them.

Conducting interviews in my native language allowed conversations to unfold with comfort, fluency, and emotional precision; narrators could speak without searching for vocabulary or translating their own memories mid-sentence. Yet this advantage introduced a different responsibility: the act of translation itself. Scholars of translation in oral history remind us that translating interview material is never a neutral step. It is an interpretive process that shapes not only how a story is rendered on the page, but how meaning travels across linguistic and cultural contexts.³⁴ Translators make constant decisions about phrasing, emphasis, and cultural resonance. These decisions influence what becomes legible to new audiences and what remains embedded in the unspoken textures of the original speech.³⁵

These insights were especially important for a project that sits between different audiences: English-language readers seeking to understand the dynamics of *tongren* communities in mainland China, and the *tongren* creators themselves, whose experiences form the heart of the project but who also face the greatest risks. Writing for both required accepting that translation perform two simultaneous functions. It opens the narrators' stories to readers outside the community, especially those who can read English but may never enter fandom-centered digital spaces. At the same time, it protects creators by making it far more difficult to trace them through linguistic habits, slang, or dialect features that would be immediately recognizable within Chinese-speaking communities.

In this sense, the translated transcripts function not only as representations but as a kind of safe haven. They allow narrators' experiences to be shared publicly, as something many of them hoped for, while keeping potential sources of harm at a distance. Translation thus becomes a boundary that determines who can enter the archive and who cannot. This understanding also shaped the choices I made while translating: I worked to carry each narrator's tone into English wherever possible, drawing on my familiarity with both languages to render meaning with care while avoiding details that might expose their identities.

³⁴ For discussion of translation as interpretive labor in oral history, see Molly Andrews, "A Monoglot Abroad: Working Through Problems of Translation," *Oral History* 23, no. 2 (1995): 47-50.

³⁵ On how translators negotiate meaning, relational power, and cultural context, see Bogusia Temple, "Casting a Wider Net: Reflecting on Translation in Oral History," *Oral History* 41, no. 2 (Autumn 2013): 100-109.

Chapter 4

Under Unwritten Rules: Deletion, Revision, and the Making of Shared Tactics

4.1 Early Encounters with Digital Censorship

The interviews gathered for this project reveal censorship as a recurring condition that shapes how *tongren* creators think and interact with the platforms around them. Through their stories, creators reconstruct the moments in which they move through a landscape defined by half-visible boundaries and uncertainties. From shock to frustration, from tentative attempts to gradual realization, from anger to renewed determination, narrators describe a process of learning that unfolds emotionally as much as technically. Each encounter with deletion prompts reflection and adjustment. Over time, these individual responses grow into a shared, community-made system of strategies that develops in tandem with the platform's opaque rules.

Two major processes shape the analysis in this chapter. The first concerns the immediate experience of deletion: the emotional shock, confusion, and sense of instability that narrators described when a post disappeared or a warning appeared without explanation. The second concerns the workarounds and adaptive practices that follow—how creators revise, repost, reformat, or relocate their work, and how these actions become part of a collective system of knowledge. Taken together, these narratives illustrate how censorship becomes a shared and negotiated experience, one that is collectively navigated and reinterpreted through the everyday work of making, revising, and remaining present within *tongren* spaces.

4.2 Experiencing Deletion: Shock, Instability, and the Emotional Aftermath

For many narrators, the first encounter with censorship is more like an emotional event. Deletion arrives without warning, often without explanation, and its abruptness produces a mixture of shock and confusion. Some creators describe the moment as an interruption of the imaginative space they had built, and a reminder that the platforms on which they create are governed by rules they cannot fully see.

One narrator, Yu Qiao (喻乔), recalls watching her collaborative fanfiction disappear moments after posting, describing the moment as “like the sky was falling” when the platform refused to publish her work during a relay event. She and her friend spent hours testing and reposting fragments of the fanfiction, trying to guess which lines had triggered the filter:

We edited it at least ten times—maybe more... Eventually, we did manage to get it up, but then a week or two later, it got taken down again.

In this case, the disappearance introduced a sense of unpredictability that made creative work suddenly feel precarious. Similarly, for narrator No. 2, instability emerges from what she calls the “gray zone” of content moderation. She explains that censorship is not limited to explicit scenes:

It’s not about what’s happening, but how you describe it. Like, you could write a line like “he kissed him,” and that would be fine. But if you go into detail, like how the tongue moves or whatever...that’s a no-go. Even if I’m just being poetic or sensual, that can still get flagged.

The lack of clarity forces creators into a mode of speculation. They begin to infer patterns from their own deletions, asking not only whether a kiss is too explicit or a metaphor too sensual, but what, exactly, the platform might be targeting. As each removal becomes a data point, it seems that personal experience becomes the only reliable evidence available. Over time, guessing replaces guidance, and these repetition brings unexpected influences. As narrator No. 1 describes it as a deeper psychological effect:

My mind doesn’t even go there anymore. Or if it does, it immediately tells itself: Don’t write that...This ‘self’ inside me is the first to say, ‘There are so many things you shouldn’t say.’ That is the most terrifying part of self-censorship.

After the initial phases of shock and instability, creators begin a kind of internal purging, one that involves convincing themselves to avoid certain narrative directions because experience has taught them that those paths will not survive the platform’s filters. In this sense, censorship becomes learned through empirical experience: creators map what “doesn’t work” through accumulated failures, and these patterns gradually reshape how they imagine possibilities in the first place. This learned self-censorship marks the threshold to the next stage, as creators describe as the search for workarounds with an emotional doubling: discouragement intertwined with stubbornness. Mu Mu (木木), whose explicit but narratively necessary scene was removed, recalls it was “of course frustrating,” but she still wanted to post it the way it is.

This process also helps explain why regulation under opaque conditions can be more effective than explicit prohibition: it enlists creators into the work of censorship itself. As media scholars have long observed, vague or inconsistently applied restrictions tend to shift the burden of interpretation onto producers themselves, compelling them to anticipate limits that are never clearly articulated. Writing about mid-twentieth-century debates over comic book censorship, Henry E. Schultz describes how indeterminate standards forced creators into what he characterizes as a “guessing game,” one defined not by compliance with known rules but by attempts to infer “what was expected of them” without ever being equipped with the information necessary to know those expectations in advance.³⁶ In such environments, Schultz argues, regulation takes the form of an ongoing contest in which “the producer and the censor appear to be playing a game” with no shared rulebook, producing heightened caution and restraint precisely because the boundaries of acceptability remain unclear.³⁷

Translation studies add another layer to this process. Work on cross-linguistic interpretation has underscored that translators often operate with partial knowledge, navigating gaps between what can be

³⁶ Henry E. Schultz, “Censorship or Self Regulation?” *The Journal of Educational Sociology* 23, no. 4 (1949): 220-221.

³⁷ Schultz, “Censorship or Self Regulation?” 221. Schultz quotes Martin Quigley’s description of censorship as a situation in which producers and censors “appear to be playing a game,” lacking shared or definite standards.

carried across languages and what necessarily remains embedded in the original context.³⁸ The parallel is instructive: *tongren* creators work within a space of incomplete information, reconstructing invisible boundaries from experience and learning to “translate” their intentions into forms more likely to survive platform scrutiny. Both practices require sustained attention to context and the ability to make decisions in the shadow of what cannot be fully known. Under conditions where rules are unstable and rarely articulated, the shift from shock to adaptation marks the emergence of a methodological orientation shaped by forced strategic response: a practical way of acting in relation to moderation that develops through repeated encounters rather than through formal guidance. This orientation is central to my analysis of censorship as a lawlike system, insofar as it shows how predictable expectations emerge not from clear rules but from lived experience with opaque enforcement.

4.3 Learning to Navigate: Workarounds, Tactics, and Community Knowledge

If deletion introduces instability, the next stage is defined by experimentation. Narrators describe a period of tactical learning that unfolds through community wisdom. This process involves continual guessing, imaginative reshaping, and what one narrator called a “battle of patience” with the platform’s filters. However, through these repeated attempts, creators begin to construct their own shared system to survive within opaque boundaries.

One of the clearest examples comes from SuiSei, who recalls a story taken down repeatedly despite its careful construction. After discovering the disappearance, she describes entering a cycle of revisions guided only by inference:

I had no idea what triggered the filter...so I started guessing. Trial and error. I probably edited it ten times, maybe more. Based on what I’ve seen on the platform, I eventually came up with a list of ‘high-risk’ content...even the lightest kiss has to be written carefully. And descriptions of blood...anything related to ghosts or the supernatural is risky.

This kind of empirical guessing recurs throughout the interviews. Without clear guidance, writers rely on patterns pieced together from their own failures and from observing others’ censored posts. As Clio explains, this emerging knowledge comes directly from the community itself:

Ah, that’s thanks to the ancestors! I mean, other writers before me. You start to pick up patterns. Like, if a post has weird symbols or gaps between characters...you know something got flagged. If separating the characters doesn’t work, then I rewrite. If that doesn’t work, I delete. And I just keep adjusting until something finally gets through.

Similarly, Narrator No. 2 shares her own working sense of the platform’s shifting limits, inferred over time through trial, error, and repeated interaction with the moderation system:

LOFTER has this weird gray area—it’s not about what’s happening, but how you describe it. Like, you could write a line like “he kissed him,” and that would be fine. But if you go into detail, like how the tongue moves or whatever...that’s a no-go.

So the space becomes really tricky. Even if I’m not writing graphic sex, even if I’m just being poetic or sensual, that can still get flagged. And LOFTER’s system has changed a few times too. In the past year, from what I’ve experienced, short posts sometimes get unblocked quickly. But with longer pieces, if there’s any of that kind of language, there’s a good chance it’ll get flagged. Once your post gets flagged, you can try to appeal, but after a few rounds, it’ll get sent for manual review. At that point, it’s pretty much guaranteed to be rejected. Most of my posts that got taken

³⁸ Temple, “Casting a Wider Net,” 101-103.

down were in that blurry space, where it wasn't explicit, but it was still "too sexual" or "too violent," according to the system. That in-between space is really hard to navigate.

Through these stockpile of strategies, creators begin to learn what Temple calls the "inferential labor" of navigating opaque systems, where actors must deduce the rules of governance from limited cues, retroactively interpreting what a system disallows because it never says so directly.³⁹ Writers describe this process as an apprenticeship of observation.

Some workarounds involve linguistic restructuring. Mu Mu, after having a necessary explicit scene removed, turned to metaphor as a technique of survival:

I rewrote parts of it...used more symbolic imagery, more metaphors. Honestly, it hurt a little... what I originally wanted was directness. But eventually, I decided: fine. If I have to use metaphor and suggestion, maybe it can become another kind of style.

Here, adaptation becomes a compromised aesthetic choice as much as a practical tool. Although this shift in style often begins reluctantly, it becomes a workable solution that allows the story to survive the platform's filters while keeping most of its emotional core. Through repeated attempts, these adjustments form a quiet agreement between writers and readers: both sides learn to recognize the metaphors, softening techniques, and coded choices that convey meaning even when explicit language is no longer possible. The workaround becomes a communicative result, relying on a shared literacy that allows readers to recognize the writer's indirect voice.⁴⁰

Other narrators adopt platform-hopping as a more structural workaround. Narrator No. 2, for example, distinguishes between stories written "knowing they won't make it through" and those that might survive, adjusting her posting strategy accordingly:

If a story has extensive sexual scenes, I'll skip posting it there entirely...I just post a short intro on LOFTER and say, 'Full version available on another platform.'

Across these examples, the "workaround" becomes a set of parallel channels that strives to preserve narrative integrity even when the main platform rejects it. Though some creators reflect a pragmatic exhaustion, the fatigue of repeated deletions sometimes sharpens into a stubborn determination to keep going. Thus, the emotional arc moves from trying, to tiring, to refusing to give up. As Clio notes when her fanfiction was censored after ten rounds of revision:

It was exhausting... pretty depressing. But it lit up the little rebel in me...The more they try to stop me, the more I want to write it.

The repeated friction with the platform does not extinguish creativity, but intensifies it. Creators begin to see each deletion not only as a setback but as a provocation, a push that activates a deeper insistence on expression. Taken together, these stories show how *tongren* creators build a sophisticated system of navigation through collective experimentation. Each deletion, revision, or repost becomes part of a larger pattern, one that circulates among writers as tacit knowledge that allows creativity to persist within conditions of uncertainty.

³⁹ Ibid., 104-105.

⁴⁰ Although some creators do migrate to overseas platforms using VPNs, this option is unevenly available. VPN use requires technical knowledge, has been subject to increasing legal restriction in mainland China since 2016, and often entails abandoning established audiences and community networks on domestic platforms. For many creators, remaining on Chinese platforms is therefore not a preference but a practical necessity.

Conclusion: Uncertainty as Governance, Experience as Method

Across this analysis, digital censorship in mainland China emerges as a system that operates not primarily through explicit rules, but through uncertainty. Rather than guiding creators with transparent standards, platforms govern by withholding clarity, compelling users to infer boundaries from outcomes and to anticipate sanctions without knowing the criteria in advance. In *tongren* communities, this uncertainty reshapes creative practice from within: creators reason inductively, revise preemptively, and internalize constraint as a form of self-regulation that comes to feel systematic despite the absence of formal law.

When this process is traced across platforms and through creators' narrated experiences, censorship appears as something learned rather than simply imposed. What emerges is a system that takes shape through repeated encounters with deletion, uncertainty, and adjustment. Across these accounts, censorship appears as an emotional, interpretive, and collective process: creators experience disruption, infer patterns from outcomes, revise their practices, and share tactics that allow participation to continue under constraint. In this way, censorship becomes embedded in everyday creative reasoning, transforming uncertainty into a lived and internalized form of governance.

The accompanying digital project, *Can You Get the 饭(fan)?*, extends this analysis beyond the written page by offering another way of engaging with uncertainty. Rather than explaining censorship through exposition alone, the website invites readers to move through a series of encounters structured by partial information, delayed feedback, and non-specific explanations. In doing so, visitors are placed in a position analogous to that of *tongren* creators, who must infer patterns without access to explicit rules and learn through repetition rather than instruction. The site thus operates as both archive and method, translating oral history narratives into an experiential form that foregrounds the cognitive and affective labor involved in navigating opaque moderation.

When understood as an epistemic condition, censorship reorganizes reasoning, creativity, and self-regulation, guiding action even in the absence of explicit rules. Although grounded in *tongren* communities, this framework highlights how creators actively work with uncertainty, developing practical ways to navigate opaque moderation rather than simply being constrained by it.

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