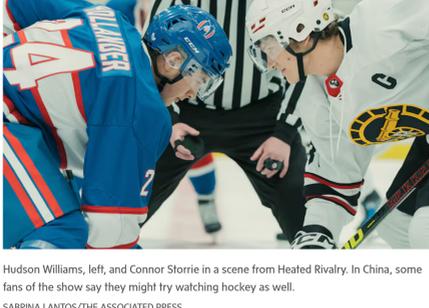


Heated Rivalry is a (pirated) hit in China, despite a crackdown on LGBTQ content

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Hudson Williams, left, and Connor Storrie in a scene from Heated Rivalry. In China, some fans of the show say they might try watching hockey as well.

SABRINA LANTOS/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

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When China hosted the Winter Olympics in 2022, President Xi Jinping talked of his country entering a “new era of ice and snow sports.” In the years since, millions have tried skiing, inspired by gold medalist superstar Eileen Gu.

The Chinese men’s hockey team, which lost all its games and ranked last in the Olympics, didn’t exactly stir the same reaction, and hockey remains a niche pastime in China, far less popular than soccer, table tennis or basketball.

Canada’s favourite sport may not be a hit, but one of its top TV shows is, so much so it could help the former gain some traction. *Heated Rivalry*, which follows the steamy sex life and slow-budding romance between two Canadian and Russian hockey players, was briefly the top-rated foreign show on Douban, China’s answer to movie cataloguing app Letterboxd, and remains in the top 10, putting it on par with *Stranger Things* or *Emily in Paris*.

That is not down to canny marketing by Crave, which also isn’t making any money off *Heated Rivalry*’s Chinese viewers, as the show isn’t legally available to stream. Its pirated popularity has spread by word-of-mouth online, particularly among fan-fiction communities focused on same-sex relationships, similar to that which inspired Nova Scotia author Rachel Reid to write the book on which *Heated Rivalry* is based.

Heated Rivalry’s U.S. invasion expands with Hudson Williams’ late-night debut on Jimmy Fallon

Could the viral Heated Rivalry fleece become official Team Canada merch?

Mu Zi, a 27-year-old vocal coach in Shanghai, said she discovered the show on a friend’s recommendation, and “never expected it to be this good.”

“I’m a Formula One fan and love watching sport, so I’m always keen to see such elements in film and TV,” she told The Globe and Mail. “Ice hockey is a highly confrontational sport, and pairing that with a gay romance creates a strong contrast that’s really interesting.”

Ms. Mu is a big reader of *danmei*, a genre of fan fiction and manga about gay relationships popular with young women in China. While some enjoy such works simply for their plot and eroticism, many have said they read *danmei* because it offers a vision of romance free of the unequal gender dynamics of heterosexual dating in still highly patriarchal China.

“Women turn to *danmei* for pure love, especially as they face pressure from families, peers and society to get married and have kids,” said Aiqing Wang, a senior lecturer at the University of Liverpool who studies Chinese popular culture and internet literature.

Some Chinese viewers have compared *Heated Rivalry* to *Addicted*, a short-lived 2016 streaming show based on novelist Chai Jidan’s teen romance of the same name.

“I was in my senior year of high school at the time,” Ms. Mu said. “It caused a big sensation, not less than *Heated Rivalry*, but was taken down shortly after. I guess most *danmei* lovers in China are envious of the atmosphere and level of support *Heated Rivalry* has received.”

Addicted was yanked from streaming services by China’s government censor, which soon after issued an order banning shows from depicting “abnormal sexual relationships and behaviours,” including same-sex activity.

The move was the start of a conservative shift that continues to this day, and has seen the visibility of LGBTQ people massively decline, alongside a crackdown on queer and feminist organizing. In November, dozens of *danmei* writers were interrogated by police and some charged with producing and selling “obscene materials.” Websites dedicated to *danmei* were taken offline, while mainstream fan-fiction sites removed hundreds of works.

Why Canada needs to produce more shows like Heated Rivalry

In this climate, Chinese fans had little hope *Heated Rivalry* would ever air in their country, even as Crave rushes to get it into other markets where it is currently being heavily pirated. (A representative for Crave did not respond to a request for comment. *Heated Rivalry* is available on HBO Max in Hong Kong, which has different censorship laws.)

“Of course, I really hope this series can be introduced to China, but right now that seems almost impossible,” said Ann Wang, a 36-year-old copyright specialist in Beijing. “In a cultural environment that doesn’t welcome same-sex love stories, such attempts might actually end up harming the work.”

Indeed, even if China’s censors were to turn a blind eye to the show’s gay and bisexual themes, *Heated Rivalry*’s frank depiction of sex would never fly in a country where TV shows remain deeply chaste, with limits on how much cleavage can be shown and romantic scenes cutting away after a few kisses. Popular Western shows that have made it into China, such as *Game of Thrones* or *Friends*, have done so with sex scenes or those referencing gay characters cut.

While Crave is unlikely to see any benefit from *Heated Rivalry*’s popularity in China, the sport of hockey just might. Both Ms. Mu and Ms. Wang admitted to becoming puck-curious as a result of watching the show.

“I’ve never watched a hockey game in the past,” Ms. Wang said. “It feels like a sport bursting with hormones. If I get the chance, I’ll go watch.”

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