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**A Search for Fun, Love, or Equality:  
Boys' Love Fiction and Fans in China**

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**A Search for Fun, Love, or Equality:  
Boys' Love Fiction and Fans in China**

**by**

**Pengli Huang, B.A.; M.A.**

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## **Abstract**

### **A Search for Fun, Love, or Equality: Boys' Love Fiction and Fans in China**

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In this research I address the phenomenon of female fans' fascination with online boys' love fiction in China, and the discussion centers on the questions of why these women are interested in the boys' love theme, why they prefer boys' love to traditional heterosexual romance, and how they define and identify with male–male relationships in the boys' love fiction. Through focusing research on a popular Chinese online-fiction website for women ([www.jjwxc.net](http://www.jjwxc.net)), I use historical review, online observations, and content analysis of online boys' love fiction to collect data on my research questions. Understanding female fans' expectation of and attitudes towards love and romance and analyzing the content of boys' love fiction allow for a comprehension of the interactions of gender, sexuality, identity, and culture in shaping these women's practice and choice of boys' love genre in China.

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## **Introduction: Why a Study of Boys' Love Fiction and Fans**

If an American says, "I am a homosexual," it may not be a big problem; if a Chinese person announces the same, especially in mainland China, it is not unusual to see how surprised people are. In China, there are still very strict gender norms regulating how men and women should behave, and homosexuality is still not an open and welcome topic for most Chinese people, although more and more Chinese scholars and social workers work hard to defend the rights of homosexual groups. As I searched Chinese Academic Journals for publications related to homosexuality, before 1990s, I noticed that there are very few articles available; after 1990s, although there was more research about homosexuality, most of articles are in such fields as medical, pathology, and HIV/AIDS prevention. The media in China provides relatively negative reports and images of homosexual groups as well, even the law decriminalizing homosexuality has only been promulgated since the early 1990s. Therefore, when talking about the phenomenon of heterosexual women's interest in online boys' love genres, generally the first idea jumping into people's heads is: What are these women thinking about? Are they crazy? Neither these women's taste nor the theme and content of boys' love are accepted by mainstream Chinese culture. To understand why these women are fascinated with boys' love genre, we need to first know what boys' love genre is.

Boys' love (shortened to BL hereafter) is a genre describing love between boys or young men, particular beautiful ones; this genre has gained popularity among women and now is mainly read and written by and for women. BL comes in various forms, including manga (comics), fiction (novels and stories), poetry, essays, and animation, and goes by different names in different places, including *Slash*, *YAOI*, *Tanbi*, *Danmei*, *Boys' Love*, and *Tongren* (Berry, 2007). Over the last couple of decades, BL genres have spread

throughout the world. In the USA, for example, it is known as slash fiction, and “the term ‘slash’ was coined as a result of the practice of placing the mark ‘/’, between the names of the two male characters appropriated from the realm of popular television, indicating to the reader the romantic or sexually explicit nature of their relationship” (Keft-Kennedy, 2002, p. 52). In Japan, the most popular BL publication for women is *YAOI*—an acronym of the first letters of Japanese words *yama nashi* (no climax), *ochinashi* (no point), and *iminashi* (no meaning)—manga which focus on romantic relationships between men and may include sexually explicit content (Levi, 2009). In the People’s Republic of China, the BL genre is called *Danmei* (indulgence in aesthetics) and gains its popularity mainly through the Internet.

*Danmei* is directly translated from Japanese word *Danbi* (indulgence in aesthetics), which was originally used to refer to a Japanese literacy school within Romance emerging from 1930s. Since this school of artists emphasized the beauty of extreme, splendor, and transiency (similar to the cherry blossom, which is so treasured and worshiped by Japanese people), so their works were considered an “indulgence in aesthetics”. When *YAOI* manga became popular among Japanese women, some fans also used *Danbi* to refer to *YAOI* since, first, there were so many beautiful boys in the manga, and second, the male-male love as a social taboo, considered by fans, brought a special aesthetic sensibility. After being introduced into China, *Danmei* (Chinese translation of *Danbi*) was accepted by Chinese fans and became the proper noun of BL publications, although its original meaning was not necessary about male-male love.

In this thesis, the reason I choose to use BL other than *Danmei* is because the former is better at pointing out the fact of the genre—i.e., the love between boys or young men. Moreover, since there are so many different names for BL genres in different countries and areas, those names such as Slash or *YAOI* do not have direct and paralleled

translations in Chinese. Usually, Chinese fans use the original names with long explanations when addressing *Slash* or *YAOI*, so as the translation of *Danmei* in English. BL seems to be a relatively simpler and widely accepted and recognized name for fans. Therefore, I use BL to address the male-male theme as a whole, and use different names such as *Slash*, *YAOI*, or *Danmei* when explaining or addressing specific circumstance.

The emergence of online BL genres (mainly fiction) began about nine to ten years ago in China. The rapid development of the Internet has provided an unprecedented opportunity for the visibility and spread of some subcultures that have been excluded and alienated by mainstream cultures, and BL genre has been one among them. As a new phenomenon, at the very beginning, people did not pay much attention to these online BL works, and they even they did not know that the readers and contributors of BL works were women. BL works gained momentum mainly on some female-oriented websites, and more and more women showed their interests in this new genre. These female fans of BL works mocked themselves as *Funiü* (in Chinese, *Fu* means decadent, immoral, corrupt, and degenerate; *niü* means girl, woman, or female. In the following content, I will use “decadent girl(s)” to paraphrase the Chinese characters *Funiü*). What are the characteristics of “decadent girl(s)”? They are relatively young, and the majority of them are high school, college, university students, and office workers. Most “decadent girl(s)” grew up with and are also loyal fans of Japanese manga; they like to spend their time on the Internet, and they are interested in online fiction, and especially in BL genres.

Being curious about this new genre, I began to pay attention to online BL works, and this triggered my research interests. Why do these women like to read BL genre? Why do they prefer BL to traditionally heterosexual romance? As females, how do they define and identify with the male-male relationship in BL works? How should we understand BL phenomenon within the Chinese social and cultural context?

This research became my thesis project, and its intended audience includes researchers and scholars in the field of women/gender studies, queer studies, cultural studies, and other interdisciplinary fields. In order to address the phenomenon of heterosexual women's fascination with online BL fiction in China, I use review and comparison, online observations, and content analysis of online BL works to collect data related to my research interests. Through the research, I hope I can present some answers to such questions as why these women like BL, what the reasons are behind their choice of BL genre, and how to understand BL phenomenon in China.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The discussion of BL works must begin with an analysis of romance since BL works mainly talk about the love stories between boys and young men, and so are a type of romance. Romance is one of the most popular genres with prodigious numbers of female fans around the world, in comparison with a relatively small number of male readers. Many romance writers have considered why women like romance. As famous romance writer Nora Roberts argues, women like romance because “[T]he books are about the celebration of falling in love and emotion and commitment, and all of those things we really want” (Grey, 2000). For novelist Susan Elizabeth Phillips, the popularity of romance among women is due to the fact that the heroine always wins, sometimes overcoming great odds so that she is no longer a victim (Leopold, 2000). Undeniably, the majority of romance and relating studies only focus on heterosexual pairing, so the extensive arguments about the “heroines” cannot be applied equally to the BL genres.

Despite its popularity and huge market potential, romance has always been derided and critically ignored, in company with other popular genres such as men's adventure and science fiction; even some dedicated readers feel embarrassed to admit to buying or even reading the books; and academic attention has not always been given to

romance and female fandom (Grey, 2000). Although the situation has changed a lot since 1980s, the research on romance is still a field dominated by female scholars. The vast majority fans of romance are women and most romance are written from women's perspectives, and some romance novelists believe that this is the reason for the derision, skepticism, and stigma toward romance (Shepherd, 2007; Grey, 2000).

Researchers studying romance fiction have also provided their findings and conclusions concerning this genre. Some believe that romance fiction works to strengthen patriarchal system and women's subordination (Douglas, 1980; Modleski, 1980); however, Radway (1983) contends that romance "may serve positive functions even as the novels celebrate patriarchal institutions," and that "some contemporary romances actually attempt to reconcile changing attitudes about gender behavior with more traditional sexual arrangements" (p. 54). Radway (1984) also opposes the tendency to study and interpret the texts of romance fiction in isolation, and her argument indicates the importance of relating any specific genre to a broad social context. Similarly, BL, as one type of romance, although it may share some characteristics of heterosexual romance, should not be examined separately from fan activities and its broad social context. That is, BL works is the co-product of both the writers and the readers, and the social context of the writers and the readers works to shape how they construct the love and relationship in the works.

Within Western/English literature, there are many researchers working on the topic of the increasing influence of Japanese popular culture to Western countries (West, 2009; Kelts, 2006; Iwabuchi, 2002; Napier, 2001; Levi, 1996; Schodt, 1996), with some studies on BL genre (*YAOI* manga) and fans' activities (Hatayama, 2009; Welker, 2006; McLelland, 2005, 2003, 2000). Among researchers on queer cultures in Japan (including *YAOI* manga), McLelland "provides an accessible and readable introduction to

subcultures which have received little attention in English-language scholarship (or in mainstream Japanese scholarship) ... . There is no comparable study available.” (book review by Vera Mackie). McLelland’s discussions of *YAOI* manga and BL tradition in Japan is illuminating to my study since during the research, I have found that BL culture and fans’ activities in China share a lot in common with *YAOI* culture in Japan. Also, when tracing the BL tradition and culture in Japan, McLelland notices the influence of Chinese traditional cross-gender performance on Japan, which has played a role on contributing to Japanese society’s fascination with and favor of male beauty and male-male love. However, although the similarities between Chinese culture and Japanese culture, no research has focused on the subject of the influence of Japanese BL culture on China, let alone the situation of BL works in China.

In China, the BL genre, which has been popular since the late 1990s, has attracted some media and academic attention, but the media, as well as scholars, often expresses a negative attitude toward BL publications since publishing and distributing BL is still consider “abnormal” in mainland China (Liu, 2009). Although homosexuality has been decriminalized since the 1990s in China, the prohibition to and control of homosexual publications has always existed. The publications of some early BL magazines in late 1990s, such as *Different Field*, *Zero*, *Act*, were stopped by the Authority only after several months. Now, very few legitimate BL magazines circulate in the market except several ones issued by foreign publishers.

Many scholars in China tend to discuss BL genres in terms of morality and moral judgment (Wang & Liu, 2008; Tian, 2008; Ruan, 2008; Han, 2007). Almost all studies agree that BL genres in China originate from the influence of Japanese BL publications, however, none has focused on how Japanese BL culture influence Chinese BL culture and what the differences are between Japanese BL culture and Chinese BL culture. Due

to a wide range of perspectives and understandings between researchers, there are still some very different, sometimes even conflicting research findings concerning similar topics. Yang (2006) implies that the main reason for women to choose the BL genre is to satisfy their sexual fantasies about men and to release their adolescent sexual desires. Because of the deficiency of sex education in contemporary China, young women cannot acquire knowledge of sex/sexuality through legitimate means, so they have to resort to the very unusual content of BL. Opposite to widespread negative attitudes about BL genres, Yu (2009) believes that the popularity of BL fiction among women indicates their acceptance of homosexuality, particularly gay men, which may lead to the acceptance of homosexual group as a whole by mainstream cultures and society. BL genres, presented by Zheng & Wu (2009) and Liu (2009), are the products of unequal gender system and will pose women's interrogation and challenge to patriarchy and heterosexual hegemony. However, according to X. Li (2008), BL literature is not the reflection of homosexuality in reality and the male-male romance in the fiction is only the projection of female identification and self-expression. Covered by the superficial disguise of anti-heteronormalecy and anti-orthodoxy, it underscores women's unconscious conformation and moderate adjustment to traditional morality and value.

Although these Chinese researchers' finds are helpful for me to understand BL culture in China, I still found that their studies haven't provided satisfied answers to my research questions. For example, as Yang (2006) argues, because of the deficiency of sex education in contemporary China, so many women choose the BL genre to satisfy their sexual fantasies about men and to release their adolescent sexual desires. However, due to the much negative attitude to homosexuality, it is still easier to obtain heterosexual pornographic materials than homosexual ones, which makes Yang's statement not so cogent and credible. Contrary to the homosexual fans argument, the fact remains that

many gay men protest the distortion of homosexuality in BL works. Considering the subject of whether BL genre is against patriarchy and male-dominance or not, there is no persuasive and conclusive evidence provided by researchers favoring either side. Therefore, the space for new interpretation of BL phenomenon in China remains open and the alternative perspectives and supportive evidences are needed.

As an online-fiction fan, I often visit some very popular online-fiction websites in China (most of them oriented towards female fans). Before I really knew what BL was, I was first attracted by the name *Danmei* (indulgence in aesthetics) because I had never heard about it. As I opened some links and read some stories, I realized that they were stories about male-male love, then I naturally assumed that these BL works were mainly by and for gay men; their appearance on women's websites was due to the fact that the similarly oppressive and unequal social status shared by women and homosexual people made female fans have a more sympathetic and supportive attitude to gay men and BL works. Based on this assumption, I hypothesized that the emergence and popularity of online BL works would help people, especially women, to develop a more tolerant, even supportive, attitudes toward homosexuality in China.

As I collected more and more data about BL genre, my original hypothesis was challenged substantially. First, BL is mainly by and for women instead of gay men as I assumed. Second, BL works and fans have also been criticized by many gay communities. Grounding on new findings, I kept adjusting and redirecting my research attention and questions. During the process, many new questions began to jump into and linger in my head: Why do these fans who mock themselves or are named as "decadent girls" like BL genres? Why do they prefer BL to heterosexual romance? Why cannot GL (girl's love) works achieve the similar popularity as BL ones? What makes fans believe

that the love between men is more beautiful and desirable? What are fans' standards of an ideal love?

In Western literature, although there is much research on the similar phenomena of heterosexual women's fascination with the BL genres, such as slash fiction in the US and *YAOI* manga in Japan, there are few studies of BL genre in China. The different developmental trajectory of BL works in China needs to be addressed under the particular social and cultural backgrounds of China, which is a gap within Western literature. For example, in Japan, pornography, prostitution, and homosexuality are not clearly defined as illegal, so there are lots of explicit depictions of sexual intercourse in manga. *YAOI* is actually an adult pornographic manga for women, and an alternative source for the acronym sometimes offered by fans is: *yamete, oshiri ga itai* (Stop! My ass hurts!)—better indicates the kind of loose and playful attitude toward sex displayed by many *YAOI* fans (Thorn, 2004; McLelland, 2000). Thus, most Japanese fans get very direct homoerotic pleasure from their readings. However, due to the strict censorship and the traditional moderate attitude toward sex and sexuality in China, as well as to homosexuality, sex descriptions in BL works are much fewer or even absent, so the BL fans in China use a different strategy and narration from fans in other countries. Moreover, since publications of homosexuality are considered “abnormal” or marginalized, most BL works are only available online or through the Internet (in China, online publications face relatively loose administration and censorship) instead of as hard-copy publications like Japan or other western countries.

Moreover, the most neglected issue in light of the phenomenon of the BL genre is the very different experiences and imaginings that the “decadent girl(s)” have through reading and writing BL works. When addressing BL genre, many researchers tend to discuss the phenomenon itself instead of analyzing and studying the contents of the

genre. BL works, as the mental production of “decadent girl(s),” present an interesting range of imaginings and fantasies that “decadent girl(s)” have when they deploy the male-male stories. However, little research has paid attention to how “decadent girl(s)” make sense of their transgressing imaginings as men, from women’s perspectives, in BL fiction. In my research, I analyze the content of some BL fiction and discuss how “decadent girl(s)” present and make sense of their imaginative male narratives.

Among the limited research on BL works in China, most attentions have focused on the negative impacts and on making moral judgments, for example, researcher Tian (2008) argues that the emergence of heterosexual women’s fascination with online BL fiction is a symbol of cultural and moral loss in China. Some psychiatrists even believe that indulging in BL would probably lead to abnormal sex-orientation or deviance (Sina News, 2008). Little research in China has answered such questions as: Why do these women like to read BL fiction? What kind of pleasure and satisfaction can they obtain from BL fiction? Does the reading of BL fiction have any impact on their sex orientation? The voices and experiences of these female fans are typically unheard and ignored in the research. Concerning the afore-mentioned inadequacies, I hope my research can fill some gaps within the literature.

## **EPISTEMOLOGY**

Research is always under the guide of specific knowledge structures and theoretic frameworks. Epistemological assumptions decide the methodology of the research, how the researcher should relate to the subject matter, and what the products of the study are. Here, I do not want to discuss how knowledge is produced, or by whom, or the nature of knowledge. Instead, I ask myself: When I use “Western” theories to structure my research, will I necessarily fall into the trap of westernization and of imposing western theories to my research and subjects? For me, the use and selection of specific theories

can be a biased and value-laden process decided by the researcher's standpoint and worldview. Writing in English and studying in an American university will not necessarily make me "Westernized," and my experience and educational and cultural backgrounds all play some roles on shaping my understandings of the research topic. In addition, language is always an issue for me since sometimes I have to use the terminology familiar to Western audiences when there is no paralleled expression in Chinese or when the direct translation may lead to some misunderstandings to English speakers (will discuss this problem below). Nevertheless, I believe that there should not be a territory limit for any theory, and it depends on the researcher who decides how to use the theory. The theoretic frameworks in the research are the ones I think instructive and appropriate to my topic and interpretation.

### **Grounded Theory**

Before I began my research, I kept thinking about the theoretical frame that I needed to guide and structure it. When I talked with some professors, they all reminded me of the trap of trying to fit my data into Western theories, which was common for international students when they analyzed subject matter in relation to their home countries. I made the same mistake at the very beginning when I read literature addressing similar phenomena in other countries, such as *YAOI* manga and slash fiction. There were many academic articles and books in English available and the researchers used different theories and research methods to analyze and interpret the phenomena of heterosexual women's fascinations with BL genres. Because there were few references available in respect to BL fiction in China due to the marginal status of homosexual and queer studies, so I just tried to incorporate Western researchers' theories directly into my research.

However, when I tried to combine some theoretical interpretations with the contexts I wanted to address, many problems appeared and there were always some gaps between the borrowed theory and the data I collected. For example, I noticed that many Western researchers use feminist theory to address slash fiction, so I also considered BL fans as feminists who challenged patriarchal system. However, my online observations did not necessarily support this hypothesis: BL fans seldom admitted that they were feminists (feminist is a newly-introduced word in China and rarely used and recognized by Chinese people; when used, sometimes, it may contain negative connotation). Many fans still view BL works as an entertainment without any political implication (for example, feminism, support for homosexuality, or being against patriarchy). During the process of reconsidering and redefining my research topic, grounded theory has been a great help and instruction. As Charmas (2006) argues, “grounded theory methods offer sharp tools for generating, mining, and making sense of data. Grounded theory can give you flexible guidelines rather than rigid prescriptions. With flexible guidelines, you direct your study but let your imagination flow” (p. 15). The reading of grounded theory helped me to avoid the armchair and positivist tendency in my original plan to force preconceived ideas and theory upon my data instead of producing correspondent theory “grounded” in the data.

In the process of data collection, grounded theory also helps me narrow my research scope and clarify my research questions, and my own interpretations about BL works have been gradually and progressively formulated, reformulated, and sometimes discarded during the process of data collection and analysis. Through the readings of other studies and research on similar phenomena (slash fiction, *YAOI* manga), I have become much more aware of the importance of grounded theory in illustrating the theoretical signification of my research. Even addressing similar phenomena, researchers

sometimes will develop different interpretations, and what is of great importance is to explain the research subjects descriptively and comparably, and to make sense of the theoretic framework. With the guide of grounded theory and a mixture of inductive and deductive reasoning, I have constructed the interpretations of BL genre and fan activities in China according to my observations and analysis of available data.

### **Gender and Sexuality**

In her analysis of the discursive practices that have shaped gender and sexuality, Butler (1990) questions the categories of “gender and the heterosexist matrix of power and discursive relations that effectively produce and regulate the intelligibility of sex, gender and desire” (p. 42). Underlying Butler’s work is a questioning of a causality that is taken for granted: a particular sex (naturally) leads to a particular gender, which (naturally) leads to a particular sexuality.

We live in a (hetero)sexist society which makes us tend to think of sexual orientation in discrete and dichotomous categories: we are either homosexual or heterosexual. The full variety and richness of human sexual experience has been neglected by the society. The by-product of the latter is the gender hierarchy. Therefore, in *Gender and Desire: Uncursing Pandora* (1997), Polly Young-Eisendrath laments the fact that, “[I]n male dominated societies, what feels good for girls and women erotically and sexually has been largely concealed. At the core of these issue is a confusion between being the object and being the subject of desire... female sexual desire is objectified as ‘how I need to look’ rather than ‘how I want to feel’” (p. 73). According to the logic of what the society defines as normality, as a woman chooses an opposite-sex mate as her lifetime partner in real life, she must also pattern her fantasies on the heterosexual scripts offered to her by the dominant culture. After all, since heterosexual attraction is natural, taken for granted, and thereby transparent, it needs no justification.

With the popularity of BL works among Chinese women, the public has paid attention to this “unusual” phenomenon. In China, a country that puts great emphasis on collectivism and morality, any behavior different from the norms will be criticized and condemned as immoral and decadent. The name “decadent girl(s)” is a reflection of public reaction to the BL fans, and this name also shows that women now seem to have the right to choose whatever they like to read, but the society has the power to censor their taste and decides whether their choice is legitimate and acceptable or not. Interestingly, while “decadent girl(s)” are stigmatized, men who like female-female pornographic pictorials and videos are much more socially acceptable. For example, heterosexual men’s magazines often feature two women together in sexual positions. However, “decadent girl(s)” often mention that the public views them as weird, perverted, or wrong, and that BL genres are things should be hidden. It is a common theme among women interested in BL genre to speak of how they have to hide the interest from their children, coworkers, or significant others as they compulsively finish reading a story. We have to ask the questions: Why is it acceptable for a guy to talk freely about how hot lesbian videos are, but wrong for women to read and discuss BL genres?

A study of women’s fascination with BL works provides us an understanding not only of the diversity of human sexuality, but also of the relationship Chinese women have to gender discourse and power. As for the former, many theorists have proved that sexual orientation is a continuous variable, and no one is absolutely heterosexual or homosexual. People can show enormous variety in their sexual behavior, sexual fantasies, emotional attachments, and sexual self-concept, and each contributes to a person’s sexual orientation (Carroll, 2007). When we look at the experiences of those “decadent girl(s),” they present us a very good example of the diversity of human sexuality: in their daily lives, they can be defined as heterosexuals and most of them have a husband, a boyfriend,

or are mothers; their fantasies are homosexual, and they are fascinated with and excited by same-sex readings and writings and some of them even admit that they only read and write BL fiction; their practices are similar to transgender ones because they read and write from the opposite-sex's perspectives. The main characters in the BL fiction are males, and some female writers even use first person narrative in the fiction; therefore, they usually need to cross the gender line and imagine from men's perspectives. Concerning the "cross-gender" experience, these women's behaviors and fantasies cannot be easily captured in any restrictive category. How would we categorize these women's sexual orientation?

Within a society like China, women's gender, sexuality, and even desire are still controlled and defined by the power of those who have the right to produce man-dominance discourses (will talk about the historical changes of Chinese women's status in Chapter One). Are the women who are fascinated with BL fiction similar to men who enjoy lesbian pornography? Is the male bonking just what those women want? Probably not. The most popular BL stories among "decadent girl(s)" are always not the ones with the most and blatant sexual plots. The lovely romantic relationship and well-organized story lines are of great importance to the fans. For many fans, it is romantic love rather than sex which people should treasure; and they believe that the main characters in the fiction just fall in love with someone who is the same sex as them, and that there is nothing wrong with their choice. In China, gender equality is still far from a reality and heterosexual relationship is really a disappointment for many women. Thus, "decadent girl(s)" use the very different imaginations and fantasies—the love stories between boys or young men—to express what they want and search for: reciprocal, mutually respectful, and particularly equal love. The study of BL works and fan activities in China works to

unfold the circumstance of Chinese women's lives and experience concerning gender and sexuality.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The characteristics of my data will determine my research methods. To understand fans of BL genre is to observe and decode their practices and activities. Because of the differences between their online activities and activities in the real world, I use online observation to collect data addressing different aspects of my research. Because the BL works are the products of fans' practices and activities, the analysis of the content of popular BL works is of importance to understand this phenomenon. Together, these methods allowed me to do a close, in-depth study of "decadent girl(s)" and to explore gendered attitudes and behaviors underlying the superficial phenomenon.

First, I conducted a non-participatory online observation in a famous online-fiction website for women in China: [www.jjwxc.net](http://www.jjwxc.net) (shortened to JJ below), including fans' communications, the conversations in the discussion forum, comments on the writers' work and the writers talking about their writing experiences and daily lives. In an attempt to find additional types of interview subjects, I paid attention to what fans like to discuss most within the communities, what they like to share when they communicate with other fans, and how they develop their friendships.

Second, I amassed and analyzed the content of some popular BL works in the website. JJ is an online-fiction website for women, including eight categories of romance fiction: Ancient, Contemporary, Campus, *Danmei* (indulgence in aesthetics, i.e., BL), *Tongren* (same person, a genre using characters from other famous works to develop another different story, similar to fan fiction), Mystery, Science and Detective, and Short Story. For the sake of convenience, I use the name BL fiction (i.e., *Dammei* fiction). The analysis of BL fiction focuses on the transgressing (cross-gender) narratives by fans, and

the purpose is to discuss how “decadent girl(s)” imagine and make sense of their imaginative male perspectives in the fiction, what the differences or similarities are between BL fiction and BG (boy and girl, i.e., heterosexual romance) fiction, and how “decadent girl(s)” define the relationships in BL fiction. Some details and descriptions in the fiction will be used to specify the interpretations. The content-analysis method can help to embody the characteristics of BL fiction through reading and encoding, and the corresponding data from the analysis will also help to corroborate my online observation data.

### **About the Research Site**

JJ is a Chinese online-fiction website specific for female fans, and was established on October 1, 2003 and now boasts the biggest online-fiction base for women in the world. The daily visitors to this website are over 20 million, its worldwide ranking is around one-thousandth and it is one of the top-hundred Chinese websites (resource from official introduction of JJ). JJ was first set up by several amateur fiction fans as a non-profit website, and the purpose was, and still is, to “build up a platform for women who like romance fiction.” Anyone who likes romance can read and post any love story on the website freely. In 2008, JJ was reformed as commercial website, and fans may need to pay for some parts of reading. Since JJ has attracted a great number of fans, the number of hits is a very important index of how popular the story is. The JJ system will rate the story according to the hits and provide the monthly, quarterly, biannually, and totally ranking lists to fans. When JJ notices that a specific genre or writer has gained substantial followers, it will encourage the writer to begin to charge money (the profit will shared half and half by the writer and JJ) or JJ will sign a contract with the writer. Usually, other publishers can also contact specific writer if they want to publish the writer’s story in hard copy. The writer has the right to decide whether or not she wants to charge the story

or becomes a contracted writer for JJ, or publish a book. So far, JJ has changed from an originally non-profit website to a semi-commercial one.

According to the data published by JJ, this is website mainly by and for women: 1) female readers; 2) female writers; 3) publications for women; and 4) female administrators, except for one or two male computer programmers. The fans of JJ are usually from 13 to 40 years old and most are middle-, high-school and university students and office workers. The overwhelming majority of online fiction is romance fiction (more than 95%) which reflect women's interest in love stories and their fantasies about love and intimate relationship. As mentioned before, JJ has eight categories of romance and BL genre is one of the categories. Among many online-fiction websites for women, JJ is the first one of only a few that gives great support to BL fiction publicly, equally to other romantic genres. Moreover, unlike other BL websites where most works are copied or translated from Japanese publications, the majority of BL fiction in JJ is original work by the writers. According to my observations, by the end of 2009, taking TOP 200 Fiction as an example, BL fiction took up almost one third of the total, although it is only one category of eight.

Additionally, JJ provides different publishing services to whomever requests them. One is informal printing without serial numbers like formal and legitimate publications, and another is formal publishing. Usually, JJ lists the names of fiction it has published formally online for ordering. When reviewing the lists, I noticed that only a very small portion (less than one tenth) of BL fiction was published formally, and overwhelming majority is heterosexual romance. This may be the reason that many BL fans advocate to buy informal copy of their favorite fiction.

Since JJ is an official and legal website in China, it always complies with all online regulations made by the Chinese Authority (the Authority, hereafter). Concerning

the problem of online pornography, which is strictly censored and prohibited by the Authority, JJ also carries out relevant purgings of its system. There is a group of “supervisors” hired by JJ working on screening pornographic and sexual plots in the fiction. Usually, if there is too much pornographic content in a fiction, the supervisors can lock the fiction or specific chapters and leave a notice of warning to the writer, and the readers cannot open the locked fiction or some chapters. Sometimes, the readers can also report to JJ when they think some fiction have too much pornographic content. Basically, all the fiction and records of online interactions in JJ that can be opened are considered legal and do not violate the national regulations on online activities.

As a non-traditional genre, BL fiction is usually viewed negatively; when searching the web, I have found that most BL websites are very exclusive and do not contain or mix with other genres. In order to avoid misunderstandings and attacks from others, these BL websites leave obvious notice on the main pages “No Enter for Dislike” or require visitors to answer some questions before opening the links just as many Japanese *YAOI* websites do, but the latter has the additional purpose of stopping unauthorized copy and download by foreign fans. However, in JJ, there is no extra requirement for fans (except for charging chapters), and fans can choose whatever activities they like: posting fiction, commenting, chatting, ordering, etc. Within the JJ community, there are all sorts of small communities for fans with different interests. This allows me to observe not only the interactions between fans of BL fiction, but also the interactions between fans of BL fiction and non-BL-fiction fans, which is usually unavailable for most exclusive BL websites.

### **Research Ethics**

Since this research is carried out on the Internet (online observation), so it is necessary to address the issue of online research ethics. In order not to disturb and spoil

the communications and interactions of online fans, I will not lead any discussion in respect to my research in the online forum, and I also will not delve secretly into any private group discussion and use their conversations into my thesis without any acknowledgment and consent. I will make sure all my data are from public areas and are available to anyone who opens and clicks the links.

In my research, I do not carry out interviews like many other researchers do with respect to similar research topics. Undeniably, interviewing is a useful way to know and acquire direct responses from the informants, and during the process, more detailed and in-depth information is available concerning the specific questions on which the researcher wants to focus. However, since publishing and distributing BL works is either considered illegal or abnormal, most fans choose to share BL works and interact through the Internet (I will also talk about the online censorship concerning BL publications in China in later chapters)—which makes the meeting and interviewing of a potential informant in reality a time- and energy- consuming job. The Internet facilitates communication between fans without the limitations of age, occupation, sex, and geography. Even if I were not a student in the US, it would still be unlikely for me to meet fans due to their widely spread residency or locations. Moreover, BL genres still carry many negative connotations imposed by the mainstream society and culture, so even some loyal fans may be hesitant to confess that they are reading and writing BL fiction. Thus, when interviewed, fans may not be willing to share or disclose their true feelings. On the contrary, the Internet overcomes the necessity of face-to-face interaction, and it may be easier and comfortable for them to post their questions or responds to other fans. In addition, it is also more convenient for me to deal with the issue of confidentiality and consent in my research since fans never need to use their real names and identities online.

Another reason I do not use interviews in my research is related to the process of IRB approval. According to the IRB policy, researchers need to screen minors (those who are under the age of 18) from their research. If the research needs the participation of minors, the permission from and accompany of parents or custodians is required. As for my research topic, referring to the available literature and the data I have collected, there are large numbers of BL fans under the age of 18, who are believed to keep their “secret” from people around them, particularly their parents, and only a small portion may tell their best friends who are either a BL fans or more tolerant than the old generation. Thus, if I use interviews, those minor fans will be left out of my agenda, which will lead to the deficiency of data concerning younger fans who are vigorous consumers and supporters of BL publications and also playing important roles on the prosperity of BL culture in China. Considering above-mentioned situations, I am disposed to online observations instead of interviews.

Furthermore, at the very beginning, I thought of the use of online investigation to collect data. When I observed fans’ interactions online, I noticed that some people also posted similar research questions or inquiries to the fan communities anonymously (in China, there is not similar process like IRB for students and researchers), which have attracted many responses from fans. As I have mentioned before, the information in fan communities is publicly shared and available to everyone. Therefore, the advantage conferred by online communication for fans (and the research process) in China is not only a prompt to choose online observations to facilitate my data collection, it will also be a part of my discussion concerning the different characteristics of fan activities in China.

## **Research Limitations**

As many intellectuals have argued, research is always value-laden and there is not an “objective” or “neutral” study at all. Correspondingly, I believe that my education, personal experience, and cultural and social backgrounds all play a role in shaping my research topic and interpretations. I acknowledge that my reading and analysis of BL fiction is a reading and analysis by me but not someone else, and that my point of view cannot represent others’. My major in Women’s and Gender Studies shapes my research questions and the structure of my theorizing, and I have long noticed that my understanding of BL works changes a lot after reading more in gender studies and relevant literature, much different from the impressions I had about BL works. I have to say that, without the two-year program in gender study, I would not have written a thesis about BL (I might not even choose this topic if I were in China). When I try to use what I have learned to analyze the reality, the analysis may be restricted by my knowledge-scope and by my personal understanding of the reality. During the research, I am also selectively sorting data brought to bear on my research questions and interpret them through the particular lenses of my own lives and training. These are some personal biases that cannot be eliminated from the research.

I always ask myself: if I had not come to the US, and if I were not a student in Women’s and Gender Studies program, would I analyze BL fiction this way? The answer is definitely No. Also: will my opinion change concerning the same topic in the future? The answer is probably Yes. To be honest, when I was in China, I never developed any interest in BL works and considered it meaningless. However, when I decided to choose it as my thesis topic, I started reading BL fiction and observing the interaction between fans. During the process, my understanding of BL works, in different locations, genres, and audience, kept changing. My point here is that this is a research with time and space

limits, carried out in a specific time period, and under certain circumstance. It also means that this research will always be open to criticism and revision.

Finally, as an international student carrying out research in a Chinese website, translation is a big issue. On the one hand, I have to admit that I still have many problems with my English; on the other hand, I have to ponder the appropriate translations of some Chinese expressions to English all the time. Direct or paralleled translations are difficult to make, and after translating, the original meanings are more or less altered. Thus, even I have tried the best to be loyal to the original meanings, there are still possibilities for mistranslation into English. For example, since much of Chinese BL vocabulary is borrowed and translated from Japanese, after translation, different meaning from the intended original may appear. E.g., *Hentai* means abnormal or perverted in Japanese, but Chinese fans use it to refer to the sex plot in the writing. Many BL words are very contextualized and will be understood differently under specific environment. Sometimes, I have to struggle with the direct translation and paraphrasing translation (using the expression familiar to Western audience). I hope these problems will not affect the reading and understanding of my research and writing.

This thesis comprises six sections. In the Introduction, I focus on why I chose this research topic, what my research questions are, and how I organize my research process and theoretical structure. I will talk about how Chinese women's sexuality is related to the literature of homosexuality and what the difference is between BL fiction and homosexual one in Chapter one. In Chapter two, the argument will be on the main question as why those women like BL fiction and how they defend their choice. Chapter three, "His Story by Her"—How Fans of BL Fiction Make Sense of Their Transgender Imagination, will analyze the content of some popular BL stories in JJ, and the emphasis is on how female fans deploy their imaginative male-male love. Chapter four is about

reactions and response from different social groups outside the BL fan communities. In the Conclusion chapter, I will present what I have learned from the study of BL genre in China. Since BL fiction writers use some different vocabulary in their writing, those very characteristic and popular BL words and their explanations will be available in appendix.

## **Chapter One: A Review of Same-Sex Literature in Chinese History**

As I mentioned before, when first encountering BL fiction, I misunderstood it (like many other Chinese) as fiction by and for gay men. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a brief historical background to Chinese same-sex cultures and to understand BL works in a broader historical and social context and make clear how BL works are different from other homosexual one, even though BL is a genre that depicts the love and relationship between boys or young men. Moreover, a review of same-sex literature in Chinese history can shed light on the shifting cultural norms and gender/sexual roles in the society, as well as Chinese women's social status. Another important question needs to be addressed is how men's gaze is different from women's gaze concerning the same-sex relationship. Finally, the same-sex literature in Chinese history, particularly the division of gender role within homosexual relationship, still produces substantial impacts on BL works, which will be discussed in next chapter.

### **WITHIN THE FEUDAL DYNASTIES (2100 BCE–1911 CE)**

Chinese ancient societies had a more tolerant than resentful attitude toward same-sex relationship, and ancient Chinese people showed both criticism and praise to same-sex relationship. Chinese ancient literature was also evident for its tolerance to homosexuality (He, 2008; Zhao, 2008). From the beginning of Feudalism in the Pre-Qin Period (2100–221 BCE) to the end of the (last) Qing dynasty (1636–1911), the records of and about homosexuality could be found in all kinds of genres and artistic types throughout Chinese history, both official and unofficial, as well as in poems, essays, novels and stories, drama, etc.

As the famous Chinese writer Xianyong Bai (who declared his gay identity in 1980s) said in an interview, “[A]ncient China did not praise same-sex love as did the Greeks, but it also did not show a strong legal or moral objection to it” (Huang, 2007). According to Bai, aristocrats’ and courtiers’ objections to emperors’ preference for same-sex partners were mostly based on political reasons. For example, in the Han Dynasty, Emperor Liu wanted to grant the throne to his same-sex lover Xian Dong. Xian Dong was eventually killed by the courtiers and later condemned as a treacherous and malicious person. In reality, however, his death and defamation were the outcome of political struggles.

In early Chinese societies, the systematic separation of ruler and ruled had already come into being. The responsibility of the ruler was to *xiushen* (cultivate one’s own morality and virtue) so as to *zhiguopngtianxia* (rule and administer the country), and the process of *xiushen* was to study *li* (morality, etiquette, courtesy, which was opposite of violence, savagery, and foolhardiness). The emphasis on *li* resulted in the softness and gentility of Chinese men (Chen, 1997). In Chinese history, men denigrated physical toughness in favor of a gentle and graceful appearance and bearing. Moreover, Chinese culture understood the ruler–ruled relationship on the metaphor of the male–female relationship, which led to the feminine mentality of Chinese men who viewed their ruler/emperor as the lover to whom they needed to be loyal forever. The aesthetic perception of *zhonghezimei* (the beauty of neutrality, emphasized by Confucianism, which was —the leading ideology throughout feudal dynasties in China) also contributed to the feminization of Chinese men. Therefore, Chinese literature was full of men with beautiful faces and weak bodies, which was believed contribute to the rise of same-sex love, especially male–male relationships, infatuation, and worship (Xu, 2008; Chen,

1997). This tradition continues in BL fiction, especially those stories using an ancient background.

Moreover, homosexuality was viewed as a behavior other than the character of specific group of people; and anyone, more specifically, the privileged, could choose homosexual behavior regardless of their sex-orientation (Chou, 2000). Since there would not be any reproduction within the same-sex relationship, and even those who played the passive roles within the relationships would get married when necessary, homosexuality did not threaten the morality, structure, and dominance of Feudalism and its family system. Hence there were fewer objections to homosexuality.

Homosexuality reached its peak during Ming Dynasty (1368—1644) and Qing Dynasty (1636—1911), and many records indicate that male–male relationships were very popular among different classes of people and that men liked to keep heterosexual-style relationships with their young servants or handsome boys. During this time, the male prostitutes and brothels for male customers emerged (Shi, 2008; Cai, 2008; Qin, 2007). Erotic male-male paintings were produced and fiction addressing the male–male relationship was published. *Bianercai (From Male to Female)* was the first novel in the world to focus specifically on the male–male relationship. In it, the author gave great praise and support to male homosexuality. Besides fiction describing homosexual relationships specifically, other non-homosexual fiction also contained the contents and descriptions of same-sex relationship (Pan, 2006).

Undoubtedly, the authors of these homosexual stories were all male, no matter how different their attitudes were to homosexuality. When reading these stories, we find that the descriptions of same-sex relationships were full of inequality, and the different roles within the relationships were decided by social status and power. What's interesting is that these powerful and rich people always played the active roles within the same-sex

relationships, and they were emperors, aristocrats, officials, merchants, or celebrity, either powerful or rich. They were not necessary homosexuals, and might also have many heterosexual partners at the same time. For them, the same-sex relationship was either a sexual stimulation and adventure to compensate for having been tired of heterosexual relationships, or a catering to the male-male fashion (Lu, 2005). Active-role partners took advantage of their power and socioeconomic status searching for sexual pleasure and excitement. Those who played the passive roles within the same-sex relationships were usually poor and had a low socioeconomic status, surviving by selling their body and dignity. In addition, only the passive roles, never the active roles, within the same-sex relationships were the bearers of moral interrogation and social discrimination. Similarly, the inequality in heterosexual relationships was also copied and grafted to the same-sex relationship (Chen, 2007). These passive roles were not punished and discriminated against by the homosexual relationship they were involved but by their similar social status and destiny to women (Zhang, 2008; Chen, 1997).

Moreover, the feminine appearance and manner of the passive role was always preferred and emphasized (Cai, 2008; Shi, 2008b). The idealized same-sex male lovers were handsome young boys with delicate and feminized characteristics and personalities—as shy, dedicated, and sentimental as beautiful women. Although they had male reproductive organs physically, they had been totally feminized psychologically, either voluntarily or forcefully (in most cases, the latter) (Chen, 1997). The deep-rooted patriarchy not only reduced women to subordinate and submissive dependents and playthings, but also produced feminized male slaves. Powerful men treated those young and handsome boys as girls and purposely confused their biophysical sex in order to oppress and exploit them sexually (Z. Li, 2008; Shi, 2008a). The so-called perfect male-male love, wrapped by passion and affection, was actually an extremely man-centered

hegemony and supremacy. The passive parties had to give up their rights as men, and further internalized themselves as women or concubines to become the sexual slaves and tools for other powerful men (Chen, 2007; Duan, 2006).

In Chinese ancient societies, the literature of and about female-female relationships was also written by men, but it latter was considered much poorer in style compared to its male-male counterpart (Shi, 2008c, Lu, 2006). In feudal society, because of the highly strict regulations on heterosexual relationships, the reality of harem life were a secret to men. Thus, most male authors just wrote female-female relationship from their imaginations. Additionally, from men's perspective, female-female relationships were relatively more acceptable since they helped prevent heterosexual affairs, which were totally unacceptable for men. Some men even promoted lesbian relationships between their concubines since they were able to enjoy the sexual pleasure provided by more than one woman without being bothered by the jealousy and altercation between concubines. Thus, in those male authors' narratives, it was acceptable for women to develop lesbian relationships; however, these relationships had to follow the traditional standard and requirement of chastity, i.e., their bodies must be belong and loyal to their sole male master (Shi, 2008d; Liu, 2007; Duan, 2006).

From what has been discussed above, we can see that within the feudal societies in China, all same-sex literature, including female-female fiction, was mainly written by and for men. The relationship between the same-sex partners was dominated or controlled by the gender who enjoyed higher social status and power. Within male-male relationship, there was a tendency to separate the actor and receptor, and the receptor was usually treated as a woman physically, mentally, or by status. In fact, this same-sex relationship conformed to, and manifested the requirement and norms of, feudal and patriarchal domination, wherein women, as well as feminized receptors generally, were

the subordinates of men and did not have the rights to choose the love and relationship they wanted.

### **THE ESTABLISHMENT OF NEW AND “CIVILIZED” GENDER/SEXUALITY ORDERS**

With the collapse of the last feudal dynasty—Qing Dynasty, the Chinese society, under the oppression and military invasion of multiple countries, was in need of a new social system and ideology. This triggered the emergence of the “5.4 New Culture Movement” in 1919, which had a far-reaching impact on the whole of Chinese society (I will shorten this to 5.4 hereafter). Before the movement, Western thoughts had been widely introduced into China and produced a consequential and substantial impact on the youth. With the deepening of 5.4 Movement, awareness of liberty, democracy, anti-feudalism, and anti-imperialism increased in popular consciousness. Many intellectuals used their writings to disclose and condemn the evils and corrupt and look forward to the coming of a new world.

During 5.4, there had emerged a brief trend of lesbian writings by some pioneer female writers. These women, were just liberated from the harems, were very familiar with the terrible situations of women within patriarchal-feudal marriages, but they had not been able to find and establish a new relationship to replace the old ones (Liu, 2008, 2007). As a result, many women turned their attention to the female-female relationship. They did not consider this lesbian relationship as abnormal; instead, in their writings, lesbianism became a special resort and was created by their fear of and disappointment at heterosexual relationship.

Noticeably, lesbianism, in the writings of female authors, was focused on mentality instead of physical or sexual contacts. More accurately, lesbian literature from this period was written to express a kind of close friendship between women, similar to heterosexual admiration and intimacy, but without sexual encounters (Chang, 2008). The

failure of heterosexual romance, the unequal marriage, and the disillusion of and disappointment about men, as well as ubiquitous gender oppression and domination, led to the emergence of lesbian literature; through it, women looked for equality, trust, warmth, comfort, and understanding from other women. The similar situations and mutual understanding and sympathy between them, at the same time, promoted and facilitated the development lesbian relationship.

Another result of studying and imitating the West in 5.4 was the incorporation of a Judeo-Christian bias that stigmatized homosexuality in China. 5.4 Movement began with advocating for the freedom of marriage, women, and individuals; as more Western concepts were introduced, a sexual revolution developed. A group of new concepts concerning sexuality appeared which led to a new discourse in gender/sexuality. This new discourse has dominated Chinese society through the present day (Pan, 2006).

The first concept constructed during the period was “civilization,” and its synonyms included revolution, advance, progress, and enlightenment. Its converse was retroaction, conservatism, laggardness. The role model of “civilization” was the West, however, this West was not the real West, but the one that had been elected, transformed, and imagined as a utopia by then Chinese intellectuals. Based on these transformations, the new and “civilized” gender/sexuality orders were produced and regulated as:

Sex should only exist between heterosexual couples, and concubines, prostitutes, and affairs were sinful; sex should be serious, and any foreplay or sexual technique was pervert and abnormal; the purpose of sex was for reproduction, and sexual excitement was corrupt; sex between same-sex couples was ugly and immoral (Pan, 2006, p. 69).

These new and “civil” gender/sexuality orders were what Chinese people inherited from 5.4 Movement. This “sexual civilization,” in the following several decades, through all kinds of social propaganda and promotion by the Authority and intellectuals, was deeply rooted in the hearts of nationals. Countless people believed that

any sexual behavior unknown to them or unfitted to the standards of the “sexual civilization” must be indecent, vulgar, and unacceptable, particularly those behaviors outside of traditionally heterosexual marriages. Even after the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 (by that time, Western ideology, ironically, had become the very opposition and enemy of socialism), especially in the first 30 years of its regime (before the implementation of Reform and Opening-up policy), the Communist Party not only inherited this “sexual civilization” but also pushed it to the extreme.

With the end of old society and the establishment of new society (in 1949), Chinese women’s status was increased to an unprecedented level. Due to the need for labor to contribute to the development and defense of newly-found socialist regime, women were advocated to “walk out the home and devote to socialist construction.” The slogan “Women Can Support Half of the Sky” became the most popular and influential mobilization for Chinese women to go into public sphere, and remains to even today. In some respects, the Chinese government did rescue women from patriarchal families by changing them from “family members” to “social members”—i.e., members of the country—which led to the new liberation to women, even the liberation was, still is, not totally fulfilled.

However, when talking about gender/sexuality, from 1950 to 1980, Chinese society can be defined as an era of total abstinence, and sexuality was closely related to politics and supervised by the Authority. The restrictions on sexuality went to an extreme and any behavior that was beyond the “normal” sexual life between married couples or against the norms was considered as a distraction or danger to the social order and the construction of Chinese socialism. During that time, China adopted a total self-independent national policy to defend against the enclosure and attacks by many Western capitalist countries, and the struggle in ideology also became a very sensitive political

issue. Some Western principles, such as freedom, democracy, and human rights, were considered and defined by the government as the attempt of Western enemies to slip and infiltrate socialist power. Collectivism and resistance to the West were the responsibility of every national. As a result, when the civil rights movement, women's movement, and gay and lesbian movement achieved substantial progress during the time, those movements had never produced corresponding effects in China; instead, they were considered as the products of "evil capitalism."

Similarly, those who advocated human rights, particularly in sexuality, would be thought of as contaminated by corrupt Western thinking and be ruthlessly suppressed and punished. From 1960s, the ideological and political struggle between China and Western countries was overestimated by the Authority, so a purging movement—the Cultural Revolution, which lasted ten years from 1966 to 1976—was carried out. During the time, sexuality was also an important index to test or indicate individual loyalty to socialism since the leading party thought that sexual freedom was the evil by-product of capitalism, and that the advocate of sexual freedom was a conspiracy to overthrow the Chinese government and socialism. As a result, any sexual behavior outside of "normal" heterosexual wedlock was punished severely and no one dared to talk about sex in public. Living in this extreme environment and atmosphere, people had to compromise their sexual needs and desires to political pressure. When searching relevant data and texts about sexuality during the Cultural Revolution, one only finds information about marriage and childbirth, but nothing about homosexuality. Chinese women, during the time, although they had participated in all kinds of public affairs and contributed a lot to social development, were still not permitted to talk about their desire, passion, and love freely.

## **AFTER OPENING-UP POLICY**

The ten-year “Cultural Revolution” brought great loss to China, and the Authority began to reconsider many of their domestic policy decisions. In 1976, the Authority ended this movement and acknowledged in official documents that the Cultural Revolution was the biggest mistake the Communist Party ever made in its history, and began to carry out a series of remedies. In 1978, the Authority changed the focus of its work to economic development and the policy of Reform and Opening-up was put forward. After that, the development of China entered a new historical phase. With the implementation of the Reform and Opening-up policy, China also restored normal diplomacy with the very Western countries who used to be viewed as enemies of socialism by the Authority. With the increase in international exchange, there began a second wave of the 5.4 Movement. A flood of Western and foreign ideas and began to appear, a with it a new sexual culture in China emerged, which is commonly taken as the very beginning of the Chinese “sexual revolution” (Pan, 2006). Chinese people’s attitudes toward premarital/extramarital sex, chastity, commercial sex, and same-sex relationships have also undergone substantial changes, and the restrictions and regulations on sexuality have become much looser.

Although homosexuality existed in Chinese history for a long time, the serious research and discussion on homosexuality in new China was not available until the late 1980s due to the absolute control of sexuality by the Authority. There were few records about homosexuality available, and the society also did not pay much attention to it. With the influx of Western research and theories, due to the implementation of Opening-up policy, Chinese people became familiar with the words and meanings of homosexuality—homosexual, gay, lesbian, transsexual/transgender and so on—but they believed that homosexuality was an exclusively Western phenomenon, and that there

could not be any homosexuals in a socialist country. However, the tendency of globalization put originally Western (particularly North American) theories and ideas in sexuality into global circulation; and these were adopted by Chinese sexual minorities as norms. The development of LGBTQ groups, since the 1980s, was always, and has been, following the trend of “global queering” (Martin *et al*, 2008, p. 6; McLelland *et al*, 2007, p. 1), although the pace was much slower.

At the beginning of the 1990s, the finding by Western countries that HIV/AIDS was closely related to homosexually sexual behavior was also introduced into China, and China began to report cases of infection, which led to a public fear among the nationals toward homosexuals. In some Chinese people’s eyes, HIV/AIDS was synonymous with homosexuality, so homosexual groups became the target of public condemnns and were discriminated against and isolated, some even faced deadly threats (Yang, 2007). When searching the research on homosexuality during the time, 90% of studies were from the medical field, the CDC, or from HIV/AIDS prevention programs.

Despite all the contempt and discrimination, the theme of homosexuality began to appear in some novels from the late 1980s. Compared to female writers, there were few male writers addressing homosexual theme in their works. The only and most referenced one by a male writer was the novel *Shi Shui Rou Qing (The Love as Tender as Water)* by Xiaobo Wang. The novel focused on the psychology, feeling, social communication, and encounters of or between homosexual men, and the author used his serious and sympathetic writing to indicate a humanistic concern for homosexuals (Liu, 2007).

In contrast, more female writers, under the influence of feminism, had deliberately chosen the topic of lesbianism in their writing. Different from early female writers in the 5.4 period whose writings only focused on psychological intimacy, the lesbian writings since the 1980s were more likely to explore and depict the erotic

pleasure between women (Liu, 2007). The expression of sexual desires and needs, which was absent from or little in women's writing (both heterosexually and homosexually), became an important part of advocating for equality and human rights.

Another foreign influence that needs mentioning is Japanese manga. After the restoration of Sino-Japanese diplomatic relations at the end of the 1970s, Japanese popular culture has been widely introduced into China because of the "Cultural Diplomacy" policy the Japanese government actively carried out. Since then, Japanese manga has produced huge impact on Chinese youth. After several decades' development and influence, Japanese manga has not only produced huge profit, but also countless manga fans in China (Liu, 2008). It can be said that those whose were born after China's Reform and Opening-up policy (1980s) were a generation who grew up with Japanese manga. Manga is a huge industry in Japan with all kinds of themes, styles, content, artists, and consumers; but because of censorship, not all manga enters into China without restriction. However, due to the profitability of Japan manga, some illegal and pirate versions still circulate in the black market regardless government regulations (in the Internet era, these operations have become much easier). BL manga, with the Japanese manga trend, entered China at the early 1990s, mainly through black market, also with very rare formal and legitimate versions. The first Chinese BL magazine was published in 1994, but it stopped publishing almost immediately because of censorship. But the fever for BL has never disappeared or been quenched. Due to the lack of corresponding environment for manga production and the censorship in China, the creation of BL works began to focus on fiction writing, which was not as easily perceived as manga. To date, there are large amount of fans of BL fiction actively participate in the practice, of course mainly online.

## **THE COMING OF THE INTERNET ERA**

The unprecedented visibility and development of some subcultures such as women and homosexuality, which were largely rejected and marginalized by the mainstream cultures, has been brought by the Internet. The popularity of the Internet makes many scholars with gender awareness anticipate the coming of gender equality. They think that the cyberspace provides a great passage for women's liberation and gender equality. The characteristics of Internet communication, such as confidentiality, freedom, decentralization and anarchy—ideas that are also popular—provide a good chance to eliminate gender inequality (Liang & Liu, 2003). In Chinese tradition, sex was a closely guarded secret for women; it was impossible for a woman talking about her desire and sexual needs openly. Although Chinese women have existed in the public sphere for more than a half-century, sex is still not a totally free topic for them. However, the Internet has become a relatively safe space for women to talk about their sexual desires and fantasies. Through online communication, women can abandon those regulations, responsibilities, and duties imposed by traditional gender/sexual norms, and cyberspace has become the catalyst for changing our gender/sexual norms (Jiang & Liu, 2003; Li & Gao, 2007).

As for homosexuality, although it was decriminalized in the early 1990s, reporting about homosexuality in the media was still limited by the Authority. An informal regulation circulating in the media was “not to report news about homosexuality,” leading to the invisibility of homosexuals within the public views (Lian, 2007). Through the Internet, however, homosexual literature has gained its popularity and momentum. The openness, interactiveness, and anonymity of the Internet allow for the existence and spread of subculture, providing a relatively free, private, and relatively safe space for people to interact with each other. Those who are not able to disclose their

interests or identities who would be rejected by the dominant cultures in reality are more likely to resort to the online communications. Hence, some stories with same-sex themes has been first published online. For example, the first lesbian-biography novel, *Wo De Tian Shi, Wo De Ai (My Angel, My love)*, was initially published online and attracted more than ten million fans (Cai & Zhao, 2007).

Similarly, as a subculture, BL fiction, with rare authorized hard-copy publications in reality, gained its popularity mainly through the Internet. Because of traditional suppression of women's voices on sexuality and the stigma on homosexuality in Chinese society, BL fans, even the most loyal fans, may lack the courage to disclose their interest in the genre. Also, it is difficult for them to find out a like-minded friend in reality. Some even doubt that whether or not they have some problem with themselves and the interest. Similar to Thorn's (2004) discussion of why fans of slash fiction decline to disclose their interest, the BL fans in China faced same dilemma: "[S]lash fiction engages only a very small community, which has endured the contempt of the wider science-fiction fandom for more than two decades. Perhaps because of Western homophobia, slash fans are both scorned by others and compelled, it would seem, to justify their hobby to themselves and to the world. Many slash fans are 'closeted,' and very secretive about their hobby, although the Internet is leading to a massive 'coming out'" (p. 173). The online community organized by the like-minded BL fans dispels their self-suspicion, and they just find that there is huge number of other women sharing the similar fascination they do. In China, online publications face much looser regulations censorship than hard-copy ones, due to the still in-process heating and controversial discussions of the Internet administration. Thus, cyberspace provides a useful platform for, and tremendous momentum to, the creation and spread of BL works, which accordingly attracts much public attention and finger-pointing. This public blaming couldn't stop fans' passion

about BL. Instead, they began to defend their choice boldly online, although their reasons may be varied (the detailed discussions will be in Chapter two).

In this chapter, through the discussion of same-sex literature in different periods in Chinese history, the outline of the societal changes of gender/sexual norms is presented, as well as Chinese women's social status and role within the system. BL, although mainly depicting the love and relationship between boys or young men and being misunderstood as gay men writing, is a genre by and for women and a genre different from homosexual literature by and for homosexual people, and its appearance reflects the changing gender/sexual concepts of and toward women in China. From the total silence of women's voices and their being consumed and controlled by men in feudal societies to now writing and reading of the love, including sex, between males, the situation has changed greatly. This is also one reason that some Chinese researchers read BL works as the liberation and progress of women, as well as support for homosexuality. Is this interpretation of the BL phenomenon totally right? How should we interpret this liberation and progress of women and support for homosexuality in China? More evidence and data need to be analyzed, especially from the fans, which will be the focus of following chapters.

## **Chapter Two: Women Go Wild? Why They Like BL Fiction?**

With the popularity of the Internet, the reading of online fiction has become a fashion in China over the past ten years (Ouyang, 2010; Wan, 2008; Yuan, 2006; Chen, 1999). Using the search engines Google or Baidu and inputting “online fiction,” in less than 1 second one will get more than a million Chinese websites and main pages on the topic. According to online research, most of online-fiction fans are young white-collared employees and college and university students and the most popular genres are romance, science and adventure, and mystery ones (Lan, 2008; Chen, 2008). The segregation of genders conforming to specific genres is also very obvious, and at the very beginning, most online-fiction fans were male and science and adventure fiction was their favorite; with the increase of female web users, specialized online-fiction websites for women have multiplied and log a huge number of fans. In general, the most popular fiction among female fans has been romance (Wang, 2009; Lan, 2008).

As many researchers have noticed, the overwhelming majority of BL fans are heterosexual young women, and usually, BL fans are always associated with words such as youth, fashionable, students, whiter collar, or bourgeois. However, when relating to the issue of age range, different researchers still have different conclusions and the most commonly acknowledged age range of BL fans among Chinese researchers is 14–26 years old (Wang & Liu, 2008; Lan, 2006; Wu, 2005; Ke, 2004). According to Wang and Liu, there is a sharp decrease beyond age 25; at the same time, the number of fans below 14 is continuing to grow. Yang (2009), however, finds that there are a considerable number of fans over 25 according to her research. I am more inclined to agree with Yang based on my own online observations, and I believe that the different conclusions made

by researchers may be due to their having analyzed different types of BL works and the correspondent fans.

I started to notice the issue of age from the content of some of the online messages left by fans. For example, one fan has mentioned that she began to read BL manga at the age of 9; after the age of 14 her reading changed mainly to BL fiction. Since then, she prefers fiction over manga. Understandably, it is easier to read a manga than to read ordinary fiction since there are so many pictures and so few words in manga. Unlike the very supportive and industrialized environment for manga creation and production in Japan (manga is considered as the national art of Japan), China has not yet developed a similar system, although there are huge fans for manga in China. Although compared to the need for somewhat professional training in drawing manga, writing fiction is relatively easier. Reading a story or novel needs more intelligibility of readers than reading a manga. Thus, generally speaking, the age range of BL fiction fans may be older than BL manga fans.

According to the data from JJ, many fans have mentioned that they were born in the early or mid 1970s (they are the first young generation that grew up with Japanese manga in China). A common belief among fans is that there is a positive relation between the age and experience of a writer and her writing skill and quality. Thus, many popular BL fiction writers are believed to be over 30s, judged from their messages to fans. Some of them, when interacting with fans, also disclose intentionally or unintentionally that they have been married for a long time (in China, the legal age for women to get married is 20, and the government advocating marital age is 23), or they have kids in certain ages. Therefore, I believe that there are certain number of BL fiction fans who are much older than 25, and the average age group of BL fans may be expected as 14-35.

## **WHY WOMEN LIKE BL FICTION?**

There is never a lack of discussion concerning why women like BL fiction within the online fan communities. Some will list a good many reasons, some may just elaborate on one, and some even do not mention any reason but emphasize they just like BL fiction without reasons. The following paragraphs will specify on and analyze the reasons presented by BL fiction fans for their interest. Most comments are coming from JJ, and a small portion of examples from other research findings are also used to support or verify my findings. All together, there are five main reasons fans choose BL fiction:

### **Out of Curiosity**

Many fans admit that they began to encounter BL fiction from the name *Danmei*, and they wanted to know what type of fiction it was. Certainly, not all women are favor of BL fiction after they finally discover their content; however, many fans ascribe their acceptance and then fascination of BL fiction to prior contact with some of the fabulous and classical BL works. Just as fan Xiaoli mentions, the first BL publication she read was one of the most popular BL manga *Captain Tsubasa* (adapted from original non-BL series of *Captain Tsubasa*), which depicts the relationship between two male protagonists Kojiro Huga and Ken Wakashimazu. In the story, Kojiro (striker) and Ken (goalkeeper) are two talented soccer players on the same team, and as close friends and team members, they support each other mentally and physically, in spite of respectively suffering from various personal problems. Finally, their fraternal and deep friendship develop into romance (Suzuki, 1998). “I never knew that the love between man and man could be that touching and beautiful, since then I just totally fell in love with BL works. However, in China, there are very little BL manga available, so I turn to BL fiction as an alternative.” Besides being curious of the name, some female fans are also curious about male-male content and relationship. For example, a fan mentions that the sexual depictions in BL

fiction are very abstract and ambiguous and she does not entirely know the sexual behaviors between men. Many fans respond to her question, some recommend their favorite BL fiction to her, some encourage her to read more, and some even recommend watching GV (gay video). There is a heated discussion of anal sex among fans. According to messages left by fans, there are still much misunderstanding by fans about anal sex. For example, some fans do not know how two males can have sex, and anal penetration is a new concept for them. For some others, they assume that anal sex is the only sexual behavior between males; if two men have sex, they must go through anal penetration. There are also some fans believing that anal sex will definitely bring orgasm, but their belief is refuted by other fans who present their very uncomfortable experience of medical enema. Although those messages indicate that many fans are not so familiar with the sexual behaviors between gay men, they have shown high interest in the topic. To some of them, the reading of BL fiction may be the way to get the information they want to know.

As Yong (2006) argues, BL works are produced and consumed as a response of women's sexual needs. In China, there is no sex education available to the youth, particularly girls and women; in addition, the society and tradition always demand that women be self-disciplined, chaste, and innocent of sexuality. As a result, women who cannot acquire knowledge and information about sexual relationships and sexuality from normal channels have to resort to and create BL works as alternatives. Relating to this argument, the reading of BL fiction, to some fans, is not only the curiosity about sexuality of gay men but also about themselves, just through a very non-traditional way.

However, Yong's argument is somewhat problematic since in China it is still easier to get heterosexual pornography than homosexual pornography due to wide-spread homophobia. Why don't Chinese women more simply choose heterosexual sexual stories

to satisfy their desire and fantasy? As pointed out by fans, when reading heterosexual pornography, women cannot help identifying with the female protagonists and the heterosexual intercourse in the story reminds them of the experience of pain, suffering, submission, being penetrated, and pregnancy—particularly when losing their virginity—which reminder makes them feel humiliated and helpless. But while reading BL stories, these women may be free of the terrible memory and identification. Just as Suzuki (1998) points out, “while identifying themselves (the readers) with a boy protagonist, described in ideal homosexual relations, girls learned how to conceive of a sexuality without any physical pain, i.e., divorced from unwanted pregnancy” (p. 251).

### **Against Heteronormality**

This reason can be analyzed from two groups with somewhat different reading purposes. For the first group, as fans point out, there are just too much heterosexual fiction with more or less similar plots and stories, which have caused their reading fatigue, and they are in need of new reading excitement. Thus, the advent of BL fiction, in certain sense, satisfies and caters to their seeking for novelty and difference, and the increasing type of online-fiction genres is the manifestation of fans’ searching for more novelty and difference. In addition, as the consumption of BL genres becomes a fashion, many women are more deliberate to emphasize their identity as “decadent girl(s)” to show how distinctive and fashionable they are.

For some other fans, reading BL fiction is an intentional repulsion to patriarchy and heteronormality, and the reading provides a psychologically safe and comfortable space for them to distance themselves from an omnipresent gender inequality which is often humiliating and intolerant to women. When reading traditional heterosexual romance, female fans cannot help identifying with the female characters in the fiction. Due to the heavy moral burdens on women and very unequal gender relationship brought

by patriarchy and sexism, which is often permeating and insinuating in heterosexual fiction, some fans turn to BL fiction intentionally to be away from patriarchy and heteronormality. This is not a turn from heterosexual fatigue. When distancing themselves from identifying, they can really enjoy the pleasure from the readings. Some fans even consider the reading of BL fiction as a self-empowerment since it not only provides the feeling of breaking the social taboos and behavior standards imposed by the society, but also, and more importantly, incorporates a rebellious awareness against the mainstream male-dominated and heterosexist cultures. Just like fan Xixi comments, if men enjoy watching female-female pornography and consume and make fun of women's bodies as an object, why cannot women read BL fiction and do the same. As Yang (2009) points out in her research, women who like BL works are more often than not with stronger feminist consciousness, so they are not willing or even cannot accept the unequal gender relationships in heterosexually romantic fiction.

### **Just Like It**

More than just several times, I have seen fans discussing that how hot they feel when seeing two men fool around with each other. Thus, one of the reasons the fans present why they like BL fiction is because they like men, so two (or more) men together just make the scene hotter and double the excitement. Fans obtain much fun from this kind of light reading in their spare time just like housewives reading of heterosexual romance. That is why Chinese researcher Li (2008) considers BL fiction as the entertainment by which women dissipate vapidness and boredom, "a toy for women to supply and compensate their emotional vacancy" (p. 18).

Less explicitly, some fans simply say, "I don't know why, but just feel like it." In a mundanely heterosexist world, people are socialized to accept gender dichotomy, which always demands the right and appropriate behaviors and etiquette according to their

sexes, even including their sexual desires and fantasies. Those who are against the gender norms will naturally be considered “perverted” or “abnormal.” Correspondingly, it is assumed or expected that heterosexual people will only read heterosexual publications and homosexual people homosexual ones. However, as discovered long ago by researchers, human beings’ congenial responses, standards of behavior, and temperaments are socially and arbitrarily constructed, including personal sexual desires and imaginations (Butler, 1990; Benedict, 1989; Mead, 1963). Thus, there should not be a clear line of preference based on specific sexual orientation, whether by heterosexuals, homosexuals, or transsexuals. When relating fans’ orientation to their choice of BL fiction, it is not necessary for heterosexual women to fall in love solely with heterosexual romance; for them, BL fiction may be more attractive and interesting, and their choice have nothing to do with their sexual orientation. Thus, it is quite reasonable for fans to ask, “why do we need to answer the question- why BL fiction? Why not just ask those who choose non-BL ones to answer why they like what they choose?”

### **For Good Stories**

Different from other groups of fans who are solely and specifically for BL fiction, fans in this group do not restrict their reading solely to BL fiction. For them, reading online fiction is a process of looking for fun, and they search for all types of online fiction that attract them regardless of the sexual orientations of the characters. As a result, they prefer an interesting BL story over a boring heterosexual romance. As BL fiction gains increasing momentum and fans, more and more writers are engaging in the production of BL fiction. Popular writers with huge loyal fans and followers are especially likely to attract thousands or millions of fans. Many writers have expressed tentativeness about trying a BL theme in the future, whether they just want to cater to the BL fashion, or whether they are considering the setting of a story. The writers’

engagement in BL theme plays a significant role on some fans' choices, as fan Zhishenfu confesses, she has read all the fiction by the writer Yingzao, who is one of her favorite writers and who used to focus only on heterosexual romance fiction and just began to write BL fiction very recently. Zhishenfu thinks that Yingzao' BL writings are as intriguing as heterosexual ones, and the BL theme does not bother her reading. Noticeably, some BL fiction is as varied in its plotting as heterosexual fiction. Sexual depictions are not the main reason a BL story is popular. The most popular BL stories among fans are not the ones with the most sexual content but the ones with very interesting plots. As popular BL fiction writer Yaozhou has mentioned, "I write sexual scenes according to the story line, and will not write sex for sex." Many fans also argue that sex may be important, but it does not mean all for a fiction; and the most successful fiction writer should be the person who knows how to tell a good story to other.

### **For the Sake of Love**

Fans in this category emphasize the importance of love in BL fiction. Love, as an eternal theme in romance, is always the most important element highlighted by women. How is love in BL fiction different from the love in heterosexual romance? What kind of love do fans learn or want from BL fiction? Concerning why the love between men is preferable and more attractive, one fan responds that, since the same-sex relationship faces more social pressure and contempt, when the two parties struggle against social taboos and strive for being together, the love between them become more heroic, pure, and beautiful. According to fan Bao'er, the love between two men is more equal the one between a man and a women since it is easy for one man to achieve equality with another man but really difficult even impossible for a women to do the same in reality. Moreover, within an ideal male-male relationship, there will not necessary be a role separation as the dominant and the dependent in a heterosexual relationship, and the two parties can

exchange their roles as they want. A very famous theory proposed by fans of BL fiction is that a person does not need to be a homosexual to choose or love a same-sex partner, and s/he is attracted to/by the same-sex partner for the sake of love. Therefore, a very popular saying among “decadent girl(s)” is “if I love you, whatever you are, a female, a male, an animal, a tree, or even a rock; whatever the difficulties I may face, I will still and always love you.” For fans insisting on the supremacy of love, the love in BL fiction, then, is the true love indeed and should be treasured and respected.

However, a question appears when ascribing the popularity of BL fiction to the depiction of true love. Why is it that love between men, but not between women, should qualify as true love? Here, I will present my own understanding concerning the issue. BL genres in China were originated from and under deep influence of Japanese BL publications. In Japan, the BL works were first produced by and for gay male communities. As McLelland (2005) argues in *Queer Japanese after World War II*, BL genres by and for women in Japan were able to appear in the market due to the prosperity of the large market for, and consumption of, homosexual publications for gay men. Some female authors began writing BL manga to cater to the male-dominated market; however, unexpectedly, their publications gained much attention and popularity among heterosexual female fans. Since then, BL works by and for women have become an independent and popular industry and female fans just took BL theme as normal. Their initial choice was marked-based—they did not realize the possible political and social implication behind their choice until they faced public blame and started defending themselves.

As Japanese manga became extremely popular in China from the late 1980s, a few BL publications were also introduced secretly or semi-secretly. Most of these early introduced BL works were some famous and far-reaching publications in Japan, which

produced a similar, if not greater, impact on many Chinese fans. It can be said that the BL genre in China is under the influence, and the direct outcome, of Japanese BL manga; although now Chinese BL works have become more and more popular and become an independent trend and fashion in China. As fan Xiaoyu mentions, the first time she read the classical BL manga *Bronze*, she just could not help bursting into tears. Similar responses are also mentioned by many other fans who are fascinated with Japanese manga. These very passionate and classical Japanese BL manga, accompanied with rare GL ones, contributed to the domination of BL theme from the very beginning, even as the creation of BL works has changed from manga to fiction in China.

Another possible explanation of fans' focus on BL instead of GL fiction, as mentioned before, is the fans' intention of distancing themselves from the female identity during the readings or writings. A further reason for the BL complex among fans is the ubiquitous and unavoidable specter of male domination within mainstream culture, which will be elaborated on in the next chapter.

### **SELF DEFENSE AND EMPOWERMENT**

The advent of online BL fiction has attracted some public attention in China, but just as Liu (2009) and Wu (2008) point out, the public, especially the media, has a very negative attitude toward BL publications. For example, a most quoted report (Sina News, 2008) uses interviews with psychiatrists to insinuate the possibility that some fans might become "abnormal" due to reading BL works. Some reports focus on the respondents' criticism based on morality and insist that BL works be totally banned because these publications only have a negative impact on the society, particularly on the youth (Han, 2007).

Many BL fans have also talked about the discrimination they encounter in daily lives. Due to traditional suppression of women's voice on sexuality and the stigma on

homosexuality in Chinese society, BL fans seldom disclose their interest in BL fiction to people around them, mentioning that because of the lack of like-minded friends in reality, they have resort to the online fan communities. Many BL fiction writers confess that their families or friends just know that they are writing online fiction but do not know about the BL theme. Writer Xiaohe jokes, “My parents are rather conservative; if they knew I am writing BL fiction, I worry that they may drive me away from home.” Niushao, a popular BL fiction writer in JJ, relates how one time, when one of her colleague accidentally found out what she was writing, castigated her with a “how can you write things like this [BL]?”

In China, morality and ideology are also considered as fields of class struggle. Anything that is distinct from dominating values will be condemned as the product of vulgar interest and as bourgeois, immoral, and decadent. BL fiction, with both homosexual and sexual plots, is entirely against the “healthy and harmonious” values advocated by the Authority, and from the beginning a negative connotation has accompanied its development. Angered by public condemnation and discrimination, BL fans have campaigned in self-defense. Since the BL genre gains its popularity through the Internet, fans, by the title of “decadent girl(s),” make voice of, rationalize, and mutually support their own existence by actively participating in online interactions and activities. They have long noticed and addressed people’s negative attitudes to them:

In ordinary people’s eyes, “decadent girl(s)” are a group of weird animals, and they do not have any other interest except for fascinating with handsome men and their sex; in gay men’s eyes, “decadent girl(s)” always try to pry about their private lives and only emphasize the importance of beautiful appearance, which tends to imply that only those young and handsome men can be gay; in the eyes of women who only like BG (heterosexual) fiction, “decadent girl(s)” are very strange and irrational because boys’ love is against “nature” (resource from Baidu Wikipedia).

Fans list different reasons to defend and legitimize their desire for BL fiction, no matter jokingly or seriously. For example, male-male relationship advocated in BL fiction, contented by fans, will help to solve the problem of population explosion in China. In addition, BL fiction are conducive to alleviate social discrimination against homosexual people, promote social attentions to their rights, and facilitate the spread of relevant HIV/AIDS prevention knowledge and information. Besides, the prosperity of BL fiction will bring more marketing interest to men, which may stimulate the consumption of “male beauty” and provide more joy opportunities to men.

For serious fans, they believe that the misunderstandings of “decadent girl(s)” are caused and exacerbated by some fake fans. The latter, according to the former, were not qualified “decadent girls” because what they want is the illusive love between two beautiful men. Fake “decadent girl(s)” were naïve and crazy; they always imagine that beautiful men exist in the real world after they read some BL fiction, so they stalk, pry, and interrogate those who they think are gay men. One male high school student talks about his experience online as how anger and embarrassed he was when he found that several girls in the class paired him with other male students. Another funny story is presented by a gay man, and he mentions that one time when he met a self-claim “decadent girl(s), and the girl kept saying how she felt sympathetic with him after knowing he was a gay, the gay man just fought “why I need your sympathy? I am richer than you, more educated than you, and even my boyfriend is more handsome than your.” In other case, some “decadent girl(s)” encourage or even force their straight male friends or boyfriends dating with other boys to show how strongly they advocate for and favor of BL. These fake “decadent girl(s),” criticized by real ones, not only confuse fiction with reality, but also do harm to the images of BL fans as a group.

Then, how counts as real “decadent girl(s)”? According to fans’ descriptions, real “decadent girl(s)” should:

1) Never feel shameful of reading BL works or being a “decadent girl,” instead, admit it bravely, and tell people who cannot understand frankly: what we want is just love; 2) never feel ashamed to write BL fiction, and tell people who discriminate against BL directly: what I write is just love; 3) sex is understandable and acceptable in BL fiction but does not mean everything; 4) to gay men, “decadent girl(s)” should more understand them and help them when necessary, but not pry about them out of curiosity or have an unrealistic expectation on them; 5) love is the most beautiful emotion, and it becomes more splendid and brilliant when transcending the barrier of biological sex. No one can deprive of others’ right to love; 6) what “decadent girl(s)” want is just tolerance (resource from Baidu Wikipedia).

“Decadent girl(s)” insist that their fascination with BL fiction does not bring any harm to society, family, other people, or themselves. If the consumption of BL publications caused moral corruption, degeneration, or physical and psychological side effect as many opponents believe, what about those Japanese girls who read BL manga from a very young age, argue the “decadent girl(s)”. Fans make clear, “We do not want to bother you; if you do not like it (BL fiction), please don’t click.” This is why many of the BL websites emphasize on their entrance pages that the sites are women-only and that men (even gay men) are not welcome as visitors (McLelland, 2005). Moreover, the mutual support among fans also strengthens the coherence of fan groups and communities. For example, when seeing that it is difficult for BL fiction writers to publish the hard-copy version, they push fans to purchase copies on the black market. They also encourage each other online that, as BL fans, they should have higher quality than other fans. When Wu (2005) summarizes the characteristics of BL fans, one of the important characteristics, she believes, is that they are more likely to do volunteer work and enjoy the happiness brought by their work in charity organizations and services. Although the author does not provide enough evidence for her conclusion, her argument

indicates an effort to challenge the society's negative impression of BL fiction and its fans.

The online communities exclusively for fans who share common interests in BL fiction provide a comfortable space of their own. In a sexist, heterosexist, and homophobic society where women have traditionally had little opportunity to develop and share distinct tastes or sexual fantasies in reality with other women, the Internet clearly offers an opportunity for online communities' development (Bury, 2005; McLelland, 2005). Within these women's online spaces, fans are able to create scenarios in which the homophobia and violence characteristic of male desire is overthrown. As McLelland (2000) argues, "Sex between boys, which in male representations would necessarily be scripted in terms of coercion and power, is instead scripted in terms of nurture and love. The female gaze recognizes a scene different from that of the male gaze" (p. 285). However, we have to say that the awareness of the potential implication of BL works against male domination, heterosexism, or homophobia is not always an automatic and conscious process for fans in China, and this can be reflected by the various attitudes of fans toward BL works. While many fans consider BL works as weapon of feminism, gay and lesbian rights, or being against patriarchy, there are still many others reading BL fiction just for fun than other purposes.

In this chapter, the discussion has focused mainly on the reasons why fans are fascinated with BL fiction and how they defend their choice when blamed and discriminated against by society. From the trajectory of fans' development, we can see that their activities become more and more self-conscious. At the very beginning, they kept silent about their interests because of outside and internalized homophobia and chastity, as well as isolation. Through the Internet, they met other like-minded fans and organized their own online communities, and they also began to defend their choice

against public ridicule. In time, their activities became more self-conscious, and they began to reflect on many questions which were not originally important to them: Why can't we read BL fiction? What is wrong with our choice? Their answers took the form of counter-interrogations directed at normal society: Why only BG (boy and girl, heterosexual relationship) fiction? Although many of fans still do not realize the political meaning of their defense and most activities happen only online but not in reality, they have begun to think about reality critically and challenge the heterosexual status quo, which may have the potential to foster social change. However, at the same time, we can also see that the defense of fans—for the sake of love—is still ambiguous: What kind of love do fans want? How should love be defined? The reading of BL fiction will provide us more concrete understanding of “the love” advocated by fans, which is the focus of next chapter.

### **Chapter Three: “His Story by Her”—How “Decadent Girls” Make Sense of Their “Cross-Gender” Imagination and Writing**

As famous scholar Janice Radway (1984) points out, “[Romance] is, rather, the end product of a much-mediated, highly complex, material and social process that involves writers, literary agents, publishing officials, and editors, as well as hundreds of other people who participate in the manufacture, distribution, and selling of books” (p. 12). However, in the Internet era, some formerly necessary intermediary steps between writing and publishing are no longer significant, so the interaction between writers and readers have become more direct. A writer can post his/her fiction to specific website he/she likes without worrying about possible rejection by editors or publishers. Within several minutes, there may be some comments posted by fans. Likewise, the formerly clear line between writers and readers has already become obscure. Many fans not only enjoy the process of reading but also take active part in the writing. The readers, when reading fiction, can leave their comments, suggestions, and opinions, which can help the writers get more information about or make changes to their writing according to the readers’ tastes, so they can profit from their fiction. For some writers, writing fiction is just a personal interest and hobby, and they do not care about whether or not they earn money from the fiction. Others claim that they started writing simply because they could not find the stories they like.

The online interactions between BL fiction writers and readers play a positive role on the prosperous production of BL fiction, and many fans are both the producers/writers and the consumers/readers of BL fiction. Through providing suggestion and advice for the improvement of writing skills, recommending favorite reading lists to each other, establishing fan groups, and leaving positive comments to the writers and the likes, a

mutually supportive and reciprocal relationship between fans has come into being. Fan reaction and opinion is also important for some writers as an aid to design and revise the stories in their fiction. To a certain extent, BL fiction is the co-product of both the writers and readers, and the social context of the writers and the readers works to shape how they construct the love and relationship in the works.

Intriguingly, as a same-sex genre by and for women, BL fiction has some unique features that distinguish it from other (i.e., heterosexual or homosexual fiction) that can be easily detected. The first characteristic we need to address is pertinent to the gendered writing psychology or tendency by female writers. Before I began to read BL fiction, I talked to a female friend who is a loyal fan of online fiction. I told her I mistook the BL fiction writers and readers to be gay men, and wondered why they were actually heterosexual women. My friend laughed and said that, from her very first reading of BL fiction, she knew the writer must be a woman. “As you read more, you’ll see it. Only women write this stuff; men would definitely not write this kind of fiction,” she commented. When asked to elaborate on the “stuff,” she did not provide a direct response and just suggested that I read some fiction by and for men on the male-oriented websites.

Following her suggestion, after reading more BL fiction and fiction by and for male readers, I gradually understood what she meant. Basically, some depictions in BL fiction, particularly psychological and emotional ones, only appear and exist in “women’s writings,” and the male characters in the fiction are psychologically. Further, BL fiction is most popular among heterosexually female-oriented websites, and is rarely found in websites for heterosexual men (some may be available on websites for gay men). Quite similar to the old saying, “women care about romance and love,” the most popular online-fiction genre for women is romance; but not so for male fans. When reading some top ranking fiction on male-oriented websites, I found that there are two tendencies: the

stories either have very little romantic plotting and female characters, or the male protagonist has affairs with countless women. More interestingly, I cannot find on those male-orient websites any genre similar to GL (men write about female-female relationship). One fan just comments, “If men do write GL fiction, it must be hard-core pornography.”

### **THE POWER OF NAMING**

An obvious characteristic of BL fiction is the very idiosyncratic vocabulary used by the fans (some popular BL words and explanations will be listed in the Appendix). If you are a newcomer and not familiar with BL fiction, reading BL fiction will be relatively annoying for you since there are always new words interfering with the reading and you have to guess and infer their meanings. To the contrary, some experienced fans can tell whether a fiction is a BL fiction or not only through the name of the fiction. When communicating with other fans online, they use the level of familiarity with BL vocabulary to judge how loyal other fans are to BL fiction. The relatively new and different expressions and vocabulary have also brought BL fiction fans criticism for being exclusive and pretentious.

The vocabulary in BL fiction has a discursive origin. By tracing the origins, we can notice the influence of different cultures on BL works in China. Many words are translated directly from Japanese, such as:

**Zhengtai**, originated from Japanese word *Shotai* (the male protagonist from a Japanese fairy story and a popular pronoun for young boy), means beautiful boy(s).

**H**, from Japanese word *Hentai* (abnormal or perverted), implies sex. Usually, the authors may use “high,” “medium,” or “low” before H to address the amount of sexual descriptions in the fiction.

**orz**, the meaning of this word is from the shape of the combination of the three letters: a person kneels down to the floor. Fans may use it to express different feelings; overall, its meaning is similar to “Oh, my god!”

Japanese manga has a huge impact on Chinese young generation. Those who were born after the implementation of Reform and Opening-Up policy in the 1980s are the generation grew up with Japanese manga. Plenty of fans of BL fiction mention that their first contact with the BL genre started with reading Japanese manga. By the time they started writing their own BL fiction, they have already learned and borrowed so much BL vocabulary from their Japanese counterparts and use them in their writings. What needs to be emphasized is that although using the same words, the original meanings may have changed during the process of translation—for example, H. This kind of change marks the digestion and reworking of an original culture.

Moreover, the impact from Western culture is also very obvious:

**3P** (or 4P, 5P, ...), short from English “three persons,” the authors use this word to declare that there is not a one-to-one relationship in the fiction, and more than two characters are involved into the relationship.

**HP** is refers not to the printer company but to Harry Potter. The pairing of male characters in Harry Potter is very popular among BL fiction writers in China.

**SM** is the abbreviation of sadomasochism; when used by the authors, there will be some sadomasochistic plots in the fiction.

The advent and spread of computer technology and the Internet facilitates the emergence of global fan communities. Fans, particularly those who know more than one language, can participate in online communication and interaction with fans in other countries. This has extended information exchange, borrowing, and sharing between fans. Intriguingly, HP paring is also popular among BL fans in Japan, US, and other countries.

Moreover, I have noticed that many Western terms from queer study are translated and used in BL glossaries in China, such as *closet*, *out of closet*, *sissy*, and *tomboy*. Thus, some Chinese researchers believe that the popularity of BL works in China will promote the movement of homosexual people.

During the process of absorbing and reprocessing foreign cultures, BL fans also invent new words and endow new meanings to old words:

**Gong**, can be both a noun and an adjective in Chinese. In BL fiction, it refers to the person who plays the active role in a male-male relationship or the sexual action of inserting.

**Shou**, opposite to *Gong*, refer to the person who plays the receptive role in a male-male relationship or the sexual action of being inserted.

**Juhua**, chrysanthemum, connotes anus.

**Huanggua**, cucumber, implies penis.

Moreover, the popularity of online fiction makes some expressions super popular among fans, and these words are also commonly used in BL fiction.

**YY**, acronym of Chinese word *Yiyin*, means unrealistic and unrestrained imagination and fantasy. It can also used as a verb, for example, to *YY* someone can be understood as to sexually harass someone, of course imaginarily.

**Lei**, thunder, when used as an adjective, it indicates the state similar to be shocked by the thunder.

**囧**, similar to “orz,” uses the shape to indicate the meaning. The character looks like an embarrassed human face with a widely open mouth—a natural reaction to some unexpected, usually funny situation or encounter.

*Gouxie*, refers to dog's blood. In ancient Chinese societies, dog's blood was believed to have the power to expel ghosts and evil-doers. When used in the fiction, *Gouxie* means all sorts of incredible and absurd plots.

*Nie*, mistreatment or abuse, when used by the authors, emphasizes that there will be substantial hardship, suffering, or torture mentally or physically experienced by the main characters. An author who includes too many *Nie* plots will be jokingly called (by herself or her fans) a “stepmother.”

Through tracing the origin and explaining the meaning of some BL vocabulary, I try to demonstrate that the BL genre in China, while originally the direct outcome of Japanese BL manga, has been under the influence of many forces and trends, and is no longer a simple borrowing from Japanese culture, but a more conscious and autonomous working and reworking with tremendous input by Chinese fans. The BL glossary witnesses the formation of a properly Chinese BL culture, and is also one of very important components of the culture. If you want to read BL fiction or to know something about BL culture, being familiar with BL vocabulary is an indispensable step. Otherwise, your reading will be like a frequently stopped journey, and you cannot help but wonder what's happening. From another perspective, however, for some fans, guessing the meaning of these words is a pastime of its own. BL fans also like to use some popular expressions to test whether others are BL fans or not. Fans know that if a girl's eyes are shining when hearing *Juhua* (chrysanthemum) or *Huanggua* (cucumber), it is highly likely that she is a BL fan.

From another perspective, as a new genre, BL fiction did not have originally have a unique vocabulary, and fans have invented and created the vocabulary and meanings by themselves. This is a marginalizing and anti-marginalizing process. Fans use the words creatively to express their meanings and provide a “gaze” different from men's gaze.

“Language and naming are sources of power,” argue Crawford and Unger (2004), “regaining for women the power to name is the first step in personal and social change” (preface, xvi).

### **“HIS STORIES BY HER”: THE WRITING OF “CROSS-GENDER” IMAGINATION**

Although some Chinese researchers have noticed the popularity of BL fiction, none of them has ever talked about or analyzed the writings of BL fiction. I also wonder how many of these researchers have read BL fiction deeply and extensively. Broadly speaking, writing is also a process of social construction; more than often not, the social reality and the writers’ corresponding reactions will be directly or indirectly illustrated and reflected in their fiction. Reading fiction can be an invaluable tool for understanding the attitudes, feelings, and opinions of the authors concerning specific questions. Therefore, reading BL fiction and deciphering the meanings behind the writing will play an important part of my research, and the focus of my question is to know how these female writers, most of who claim to be heterosexual women, make sense of or display their “cross-gender” imaginations and narratives to the audience.

Here, I use “cross-gender” as a metaphor to address the fact the authors are females but write from men’s perspectives, so their imaginations and writing have “crossed” the gender norms. I chose “cross-gender” rather than “transsexual” because, in my mind, the former works better to point out that although BL fans write about male-male plots and their imaginations are crossing the gender norms, they are much different from transsexual people who want to change their physical sex in reality, but not just fictitiously. Thus, the word “cross-gender” will be more appropriate for my discussion. When talking about “cross-gender” narratives in BL fiction, I will pay attention not to the authors’ writing and rhetorical skills, language style, wording, phrasing and the like (which is especially difficult to do because of the language and rhetoric differences).

Instead, my discussion will go beyond language and literary analysis and focus on how the BL fiction writers deploy their “cross-gender” narratives, and what are the meanings and implications behind these narratives. All the analysis here is from the readings of BL fiction in JJ.

### **Transcendence and the Creation of a Perfect Sex**

As many BL fiction writers have mentioned, writing BL fiction gives them more freedom and fewer barriers than traditional heterosexual romance fiction to design the stories. Zhuoxuan, a well-know writer among fans, argues, in terms of the relative flexibility of BL fiction, that since the stories in BL fiction have already not been accepted and credited by the mainstream culture and ideology, no matter how exaggerated the plots will be, they all can be displayed and presented in BL fiction. Transgressing the conventions of heteronormalcy, BL writers boldly design their plots, and some go to extremes to challenge the readers’ imaginations. For example, *Shi li Hong Lian Yan Jiu (Ten-mile Red Lotus and Wine)*, a very popular BL fiction among fans, talks about the love story between three beautiful men: Yuhuang, Xuanfeng, and Chonglian. The story happens in an unreal historical time and place where male-male relationships are a common. Yuhuang, who is the cousin of Xuanfeng, falls in love with Chonglian; however, because Xuanfeng has a strong crush on Yuhuang, he cannot allow the love between Yuhuang and Chonglian. So he creates misunderstandings between Yuhuang and Chonglian and even frames and rapes Chonglian. After being misunderstood and raped, Chonglian disappears suddenly. When Yuhuang finally finds Chonglian, Chonglian has already delivered a baby (the father is Xuanfeng) and lost all past memory. Yuhuang, by patience and love, helps Chonglian restore the memory and also finds out the truth. Finally, Yuhuang and Chonglian are together again, and Chonglian also has another baby for Yuhuang.

Generally speaking, the wildest stories are more likely to appear in this category, and rationality is not an issue that the authors worry about. The stories usually have a very ambiguous and unreal time setting (such as A.D. 5000 or once upon a time). From the very beginning, male-male love has already been a natural and uncontroversial existence; no one would ask or care why a man likes another man. Within the male-male utopia, young and beautiful men are everywhere and they may even possess the function of women: to be pregnant and to deliver a baby. In addition, majority fiction in this category has a happy ending: the lovers are finally together after some misunderstandings and obstacles. Generally, fans who like this type of BL fiction are relatively young and very open to novelty and creativity.

Interestingly, some words commonly used to express how surprised a person is are more likely to be related to this category of fiction, such as *Gouxue* (dog's blood), *orz* (oh my god), *Lei* (thunder), 囧 (shock), or *Wuyu* (no comment). Fan Craziess No.1 comments jokingly, for example, "According to scientific studies, fans who have read *Shi li Hong Lian Yan Jiu* (*Ten-mile Red Lotus and Wine*) all have indicated high resistance to shocks. Psychopath study center will provide free services to those who still survive now after reading."

Noticeably, within BL fiction, female characters are few and inconsequential and some stories even do not have any female character at all. Researchers who study BL phenomena have long observed the issue of "misogynistic" tendency in BL publications (Masaki, 2008; Lees, 2006; Suzuki, 1999). It is also a fact that in many BL stories in China, women are portrayed negatively or badly. Many fans express a contradicted mentality toward the misogyny in BL fiction. After reading *Wo De Di Di Dou Shi Lang* (*My Brothers are All Wolves*), fan Xiaolin comments, "In this story, from the beginning to the end, there is not even one female character. Although I am a big fan of BL fiction, I

still feel uncomfortable with this kind of arrangement and it makes me feel that women are unwanted.” On one hand, they do enjoy seeing the stories between many beautiful men; on the other, they also feel somewhat angry and humiliated due to the ignorance or negative portray of female characters in the fiction. How should we understand fans’ ambivalence?

BL fiction, to a certain extent, can be considered as the YY (unrealistic fantasies) of the women toward male-male relationship. Why do women enjoy these kinds of fantasies? To answer this question, some fans may as well ask why men enjoy watching girl-girl videos. Similarly, if men can obtain a feeling of control from watching lesbian pornographic videos, fans of BL fiction are also enjoy the feeling of designing men’s destinies in the fiction and the feeling of transcending the male-domination reality. As writer Meiyin addresses, “[I]t is funny to arrange those male characters in the story encountering all kind of problems but being unable to solve them. In my hand, those male characters have become my lively toys, and I can ask them to do whatever I want. Why does it matter to have female characters?”

Another way for fans to avoid the problem of misogyny is to create a perfect gender—androgyny. They are not satisfied with the stereotypical gender roles concerning the traits and behaviors of men and women defined by the society. For example, women should be tender, submissive, delicate and emotional; men should be independent, dependable, strong-minded and emotionless. Alone, femininity or masculinity is not perfect; thus, an androgynous gender combining the qualities of both men and women is created in BL fiction: although having men’s physical appearance, the male protagonists are also as tender, considerate, nurturing, and devoted as women; and they are very different from the stereotypical gender role-models constructed by society. One good

example of BL fans' fantasies of androgyny is the plot of "male pregnancy and delivery" in the fiction.

Although both imposing feminine traits and personalities to male bodies, the purposes of the two groups (the male writers addressing homosexual relationship in Chinese history and the BL writers) are quite different from each other. The male writers imposed feminine characteristics to other men by imagining them as sexual objects similar to women and described male-male relationships as heterosexual relationships; however, in BL fiction, female fans' projection of femininity to male characters indicates their dissatisfaction with the gender roles the society assigns to men and women and their attempt to construct a relationship different from unequal heterosexual relationships.

However, even BL fans have expressed their discontent with unequal heterosexual relationships, their writing is still under the deep influence of heterosexism. For example, within the male-male relationship, there is always the role division of actor and receptor, similar to a man and a woman in a heterosexual relationship. Likewise, in most BL fiction, the actors are relatively masculine and the receptors feminine. For example, in *Shi li Hong Lian Yan Jiu (Ten-mile Red Lotus and Wine)*, among three male protagonists, Xuanfeng and Yuhuang (who have penetrated Chonglian and make the latter pregnant) are manly men; but Chonglian is a rather feminine man, including his name which contains the meaning of lotus and traditionally is a name for women. When depicting the beauty of Chonglian, the author writes that "he is sitting here elegantly with falling down long black hair. There is a red lotus tattoo on his neck, blossoming brilliantly and seductively, which makes his beauty even more outstanding. This is a shining beauty who makes others blind. Even you have known him for a long time, every time when you see him, you will still think he is so beautiful." Similar depictions of Chonglian's beauty are found throughout the story, and these depictions are not very

different from ones describing women's beauty. As many fans have pointed out that, if one does not know the gender of the main character in the fiction in advance, she will mistake him for a woman after reading these kinds of depictions.

The role division in fans' fantasies of two male lovers is obvious in most BL fiction. This tendency leads to Lan's (2006) argument that BL phenomenon is a copy or reproduction of unequal heterosexual relationship in reality, and that women who like BL genres identify with the receptors within male-male relationships and are eager to be conquered by the "double man". Borrowing French writer Jean Genet's idea that "a man who fucks other men is a 'double man'," Lan laments that, through projecting the intensive love between men to their own reality, women's fascination of BL works may indicate their eagerness for domination by a "double man". Li's argument is heterosexually biased and caters to the phallogocentric "impression that penetration signifies domination and feminization—a construction facilitated by a gendered binary in which the penetrator is cast as masculine and the person being penetrated is cast as feminine, or in which one is active and the other is passive" (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 61). We cannot help but ask: Why can BL fans only identify with the penetrated? Why can't fans identify with the penetrator—because they don't have penises? In fact, many fans have mentioned that they identify with *both* parties in the reading, and to be penetrated is not the only choice for women.

Concerning the role division in BL fiction, many fans complain that there is not any difference between some BL fiction and BG fiction and the authors just change the female characters in heterosexual fiction into male ones. Fan Xiayi thus derides:

As incredible as the evidences insisted by NASA to judge whether or not there is extraterrestrial life: water and oxygen. Why must aliens need water and oxygen? Correspondingly, why must the same-sex couples be two persons with differently psychological gender? If they require the partner as an "opposite sex," how is their relationship different from heterosexual ones? Is there any rule in the world

that a more masculine man must match a more feminine man as partner? There is no necessity for a complementary relationship between different genders, and it's more irrational to assume that possession of a trait by one party (masculinity) naturally connotes the lack of that trait by the other.

### **The Longing for True Love**

For BL fiction in this group, I may say, they are likely to be viewed as “real” stories. Usually, the stories in the fiction have relatively clear and real historical backgrounds, which can be sustained by historical facts and records. For example, the story of Emperor Xin Liu (25–1 BCE) and his same-sex lover Xing Dong. According to historical records, Liu was deeply in love with Dong. One time, when they were sleeping together, Liu needed to leave for business but his sleeve was pressed by Dong's body. In order not to bother Dong's sleeping, Liu used his sword to cut off the sleeve. Since that, “cutting sleeve” was used to address the love between men. As what has been discussed in Chapter One, there are considerable records and literature concerning male-male relationship in China. Similarly, these records and literature are also borrowed by BL fiction writers into their writings.

Compared to the relatively tolerant attitude to homosexuality in the history, BL stories in modern times are more likely doomed to a sad ending. Within their writings, the authors do not try to cover or whitewash the omnipresent homophobia in reality. They express implicitly or explicitly their support and sympathy for homosexual people while simultaneously indicating their anger towards heterosexism. Some authors also mention that they have gay male friends and have a better understanding of their lives and struggles. For example, in the fiction *Shui Zai Ni Yin Jing Li De Sa Mo* (*Sleeping in the Desert of Your Eyes*), the author emphasizes at the beginning that the work was inspired by a real story. The story talks about how a girl finds out that her beloved uncle is actually gay, and then how she does everything to separate her uncle and his lover. At the

end, not only does her uncle's lover die while her uncle is exiled from the family, but the girl lives in perpetual self-blame and always tries to commit suicide. After reading the fiction, one fan just writes down, "[I]n many BL fiction, those male characters are always living in happiness without the bother of reality. Do any of you ever think about how repressive and painful the real life of homosexual people is?"

Moreover, many fans also point out this type of BL fiction are really the love story between two men rather than the story between a masculine man and a feminine man. Usually, there is not the distinguish of actor or receptor within the relationship; just as fan Ruoyibingfen comments, "BL, as the name indicates, first of all and after all, is about the love between men." The fiction *Qi Lin Zheng Zhuan (Love Story in the Army)* tells the love between two soldiers Zhang and Li. After experiencing countless life and death ordeals, they develop a mutual affection deeper than friendship or brotherhood; however, because of the homosexual taboo in the society, particularly in the army, they have to keep this love in their hearts and miss each other when they have to be apart. The author talks about the motive of writing this fiction: "[W]hat is the beauty of BL? I think the real beauty is not the brilliant rhetoric, splendid clothes, and super handsome male characters. In the world, the pure souls are the most beautiful; thus, when two pure souls attract and encounter each other, the most beautiful story will naturally happen." Responding to the fiction, fan Amuding praises, "[The fiction] is the love between two real men; only fiction like this, rather than stories about the delicacy and pretentiousness of women, matches my imaginings of male-male love."

Catering to the reading psychology of women, some BL fiction writers in this group do provide happy endings to the stories. However, these are different from those "living happily together forever" endings. The male characters are together, but they have sacrificed many significant things such as family and job in their lives to secure their

love. Most of the time, there is no open blessing and support for their relationship, and the male characters have to keep their relationship secret from people around them, even after moving to a new environment. In fact, the so-call happy endings just remind the audience that there will never be any happy ending for homosexual people within a heterosexist society.

Most interestingly, many male characters in this group of BL fiction are not homosexuals from the beginning, and they never doubt their heterosexual orientation before meeting their beloved partner. Many of them have gone through a very painful and tortuous process of self-denial and self-blame until they finally accept the love bravely. This kind of story setting best manifests the importance of true love advocated by BL fans: a person does not need to be a homosexual to choose or love a same-sex partner, and he is attracted to and by a same-sex partner for the sake of love. Thus, the love which has transcended social taboos and moral obstacles is the true love needs to be praised and treasured.

Although these BL writers confront homophobia directly and emphasize the importance of true love, most of them may never consider why they use love between men to represent true love. Why not the love between women, who have the same gender as the writers, and which is also a social taboo? Although I did not find direct response to the above questions from fans, many observations from Japanese researchers on *YAOI* manga provide the possible answers. Concerning the question why BL instead of GL in homosexual relationship, Japanese writer Hagio confesses that,

Whether I depict male homosexual or female homosexual love did not matter in theory. But in practice, I write about lesbian, I see a lot of dirty aspects because I am a girl. However, I can describe ideal male homosexuals since I do not know much about them. Men and women are two distinct existences because of the difference in sex. So if I write about heterosexual relationships, I have to deal with them very seriously since I cannot help but realistic (Suzuki, 1998, p. 248).

As we know, BL stories are fantasies about male-male relationships by and for women. Although fantasies can transcend reality, they also reflect it. Thus, Hagio talks about the feeling as “cannot help but be realistic.” Similarly, her feeling is also shared or experienced by fans in China. Chinese women, like women everywhere, are eager for equal, respectful, and mutual love and relationship, but the gender inequality and discrimination that they still experience in reality have discouraged their dream for a true love. Just because of their keen awareness of gender inequality in reality, they choose to express their wish for a true love only through fantasies. For them, traditional heterosexual relationships have already been a disappointment, so they look for alternatives. For example, a fiction genre in heterosexual romance called *Nüzun* (female domination) appears in JJ. In *Nüzun* fiction, although still focusing on heterosexual relationships, the status of women and men is opposite to the one in reality: women are dominating over and prior to men. However, *Nüzun* fiction is not so popular among fans. GL fiction, which depicts female-female relationship, faces similar destiny. On the contrary, BL fiction, compared to the above-mentioned two, has achieved progressive success among fans.

Why do women finally choose BL to express their wish for true love? We still need to go back to the feeling of “cannot help but be realistic.” No matter how women’s fantasies can transcend the reality, their identity as women keeps reminding them of the reality. As Suzuki points out, “To make women feel that they are the inferior or weaker sex because of the sexual difference is the very core of the mechanism of phallocracy” (1998, p. 248). In *Nüzun* fiction or GL fiction, fans cannot help but identify with the female characters, and the more the stories transcend reality, the more unrealistic they feel when compared to reality and fans’ own experience. However, when reading BL

fiction, although fans also identify with male characters, this is the life and status they have never really experienced in reality. On the one hand, fans can write about the male-male relationship as freely as possible; on the other, because of the “mechanism of phallocracy” and the power and privilege enjoyed by men, fans believe that real equality can only be actualized between two men. Therefore, the BL theme, rather than GL or others, is the choice of fans; meanwhile, it also reflects the gender inequality that Chinese women face and struggle with in reality.

### **The Complex of Being a Man**

The BL fiction in this category, usually, like to use the combinations of “crossing” and “transgender” plots in the writings. “Crossing” plots became popular in the late 1990s. As the fans jokingly put it, the stories are about “dating with ancient people” (Chen, 2008, p. 183). Generally, the main characters cross time and space back through history because of some unexpected accidents, such as a traffic accident, airplane crash, drowning, getting lost, and the likes. The authors arrange the experience of the main characters upon some real historical records and events, which make the seemingly impossible “crossing” plots become relatively credible. After crossing to the ancient societies, because of their differences in behaviors and thinking and their possession of some knowledge and information unknown by past people, the main characters always have many intriguing and adventurous encounters.

Accompanying the “crossing” narratives, the “transgender” plots are also sometimes added by BL fiction writers, leading to stories whose main characters not only cross history but also change their sex (from a woman to a man). The combination of “crossing” narratives and “transgender” narratives explain why the male characters are always feminine: there is actually a woman living inside the body of man. Therefore, it

will be natural for the male characters to sometimes act like women because they are still struggling to match their appearance with their inner self.

Similar to the first group, the authors have also noticed how their writings have been feminized by their female identity. Not only their writings but their ideas are also gendered. As BL fiction writer Xia'an points out, due to gender differences, one gender, based on the gendered experience, will always hold some stereotypes toward other genders. Therefore, some qualities of male characters in BL fiction may not be the real qualities of men, which are just women's assumptions, expectations, or understandings of men. Then, how to fix the gap between the male characters and the author's identity as women? The "transgender" plots bridge the gap and make sense of the whole story.

Another issue that needs to be addressed is why the authors do not write plain men's narratives like the above-mentioned two groups but instead choose "transgender" narratives. As mentioned before, I have never found any fiction by men that deal with "transgender" imaginings, and I also believe this kind of writings will never gain its popularity among male readers. I tend to interpret the "transgender" plots in BL fiction as women's desire to be a man. Within male-dominated mainstream society, men do enjoy many privileges over women. Due to the relatively low and submissive social status of women, it is understandable why women dream of becoming men; and the unequal gender relationship also works to explain how undesirable it is for a man to imagine himself being a woman. It is for this reason that some Chinese researchers see BL fiction as a compromise or conformation of women to male domination and patriarchal discourse, though through a very nontraditional manner (J. Li, 2008; Ke, 2004). However, I tend to consider the writing of BL fiction to be the manifestation of gender inequality by women consciously or unconsciously, although they do not talk about this inequality directly in the fiction. They may be affected or captured by the omnipresent

sexism, but their choice of BL should not be viewed as a compromise and conformation of women to male domination and patriarchy, but a wish of and struggle for gender equality. This is evidenced by my observations on online-fiction websites for male readers: there is simply no GL fiction by and for men.

The desire to be male is more particularly manifested in BL fiction using first-person narrative. The first person narrative is commonly used in romance fiction than other types of fiction since the major audiences of romance fiction are women who demand more emotional and mental descriptions. When using first-person narratives, those details between lovers such as eye contact, sweet pranks, small smiles, and the likes, are easier to catch and depict by the authors through the “I”. The “I” in the fiction has already become the “puppet” of the authors, conveying and expressing ideas and opinions of the authors intentionally or unintentionally. Sometimes, the “I” in the fiction is confused with the self in reality, and the readers just feel the authors are talking about their own stories. In *Feng Ba Tian Xia (Hegemony of A Woman)*, “I,” i.e., Yue, a female killer in modern society, changes to a young man in an ancient society after death. With the knowledge learned from modern society, “I” conquer all kind of difficulties and become supper successful. During the process, “I” also meet and attract many beautiful and excellent young men, so the romance between “I” and them accompanies the development of my cause. In the end, with the help of my male lovers, “I” become the kind of the country.

Here, we need to ask why the authors whose physical sex is opposite of the male characters want to use first person narrative in their writings. Particularly, when using first person narrative in BL fiction, the authors have always given considerable praise to the male “I.” Doesn’t it mean that in their subconscious they consider themselves as men, or yearn to be men? I am disposed to consider that for these BL fiction writers there

really made be a deep-rooted complex for being male. Opposite to the male characters' encounter as "a woman living insider a man's body," for the female fans, there may be a man living inside their female bodies.

Additionally, one issue seldom noticed by Chinese researchers concerning the complex of being a man is the self-exploration of BL fans, particularly those who are still not so sure of their sexual orientation. I have found that many lesbians also like BL fiction. As one fan writes, "I feel like I love women more than men although I was taught to love men only. BL fiction provides me the opportunity to experience the role of men." "I do not know whether I love women or men," posted another fan. "After reading BL fiction, my confusion becomes much stronger. But I know that being a woman should not be the only choice." No matter of how uncertain they are of themselves, BL fiction is a way for them to experience the role of different gender role from their own and to explore their deep self.

In this chapter, I have analyzed the "cross-gender" sub-genre of BL fiction, and have discussed how fans make sense of and display the "cross-gender" female-to-male transformation to the audience. The several interpretations listed above regarding how BL fiction writers deploy and arrange their "cross-gender" imaginations are only some of the possible interpretations. However, BL fans, by writing and reading male-male love stories, express their wish and eagerness for love and equality, as well as reading pleasure, although they do not talk about gender inequality of reality directly. Their fantasies and choice of male-male relationships are the best demonstration of their protest. Because the love and relationship they want cannot be obtained in reality, they resort to this unique sub-genre of BL in order to voice their desire for love and equality, no matter whether they realize this desire consciously or not.

## Chapter Four: Beyond the BL Fan Communities

Certainly, the effects of BL fascination have moved beyond the mere fan communities. In the above chapters, I have talked about some social attitudes, usually negative, towards BL fiction and its fans. What are the manifestations of the hostility from different groups of people? What are their reasons for being against BL fiction and its fans? This chapter will focus on the various reactions stirred by BL fashion.

### WITHIN THE WOMEN'S COMMUNITIES

Undoubtedly, not all women are interested in BL fiction. I am also curious about how women who are not fans of BL fiction react to the fans. As mentioned before, BL fans create their exclusive groups and communities online to evade outside criticism and condemnation. Sometimes, they make it very clear on their webpages: “If you do not like it (BL) or cannot accept it, please just do not click the link.” Different from these very exclusive groups, JJ is one of the few official websites which openly exhibits support for the BL genre in China. When I began to read fiction on JJ in 2005, it had set BL as a big category among another seven. In 2009, JJ even changed its name from “The Biggest Fiction Base for Women in the World” to “Romance fiction, BL fiction, and *Toren* fiction: The Biggest Fiction Base for Women in the World.” Thus, JJ provided me with a good opportunity to observe some interactions between BL fiction fans and non-BL fans

Based on my online observations, there are very few conflicts between BL fans and non-fans, which may be also attributed to the regulation of JJ for reader politeness. Negative comments about fiction are not only restricted to the BL genre. The most extreme case I have ever observed was due to mislabeling. On JJ, every story carries some tags—such as modern or ancient, heterosexual or other, original or *Tongren*—to

give some simple information about the fiction. One writer tagged her BL fiction as heterosexual and a fan who clearly hated the BL genre very much left a lot of negative comments on almost every chapter of her work, and accused the author of lying about the true nature of the story.

That another example can probably be reckoned as the conflicts between BL fans and non-fans is the revision of the JJ homepage. Before 2010, the category of BL fiction was listed together with other categories in the homepage. In January 2010, JJ announced a sudden revision of its homepage. Since then, BL fiction and heterosexual fiction have their own separate homepages. Although the reason for this revision, according to JJ, was to provide “a better website function and a more clearly categorized index for readers,,” I cannot help but wonder whether this division is also caused by some unacknowledged conflict or incompatibility between BL fans and non-fans. Many fans, particularly those who do not care about the sexual orientation of the fiction, have expressed their dissatisfaction with the revision and say that the revision brings more trouble than convenience, contrary to JJ’s claims.

If we say female fans in JJ are more tolerant of BL fiction, however, there are more misunderstandings of GL fiction within the website. Many fans have indicated that they can accept BL fiction much more than GL fiction, and many BL fiction fans confess that, although they like BL fiction, GL fiction is still unacceptable to them. A large number of online fiction fans, including BL fiction fans, believe that the possible audiences for GL fiction are lesbians. It is particularly ironic that many fans of BL fiction hold a similarly heterosexist attitude toward GL fiction as they believe that they are more “normal” than fans who like GL fiction, since they still love men instead of women. Here, the female-female relationship becomes an abnormality, and true love is no longer

viewed as an important reason and standpoint for GL fiction fans as it is for BL fiction fans.

### **FROM GAY MEN'S COMMUNITIES**

Because of the relation of male-male writings to homosexuality, the BL genre is always confused with homosexual culture and there are more reactions and responses from gay men communities with respect to BL works and the fans. Above all, the most severe criticism of BL fiction comes from gay men. As some gay men point out, within the male-male relationship in BL fiction, there is always the division of actor and receptor similar to the roles in a heterosexual relationship. In reality, however, there is usually not this kind of role division between same-sex partners. Because BL fiction fans do not really know much about homosexual people, they use their imaginations and suppositions to supplement their ignorance, imposing a heterosexist standard of “love only exists between one man and one woman” on homosexual people. Then, sissy men are considered naturally by some BL fans as gay men who play the role of receptor similar to women in heterosexual relationships.

Another criticism is against the prejudices brought about by images of male characters in BL fiction. Pointed out by gay men activist Satō, the BL genre “failed to provide accurate information about gay men, promoted a destructive image of gay men as wealthy, handsome, and well-educated, ignored prejudice and discrimination against gay men in society, and co-opted gay men as masturbation fantasies” (Vincent, 2007). Furthermore, the sexual descriptions are also very misleading, depicting gay men as always searching other men for sex. Anal sex, namely penetration, is a standard and routine for male-male sexuality in BL fiction and depicted ambiguously and aesthetically similar to heterosexual sex. BL authors always like to use flowers to metaphor the beauty of male protagonist (particularly the receptor) and his body. For example, in *Liu Xue*

(*Going Abroad*), there are many sexually episodes within which the body of Xiaobai (the main character) is described as the blossoming cherry. As the author writes, “His body is so tender and white, even more delicate than a little girl, with unresisting and breathtaking attractiveness.” Similar to heterosexual romance which never talks about condom use during sex, as a fan puts it, “Some of the information about anal sex that I get from others emphasizes the importance to do some cleaning jobs such as an enema before the sex. I am curious why there is not any mention of enemas and the like in the H (sex) plots of BL fiction.”

Nevertheless, many gay men also mention enjoying reading BL fiction. According to them, BL fiction reads somewhat like a fairy tale. Although the love depicted in the fiction could never occur in reality, reading it can provide a temporary escape from the cruel reality into the pleasure of a free imagination. As one fan leaves the message, “I am a gay man, but also like to read BL fiction. But I don’t like homosexual fiction very much because it’s just too real and cruel to read. We as homosexuals have experienced too much discrimination and pressure in reality, and I really do not want to repeat such pain in my readings. It is interesting to read those funny stories in BL fiction and know how women think about male-male relationships.”

#### **RESPONSES FROM SOCIETY**

In China, BL publications are still considered illegitimate and face much censorship from the government. Generally, BL fiction has to endure a double censorship in to the form of anti-pornography and homophobia. Due to the development of gay rights in China, homosexuality is no longer considered a mental disease or crime by the Authority, although discrimination is still wide spread. Thus, the censorship mostly focuses on possible pornographic content in BL fiction. In the past few years, the Authority has advocated and sponsored several purification movements specifically

directed at online publications. In my observations, during the online purification movement of 2008, one BL story ranked as No. 1 in the “Top 200 Stories” on JJ disappeared from the list, which triggered heated discussion among fans. According to JJ’s official explanation, the story was deleted because there were too many sex scenes. However, JJ did not provide a clear answer for the question of how many totally stories were deleted from the “Top 200” list that year. We do not know how many overly-sexual heterosexual stories were deleted from the list or what the criteria were for determining pornographic status.

According to some material I collected during that time, many websites or links by and homosexuals were either locked or deleted by the Authority, regardless of their pornographic content. The possible logic for the censorship may be “homosexuality = abnormality = pornography,” which is also widely held by the public the mainstream culture. There are many reasons for the formation of this logic. First, homosexuality is still stigmatized and marginalized in China despite its decriminalization. Second, the stereotype of “women care about love, men care about sex” is a common belief in China. Thus, people always assume, when two men are staying together, that they prefer nothing else than sex. Furthermore, there are really many sexual descriptions and plots in some BL fiction. As a result, the logic of “homosexuality = abnormality = pornography” just come into being naturally, even BL fiction is a genre by and for women and even there are more pornographic contents in some heterosexual publications.

Concerning the issue of whether BL fiction is pornography, based on my observations on JJ, there is no evidence indicating that there is more pornographic content in BL fiction than in heterosexual romance fiction. Accordingly, if I can find pornographic BL works online, I can also obtain a large amount of heterosexual pornography—and the latter far outweighs the former. Nonetheless, the former faces far

more censorship than the latter. Intriguingly, at the end of 2009, the government implemented another online purification movement. As an official website, in order to exhibit its compliance to government administration, JJ increased its reporting of possible pornography on the website. Anyone who thinks there is too much pornographic content in a specific story can click a report button, and the reported story will be immediately inspected. If the alleged pornography is confirmed, the story will be either locked for revision or deleted forever. As some fans joke, the more chapters that a story has locked, the “better” or “more interesting” it is. When comparing the number of locked chapters in BL vs non-BL fiction, I did not find much of a difference. Therefore, it is reasonable to infer that the recent decision by JJ to move BL fiction to a different homepage may be JJ’s effort to protect BL fiction (and its readers) from attacks due to a new round of online purification, by fans who believe that “homosexuality = abnormality = pornography.” BL’s segregation probably resulted from heterosexual fiction fans’ intolerance of and incompatibility with BL fiction and fans.

## **Conclusion: What can be Learned from this Study**

Several years ago, I was carrying out a sex-education project among adolescents in China. When asking a group of middle-school students what they expected about in the future partner, I got many interesting but predictable answers. For male students, their future lover should be a beautiful girl (long hair, big eyes, white skin, tender, submissive, lovely, etc.); for female students, a handsome boy (tall, strong, dependable, trustworthy, rich, smart, humorous, etc.). I seldom heard traits such as *equal* or *equality*, let alone any desire for a same-sex partner. Maybe equality was still not a big issue for them or maybe they did not think the heterosexual relationship could really be equal. Looking back on this experience, I cannot help but think that these gender norms and stereotypes will be inherited generation after generation. However, I have learned something different from the BL genre.

The BL genre, as a special subfield of romance, has attracted more and more academic attention. In China, researchers have come to different conclusions concerning the BL phenomenon and its consequences. Some believe the popularity of BL genre indicates an increase in women's status and freedom, and some relate the BL genre to homosexual rights and contend that BL will bring more social attention to homosexual people and help to eliminate discrimination against homosexuality. But there are also researchers who argue from the standpoint of mainstream culture and criticize the BL genre as degenerate (hence the moniker "decadent girl"). Some even claim that the BL phenomenon is not about women's liberation but rather a confirmation of patriarchal value and male domination. Although these research findings have helped me understand the BL phenomenon in China, I have found that they are also problematic in some ways.

In China, BL genre is always misunderstood as and confused with homosexual literature and activities, and many BL fans also keep the belief that their choice is to increase the awareness of homosexuality. However, the BL genre is definitely not a homosexual genre, and in order to make clear the difference, I present a brief history of same-sex literature in China. Another purpose for introducing this history is to present the changes in women's social status and gender/sexual norms during different historical periods. When understanding the relation between BL genre and the homosexual campaign, I tend to compare it to the relation between the women's movement and the gay and lesbian movement in the USA during the 1970s and 80s. The BL genre, although it is not about the reality of homosexual people, has borrowed and accepted many concepts dealt with in gay and lesbian study. Undeniably, gay and lesbian campaigns in China have gained momentum and support from the BL phenomenon and fans. According to my observations, BL fans show more tolerance and support for same-sex relationship or marriage. Campaigns and mobilization in support of legalization of same-sex marriage are commonly seen within online communities for BL fans.

The BL genre, after all, is not a homosexual genre—it is a genre by and for women. When seen as a reflection of changes of women's social status, BL phenomenon can be considered as unprecedented progress: from total silence to the consumption of men (although just in fantasy). However, I have to say this progress is very limited and contextualized—gender inequality and discrimination against women is still common in China, and the emergence of the BL genre is the manifestation of women's protest and voice against the unequal reality.

BL fans use a very unusual way—the relationship between beautiful boys or young men—to express their dissatisfaction with heterosexual relationships. Some researchers are bewildered and deceived by the emphatic descriptions of the beautiful

appearance, and sex, or their male protagonists, so they view BL as pornography for men, just like female-female pornography is for by men, and argue that BL is a case in point of the coming of the women's era, as well as sexual freedom for women. No doubt, many BL fans have confessed that young and beautiful protagonists and male bonding do attract their attention, and that they do have fun from reading and writing BL works. However, what has been ignored by these researchers is: why don't BL fans just read heterosexual pornography if what they care about is just appearance and sex? In my research, I also found that the most popular BL fiction among fans is not the one with the most sexual plots.

When fans in China first encountered BL fiction, they seldom disclosed their interest to others because of the stigma on homosexuality and the traditional emphasis on chastity. The stigma prevented them from forming groups to share similar interest and support each other. The advent and popularity of the Internet has brought new opportunity and momentum to the spread of BL works and the establishment of online fan communities. With the expansion of BL works and fan group, many blames and misunderstanding appear accordingly. As a big group with huge number, BL fans no longer "closet" their interest and keep silent to public attack but choose to defend their choice. Step by step, BL genre has been a tool for fans to interrogate and fight against society.

As for BL fans who defend that what they really want is love, my reply is: Who doesn't need love? And why is it that only the love between *males* counts as true love? Isn't love also a good excuse for additional antisocial behaviors, such as incest or pedophilia? And how to define the love? BL fans do not provide satisfactory and further answers to these questions. Nevertheless, through reading and analyzing BL fiction, the fans' ideal conception of love becomes more palpable. Furthermore, by focusing on the

question of why the relations are BL rather than GL (or other), we see that the fans' choice directly reflects the very real gender inequality in the world. In fact, the love advocated and desired by BL fans is a mutual, a respectful, and in particular an *equal* relationship between lovers; just because this kind of love is far from the reality in China, so fans have to resort to fantasies and invent an ideal love in BL fiction. The inequality and discrimination they have experienced in reality make them unable to imagine a satisfactory love within heterosexual relationship or female-female relationship. Thus, it is more accurate to understand BL fans' choice as a struggle for *equality* rather than just for *love*; and behind their apparently normal reading and writing lies protest and voice of women against gender inequality in China, no matter whether they realize it or not.

Although BL trends have become increasingly popular in China, most fans activities are still happening online; and it is still difficult to imagine that BL works, like other legitimate hard-copy publications, will enter the market and circulate freely so that fans can buy them at bookstores and stands without shame. This point brings to mind *YAOI* manga in Japan. At the very beginning, *YAOI* manga also faced a lot of condemnation and discrimination; however, now it is one of the most popular publications among Japanese women and has countless fans; and its influence even goes beyond the national border, and has become a fashion in both Western and Eastern countries. However, as a relatively new trend, BL genre's development encounters different situations in different places.

In Japan, *YAOI* manga is available everywhere, and bookstore owners will put the advertisement (sometimes with vivid sexual scenes or descriptions) in an obvious place to attract more buyer. Girls, even those in middle and high schools, can choose whatever style of *YAOI* manga they like, and their parents also know they are reading *YAOI* manga. In Western countries, more specifically, the United States, there are also many

fans fascinated with slash fiction and *YAOI* manga. “My parents would totally freak if they knew what I was watching,” as one young *YAOI* fan said to the researcher; however, some parents also have a tolerant attitude to *YAOI* manga and take it as a sex/sexual exploration by adolescents. As an American mother who is a *YAOI* fan with a teenage daughter who also developed an interest in *YAOI* comments, “I am a bit concerned, ...So far the worst that’s happened is that she’s taking first-year Japanese in school and is starting to talk about summer programs abroad. I just hope she isn’t too disappointed that all the Japanese boys don’t look like *bishounen* (beautiful boy)” (Levis, 2009, p. 172, 173). In China, according to a widely-read news report about the emergence of BL genre, a mother, after finding her teenage daughter reading BL manga, called the press, crying and asking, “Why does she (the daughter) read this kind of book? Does she have a mental problem? What should I do?”

## Appendix: The List and Explanation of BL Vocabulary

**ACG:** the short for A (Anime), C (Comic), and G (Game).

**BB:** short for Boy and Boy.

**BG:** short for Boy and Girl.

**BL Game:** the computer games designed for women who like the BL theme. Within the games, beautiful men are male characters. By written texts or role-playing, the games can develop different romantic relationships between the main characters and other men around them.

**CC:** from English word “sissy.”

**Chugui:** translated from English “out of the closet,”—i.e., disclosing one’s homosexual identity to others.

**Danmei:** the indulgence in aesthetics. In China, it’s the proper noun for BL works.

**Funü:** female fans who like specifically BL works.

**Fuzi:** the romantic relationship between father and son.

**GC:** Gay Comic, namely BL manga and comic.

**GL:** girls’ love, the love stories between female protagonists. It’s a subcategory of the *Danmei* genre.

**Gong:** both a noun and an adjective in Chinese. In BL fiction, it refers to the person who plays the active role in a male-male relationship or the sexual action of inserting.

**Gouxue:** dog’s blood. In ancient Chinese societies, dog’s blood was believed to have the power to expel ghosts and evil-doers. When used in the fiction, *Gouxue* means all kind of incredible and absurd plots.

**Guichu:** translated from Japanese, meaning one who is as cruel and callous as the Devil. For example, the actor injures the receptor physically or abuses the receptor psychologically.

**H:** from Japanese word *Hentai* (abnormal or perverted), implies sex. Usually, the authors may use “high,” “medium,” or “low” before H to address the amount of sexual descriptions in the fiction.

**HP:** the short for Harry Porter. The pairing of male characters in Harry Porter is very popular among BL fiction writers in China.

**Huanggua:** cucumber, implies penis.

**Jianqishou:** a receptor who is lovely, sunny, and easy-going.

**Jianquan:** proper for all age ranges, without sexual content.

**Jiao:** fellatio.

**Jinfu:** during intercourse, the actor tightens and constrains the receptor's body by string.

**Juhua:** chrysanthemum, connotes anus.

**Kong:** the preference or mania for specific things or people. For example, *Zhentaikong* refers to the specific favor for young and beautiful boys.

**Kuso:** from Japanese, meaning funny or making fun.

**Lei:** *thunderous*. It indicates the state similar to be shocked by the thunder.

**Lieqi:** a scene containing descriptions of sexualized bodily violence.

**Lichangdaohuan:** the roles of the partners exchange. The original actor become receptor and vice verse.

**Niangshou:** sissy receptor.

**Nianxiagong:** the actor's age is younger than the receptor.

**Nianshanggong:** opposite to *Nianxiagong*, the actor's age is older than the receptor.

**Niwandao:** a pairing that is against the dominating tendency.

**Nüe:** mistreatment or abuse, when used by the authors, emphasizes that there will be substantial hardship, suffering, and torture mentally or physically experienced by the main characters. Jokingly, if a fiction has much too many *Nüe* plots, the author will self-claim or named by the fans as "stepmother."

**Nüwangshou:** a receptor who is as proud and superior as a queen, so the actor has to be submissive to his charm and control.

**orz** (sometimes as OTZ): the meaning of this word is from the shape of the combination of the three letters: a person kneels down to the floor. Fans may use it to express different feelings; overall, its meaning is very much similar to “oh, my god!”

**Pingxiongxiaoshouwen**: writing BL fiction from a heterosexual perspective, namely a receptor who is similar to women both in appearance and in mindset.

**Qiangqigong**: an actor who is powerful and dominating.

**Qiangqishou**: a receptor who is powerful and dominating.

**Shangkexia**: an actor who has relatively lower social status, whereas the receptor possesses higher social status.

**SM**: the abbreviation of sadomasochism; when used by the authors, there will be some sadomasochistic plots in the fiction.

**Shou**: opposite to *Gong*, refers to a person who plays the receptive role in a male-male relationship or the sexual action of being inserted.

**Tianranshou**: a receptor who is somewhat slow-minded and dull.

**Tongren**: same person, i.e., using the same characters from some popular or well-known movie, TV, or other fiction to develop another different stories, similar to fan fiction. Different from BL fiction, *Tongren* fiction can be either heterosexual or homosexual.

**Tonrennü**: female fans who like *Tonren* works. There are some overlaps between *Tonrennü* and *Funü*.

**Wangdao**: affecting the dominating tendency. For example, the pairing of two beautiful men is the *Wangdao* in BL works.

**Wannianshou**: someone who is always receptor and penetrated.

**X**: the special character for pairing. It is used to connect the names of the pairs and can be omitted sometimes. The name before X is the actor and the name after is the receptor. The order should not be reversed.

**Xiongdi**: the romantic relationship between brothers.

**YAOI**: from Japan. Addressing fiction with considerable pornographic content.

**Youshou**: a receptor who takes the initiative to seduce the actor.

**YY:** acronym of Chinese word *Yiyin*, means unrealistic, unrestrained imagination and fantasy. It can also be used as a verb, for example, to YY someone can be understood as to sexually harass someone, of course imaginarily.

**Zainü:** *home ladies* or *women*, refers to women who stay at home all the time. Many Zainü like BL works.

**Zhengtai:** originated from the Japanese word *Shotai* (the male protagonist from a Japanese fairy story and become popular pronoun for young boy), means beautiful boy(s).

**Zongshou:** no matter whomever he is paired with, the role is always receptor.

**Zonggong:** opposite of *Zongshou*, no matter whom he is paired with, he is always actor.

**0:** refers to the receptor, insinuating anus.

**1:** refers to the actors, insinuating penis.

**3P** (or 4P, 5P...): short from English “three persons,” the authors use this word to declare that there is not a one-to-one relationship in the fiction, and more than two characters are involved into the relationship.

**18 Jin:** prohibited to whomever is under the age of 18.

**419:** from English “for one night.”

**囧:** similar to “orz,” uses the shape to indicate the meaning. The character looks like an embarrassed human face with a widely open mouth—natural reaction to some unexpected, most of time funny, situations or encounters.

(Resource from Baidu Wikipedia)

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## **Vita**

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