

# ***Reality or Fantasy: Minority Male Readers in the BL Subculture***

**YuanYi Yang<sup>1,a,\*</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>*GuangHuaCambridge International School, Chuan Zhou Road 2788, China  
a. 041128yvonneyang@gmail.com*

*\*corresponding author*

**Abstract:** The fiction media genre of “Boy’s love”(BL) and its subcultural products was originated in Japan in the 1960s and 1970s. It has been more than thirty years since it entered mainland China in the early 1990s. This article, based on ethnographical research on BL readerly community and personal observation as an avid and experienced reader of BL, focuses on queer male participants in the BL culture in China. Though the number of them is relatively small, they are an important contributor to the burgeoning of BL culture in China and this group is largely overlooked in existing literature. Furthermore, the subject of study in this article belongs to Generation Z in contemporary China. Generation Z have their own ways of life that set them apart from earlier generations and this deserves scholarly scrutiny. Born in the era of globalization and neoliberalism, Generation Z observe the imprint of the current age in their ways of consuming popular culture and subculture. To many gen Z readers, especially queers, BL is not only a form of leisure, it constitutes a way for sexual minority male readers to navigate their sexual identity. Therefore, they tend to perceive that BL to a certain extent mirrors reality or projects their imagination for a better, and more inclusive world. This paper further compares different strategies in which queer male readers of BL culture negotiate their sexual identity in a largely homophobic society with practices ranging from mask, switch to openly coming out.

**Keywords:** subcultural, generation Z, sexual orientation

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1. Background**

#### **1.1.1.Social background**

The fiction media genre of “Boy’s love” (BL) and its subcultural originated in in Japan in the 1960s and 1970s. It has been more than thirty years since it entered mainland China in the early 1990s. Relying on the platform of the Internet, BL culture has become popular in China especially among Generation Z. Unlike typical media such as newspaper, television or radio broadcast, the internet has less level of government censorship for BL content. Also, the internet allows subcultural group members to get connected and communicate with each other, thus reinforcing their identity as BL lovers. Female readers are called as “Fujoushi” and males as “Fudanji.”

Referring to the generation born between 1995 and 2009, generation Z has been seamlessly integrated with the age of Internet since childhood, and are greatly influenced by digital information technology, instant messaging devices, and smart phone products. Major communication platforms for BL culture lovers of Generation Z are as follow, and they serve different functions for Gen Z readers: Weibo and QQ (social platform), Jinjiang Original Literature Network (Original BL novels), Bilibili (video/comic platform) and Tiktok (short videos). Among the five platform the Jinjiang original literature network has been the oldest and the most influential website for the development of BL culture in China. In 2003, Jinjiang Original Literature Network was established, and set up a Danmei Doujin (BL) channel targeting at the female BL readers. By 2017, about 54,200 original BL novels have been collected on the website. It is also on this website that multiple themes of Chinese-language BL novel start to develop, such as ABO, antiquity, school life etc. The great financial success it has achieved has even helped attract the attention of serious literary critics to Yaoi fiction [1]. At present, the website has about 5 million registered users and a daily visit of about 2 million. As to other platforms, the popularity of BL is similarly illustrated with impressive statistics. For instance, by 2022, “Tian Guan Ci Fu,” a Chinese BL animation series released on Bilibili received 510 million views and 8.797 million likes.

Despite its popularity among gen Z, BL is very controversial and is especially deemed as subversive or transgressive by mainstream media and cultural conservatives. China is a heteronormative society and the mainstream cultural often perceived BL in a negative light, as BL allegedly threatens of the stability of the heterosexual norm of the society. Critics of BL on Chinese mainstream media accuse it of promoting “homosexuality” and its erotic content induces premature sexual practice, elicits sexual crimes, and causes confusion of sexual orientation among adolescents. Proponents of BL, on the other hand, credit BL culture for its empowerment of women to challenge or reflect on the patriarchal social order and defy male gaze by expressing vocally their desire, and they also believe that the spread of BL culture helps to develop a tolerant social attitude towards homosexuality.

### 1.1.2. Research Background

From the ethnographical research on BL readerly community, this article focuses on male participants in the BL culture in China, which, despite in relatively small number, is an important contributor to the burgeoning of BL culture in China. This group is largely overlooked in existing literature. By contrast, in western culture yaoi fiction enjoys a greater male fan base and more vocal support for gay rights [2].

Although other studies touch on the presence of men in the BL readerly community, there is no article that takes this as a central research topic and explores deeply the meaning and experience of men as Fudanji (male BL lovers). Furthermore, the vast majority of articles are not about the experience of Gen Z, and could not reveal how BL subculture influences one’s formative years and contributes to the development of one’s identity in adolescence. Generation Z has their own ways of life that set them apart from earlier generations and this deserves scholarly scrutiny. Born in the era of globalization and neoliberalism, Generation Z encapsulates the imprint of the current age in their ways of consuming popular culture and subculture.

It is undeniable that difficulties lie on the way to conduct scholarly research on Generation Z. They indeed have their own habit of social media interaction and popular cultural consumption that is different from that of the mainstream, and such difference has not been adequately addressed in existing studies. Combining the advantages of having the actual experience of being embedded in the cultural network as a member of gen Z and ethnographic skills for qualitative research as a research, this paper possess the dual perspective of relatable insider and objective observer.

## 1.2. Research Topic

This paper start with the following research question: Is there any male readership of BL, and if so, why do men read BL?

Inquiry into this question helps to locate a significant number of queer male readers of BL. BL is not only a form of leisure or escapism for them, but it constitutes a way for sexual minority male readers to navigate their sexual identity. Therefore, they tend to perceive that BL to a certain extent mirrors reality or projects their imagination for a better, and more inclusive world. This paper further compares different strategies in which queer male readers of bl culture negotiate their sexual identity in a homophobic society with practices ranging from mask, switch to openly coming out.

## 2. Literature Review

Existing scholarship of BL female readerships states that fandom allows female readers to direct their subversive gaze at men, and through an alternative aesthetic it brings joy in escaping the patriarchic reality and the heteronormativity. Female gaze, as Uli Meyer [3] argues, is integrated into yaoi fandom and functions similarly as male gaze in the way in which it objectifies and subjugates male characters for female readership. It also provides fans with a new platform to negotiate the hegemonic norms of heterosexual sex, gender and love.

The cross-border popularity of BL has also attracted the attention of academics. Researchers have focused on fan acceptance and utility of BL, showing that BL fandom is a “female gendered space” [4], gendered with sexual policies and fan culture [5]. Welker [6] argues that BL can provide a space for heterosexual female fans to “experiment with marginalized sexuality and play identity-shaping roles” (p 843). In China the digital feminism within BL community tends to create feminist awareness among its fans through literary and discursive constructions [7].

As presumption of BL fandom primarily takes place on digital media, some researchers recognize that democratic potentials inherent to cyber platforms make it possible for BL culture to mobilize online feminist masses to raise awareness of gender equality and encourage political campaigning [8]. For instance, Edell Jackson and Rentschler’s studies show how social media and other types of digital platforms have empowered young women around the world to combat misogyny, sexism, sexual harassment, and rape cultures championed by patriarchal ideologies [9-11].

While female readers find subversive elements and democratic potentials in BL culture, they often consume BL and create fan-fiction, rather than individually, as part of a fan community. In fact, many female readers actively find and identify themselves with fan groups, in which the shared interest in BL and gender-related issues help them forge communal bonds on the cyberspace. Fandom offers those who lack positive social connections in their offline lives with networks of supportive individuals and communities who facilitate their identity development process [12]. Observing Japanese yaoi culture, Mizoguchi argues that yaoi fandom constructs “an unprecedented, effective political arena for women with the potential for feminist and queer activism.” [13]. Moreover, BL community in China have made feminist conversations/debates in a cross-cultural context easier to achieve. They have given more women the opportunity to understand life conditions beyond their own and provided possibilities to obtain empowerment through a community of empathy [7].

In this way, they could collectively articulate group identity and locate collective resistance to heterosexual and hetero-social norms, with which they can actively pursue their identity and sexuality.

A significant number of studies on the subject of BL and fan fiction focus specifically on female interests [14-20]. Scholars argue that while the rise of entertainment culture has accelerated the diversity of marginalized communities [14,21], gender stereotypes still dominate discussions of culture and behaviour. Despite evidence that gender queers and trans population are growing in digital fandoms [22,23], they remain underrepresented in existing research. In western culture, Yaoi fiction

enjoys a greater male fan base and more vocal support for gay rights [2]. Yet in the study of BL in China, male, especially male queer readers, remains unacknowledged.

### 3. Discussion of Ethnographic Findings

#### 3.1. Methodology

The main method used in this research is a semi-structured interview. There are around 10 fixed questions related to their experience as a BL lovers and basic demographic information. The central question is ‘What did you gain from your experience as a Fudanji?’. All other questions are based on participants response on the previous questions. Each interview took between 25 minutes to 45 minutes. Four of the seven interview took place under a face-to-face condition off line, while the other three were taken online using voice calling software. All the interviews were recorded and later transcript into text. A vocal informed consent for participate and recording was also granted by each participant.

#### 3.2. Analysis

Among the 7 interviewees who are BL readers and participants of BL culture, 71% identify themselves as sexual minority. Within the male interviewees, 60% are self-identified queer. A strong correlation could be found between the non-heterosexual orientation and the preference for BL culture. Much research characterizes fan fiction and BL communities as “overwhelmingly female” [15] and readers are assumed to be mostly adult and heterosexual [24,25]. Even though the sample size is limited, it is quite striking to observe that quite a significant number of male BL participants identify themselves as queer. Targeting on the male readers and using qualitative data collected during the interview, the paper proposes the following arguments as follow.

Table 1: Information of interview participants.

Name	Age	Gender	Sexual Orientation	City	Duration	Type of BL
Oscar	17	male	homosexual	second-tier city	3 years	Novel and Manga
Jason	17	male	bisexual	second-tier city	5 years	Animation and Novel
Ais	18	female	heterosexual	first-tier city	6 years	Animation and Manga
X	15	male	homosexual	third-tier city	3 years	Novel, Manga and Animation
Zhang	27	male	heterosexual	First-tier city	1 year	Manga and Novel
Loren	17	female	homosexual	First-tier city	5 years	TV shows and Animation

##### 3.2.1.A Deep Analysis of O

That real-life trans/queer communities and slash communities are deeply entangled. Slash can function as a gateway to real- life queer communities, and vice versa [22]. This view is confirmed in ethnographic findings of this paper. One of the interviewees, O, recollects his exposure to BL that BL

is much more than a leisure for him, but projects an ideal imagination of a more sexually inclusive society. His experience of discrimination due to his sexual orientation was a reason why he started to read BL novel. He found that in BL world a more tolerant, inclusive culture where sexual minority - their desire, struggle, life experience - is represented. He mentioned that in BL novels his favorite plot is when the two main characters publicly declare their relationships and come out of the closet, for instance, in BL novel *Saye*. However, this scenario, in reality, unfortunately is hardly possible that queer couples often find it challenging to get accepted by their friends and family [26].

O admits that “the most difficult situation in real life is the official announcement, and then it is accepted by everyone.”

In this regard, it can be argued that BL is more than a fiction but constitutes a workable future that queer community could aspire for.

O emphasized that the longing for the inclusive culture described in BL is the driving force for his continuous reading of the genre, and he seriously hopes that the content in the novel can become a reality:

It is in this general (hostile) environment in China that most of the minority groups cannot obtain their own happiness after they reach adulthood and enter the society. That’s why I am very envious and look forward to the same plot as in the novels. Although a lot of people around told me that this is unrealistic. They (the stories) are all fake, I know they are fake. It can’t be true in real life, but I hope this will happen, so I continue to read it.

Here, O’s testimony reveals that he is very aware of the homophobic environment that he lives in. He also shows the sensitivity that a lot of BL readers share that the representation of BL is fictional, and this view (BL is unrealistic) reflects the general impression of BL among many of its readers as a consensus within his surroundings.

O’s hope for a more inclusive future should be not regarded as merely a subjective perception but reveals the transformative potential that this genre possesses. BL provides a vision, a more sustainable future that recognizes the plight of the queer group and acknowledges their pursuit of love and intimacy as legitimate and equal as heterosexuals; in this way, we can see that BL to some extent, despite its idealized depiction of homosexual relationship, helps to project imagination of a future that is yet to be realized in a heteronormative society as China.

Officially, there are several official laws being implemented targeting on BL and homosexuality in China. In 2007, the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television classified representations of homosexuality as obscene or “unhealthy” sexual content that should be deleted or selectively cut [27] and in 2018 April there was a temporary ban of LGBTQ posts on the social media platform Weibo. In terms of BL, there have been swings between periods of more and less stringent censorship, including some prominent arrests: in 2011, over 30 young women who were BL fiction writers were arrested on charges of disseminating obscene material [28,29], and more recently, a BL author was sentenced to 10 years prison for a self-published book.

Socio-culturally, according to the 2016’ Survey report on the living conditions of sexual minorities in China’ sexual minorities in China face various difficulties. The family is the place where the most instances of rejection and discrimination occur, followed by schools and workplaces. Only 5% of sexual minorities disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity. Among the married sexual minorities, only 13% chose “formal marriages”, and 84.1% succumbed to social pressure and eventually married heterosexual spouses. At the same time, the report also shows that in terms of medical and social services, once service providers know or only suspect their sexual orientation or multiple gender identities, sexual minorities will face many difficulties when seeking corresponding services. Sexual minorities infected with HIV are faced with double stigma and face many obstacles in obtaining disease prevention and unbiased psychological support and counseling services.

Even the interviewee himself personally experienced bully related to his sexual orientation in family and school space:

They (O's family members) said I was sick and insane, so I told them I was wrong and I never watched it again, and continued secretly.

When we (O and his brother) quarreled, he would say "If you don't obey me, I'll tell mom (that you are gay)", I really couldn't resist.

Oscar's experience reflects the mental violence that homosexuals may undergo even in family relations, therefore there is the fear for a homosexual to reveal his/her sexual orientation even within the presumably intimate relationships; and this echoes the finding in the report that family is the place where the most instances of rejection and discrimination occur. As well as considering marriage with homosexual lesbian couples to escape from social pressure:

In the future, if i really could have a partner, I would find a pair of lesbians and have a marriage of convenience. We will live our own lives after marriage to lie our parents a little bit.

When O envisions the fulfillment of a marriage of convenience, it affirms the idea that he still takes seriously feelings of his parents and pretends to live a heterosexual life or observe heteronormative obligations.

One unique genre mentioned by some of the interviewees is ABO (Alphas, Beta and Omegas). Among BL genres, ABO is a popular one and with an ever-enlarging fan base within the Yaoi cultural landscape [7]. It is a kink trope wherein some people have defined biological roles based on a hierarchical system. Alpha has an advantage in physical fitness and occupies a leadership position. Beta fertility generally belongs to the middle class. Omega is the most fertile and are subordinate feminine minority with an uncontrollable, highly fertile, monthly mating cycle to which Alphas respond. Males and females are mostly distinguished by appearance, and more reproductive characteristics are determined by their Alpha/Beta/Omega sex. It became very popular due to the holistic worldview setting for male-male reproduction.

This subgenre of BL culture, highly controversial, provides a critical lens for us to examine pressing issues about gender and sexual hierarchy and see how BL culture straddles between the realistic and the fantastical. It is often discussed that the relationship between A and O being highly unequal mirrors real-life heterosexual relationship and even social structure. In the ABO world view, Alpha is a natural leader, dominates society and has the first inheritance right in the family (regardless of gender). In some fiction, there are Omega types who will use various means to disguise themselves as Beta or Alpha. Unwilling to be in a disadvantaged position in society, Omega chooses to pretend to be another gender to seek the development she wants. There are even novels featuring Omega equal rights texts on Jinjiang, further mirroring the position of Omega with real life female, LGBTQ+ and ethnic minority groups. This phenomenon corresponds to the fact that Chinese BL narratives mainly adhere to heteronormative ideologies, duplicating real-life quintessential hetero-patriarchal relationships, albeit through a homosexual rather than heterosexual perspective [30] [31].

However, for the interviewees in this paper the most attractive part was its fantastical design rather than the realism of hierarchical relationships. In the ABO setting, both male and female have ability to give birth. ABO, though being an erotic fantasy, provides the imagination of male-male reproduction. To some male queer participants of BL culture, the setting of ABO allows them to fantasize male-male reproduction:

For instance, O expresses his appreciation of ABO genre: "The most imperfect thing in reality is that there is no way for men and men to get married and have children. Because I like kids very much."

To put it more broadly, the setting of ABO allows certain social issues related to homosexuality to be visible. Surrogacy, for example, is illegal in China. It is not only illegal but also a taboo that has never been openly discussed and debated in China, In the western world, surrogacy is now a common method for homosexual couples to have their own child. Though the ethics around surrogacy is highly



contested, it nevertheless makes it possible for homosexuals to have children, which is unthinkable to Chinese homosexual couples. However, ABO genre, with its setting that enables male-male reproduction, allows homosexuals to imagine the formation of nonconventional families and offspring, and it thus effectively raises consciousness about the social issue that is otherwise invisible to the public.

ABO genre or the whole BL context provides an inspiration and imagination of non-conventional family for its homosexual readers. It gives a longitudinal ideal romantic relationship blueprint for O. Even though the plot of a BL novel or animation often centers on the process of how the two main characters get to know each other, O is actively thinking about extending male-male reproduction to family and social relationship, and he also explores these into his own work of fanfiction writing:

I like to write about what happens after I get older. It is a continuation. Females or heterosexual readers of BL will not connect fictional plot and real life. If there is such a homosexual couple as represented in BL fiction, what will they do in the future? How they will face their parents in the future is a big problem, and other problems include the impossibility of having children, the challenge of marrying legally and receiving adequate elder.

Here, it is clear that ABO sparks O to consider and contemplate on some real-life issues that homosexual couples have to grapple with. And O considers that as homosexuals, his understanding of BL is different from female/heterosexual readers.

### 3.2.2.ABO

As mentioned before, the ABO setting contains a relationship that is highly unequal. Thus it may also provide a lens for queer readers to contemplate on what kind of homosexual relationship is more desirable.

Two of the queer interviewees of the study both state that they prefer equal relationships with their partner and are strongly opposed the idea of top and bottom in many of the BL and slash fandom. O criticizes the ideology of top and bottom as a “trying to replicate male-female relationship” from homosexual couples:

I have already come to the point where a man and a man are couple, so why to create two genders among boys? It's just that I don't think it's necessary, that is, two boys are two boys, we don't need distinguish between boys like one is seme (attacking) and the other is uke (receiving). I don't like this. Try to make the concept of attacking and receiving as vague as possible.

It reveals that the popular idea of top and bottom as one masculine male and feminine male among female readers was actually disliked by the homosexual male readers. One possible reason is that author used the idea to commercialize their products as it would create a stronger connection between its target female readers by generating some of the heterosexual element in real life. Also, mentioned by X that the idea of top and bottom may help reader to quickly get to know the character and situation for the heterosexual readers:

It is easier to understand the character. Well, it is convenient for you to understand the personal traits of the characters, but for the gay in reality, it is not very helpful.

Here, X as the real life homosexual expressed his understanding of Uke and Seme within the BL cultural, but he also states that this type of concept hardly exist in real life relationship and would have little effect to help people understand the real condition of homosexuality. The binary of Uke and Seme is indeed oversimplifying the complex relationship between human, thus fairly reductionist as it ignores individual difference. The personalities of homosexuals can be diverse in many ways.

For male homosexual readers, they desired for a more equal relationship as the ideal relationship. For example O states that his favorite type of relationship is when both are attractive and initiative so called “Mutual seme (attacking)”. Similarly, X wants a relationship that they mutually dote each other.

By contrast, the idea is widely accepted by both female and heterosexual male readers. For example, the bisexual male interviewees J accepts the idea and states that being top in a relationship doesn't just means dominate but should bear more responsibility in the relationship.

I think this definition should be that seme not only has a dominant role in relationship, but also may take on more responsibilities.

Interestingly, although the ideal uke is usually set by the author and expected by female readers to keep their bodies chaste, Seme is usually not bound by this [7]. In the ABO setting, Alphas are able to "create" certain configurations within Omega's body, causing excruciating pain if they have sex with other Alphas. While this again reflecting some parallel between the character of uke and real life female gender norm, it is considered to be a sign of uke's loyalty in the relationship by some of the female readers [7]. To male queer readers, however, this setting is hardly desirable. One of the bisexual interviewees is particularly critical of it: J criticized Alphas under ABO setting as disloyal and inequal that replicates real-life power imbalance in heterosexual relationships.

### 3.2.3. Identity

It is commonly discussed that female BL readers form online community to find people of shared interest and build communal bond which gave them courage to stand against patriarchy. This was not always the same between male BL readers, as they develop strategies with regard to if reveal their homosexuality as well as fondness for BL.

Male BL readers often need to disguise their identity in their daily life. Base on observation within BL cultural for the last 6 years, it is very common for female readers to include BL as a hobby in their introduction and are highly active in leading daily conversation on to BL topics. On the other hand, it is very unlikely for a male BL lover to openly reveal their identity in real life. Although they would engage in the BL community online, they are unlikely and unwilling to reveal their gender. In a society that imposes certain norms on masculinity, male queer participants tend to be more precarious and are constantly marginalized or challenged by the expectation of a heterosexuality-based idea of manhood. Hastily revealing their sexual orientation and BL hobbies is likely to lead to them being ridiculed by others and being labeled as eccentric, which further leads to discrimination and even bullying.

The male BL participants in this study have developed their own strategies of expressing their fondness for bl culture and pursuing their sexual identity. They are all very aware of this heteronormative masculinity but adapted very different approach to it.

O being after being bullied, isolated, and even threatened for being a gay decides to choose concealment and hide his sexual orientation to protect himself. He also mentioned that he is actually quite willing to reveal himself and talk about BL with his female friends but never so to males, considering female are the majority of BL culture and are more likely to accept gay. He was also reluctant to be considered as part of the BL community as he was very aware of the discrimination and was reluctant for being labeled as "lustful Uke". This shows his desire to be accepted by a wider, mainstream society. Further enhancing the necessity and significance of more research into the group, is the ethical imperative to shatter both discrimination and stigmatize. He uses the metaphor of "mask" when discussing about how he decided to hide himself. Mask by definition is a veneer of camouflage is only cover on the outside both hide the true him and protect him like a armor. At the same time, mask is only a temporary camouflage of the true self and can be easily removed when needed. This reflects the indecisive and contradictory attitude of O to his identity as mentioned that he may sometimes take it off and express himself.

"In fact, I am quite contradictory. With no clear reasons or sign, it is just that I feel that I am alone and helpless, and I want to find some support from others, I may suddenly told others (about my sexual orientation and BL reading) on an impulse."



J, on the other hand, adopts a unique method which he named it as “switch:

“I feel disgusted when they [his heterosexual friends] use discriminatory sentences to gays. When I get along with straight men, then I am a totally straight man. I feel and act like a straight man and have the mentality of a straight man. What I can switch when I get along with, for example, my roommate, who is a totally straight man who doesn’t have any (homo) thoughts, nor any behavior of any kind of homo. But in front of other gay men, or in front of some Fujushi, I may feel that I will show my bisexual side more.”

He mentioned that he often comes across heterosexuals commenting on homosexuality and made malicious jokes about them. Unable to alter the opinions of everyone around him, J tries to protect himself from the injustice treatment by immersing himself into the surrounding environment, even though it could cause discomfort. He considers the BL community as a relatively safer place for him to express his true self with members such as female BL readers.

X being the youngest interviewees in this study has the most open and brave attitude among the three homosexual male participants. He is open to criticism regarding his sexuality around him and is willing to firmly state his identity as a BL lover and homosexual under the homophobic environment.

“Regardless of being ridiculed or judged, I just want to be myself. Even if someone hates me because of this, or denies it, I want to be myself.”

Just like the O and J, X is fully aware of the consequence of doing so, but had little fear toward it.

“Some people will maliciously bully you because of you like something. I don’t take it too seriously. Let them say what they say, I just need to continue to like my own things.”

#### 3.2.4. Female BL Readers

The two female yaoi readers (one homosexual and one heterosexual) have consistent and open attitude toward some of the male readers around them. They both believe that it is completely normal and reasonable for BL as a cultural to attract people from both gender regardless of their sexual orientation.

Take A as an example, she directly states that “I think it’s normal. It’s just that liking a type of culture should not be differentiated by gender. Women like to read BL, and men can also like to read BL, and those Fudanji do not necessarily have to be a gay. “

Furthermore, their exposure to such subcultural helps them to develop a more inclusive attitude to the sexual minority.

L as a homosexual herself states that “I didn’t fully realize that I was indeed an LGBT group when I was in the first grade of junior high school. Reading BL, however, made me care more about LGBT right at the time.” Importantly, reading BL gave her the initial motivation to get to know about LGBT. “When I don’t know such group of LGBT, (BL) help me to have such an idea of wanting to know them.”

Similarly for A reading BL at the early age which she thought heterosexual was the normality, opened her horizons and became more open-minded.

“Watching Danmei let me know that there are gay in reality, because I was relatively young when I came into contact with it. I thought it was the most normal to be heterosexual, but after reading and watching Danmei it made me realize that In reality, there will be groups with similar sexual orientations.”

## 4. Conclusion

This paper brings attention to an understudied group of BL fans in contemporary China: male, especially queer male readers, and investigate their preference, understanding, and patterns of

consumption of BL. Moreover, it reveals how their engagement with BL helps them reflect on their sexual identity and sociality. The present research fills in the gap in the study of sexual minorities in China, and advocates that they should not be defined as inferior and less significant, since even the being a minority, the sheer number of them is striking: there are more than 35 million homosexual men in China according to a 2014 study by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

Moreover, among Chinese millennials, we can observe a more open attitude towards BL and homosexuality, which corresponds to the finding of Yi [25], who proclaims that BL culture could contribute to an open attitude in discussing homosexuality and topics related to sex.

In addition to genre or plot that is intrinsic to BL culture, future research can further investigate how extrinsic factors, like digital technology of social media, promotes the acceptance of BL in China. For instance, it becomes a fashion on social media such as QQ and WeChat for young members of subcultural groups including ACG cosplay and BL culture to claim to be LGBTQ+ as a way to attract attention and data traffic. This could be a potential reason why there are increasing number of LGBTQ+ in which some of them are not necessarily true sexual minority but secretly exploit the situation of sexual minority to their own advantages. More research is needed to have an in-depth examination of this phenomenon.

## References

- [1] Feng, Jin. 2009. "'Addicted to Beauty': Consuming and Producing Web-based Chinese 'Danmei'."
- [2] McLelland, Mark. 2005. "The World of Yaoi: The Internet, Censorship and the Global 'Boys' Love' Fandom." *Australian Feminist Law Journal* 23 (1): 61–77. doi:10.1080/13200968.2005.10854344.
- [3] Meyer, U. (2013). *Drawing from the body—the self, the gaze and the other in Boys' Love manga*. *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, 4(1), 64-81.
- [4] Mizoguchi, A. (2003). *Male-male romance by and for women in Japan: A history and the subgenres of yaoi fictions*. *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal*, 25, 49–75.
- [5] Pagliassotti, D., Nagaike, K., & McHarry, M. (2013). *Boys' Love manga special section*. *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, 4(1), 1-8.
- [6] Welker, J. (2006). *Beautiful, borrowed, and bent: "Boys' Love" as girls' love in Shōjo manga*. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 31(3), 841-870.
- [7] Jiang Chang & Hao Tian (2021) *Girl power in boy love: Yaoi, online female counterculture, and digital feminism in China*, *Feminist Media Studies*, 21:4, 604-620, DOI: 10.1080/14680777.2020.1803942.
- [8] Boyd, D. (2008). *Can social network sites enable political action*. *International Journal of Media and Cultural Politics*, 4(2), 241-244.
- [9] Edell, D., Brown, L. M., & Tolman, D. (2013). *Embodying sexualisation: When theory meets practice in intergenerational feminist activism*. *Feminist Theory*, 14(3), 275-284.
- [10] Jackson, S. (2018). *Young feminists, feminism and digital media*. *Feminism & Psychology*, 28(1), 32-49.
- [11] Rentschler, C. A. (2014). *Rape culture and the feminist politics of social media*. *Girlhood studies*, 7(1), 65-82.
- [12] Seregina, A., & Schouten, J. W. (2017). *Resolving identity ambiguity through transcending fandom*. *Consumption Markets & Culture*, 20(2), 107-130.
- [13] Mizoguchi, "Theorizing Comics/Manga," 164.
- [14] Click, M.A., & Scott, S. (Eds.). (2017). *The Routledge Companion to Media Fandom (1st ed.)*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315637518>
- [15] Jenkins, H. (2018). *Fandom, negotiation, and participatory culture. A companion to media fandom and fan studies*, 11-26.
- [16] Galbraith, P. W. (2011). *Fujoshi: Fantasy play and transgressive intimacy among "rotten girls" in contemporary Japan*. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 37(1), 219-240.
- [17] Hemmann, Kathryn. 2015. "Queering the Media Mix: The Female Gaze in Japanese Fan Comics." *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 20. <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2015.0628>.
- [18] Kim, H. (2009). *Women's Games in Japan: Gendered Identity and Narrative Construction*. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 26(2–3), 165–188. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276409103132>
- [19] Martin, F. (2012). *Girls who love boys' love: Japanese homoerotic manga as trans-national Taiwan culture*. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 13(3), 365-383.
- [20] Zhao, Y., & Madill, A. (2018). *The heteronormative frame in Chinese Yaoi: integrating female Chinese fan interviews with Sinophone and Anglophone survey data*. *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, 9(5), 435-457.

- [21] Hellekson, K., & Busse, K. (Eds.). (2006). *Fan fiction and fan communities in the age of the internet: new essays*. McFarland.
- [22] Duggan, J. (2020). Who writes Harry Potter fan fiction? Passionate detachment, "zooming out," and fan fiction paratexts on AO3. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 34, 1-25.
- [23] McInroy, L. B., & Craig, S. L. (2018). Online fandom, identity milestones, and self-identification of sexual/gender minority youth. *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 15(3), 179-196.
- [24] Coppa, F. (2014). Fuck yeah, fandom is beautiful. *The Journal of Fandom Studies*, 2(1), 73-82.
- [25] Yi, E. J. (2013). Reflection on Chinese boys' love fans: An insider's view. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 12.
- [26] The United Nations Development Program. *The Survival Status of Sexual Minorities in China—A Survey Report on Social Attitudes Based on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Gender Expression*. [M]. United Nations Development Programme. 2016.
- [27] Zhou, E. L. (2017). Dongfang Bubai, online fandom, and the gender politics of a legendary queer icon in post-Mao China. *Boys' love, cosplay, and androgynous idols: Queer Fan cultures in Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan*, 111-127.
- [28] Yi, E. J. (2013). Reflection on Chinese boys' love fans: An insider's view. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 12.
- [29] Lavin, M., Yang, L., & Zhao, J. J. (Eds.). (2017). *Boys' love, cosplay, and androgynous idols: Queer fan cultures in Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan*. Hong Kong University Press.
- [30] Zhao, Y., & Madill, A. (2018). The heteronormative frame in Chinese Yaoi: integrating female Chinese fan interviews with Sinophone and Anglophone survey data. *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, 9(5), 435-457.
- [31] Zhou, Y., Paul, B., & Sherman, R. (2018). Still a hetero-gendered world: A content analysis of gender stereotypes and romantic ideals in Chinese boy love stories. *Sex Roles*, 78, 107-118.