**Young Chinese Women Fans of ‘Boys’ Love’:   
The Appeal of Homoerotic Fictions**

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# Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to apply feminist perspectives to explore the ‘boys’ love’ (BL) culture in China. I argue that women in China are challenging traditional patriarchy through this new culture. Drawing upon interviews with 30 young Chinese women, I explore the attitudes of an ambitious new generation who are questioning gender norms in three areas: sex, love and relationships, and self-identity. With regard to sex, these women are challenging their negative sexual status. Traditionally, women are considered innocent and passive objects that are defined, gazed at, and consumed. However, my participants express their own sexual aesthetic and sexual desires, and they understand sex positively through BL. With regard to love and relationships, young women are questioning women’s roles as expected by mainstream society. Unlike men, who are considered to be independent, women are traditionally considered to be dependants that have no choice but to invest their whole selves in love and relationships, and to become ‘good wives’ and ‘good mothers’. However, my data shows that young women now have different demands for love and happiness, and as a result they are questioning traditional family forms, the heterosexual norm, and patriarchy. With regard to self-identity, I explore how the young women question gender norms. The definition of femininity has restricted women’s achievements and their opportunities to access equal resources in past and current Chinese society. My participants demonstrate a rethinking of gender norms through the medium of BL. Ultimately, the contribution of this thesis is to explore a new awareness arising in a newly formed women’s social practice, one that questions the gender binary, the heterosexual norm, and the gender inequality that arises from them, in an era of social change in China.

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# Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

# Introduction

In China, patriarchal discourse dominates the gendered and sexual culture. Therefore, on the one hand, any intimate relationship that is other than heterosexual is considered deviant. On the other hand, women are viewed as ‘other’ relative to men, who take the dominant role in heterosexuality. Women are not regarded as autonomous beings, and they have long been the object of male definitions, gazes and consumption. However, modernity has caused global social changes that are unprecedented in human history. China has experienced diverse modernization projects, including in the area of gender and sexuality. Today, many women in China no longer want to be silent and passive; they are eager to have their voices heard. My thesis aims to explore why young Chinese women read ‘boys’ love’ (BL) works as an example of Chinese women’s self-expression. BL works, which are mainly created and consumed by women, reflect women’s fantasies through the representation of highly idealized same-sex male sexual and romantic relationships. The women who are the most committed and enthusiastic fans of BL are called *fu nü*, ‘rotten girls’.

My thesis focuses on elaborating the image of *fu nü*. Through BL, which is used by *fu nü* as a form of self-expression, I intend to understand why Chinese women find same-sex male erotic behaviours appealing. Women and homosexuals are marginalized and powerless in relation to heterosexual men in China. I will argue that the popularity of BL and the development of *fu nü* represent a microcosm of the transformative consequences of modernity in gender-related issues in contemporary Chinese society. The phenomenon represents a challenge by this group of women to patriarchal domination, the gender binary, and heterosexual normativity and hegemony in the specific context of China.

**Motivation: why choose BL as a research topic?**

月が绮丽ですね, *tsuki ga tottemo aoi naa*. The moon is so blue tonight.[[1]](#footnote-1)

I had a crush many years ago, and as the quote above suggests, it was very special and impressive to me. This experience, which I want to share with you, has some resonance with BL, which I explore in this thesis. This crush can also be seen as a turning point that led me into the mystery of women’s studies, a relatively new area in China. Not until I had finished my whole PhD thesis and reviewed the details of my research did I realize that my interest of women’s and gender studies started many years ago. Reflecting on this, I can see how my research experience was interwoven with my personal life. I will now introduce my motivation for starting this research, my experiences and thinking during the research, and how these combined in the study of BL culture.

The story began in my first week as an undergraduate in China in applied psychology and social work. We were all keen but knew almost nothing about what we would learn. The first assignment was: choose AIDS or homosexuality as a topic, and complete an essay within a month. I still clearly remember the scene in the classroom at that time: we were stunned and silent. For us as Chinese students, the college entrance examination had been almost the only focus in our lives to date. We had never even talked to an opposite-sex classmate before, let alone talked about sex and sexuality. Now, with such surprising openness, these two topics were the start of our academic lives. For us this was not merely a challenge, but rather a threat. We regarded both topics as negative, thanks to the only discourse we had previously been able to access from the mainstream. To complete the essay, we had no choice but to enter a world which seemed strange or even ‘impure’ to us because of our professor’s challenge.

I remember clearly that many students chose AIDS as their topic, while I was among the few people who were interested in homosexuality. Many students treated HIV as a medical problem, a disease related to social issues such as blood transfusions in medical malpractice, the AIDS epidemic among peasants who sell their blood, or needle-sharing among drug addicts. As I look back on these perspectives today, I realize that none of them discussed sex or sexuality. As a topic related to sex and sexuality, homosexuality was much more difficult to study for many of us at that time—it was like a taboo. The two reasons I chose homosexuality as my first research topic were, on the one hand, I had a few friends who were out of the closet with friends like me, and on the other hand, BL manga and novels (yes, the things I mainly talk about in this thesis) were secretly and widely circulated among my classmates. Thus homosexuality was not a totally strange topic to me. My essay earned me a high mark on the course. Therefore, I realized that this topic was ‘cool’, and it also made me look cool and advanced—standing out from ordinary people who did not dare to touch it.

My academic interest continued as I took advantage of it to be ‘cool’. It was in 2008 that my friend, Wen, and I started internships at the Beijing LGBT Centre. For an undergraduate in social work, an internship in a suitable organization was compulsory. The Beijing LGBT Centre was my first choice, and it formed a stark contrast to the choices made by my classmates, who were taking internships at NGOs related to education, poverty, or environmental issues, all organizations that were well resourced and developed. To take an internship at the LGBT NGO was bold and innovative. At that time in China there was a great deal of controversy surrounding homosexuality, and popular opinion on same-sex relationships was significantly more negative than it is today. My interest in the centre focused on how a grassroots LGBT organization had gone from struggling to surviving successfully in a hostile environment.

My experience in the centre greatly broadened my knowledge, from diverse perspectives. The centre organized seminars every week, and talks about Butler, Beauvoir, and Yinhe Li. It also provided lectures on topics including financial management, physical and mental health, family counselling, etc., to better support members of the centre to ‘survive’ as LGBT people in a harsh environment. Not only did this broaden my knowledge of sex, sexuality, and especially homosexual-related issues, it also surprised that me these people, living with a stigmatized label—'homosexual’—made great efforts to live better, demonstrating that even though they were marginalized because of their sexual orientation, when they acted as ‘humans’ they were much cooler than many ordinary people.

The staff at the centre welcomed Wen and me warmly—although it was clear that Wen’s sexuality (she identifies as a lesbian) had made it much easier for us both to secure the internships—and we both adapted well to the work. People often thought that Wen and I were a couple, a supposition that we always corrected and at which we always laughed. However, I could feel that I was to some extent an outsider to the staff at the centre because I did not identify as homosexual. Hence a subtle but noticeable division existed between us, although this was soon to be erased. To celebrate New Year, the centre organized a cocktail party, and with my black dress and high heels I impressed everyone. Unfortunately, my party outfit did not befit the inclement weather. When Wen and I left the party it was snowing, and the road was wet and slushy. Wen therefore offered to carry me to the taxi rank. On her broad shoulders, I felt safe and warm, and while we did not speak along the way, it was the closest we had ever been.

Due to my passion for higher education, I decided to take advantage of my previous experience and continue my research on homosexuality. I was baffled at first, because the more literature I read, the more confidence I lost. Scholars in the area of homosexuality, such as Kong (2002) and Chow (2000), had completed fascinating studies on homosexuality in China, and I was not confident that I could successfully add to their work. Moreover, I did not identify as homosexual, which made me concerned that my research would be less persuasive, as I would be writing as an ‘outsider’. As had been the case years before at the LGBT Centre, I felt so close to what I wanted to approach, but still also very much on the outside.

One day, my supervisors read a literature review I had written about homosexual-related issues in China. They were interested in my points about BL culture, and they encouraged me to explore it in more depth. ‘Boys’ love’ is a translation of a Japanese term for female-oriented fiction featuring idealized romantic relationships between two men. With further reading, I realized that BL developed from everyday ‘brotherhood’, which struck a chord with me as akin to something I had felt for Wen. I felt happy around her and worked well with her, and there had been butterflies in my stomach that evening when she carried me to the taxi. Maybe I should have asked her to look up into the sky and say ‘the moon is so blue tonight.’

I realized then and understood that there can be chemistry and romance between people of the same sex. More generally in Oriental culture, such expressions of love are tolerated, even celebrated. An extreme form of implicit romance is *tanbi*, the worship and pursuit of beauty, which includes all the beautiful things that make people feel warmly to one another. It is the most flawless kind of beauty. Many giants of Japanese literature since the 1930s have been deeply affected by this trend. The use of the phrase ‘the moon is so blue tonight’ to mean ‘I love you’ is an example of *tanbi*. The feeling of having a crush, and even ‘I love you’, had suddenly pulled me into an exciting world without the boundaries of sex or gender separation. In that very moment, one might say, I changed. From being an outsider who considered homosexual-related issues and homosexual people ‘cool’ and used it to attract attention—or who advocated LGBT pride in a politically correct but alien way—I truly become a ‘comrade’ who could understand homosexual people’s feelings, even though I had a heterosexual identity and had been educated by heterosexual norms for the whole of my previous life. Homosexuality was not special at all!

Therefore, I decided use BL as my point to officially begin my PhD research.

**Research object: what are BL and *fu nü*?**

In the early 1970s, *June* magazine began to publish BL manga. These romantic male-male stories, written for and about the worship of beauty, using particularly flowery language and unusual kanji, became incredibly attractive to women. Since then, *tanbi* has been used only in reference to BL. That is to say, the emotions in BL are considered extremely beautiful, tender, sweet feelings between two men. However, BL is not homosexuality. Although you may hear these two terms used interchangeably, BL and homosexual manga are in fact two very different genres, complete with different contents and target readers.

Most BL researchers, as well as the gay community, regard BL as homoerotic rather than homosexual. The highly idealized, romantic, and relatively ‘feminine’ characters’ presentation is not for gay audiences. BL is also criticized as unrealistic fiction that denies the existence of a real gay community in the real world, and even as anti-gay. For gay readers, the *bara* genre is considered the typical style: it is less romantic, and the characters are hypermasculine in appearance and personality. More crucially, BL plays male homoeroticism for a predominantly heterosexual female audience, without breaking the boundary between homosociality and homosexuality, and it even reinforces heterosexual hegemony with the roles of ‘top’ and ‘bottom’ (see Chapter 3).

[](http://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=i&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=images&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwj7yrHEzZDZAhVB3aQKHc4sBLUQjRx6BAgAEAY&url=http://datawav.club/galleries/bara-yaoi-muscle-dick-sex/&psig=AOvVaw3jikCz_n-FPViskgE3q9Nn&ust=1517982971629160)  
Figure 1. Typical Japanese bara manga (gay manga).  
Source: https://www.pinterest.ca/pin/820710732064496540/



Figure 2. Typical erotic scene in Japanese bara manga, created by Tagame Gengorō, the well-known openly gay Japanese manga artist specialized in erotic manga and BDSM bara.

Source: http://www.tagame.org/jblog/?p=5787



Figure 3. Typical BL sexual scene.  
Source: http://favim.fr/image/1482111/

BL culture, which was originally imported from Japan, has become increasingly popular and accepted by young people in China. Thanks to rapidly developing communication technology, and the efforts of *fu nü* communities themselves, BL culture cannot be considered a subculture. Although the general population and mass media still lack any clear understanding of this cultural phenomenon, society has gradually shown a greater tolerance towards this homoerotic genre. Almost a decade ago, BL was accused of being decadent and obscene, but now it is becoming normalized in the eyes of the public. The publication of homoerotic literature became more acceptable, and the number of self-published BL works is also increasing. However, the front line for adolescents engaged with BL culture is on the Internet. For instance, the Jinjiang community, the Baidu BL group, and Douban (an online forum for young people with shared interests) are some of the places where the young are most enthusiastically discussing BL culture.

With BL becoming increasingly popular, its content is no longer limited to the pursuit of implicit beauty, *tanbi*. Other forms have also been created, such as those focusing on erotic masculinity, called *yaoi*, or those focusing on beautiful young characters, called *bisonen*. Since BL is targeted at a female audience, its fans are mostly women. These young women were mainly born after the mid-1980s in China and consumed BL during their adolescence in the 1990s, at which time BL material was flooding onto the Chinese market from Japan and Taiwan. Most of the literature was pirated and could be rented in bookshops around educational campuses. Along with other romantic manga or novels, BL opened a doorway and allowed girls to fantasize safely about sex and love. Those who indulged most routinely and extremely in BL were called *fu nü*, ‘rotten girls’.

The BL fans identify themselves as *fujoshi*, which is written as 腐女子in Japanese. The *fu* here means ‘rotten’ here because of their passion of ‘incurable’ love to BL in Japanese (Galbraith, 2011), which is a way to self-deprecate and show their deeply love about BL. This term is generally accepted in China mainland and Hong Kong, Another term, another word *dan mei lang* (耽美狼, Danmei Wolves, wolf here is traditionally use to stand for the man who want to take sexual advantage of women in China) has also been commonly used for self-description in China. Liu (2009) consider that the use of ‘rotten’ and ‘wolves’ is ‘perverse’ of male gayness and demonstrates their awareness of unique cultural taste. All these terms stress the negative part of their identity, which infer that in the knowledge of main society, are a group of deviate people, who can label in related to two words: women and homosexual, thus they are double vulnerable even other than homosexuality (See chapter 7).

Homosexuality has become a hotly debated issue in recent decades as China has become increasingly open and modernized in China. However, ignorance and misunderstandings continue in the mainstream. Lesbians are always neglected, and people often talk about homosexuality in relation to sexually transmitted diseases such as AIDS or hepatitis, revealing fear and stigmatizing gay men as sissies or perverts, men who indulge only in anal sex. Moreover, *fu nü* are considered abnormal because of their interest in such men and in homosexual culture more generally.

Since I completed my fieldwork, censorship in China has been tightened, particularly in relation to the Internet:

On June 30, 2017, a set of new rules and regulations called shen he tong ze (general rules on censorship) was passed. The controversial section 6 focuses on activities that promote pornographic and bad taste representations, which are to be prohibited. They include images and scenes of prostitution, promiscuity, rape, masturbation and abnormal sexual relationships and behaviors, such as incest, homosexuality, sexual perversion, unhealthy values on marriage, extramarital relationships, one-night stands and sexual liberation. Also included are sexually explicit images and seductive language. (Ho et al., 2018, p.501)

BL involves many topics that violate this legislation. BL products created and spread by cyber-citizens are under much heavier censorship than was the case 10–20 years ago when BL first sprang up in China. Therefore, how young Chinese women consume these products as a space to escape the restrictions of reality, and how they compromise to the mainstream value within the fan culture, are questions worthy of exploration.

Nevertheless, BL culture continues to grow in China. Along with the development of many popular phenomena on the Internet, the number and variety of BL novels, comics, games, dramas, broadcasts, and movies have been increasing. But in formal academic studies, related literature is sparse. Since the 1970s, as an emerging but influential part of LGBT culture, many Asian studies (mainly of BL manga originating from Japan) and Western studies have been conducted, from a variety of perspectives, on this specific genre of female fantasies about male homosexuality (Nagaike, 2003). However, there is little research on Chinese BL culture, and what does exist relates to Taiwan (Martin, 2012) rather than the People’s Republic of China. This indicates that there is great value in this thesis studying BL culture in China

Adopting qualitative methods, I explore why many young Chinese women identify as *fu nü* and read BL literature today. Due to the lack of existing knowledge about this group, and the stigmatized label they carry in China, investigating BL fan culture is important. Scholars, mostly in Japan and Western countries, have questioned whether BL is a meaningful step in the development of feminism. With the help of feminist theories on gender and sexuality, I propose to investigate young women’s self-identity and self-fulfilment within BL fan culture.

**Research experience and purpose: the personal is political**

Conducting this research and completing this thesis has been a long and difficult task. The main struggle was not about the academic discipline, but about the transformation of my own consciousness as a woman. While I undertook my research, which combines women’s and same-sex issues, at the Centre for Women’s Studies at the University of York, I experienced many embarrassing moments. When I talked about my research topic with Chinese people who were not familiar with women’s or gender studies, a common reaction was ‘ah, you are studying *sex*!’ Some had a little knowledge and would say, ‘is it like what Yinhe Li [the famous Chinese female scholar of sex and sexuality] does?’ This was not as good as it may sound. Most Chinese people regard Yinhe Li as an old widow who advocates swingers’ parties and makes ‘shocking’ comments—comments that have been taken out of context and spun by the media. Some reactions were even worse: people would give me a meaningful smile and say ‘she is studying porn cartoons’ which are ‘full of genitals’. Some men who barely knew me would even say to me with a disgusting smile that they ‘understood’ me; they considered me a horny, easy girl, and would even ask whether I wanted to see ‘the real thing’.

To be honest, for a while I suffered a great deal from this crushing experience. I kept grumbling to myself about why I had chosen gender studies as my research area. It made me feel vulnerable and marginalized. I felt uncomfortable and anxious, like a clown who was being seen and judged. In other people’s eyes, a PhD should be as bright as the sun, and therefore respectable. Due to this damned research topic, I was being rejected by the mainstream, and stigmatized as well. However, when I deepened my knowledge in the area of women’s and gender studies through reading, attending lecturers and seminars, and talking to other researchers and scholars, I came to feel that sex and sexuality is abundant and diverse—as Jackson (2010) suggests, it relates to every aspect of individuals’ lives. The reason I had regarded it as ‘meaningless and shameful’ was that I used to be one of those women who were defined, watched, and consumed by patriarchal values and restrictions; I had taken all that for granted. Thus, when mainstream people judged me with their consensus-based patriarchal values, I automatically used those same values to judge and criticize myself as well.

When I worked through this logic, I found that my identity was somehow restricting my perspective on my research. As an unconventional topic, my research may be less interesting to most of the mainstream; but for *fu nü* it is a crucial and irreplaceable part of their lives and the meaning of their identity. My own experience as a BL researcher, in relation to them as BL fans, was that our connection was more than just that between interviewer and interviewees: we were women facing a similar situation.

**Overall structure of the thesis**

This thesis is divided into seven chapters, plus this Introduction and a Conclusion. Chapter 1 explores the literature that has emerged concerning women and sexuality since the feudal period. I review China’s historical background in this regard, from the formation of patriarchal society under the feudal system and the influence of Confucianism; the impact of Westernization, which began to give Chinese women a sense of autonomy during the period of the Republic of China; the Mao era, when a rough equality was built; and the contemporary period, modernity, and changing gender during the era of reform.

In Chapters 2 and 3, I explore homosexuality in China and review BL globally. I outline the historical development of same-sex relations in China, assess the current state of same-sex relations, and explain the relationship between BL and homosexuality.

Chapter 4 presents the methodological approach I used for collecting data in China in the summer of 2014, when I spent four months interviewing 30 participants, including four focus groups with three participants among them. I explain how I recruited participants from existing BL communities and online social networks, invited participants at a comic-con, and recruited participants through personal networking and snowball sampling. My participants were aged 18–26, and all were educated: undergraduate and postgraduate students, young women in the workforce or self-employed with at least a bachelor’s degree, including white-collar workers, schoolteachers, a painter, a singer, and so on. The interviews were conducted in four cities: Beijing, Guangzhou, Chengdu, and Nanning. These are two first-tier cities and two second-tier cities in China, and they share a common characteristic: a high degree of sexual openness, sexual freedom, and acceptance of homosexuality compared with other cities in China. In this chapter, I also explain the rationale for my feminist methodology and reflect on the research process as a whole. I consider the ethical implications of my work and the steps I took to ensure best practice. I discuss the obstacles I encountered in the field while doing research on this sensitive topic, and I specifically focus on the *guanxi* issues I faced during snowball sampling. I also give an overview of the interpretative and coding procedures used to form the analytical chapters of this thesis.

In Chapter 5, I explore the appeal to women of sexual aesthetics, sexual satisfaction, and sex education in regard to BL. I discuss how women redefine masculinity and male attractiveness from their own perspectives. Then I explore why women use BL instead of heterosexual erotica as material for their own sexual satisfaction and education. Following this, I discuss how ongoing traditional ideologies, such as Confucianism and party-state efforts to impose sexual and moral control, have imposed taboos and anti-sex attitudes on individuals, and how modernity is reshaping a young generation of women who have more active sexual choices and expressions thanks to BL.

In Chapter 6, I explore the topics of ideal lovers, love, and relationships according to *fu nü*. I discuss my participants’ views of what love should be, and what it actually is today. I also consider their thoughts regarding ideal boyfriends and husbands, intimate relationships, and marriage, in comparison with the less satisfying reality of contemporary China and its traditional gender norms. Following this, I explore the paradox that my participants still view marriage as an inevitable and taken-for-granted stage in a woman’s life course. I analyse the pragmatic issues they encounter, such as the pressure to have children and continue the family line, financial issues, the continuing stigma, etc., and I explain how they use BL as an escape from reality.

In Chapter 7, I explore my participants’ self-identification and self-construction, drawing on their views about the meaning of being a woman in China. I argue that women are subordinated and face many restrictions and role expectations under the patriarchal system. I then analyse how women use BL as a vehicle to get together and advocate individuals’ expectations for themselves as women, and how they live a double life—online and offline, inside and outside the *fu nü* group—when they feel under pressure.

# Chapter 1. Women and Sexuality in China

The first part of this chapter focuses on how the feudal system formed patriarchal society in China. Within this system, women were scorned, and sex was restricted. I will demostrate a During the period prior to the Ming dynasty (1368–1644 AD), women had enjoyed higher status in both the family and society; as Ebrey (2003) argues, Chinese women’s history is related to the history of the entire family. When China reached the Ming and Qing dynasties (established in 1636 and ruling China from 1644 to 1912 AD), which were influenced by Confucian thought, women’s social status became notably inferior, their activities were restricted, and they were morally shackled by *li[[2]](#endnote-1)[[3]](#footnote-2)* and the Three Obediences and Four Virtues (*san cong si de*,三从四德). Women were not allowed to divorce or remarry. Some scholars believe that the Three Obediences and Four Virtues formed the core of women’s identity and, along with chastity, became the quintessence of Asian female culture (Hu, 1986; Lin, 1992). Feudal Confucian ideas of compliance and the Three Obediences and Four Virtues continued to warp people’s minds (D. Chen, 1998), and Yinhe Li (2005) states that this period was probably the darkest in women’s history in China. However, this period shaped the status of women, and it continues to have a huge impact in modern China.

During the period of the Republic of China (1912–1949), a special time of dramatic change in Chinese society, women’s status altered alongside other social transformations. Women were actively involved in politics, the pursuit of economic independence and education, and the advocacy of freedom of marriage, pursuing their rights as women and making significant gains. Thus, we can say that the changes in women’s status have been, and continue to be, reflected in the degree of civilization in China. The situation of women in the early period of the Republic of China’s social and economic life had great significance for the further improvement of women’s status in society under Mao. The third section of this chapter will thoroughly examine this later period.

The founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 was the beginning of a new era; it also marked a new phase of women’s history in China. Under the control of Zedong Mao, women’s position in Chinese society significantly improved (Chan et al., 1998). As Croll (1983, p. 1) contends, after 1949, the new government of China adopted policies and programmes that redefined the role of women and placed them in a position of equality with men in both the public and domestic spheres. During this era, women’s liberation reached its peak with Mao’s slogan ‘women hold up half the sky.’

After Mao’s death in 1976, a more relaxed political atmosphere emerged. Mao’s idea of the equality of men and women was questioned. Xue (1999, p. 143) argues that the situation in Mao’s era not only denied differences between the sexes but was also unpromising for the social development of women as a group. Society’s intense gaze returned to focus on the differences between the genders. In order to build a harmonious society, women’s virtue was re-emphasized, and the slogan ‘women return to the family’ was proposed. However, the trend of feminism awoke many women and became a powerful force during this period.

**The pre-modern era**

For various reasons, the pre-modern era is often neglected by historians (Guilk, 2003). It is notoriously difficult to study because of a lack of evidence (Mann, 2011). The sources for such research are primarily ancient Chinese literary and religious texts, in addition to government documents. Although most people kept their sex lives private, outside official channels discussions of sex were open, and literature on sexual fantasies was circulated widely (Guilk, 2003; Mann, 2011).

Examining the thousands of years of women’s history in China, many Chinese and Western scholars believe that sex in ancient China was restrained, and that women were at the bottom of the social hierarchy (Yinhe Li, 2003b). During the thousands of years of the feudal system, Confucianism heavily influenced Chinese society from top to bottom. During most of this time, women were considered to be at the bottom of the gender hierarchy and had low status in society generally. However, it would be wrong to assume that Chinese women have always been the objects of oppression and victims of sexual exploitation (Huang, 2001). Government-released documents, and the rich erotic literature and depictions still extant today, prove that this was not always the case, especially during the Tang dynasty (618–907).

Chang (2014) contends that over 2,000 years ago, while the Western world was repressing sex and sexuality, the Chinese were enjoying the sensual and spiritual pleasures of sex. Guilk (2003) emphasizes that the subject of sex was at the centre of ancient Chinese thought. Chinese philosophers would discuss this fundamental human topic openly and sincerely. However, this sophisticated and long-standing tradition has often been neglected by modern historians. According to Jucai Liu (1998), China has a long history that includes a full and rich historical record on sex. There was a comprehensive understanding of sex, sexuality, and the joy of sex, all of which were celebrated in ancient literature.

Liu (2003) concludes that by examining these stories, we can understand that women in ancient China enjoyed relatively high social status. They were not only allowed to pursue love just as they wished, but they also enjoyed equal rights to men in this arena (Y. Liu, 2003; Yinhe Li, 2014). Women’s equality was recorded in *Shi jing* (the oldest existing collection of Chinese poetry, comprising 305 works dating from the 11th to 7th centuries BC) and protected by law. During the Tang dynasty, women’s social status reached its peak (Yinhe Li, 2006a).

After Confucianism became the tool of the feudal emperor, used to strengthen his rule, sex was repressed, and women in China entered a dark age (Jucai Liu, 1998). Hall (1997) states that the core doctrine of Confucianism was harmony, and to achieve this harmony people had to remain in their correct places within the social hierarchy. Women were placed on the bottom rung of the social ladder and categorized alongside slaves and inferior men. Kristeva (1977) points out that this social hierarchy significantly reinforced the oppression of women and women’s submissive status in the feudal family.

Neo-Confucianism (*li xue*, 宋明理学) became prominent during the Song (960–1276) and Ming dynasties. This was a moral and ethical philosophy heavily influenced by Confucianism. One of the most important scholars of neo-Confucianism, Zhu Xi, proposed that everyone should ‘cherish heavenly laws, deny human desires’ (*cun tian li, mie ren yu*, 存天理，灭人欲). These interpretations of Confucianism further reinforced male authority in the feudal system (Rosenlee, 2006). Liu (2003) emphasizes that, in feudal society, Confucianism was advocated and enhanced by the ruling class, gradually developing into an unshakeable moral law throughout the feudal era.

Ebrey (2003) argues that Chinese women’s history is closely related to the history of the family, and that family and marriage practices are the key elements that shape women’s lives. Men and women were never equal in the Confucian system (Hall, 1997). Confucianism not only stated that women were inferior to men (*nan nu you bie*, 男女有别), but also declared that a woman should take no part in public affairs. Mann (2011) emphasizes that *nan nu you bie*, the foundational idea of the separation of the sexes, was an integral part of classical Chinese thought. In this model, men take charge of grain, wheat, and meat, while cloth and housework are women’s primary concern. Yinhe Li (2014) points out that this old model of the gender division of labour persisted, and was still to be found in the China of the 1980s.

Separated from labour and production, women in the feudal system were also separated from society. Women were categorized as dependants of their male family members. Before marriage, a woman was family property (Lang, 1968). Education was never a fundamental right for women. However, there was another type of education for women in the feudal system, often known as ‘female textbooks’ (*nü jiao*, 女教). The core doctrine of these ‘female textbooks’ can be summarized as the Three Obediences and Four Virtues.

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, the oppression of women reached its highest point. It was reflected in every aspect of society, from social status to social space. Firstly, as mentioned above, women were at the bottom of the Confucian social hierarchy. Not only did Confucius compare women to inferior men, he contended in the *Analects* that ‘young women and small men are hard to rear; familiarity loses respect, and aloofness rouses resentment’ (Pound, 1970, p.279). Pound’s literal translation of *xiao ren* as ‘small men’ can be understood as ‘inferior’ or ‘despicable’ men. In short, women in imperial China were on the bottom rung of the social ladder from the day they were born.

**The late Qing dynasty and the Republic of China**

Early 20th-century China was an unstable and uneasy country. While mass civil disorder began and continued to grow, the empire lost its territories piece by piece to Western colonists. The late imperial and early republican periods witnessed the Westernization process in China. The Chinese people turned away from tradition in favour of Western ideas. The Westernization process was reflected in all aspects of society, from daily life to the social and economic structure and political system. To save the empire, Chinese intellectuals began to study models from Western science concerning the democratic social structure, and they concluded that the traditional Chinese family structure was the main reason for China’s weakness (Yinhe Li, 2005; Chen, 2000). They pointed out that women’s low social status and lack of education prevented them from raising a strong Chinese population. In the late 19th century, male Chinese intellectuals and reformists had raised the issue of women’s liberation. Youwei Kang (1858–1927) and Qichao Liang (1873–1929) were the pioneer advocates who called for women’s rights. While Liang inspired and influenced a new generation of Chinese people with his work, arguing that women should receive an education, Kang promoted radical change in China and proclaimed a constitutional monarchy. Both reformists advocated women’s rights to education and freedom of marriage. They put women’s emancipation in a nationalist context, and they believed that Chinese women’s liberation was crucial if China wanted to be strong (Snow, 2004).

Unfortunately, Kang, Liang, and other Chinese reformists’ efforts for women’s liberation vanished after the Hundred-Day Reform Movement failed in 1898. Despite the failure of the revolution, the idea of women’s liberation had been kindled among Chinese intellectuals, and it continued to influence Chinese society into the next century. Meanwhile, Western ideologies and cultures found their way into China when the late Qing government was forced to open more ports to Western colonists. According to Snow (2004), Herbert Spencer’s *The rights of women* and John Stuart Mill’s *The subjection of women* were introduced to China and translated into Chinese. Under such influences, Chinese revolutionary writer Tianhe Jin published his work *Nu jie xhong* (*The women’s bell*). Jin tried to ring the bell to awaken Chinese women, encouraging them to join the revolution and overthrow the feudal system. Influenced by Western ideology, Jin’s work shared many similarities with Western liberalism and feminism. He described Western ideologies as ‘a ray of sun appearing in dark China’, although in fact the ray had yet to reach China (Z. Wang, 1999). He not only stressed that Western scientific research proved that there was no difference between men’s and women’s intelligence, but he also believed that ‘civil rights and women’s rights were born together’ (Z. Wang, 1999, p.38). He advocated a Western liberal conception of civil rights and women’s rights, and ‘believed that the 20th century was an age of feminist revolution when Chinese women should rise up to recover their rights’ (Z. Wang, 1999, p.39).

The Chinese revolution of 1911 overthrew the last Chinese emperor, symbol of the Chinese feudal system. China then entered the era of the republic. The establishment of the Republic of China was a significant step towards women’s liberation (Zhou, 2003; Z. Wang, 1999). After the republican government settled in Nanjing in 1927, the Chinese government made efforts to improve women’s status in society. The government introduced legislation offering Chinese women more legal rights in relation to education, marriage, and property. In the 1930s, the new government established legislation to grant women property and marriage rights. Meanwhile, many women’s organizations campaigned for women’s liberation in public squares and called for changes in the social status of Chinese women, including educational opportunities and the elimination of concubinage, prostitution, and feudal marriage in all its forms.

The May the Fourth Movement of 1919 marked another great improvement in women’s liberation in modern Chinese history. This movement greatly enlightened Chinese women within a cultural framework by attacking traditional culture and Confucian ethical codes (Gilmartin, 1995). Chinese women began to raise their own voices, and the numbers of Chinese women devoted to the women’s movement increased as they joined anti-imperialist marches, called for a national awakening, promoted women’s suffrage, and denounced foot-binding, sex segregation, the inhumanity of arranged marriages, and the poor quality of women’s education (Gilmartin, 1995). In this sense, the May the Fourth Movement was the first meaningful women’s movement in Chinese history (Gilmartin, 1995; Z. Wang, 1999).

To understand this shift more fully, it is necessary to elaborate on the changes in Chinese women’s liberation, especially in terms of education, politics, and social status, during the republican era.

As marginalized Chinese women began to find their voices during the republican era, gaining control over their own bodies became the crux of women’s liberation. Originally framed as a health concern, and then seen as an oppressive tool of feudal imperial gender norms, the control of women’s bodies was frequently discussed as an issue of national concern. The anti-foot-binding and anti-breast-binding campaigns cast women’s bodies as the battleground for women’s national liberation.

The upsurge of foot-binding can be traced back to the Song dynasty and the emergence of neo-Confucianism. As Guilk (2003) points out, women’s bound feet played a vital role in Chinese sexual life, with small feet considered an indispensable attribute of beautiful women. More importantly, foot-binding signified male control over women (Yinhe Li, 2005; P. Wang, 2000). On the other hand, under the neo-Confucian orthodoxy of obeying the heavenly order and destroying human desire, sexual desire was discouraged (Z. Wang, 1999). Due to their supposed ability to sexually arouse men, feudal women were forced to bind their breasts so that men could maintain inner peace. Although modern historians view foot- and breast-binding as oppressive to women, this cultural practice was voluntarily passed down from generation to generation until the Qing dynasty.

In 1860, when the Qing empire lost the Second Opium War and was forced to open five new treaty ports, an increasing number of Western missionaries gained free access to mainland China. When these missionaries witnessed the practice of foot-binding, they described it as senseless, grotesque, and barbaric ruling measure (Rejali, 2014). As Hershatter (2007) states, one of the main concerns of Western missionaries in relation to liberating Chinese women was to abolish the practice of foot-binding. Male Chinese reformists also began to view the emancipation of women as the key to creating a strong and healthy nation, and they urged the Chinese to abandon the old feudal practices, as well as pushing for women to be educated. Chinese reformist writer Tianhe Jin called the practice foot-binding one of the four ‘cardinal harms’ to women and argued that it was an old, corrupt practice that should be eliminated (P. Wang, 2000). Launched and supported by Chinese reformists and intellectuals, the anti-foot-binding movement was quickly accepted by the general population and became the national agenda on which to build a strong, modern, and competitive ‘new China’ (Z. Wang, 1999). By the end of the Qing empire, which fell in 1911, not only was the majority of public opinion strongly against foot-binding (D. Chen, 1998), but the newly established Republic of China’s government initiated a ban on foot-binding in an effort to improve women’s status.

In contrast to the rich and diverse discussions of the anti-foot-binding movement, the anti-breast-binding movement has attracted less attention and been much overlooked. However, this campaign also had significant influence on Chinese women’s lives and changed their lifestyles dramatically (Yinhe Li, 2014). Neo-Confucianism not only regulated moral behaviour, but also influenced ideals of feminine beauty in imperial China (Bailey, 2012). Breast-binding followed the same path as foot-binding, beginning as a practice interpreted by neo-Confucianism, and later developing into a symbol of class that became popular among Chinese women (A. Zhang, 2011).

Breast-binding was introduced to ‘flatten women’s breasts to prevent arousing men’s sexual desire’ (Yen, 2005, p.176). Yen (2005, p.177) explains that ‘a flat chest was considered a standard of beauty for urban, educated women and became a symbol of class status that distinguished urban educated women from rural peasant women, whose natural breasts were seen as vulgar and uncivilized.’ Hence, breast-binding became a class symbol and fashionable among Chinese women; moreover, it reinforced male domination under the feudal system (Z. Wang, 1999). In the late imperial period breast-binding became considered a corrupt feudal practice that posed a great health risk to women, and a movement against breast-binding was initiated by male Chinese reformists. Despite the fact that gender equality and women’s education were promoted by these reformists, the movement regarding the practice of breast-binding was small (A. Zhang, 2011). Unlike the rapidly ended practice of foot-binding, the elimination of breast-binding was a slow process.

Chinese female educationalist Shuhua Lin urged women to abandon four practices— foot-binding, breast-binding, using make-up, and wearing jewellery—because women should not rely on such practices to please men, especially at the cost of their own health (Z. Wang, 1999). She called on women to unbind their breasts to improve their lives, free their minds, and widen their choices (Z. Wang, 1999). Chinese women gradually took control of their own bodies, with unbound feet and shorter hair becoming symbols of women’s liberation in the republican era. However, some scholars have commented that rather than viewing the 19th-century women’s liberation movement in China as self-motivated, we should see it as more of a by-product of the Westernization that was being led by elite Chinese males (Z. Wang, 1999; Bailey, 2012). As some commentators (Z. Wang, 1999; A. Zhang, 2011) argue, both anti-binding movements were led by male reformists, and they aimed to contribute to the nation and the race rather than to the interests of Chinese females, thereby casting women’s bodies as the battleground for a patriarchal political agenda. Nevertheless, these movements brought women out of their homes and into workplaces and schools.

Mann (2011) argues that the anti-binding movements reshaped the notion of the body in Chinese culture. The anti-binding movements played a vital part in the emancipation of women, not only in body but also in mind. Together, they helped Chinese women to reformulate women’s ‘nature’ and raised women’s consciousness of the capabilities of their own bodies (J. Hong, 1998). Thus was ensured the means of a new physical, psychological, and cultural identity for women (F. Hong, 1997). By the late 19th century, women had slowly gained higher social status and a broader range of activities than those which Confucius had permitted. However, the household remained the last barrier to their participation in public roles.

Chinese reformists argued that the physical and spiritual inferiority of Chinese women was at the root of China’s weakness (Z. Wang, 1999; Ono, 1989; Xu, 1992). Cheng (2000) likewise emphasizes that feudal Confucianism’s prevention of women’s schooling was the reason that China was brought to catastrophe. Therefore, the issue of women’s education was put on the agenda as a means of strengthening the nation. The late Qing government and the patriotic Chinese reformists established women’s schools all over the country, considering these an effective tool to cultivate ‘the future of the nation’ and the last resort to save the declining empire (Z. Wang, 1999). According to F. Hong (1997), the number of registered female students increased rapidly from 1902 to 1922.

More importantly, influenced by the ideals of equality, democracy and science, the objectives of female education changed. Traditional feudal female education had taught women to sew, cook, and nurse, that is, to be good wives and mothers. Women’s demands changed during the May the Fourth Movement: they wanted to be educated in order to survive in society. By the end of 1919, not only could women register at all universities, but they also shared the same curriculum as men (J. Hong, 1998). Notably, physical exercise was introduced into women’s education for the first time, not only teaching women how to exercise, ‘but also convey[ing] to them the spirit of sport, self-respect, self-control [and] self-realization’ (cited in F. Hong, 1997, p.135). All in all, a new femininity was manifested: modern, active, and assertive (F. Hong, 1997).

Beginning as the by-product of Western missionaries’ objectives to bring Christian and/or Catholic influences into China, a new era of women’s education became embedded, bringing a spirit of enlightenment and progress to Chinese society (Jucai Liu, 1998). Women’s education gained an unstoppable momentum that pushed forwards women’s emancipation in China (Jucai Liu, 1998; Ono, 1989).

The establishment of the Nanjing government in 1912 marked a significant improvement in women’s status. The revolution had overthrown the feudal system that had ruled China for more than 5,000 years. After the success of the revolution, some feminists (Qun-Ying Tang and Zongsu Lin, for example) proposed equal rights, and expressed their desire to participate in government and political affairs. Although their demands ended in failure, the 1911 revolution marked a point at which women’s emancipation in China evolved from a call for equality to a political awakening (Wang, 1999).

However, feudal hangovers still affected society. During this period, the ‘new cultural movement’ (1915–1925) was initiated, led by Chinese intellectuals. With urgent calls to use Western democracy and science to create a new Chinese culture, Confucianism became the target of intense attack, condemned as ‘the cruelty, irrationality, backwardness and stupidity of Chinese cultural tradition’ (Z. Wang, 1999, p.12). Under the feudal Confucian system, women had suffered inhuman practices, such as foot-binding, enforced chastity, gender separation, and so on; Chinese intellectuals now believed that women’s liberation was the key to the establishment of a new Chinese national culture (Wang, 1999). In other words, women continued to be associated with the fate of the nation.

Many Chinese female activists called for the true liberation of women to be achieved on social and economic fronts (Ono, 1989; Mann, 1997). They further pressed the authorities to recognize and realize their social rights, and an idea of the ‘new woman’ was promulgated. The 1921 Marriage Law challenged the feudal marriage system and fundamentally changed the unequal status of women in marriage; monogamy and marriage were now based on free will (Lu, 2004). The immense popularity of women’s magazines during the 1920s and 1930s also helped to develop the ‘new woman’ image. Despite this, some researchers (Chin, 2007) claim that the ‘new woman’ was an ideal designed by and for men to fulfil their fantasies of the perfect modern woman. Rooney (2014) concludes that the ‘new woman’ was a complex sociocultural figure who straddled the divide between the real and the ideal.

Some researchers (Lu, 2004; Hong, 1997) conclude that the emancipation of women during the republican era cannot be seen simply as a symptom of Westernization. The emancipation movement inaugurated by male activists and reformists indicated women’s awakened consciousness of their own oppression. This consciousness signalled a transition in women’s roles, from objects of liberation to its agents, from passive respondents to active initiators (Wang, 1999).

**The Mao era**

With the famous proclamation ‘women hold up half the sky,’ the emancipation of Chinese women was pushed to the next level. This powerful statement made by Zedong Mao emphasized that women could do just as much as men. Chinese women were encouraged to step out of their homes and into the world of paid work. Therefore, during this period, the proportion of women within the paid labour force rose dramatically.

However, this controversial policy led to debates, both domestic and international. Influenced by the works of Marx and Engels, and the experience of the Soviet Union, both Mao and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) believed that promoting women’s participation in paid labour was the key to liberating women (X. Gao, 2007; Z. Wang, 1999). On the other hand, the party-state’s urgent task was to mobilize every possible resource to rebuild the country, as well as to demonstrate ‘communist superiority’ to Western capitalist countries (Manning, 2007). Under these circumstances, women’s rights were driven primarily by party ideology and economic needs. As Feng (1991) states, women’s equal participation in the economy and society during the Maoist era was necessary to advance the nation. Furthermore, he explains that Western feminism often began with grassroots activists, while under Mao’s regime Chinese feminism was initiated and controlled by the party-state.

In order to rescue the economy from the brink of collapse and to maximize production levels, women were mobilized into all areas of the labour force. As scholars (Andors, 1983; Y. Gao, 1987; Honig, 2002; Jin, 2007) have observed, women worked not only in the agriculture and light industry, but also in traditionally male sectors, such as construction, mining, and steelwork. In this way women’s participation in paid labour was pushed to a peak. As Mao famously proclaimed in the *Little Red Book*:

In order to build a great socialist society it is of the utmost importance to arouse the broad masses of women to join productive activity. Men and women must receive equal pay for equal work in production. Genuine equality between the sexes can only be realised in the process of the socialist transformation of society as a whole. (Mao,1966, p.297)

As women embraced Mao’s famous proclamation and showed great enthusiasm for paid work, a new image of the socialist woman was moulded. During the ‘great leap forward’, ‘iron girls’ were promoted to further motivate women into paid labour. ‘Iron girls’—brave, strong, muscular women who could do anything that men could do, including physically demanding tasks—were praised in the newspapers, on posters, and on the radio. Consequently, following these new role models, women changed their appearance, for example by having short haircuts and wearing men’s uniforms (Honig, 2002). Moreover, this period saw a change not only in women’s appearance but also in official views, which stated that women and men were exactly the same, psychologically and physically.



Figure 4. The iron girls who blur their feminine and can be workers, peasants and soldiers as men, with the slogan ‘Women hold up half the sky’.  
Source: http://news.ifeng.com/a/20170831/51816108\_0.shtml

While Mao’s slogan promoted the concept of the androgynous woman (Croll, 1995), the ‘iron girls’ reinforced that image by eliminating gender differences. As Croll (1995) points out, gender politics under Mao’s regime paid little attention to women’s role in marriage, repro duction, or the family. Jin (2007, p.617) questions the limitations of Mao’s gender equality: ‘this equality is based on male standards and simply ignores physiological and physical differences as the premise. Women have to sacrifice, and make much more effort to achieve gender equality.’ The purpose of the slogan ‘men and women are the same’ was to encourage women to make contributions that were more like men’s, rather than to encourage or support equal rights. In practice women only had more obligations and developed very little awareness relevant to their rights, resulting in their earning less than men in the same jobs (Jin, 2007; Jieyu Liu, 2007). Despite women’s high participation in paid labour, scholars (Jieyu Liu, 2007; X. Gao, 2007; Manning, 2007; Jin, 2007) have observed that gendered divisions still dominated, and women’s role in the family remained unchanged.

While the party-state deliberately neglected gender differences, Chinese women rejected femininity and celebrated sexual equality (Honig, 2002). Mao’s regime witnessed ill-fated developments in gender equality in China, and the liberation of women became a new patriarchal orthodoxy, since the party-state line was not rooted in women’s own experiences or visions (Jaschok and Miers, 1994).

Some commentators contend that under Mao’s regime, public discussions and expressions of sex and sexuality vanished. This repression allegedly reached its peak during the Cultural Revolution (Yang, 1994). Honig (2003, p.143) claims: ‘to discuss any aspect of personal life, romantic relationships or sex was considered bourgeois and hence taboo.’ Evans (1997, p. 55) too argues that any suggestion of sexual interest was considered immoral during the Cultural Revolution: ‘gendered tastes in hairstyle and dress were coerced into a monotonous uniformity of shape and color… a sexual sameness, based on the defeminisation of female appearance and its approximation to male standards of dress.’

Interestingly, however, the early CCP had held a rather open-minded view of sexual relations. Sigley (2006, p.46) emphasizes that the party at first had promoted ‘a romanticized view of sexual liberation as part and parcel of human liberation’. These views were later used by the CCP to attack those they defined as enemies, including the Guomindang. During the Chinese civil war, the CCP and its supporters denounced the Guomindang as corrupt and sexually degenerate (Sigley, 2006). Thus sexual morality was used by the CCP to build its political legitimacy and demonstrate its superiority in every respect, especially as compared with ‘Old China’ (Sigley, 2006). Under these circumstances, Mao’s regime subsequently promulgated a strictly ‘antibody, antiflesh, antisexuality attitude’ and ‘systematically eradicated all palpable signs of bodily interest and institutions of carnal pleasure’ (Zha, 1995, p. 139).

For instance, the ‘eight model plays’ (*yang ban xi*, 样板戏) were created as party propaganda. This was a series of operas, ballets, and plays with a communist theme, depicting class struggle and communist revolutionary stories from before 1949. The eight model plays dominated the Chinese cultural scene for more than 10 years during the Cultural Revolution, and were adapted into various local theatrical forms to reach broader audiences. Modern scholars (D. Bai, 2010; Roberts, 2010) state that these Maoist plays were tantamount to ‘gender erasure’. While on the surface the plays appeared to support and highlight women’s liberation, in actual fact all femininity, including sexual desire, was erased. Even though most of the plays featured women in leading roles, they were always combatants or party secretaries, and female characters were often depicted as unmarried, widowed, or with an unclear marital status (D. Bai, 2010): it seems that it was considered that the performance of a family role would reduce their heroic spirit. The heroines in these plays needed neither husbands nor families, as they had revolutionary spirit and physical strength. Moreover, female characters often employed masculine body movements to create heroic images. However, with their femininity erased, these female characters eventually became simply replicas of men. As Jin (2007) emphasizes, the derogation of women’s family roles reached an unprecedented level during the Cultural Revolution.

The period of the Cultural Revolution was a time when sex disappeared from public expression and popular culture in China. Sex was not an issue that educated people would openly discuss under Mao’s regime (Manning, 2007). Sexuality was a very personal matter. It was heavily policed, and all behaviour or ideas deemed immoral in the context of a socialist utopia were severely punished. Yuan Gao (1987) states that the party’s purpose was to build a ‘pure’ communist society, with a new order and structure; in other words, controlling sexual desire was a necessary means to maintain control of the whole society. Political and cultural control subjected ordinary people to a regulatory power, the indisputable authority of which was sustained by the silence it imposed.

Despite claims that the repression of sex in China reached its peak during the Cultural Revolution, however, the role of the party-state remains unclear (Honig, 2003). There is no evidence that the CCP officially prohibited non-marital romantic or sexual relationships (Honig, 2003). Novels, films, and memoirs published after the Cultural Revolution indicate that ‘sent-down’ youth engaged in premarital sex, there was an increase in the reported incidence of sexual abuse, and overall, sex was not actively repressed. The subject of sex and sexuality was not entirely silenced, nor did the authorities strictly suppress sex. Jeffreys and Yu (2015, p.69) conclude:

the perceived ‘silence’ on sex-related matters during the Maoist period is an effect of the primacy accorded to the imported discourse of Marxism in the state-controlled media, and the reorganization of the social space to meet the requirements of centralized planning, which included the restriction of commercial spaces. Sex-related issues clearly became enmeshed in broader political and social movements.

**The reform era**

The reform era (1978–present) witnessed drastic changes in every aspect of society. Mao’s death in 1976 and the arrest of the Gang of Four marked the end of the chaotic Cultural Revolution and the beginning of a new era. A relatively more relaxed political atmosphere gradually emerged. Led by new party leader Xiaoping Deng, economic reforms drastically overhauled China’s economic system. By the end of the 1980s, the previously state-owned economy was gradually being replaced by a more flexible market economy. Furthermore, a diversity of enterprise ownership was being encouraged by the central government to boost economic development. As this economic reform continued, the party-state made fewer interventions in every area of the economy, and the close supervision of people’s daily lives was removed (Zhang, 1999). As a result of these changing social and political circumstances, reform gradually influenced all fields of social life.

As Rofel (1999) describes, during this period, national identity was weakened, and an increasing number of citizens sought to fulfil their personal identities. One apparent social phenomenon is that women now have diverse choices in relation to marriage and family. Some become full-time housewives; some young women choose to have extramarital relationships with rich married men; and some consider money to be the most important factor in choosing relationships (X. Zhang, 2010). Scholars (J. Cheng, 1998; Farrer, 2002) have also observed that divorce rates are increasing, extramarital affairs are becoming more commonplace among young people in China, and premarital sex and cohabitation are common practices.

Policies at the state level also helped to push women’s liberation during this era. Suiming Pan (2006) observes that the one-child policy adopted in 1980 was instituted to limit the birth rate, and that this helped to liberate women from their role as ‘reproductive machines’; moreover, the revised Marriage Law helped to transform conceptions of love from ‘marital favour and gratitude’ to a phenomenon related to romance.

Wang (2001) points out that the metaphor of ‘revolution’ is often associated with descriptions of social change in China. The sexual revolution of the reform era dramatically changed China’s sexual culture (Yinhe Li, 2003b). As part of the more general reform, the open-door policy brought into China not only Western investment but also Western culture; according to Braverman (2002), when China decided to open its doors to international markets, it inadvertently let in another modern phenomenon: Western sexual culture. Despite official anxiety about this sexual revolution, associated it as it was with Western bourgeois notions of sexual liberation and sexual freedom (Sigley, 2002), the public discussion of sex and sexuality was greatly enhanced. As Suiming Pan (2006) observes, there has been a significant and long-lasting transformation of Chinese sexual mores and behaviour since the 1980s. Moreover, he argues that this sexual revolution is not a result of ‘Western influences’ alone, nor indeed of any dramatic changes in the nature of sexuality.

Another notable social phenomenon is the rise of female writers. Chinese mainstream culture since 1949 had been focused on revolutionary literature, serving as a political and social reflection of the party-state. But in the 1990s, influenced by the Western notion of ‘consciousness-raising’ (Whelehan, 2005), a group of female writers broke with the traditional, male-centred literary grand narratives. Using self-narration, they began to reconstruct female identity within a new context. As cultural change and sexual revolution swept across China, in tandem with the emergence of new technology, a new generation of female writers, such as Wei Hui and Annie Baby, focused on writing sexually explicit novels. They became enormously popular among Chinese youth, despite being accused of promulgating Western corruption (Yinhe Li, 2006b).

The remainder of this chapter will highlight the changing role and identity of women within the context of Chinese modernization, and will then illustrate the influence of the sexual revolution on women. This will be followed by an examination of how women have reflected on their own lives and identities in recent literary work.

**Women in China today**

As discussed in more detail above, following deepening economic reform, China transformed itself from a socialist society to a marketized society, with concurrent cultural and ideological changes. People consciously relinquished older traditional values, which they believed no longer fitted the present; they developed a new set of values and changed their behaviour accordingly (Yinhe Li, 2000). Influenced by drastically changing social circumstances, women now had diverse choices, particularly in relation to family and marriage.

During the 1980s, to serve the purpose of building a stable society, the image of the ‘socialist new woman’ was built into the party-state propaganda machine (Bauer et al., 1992; Stacey, 1983). Women who single-handedly shouldered the burden of domestic and paid work were often held up as role models by the party-state. The new definition of the virtuous wife and good mother was now one who both took care of her family and worked outside the home, although family harmony was often given higher priority (Milwertz, 1997; Xue, 1999). The sexual division of labour within the family remained unchanged, even decades after economic reform. Women in full-time employment still had to take on most of the housework, thus being held to a high standard in both public and private spheres. Traditional Chinese family values still considered the education and training of the child to be the task of the mother (Robinson, 1985).

However, the previous formal kinship structure was dismantled by radical structural changes, including the one-child policy. Consequently, the husband’s dominant position in the family was greatly weakened (Liu and Ma, 2009).

Initiated in 1979, the one-child policy aroused strong criticism from domestic and international quarters. The debate concerning the implementation of this policy still echoes today. Croll (1983, p.1) called it ‘momentous and far-reaching in its implications for China’s population and economic development’. Although Li (2005) believe that this strict population-control policy was originally designed to prevent starvation and help boost economic growth, the policy also made life painful, even humiliating, for individuals, especially Chinese women. Nonetheless, many researchers hold a positive view of the association between women’s liberation and the one-child policy.

Firstly, as Suiming Pan (2006) emphasizes, the one-child policy freed women in China from being simply tools of reproduction, because it reduced the never-ending cycle of pregnancy, childbirth, and child-rearing. Therefore, women could now devote more time and energy to other activities, which encouraged them to make non-traditional career choices. Secondly, the policy helped to transform Chinese society, with a shift from the ‘parent-centred’ family to the more ‘child-centred’ family. As Fong (2002, p. 1101) contends, this policy meant that Chinese society changed from ‘a patrilineal, patrilateral and patrilocal one to a bilineal, bilateral and neolocal one’. Lastly, the one-child policy promoted social equality, because children were the ‘pearls in the palm’ of the family. One girl in the family was now treated as no less important than a boy would be, and educational opportunities for girls greatly improved under the influence of the policy (Tsui and Rich, 2002). As Tsui and Rich (2002, p.76) conclude, the policy ‘help[s] to elevate a daughter’s status within the family by removing the structural prerequisite for gender discrimination: the presence of a brother as a competitor for parental attention and resources’.

By the end of the 1990s, the first generation of children born under the one-child policy had reached adulthood. Studies showed that this new generation of women was seeking spiritual independence, and that they also expressed disapproval of self-sacrifice in the families and had a great desire for equality in the domestic division of labour (Jieyu Liu, 2007).

The one-child policy thus brought great benefits for women. As scholars (Hardee *et al.* 2000) conclude, it helped Chinese women to reach a level of social equality that had previously been unattained, under even the most favourable ideological conditions.

Economic reform was a complex social project, involving billions of people and prompting a series of deep social changes. The implications of such reform continued to affect Chinese society after the departure of Xiaoping Deng. With the break-up and reconstruction of long-standing economic and social patterns, numerous new problems have emerged, including problems specific to women. In order to survive in a fiercely competitive market and to constantly renew competitiveness, state-owned enterprises require their employees to renew their contracts every five years (Farrer, 2002). For the first time, the permanent employment system (‘iron rice bowl’, *tie fan wan，*铁饭碗) has been smashed. Whereas they previously relied in full on the party-state for their jobs, healthcare, education, and retirement, millions of Chinese people are now experiencing a loss of jobs, social benefits, housing benefits, and consequently social respect. During the economic restructuring process, millions of workers have been laid off, the majority of whom have been women. Women have been especially disadvantaged in several ways: more women are laid off than men, they are forced to retire at a younger age than men, they receive less social support, and their re-employment chances are significantly lower. Hence Lin (2007) argues that women are losing ground and becoming increasingly marginalized.

However, economic reform opened another door for Chinese women. With the ending of the lifelong employment system, the new economic reform completely changed traditional employment mechanisms, and placed everyone under the pressure of competition. The market-oriented employment system has seen a fundamental change in the pattern, structure, and earnings of women’s employment (Jieyu Liu, 2007). Market competition has been introduced not only between enterprises but also between the sexes. As Jieyu Liu (2007) states, reform has created a wide range of opportunities for women, and they now enjoy freedom of employment as well as feeling the pressure of competition. Liu (2007) emphasizes that, for the first time, women have finally left behind their sense of inferiority and dependence, and have cultivated an unprecedented sense of urgency and self-reliance. They have begun to learn new professional skills to improve their re-employment chances, and some have started their own businesses. By challenging themselves and society, they have learned to be independent, becoming more capable and creative.

Economic reform has also sparked Chinese women’s passion for study. In order to meet the rising requirements of the labour market and keep abreast of ever-changing innovations, Chinese women have sought to raise their own educational levels. They buy academic books, and they attend evening classes and training classes. Statistics show that in Shanghai, 161,400 more women graduated from universities in 1990 than in 1982 (Ma, 2004). In terms of educational access, girls’ enrolment in primary schools has reached the level of boys’, and girls constitute 40 per cent of university students (Ma, 2004).

In rural China, every part of people’s daily lives has been heavily affected. Whilst gender relations have been reshaped everywhere, rural women’s lives in particular have been completely transformed. The ‘household responsibility system’ was introduced as part of the economic reforms. This system has greatly improved productivity and farmers’ incomes; more importantly, it has freed much of the population from agriculture. As Meng (1993) states, the most significant change for rural women during the reform era has been the breakdown of homogeneity. Traditionally, the mobility of Chinese rural women was heavily restricted by the household registration system (*hu kou，*户口): women were bound to the land, and were not allowed to leave their village, expect for marriage or a few other tightly controlled reasons. Under the economic reforms, such restrictions were loosened. Much of the rural population migrated to more economically developed regions in search of better living standards and job opportunities. According to Meng (1995), labour migration within China increased dramatically in the 1980s, and reached a pinnacle in the 1990s.

Economic reform has thus created a new social group: *dagongmei*,rural-to-urban migrant workers. Suffering from the political, economic, and cultural deprivations of unequal power structures (Yinhe Li, 2006a), they often work in factories, or as waitresses, salespersons, or domestic workers for urban families. Cruelly disadvantaged in society, many rural women hope to move up the social hierarchy through hypergamous marriage (Fong, 2002). Even though hypergamous marriage often produces inequality, some rural women regard it as a route to a better life and social status, and hope to couple with upper-class men (Honig and Hershatter, 1988). Thus, migration has an effect not only on physical but also on social mobility.

In sum, with the Chinese rural population no longer closely bound to the land, and with rural women gaining physical and social mobility through marriage, the traditional Chinese agricultural system has been broken up and restructured under economic reform, and Chinese rural social life has changed beyond recognition.

The market reforms have relentlessly pushed forward economic growth as well as dramatically changing society. As mentioned above, the divorce rate is increasing, and the reported incidence of premarital and extramarital affairs is climbing to a record high (Woo, 2006). Released from traditional constraints, and freed by the market mantra of ‘bargaining and choice’, Chinese men and women have become consumers at home and at work, in their private relationships as well as in their public roles. As mentioned above, however, this complex sexual revolution cannot be explained away simply as the by-product of economic reform, even though mainstream Chinese media frequently blames the changes on the Western bourgeoisie, moral corruption, and the loss of social control (S. Pan, 2006).

For thousands of years in traditional China, the sole purpose of sex was to produce a male heir to continue the family line (S. Pan, 2006). As Suiming Pan (2006) explains: ‘the reproductive orientation of sex in traditional China owed much to the prevalence of ancestor worship and it encouraged conceptions of loyalty and steadfastness in sexual relations and seriousness in sexual behaviours.’ Such a focus on ‘sex for procreation’ tragically turned Chinese women into tools of reproduction. With the implementation of the one-child policy, the equation of sex with reproduction was erased, and this reshaped the idea of the Chinese family and the nature of sexuality. The policy was first introduced to the urban population across the country (Croll et al., 1985). Nobody foresaw that this policy, originally designed as a method of population control, would have such an impact on society. Suiming Pan et al. (2004) contend that the only reason for married couples to maintain a sex life after the birth of a child is to seek pleasure. Hence, women are no longer tools of reproduction, and the concept and practice of ‘sex for pleasure’ has begun to emerge in modern China (S. Pan, 2006). Thanks to the unharnessing of sex from procreation, sexual behaviours once considered tantamount to ‘Western corruption’ are now gaining more social acceptance (Li, 2002; Pan, 2004).

These dramatically changing sexual and cultural behaviours are greatly reflected in Chinese youth, especially urban youth. This group has been much more receptive than its elders to the changing ideology (Li, 2002). The new generation now delay marriage and are more willing to engage in short-term relationships (Farrer, 2006). Consistent with the idea of free choice, they allow their companion greater freedom to break off or withhold commitment before marriage (Farrer, 2006). Farrer (2006) further observes that dating is now ‘just for fun’ in the eyes of Chinese youth, who also redefine premarital intercourse as an expression of love. One survey showed that 15.5 per cent of interviewees had taken part in premarital sex; that figure went up to 70 per cent just two years later (Li, 2002). The changing discourse of sexual motivations among Chinese youth is a complex and contradictory mixture of ‘feeling’ and love, seriousness and play, pragmatism and romance. All in all, the interpretation of individual choices and abilities is shifting from ‘revolutionary duty’ and ‘honour’ to ‘individual desire’ (Farrer, 2002).

Even during the reform era, however, the government has continued to maintain relatively tight political control. The younger generation of Chinese people are encouraged to be independent and individualistic in some respects (i.e. to be competitive and entrepreneurial) but not in others (i.e. no self-expression or empowerment) (Pei, 2007). Under these circumstances, Chinese youth live their lives in confusion, struggling to find their identities while dealing with the dominant materialism. As Farrer (2002) contends, sexual storytelling plays a key role in self-identity formation. Sex talk has therefore become a form of self-expression for this generation (Xie, 2001).

The complexity, confusion, and contradictory nature of the younger generation is thus reflected in their literature. Among the post-1970s writers who grew up under the influence of reform, Mian Mian and Wei Hui are considered representative of the ‘glam writers’. Sharing similar backgrounds—both women were born in the 1970s and raised in the city—they have attracted domestic and international controversy. Mian Mian claims to be the first Chinese female writer to publish sexually explicit novels about underground youth culture (Farrer, 2006). Her work was officially banned by the Chinese authorities due to its extremely explicit descriptions of sex, drug use, and suicide [[4]](#footnote-3). Not surprisingly, Wei Hui’s work has shared a similar fate. Her novels contain explicit depictions of female masturbation, homosexuality, and drug use, and she was declared decadent, debauched and a slave of foreign culture (Hopkin, 2000). Consequently, she was considered a bad influence on Chinese youth, and her work was banned by the authorities as pornographic (Goldblatt, 2000) and prohibited from being sold in mainland China[[5]](#footnote-4).

However, even though Mian Mian and Wei Hui’s writing generated such controversy, the prohibition did not prevent the underground distribution of their work. *Shanghai Baby* by Wei Hui has been republished six times, and at least four different versions of it have circulated in pirated copies through newspaper kiosks, magazine stalls, and private bookshops (Pei, 2007). The rapid development of the Internet has also aided circulation, and in this way her writing has gained enormous popularity among the younger generation. As Pomfret (2000) states, *Shanghai Baby* became China’s hottest work of fiction.

Some critics (F. Li, 2000; Shi, 2002) have argued that the explicit sex described in Wei Hui’s novel was what made it so popular. Nevertheless, it was undeniable that her work resonated with a generation of young Chinese readers, not only because they were born during the same period and shared similar life experiences, but also, more importantly, because the sexual content in both Mian Mian and Wei Hui’s work stress that the individuals of new generation Chinese need to communicate (G.Jones, 1999). Moreover, both writers ‘speak for a generation who demand both spiritual and sexual fulfillment, something their parents don’t understand’ (Pomfret, 2000, p. C01).

Wei Hui and Mian Mian’s popularity among young Chinese women in particular has come about not only because their work reflects the generation gap between young women and their parents, but also because it highlights the new model of female sexuality. Chinese discourse on female sexuality is no longer limited to the model of ‘active-male/passive-female’ (Pei, 2007). In the narratives of Wei Hui and Mian Mian, sexual pleasure appears to be the dominant reason for getting involved in sex (Pei, 2007).

The remarkable improvement in women’s social status in the reform era also has significant implications for marriage behaviour. The traditional concept of marriage is faces a greater challenge than ever. The traditional Chinese notion of love is favour and gratitude between husband and wife (Pan, 2005), which means that ‘love’ in this sense is neither a precondition for marriage nor a personal matter for the parties concerned (S. Pan, 2006). Pan (2005) emphasizes that in terms of the relationship between marriage and love, the latter was traditionally subordinate to the former: ‘love’ is merely the basic precondition for ‘living a life together’ (Pan, 1995). Although the Western ideology of love was introduced into China long ago, discussions of love and sex in the Western sense were taboo during the Cultural Revolution. Transcended by class struggle, the notion of romantic love was framed as a ‘Western bourgeois sentiment’ (Pan, 1995). It was not until the reform era that the open-door policy encouraged Chinese people to embrace such Western ideologies. Consequently, Western conceptions of romantic love have fused with traditional Chinese conceptions of marital favour and gratitude to form a new understanding of romantic love, and this new notion has gradually become established in the Chinese imagination (S. Pan, 1995). This new conception of love has also gradually been accepted by the authorities: the revised 1980 Marriage Law specifically cites ‘the loss of love’ as grounds for divorce (Woo, 2006). Thus, romantic love has become the basis of marriage and the essential measure that assesses the quality and value of a marriage (S. Pan, 2006).

An even more radical view has begun to emerge as the post-1970s female writers express the view that ‘any relationship based on affection, even extramarital love, should not be considered immoral’ (Farrer, 2005, p.17). Despite being disapproved of by the authorities, such views have become increasingly mainstream in China (Farrer, 2005). Suiming Pan (2006) observes that the conception of romantic love is now deeply embedded in the consciousness of the young generation in China. Within the context of globalization, romantic love not is only one of the most important themes in popular culture, but is also reshaping perceptions and understandings of gender and sexual and family relationships in modern China (Jin, 2001). Most importantly, as Suiming Pan (2006) emphasizes that the value of love today in China surpasses that accorded to the institution of marriage when comparing to previous days.

There is a growing official anxiety about these new romantic values, which are considered to be based on Western notions of sexual liberation and sexual freedom (Sigley, 2002). It is true that extramarital affairs have become more common since China reopened its door to the Western world (J. Cheng, 1998; Farrer, 2002). However, Pan(2005) argues that instead of blaming Western-style conceptions of ‘sexual freedom’ for eroding the traditional equation of sex with marriage, the authorities should see the weakening of the traditional institution of marriage as the true cause of the so-called sexual revolution.

The feudal systems of concubinage and prostitution were banned after 1949, and the system of monogamous marriage was promoted and protected by the Marriage Law. However, the increasing reported number of extramarital affairs indicates that economic prosperity has resulted in the reawakening of the long-abandoned feudal practice of concubinage known as *bao er nai* (‘keeping a mistress’) (Yuen et al., 2004). Aihua Zhang (2011) describes this modern concubinage as ‘men contract[ing] a woman, which implies both a financial transaction and exclusive rights to a woman’s body and her sexuality’. Women are objectified and commoditized in what amounts to a transaction for ‘sexual consumption’ (Shen, 2008). Scholars (Thornton and Lin, 1994; Xu et al., 2000) point out that women marrying men of higher social status (i.e. hypergamous marriage) was a traditional practice in China. In the past, women would marry men with a higher educational background than themselves. In modern China, the overall educational gap between men and women is very small. Women today therefore consider money or social status to be the most essential factors when seeking extramarital relationships (A. Zhang, 2011). Suiming Pan (2006) states that the third parties involved in extramarital relationships are generally seeking the protection and support offered by traditional marriage. Furthermore, he concludes that sex has not been separated from the institution of marriage; on the contrary, it has gained more value and significance within it (Pan, 2006).

During the reform era, Chinese women have been involved in ongoing processes of global integration, modernization, and the international women’s movement. Women are becoming able to get out of the broad social categorization as one homogeneous gender with separate individual awareness and come back to themselves ( Liu, 2007). In the reform era, a more reflective tone has gradually developed, urging women to kindle an inner desire not only to be equal to men, but also to be themselves as individuals. Chinese women have not hitherto experienced a sexual revolution such as that experienced by women in Western countries. To achieve true liberation in China, it is essential to awaken women’s consciousness of themselves as women (Barlow, 1993).

Pan (2006) concludes that the origins of China’s sexual revolution can be traced to five considerations: ‘Firstly, the increasing separation of sex from procreation; Secondly, the growing understanding that love is superior to traditional conceptions of the institution of marriage; Thirdly, the growing freedom of sexual desire from the constraints of romantic feelings, and finally the generational shift in the nature of female sexuality’. Moreover, young Chinese women are experiencing more rapid changes in their sexual attitudes and experiences than did their elders.

# Chapter 2. Homosexuality in China

Homosexuality in China has been documented since ancient times. Unlike the situation in medieval Europe, where same-sex desire was repressed and homosexuality illegal, same-sex relations were treated with tolerance in ancient China (Guilk, 2003; Yinhe Li, 2003a; Chou, 2000; Ruan, 1991). Indeed, homosexuality was never considered so problematic that it caused serious conflict within social, political, or scientific realms (Yinhe Li, 2009), as it did in Europe, for example. However, there was also no concept of ‘homosexual’, ‘gay’, or ‘lesbian’ identity in ancient China (Chou, 2000). As Wu (2003, p.118) states, ‘homosexual’ and equivalent terms were used to ‘describe people’s sexual behaviour or a type of romantic relationship’. Chou (2000) further explains that the term ‘homosexual’ in ancient China was only an adjective, never a noun. Furthermore, aside from vague speculations in ancient China regarding the ‘causes’ of homosexuality, which were generally agreed to be ‘natural’ (Ruan, 1991), there was very little investigation or questioning of homosexual behaviour.

Unlike the essentialism of Western ideology, which distinguishes men from women and places them in polar opposition to one another, traditional Chinese philosophy emphasizes a universal balance: heaven and earth, yin and yang, *xiong* and *ci* (masculinity and femininity), light and dark. Everything in the universe contains a part of its opposite; rather than being contradictory, fixed, or mutually exclusive, ‘opposites’ are actually interdependent, complementary, and interactive ( Li, 1997; Chou, 2000). Daoists believe that every individual contains both yin (feminine) and yang (masculine) (S. Pan, 1995; Yinhe Li, 1997; Mann, 2011): men contain yin, just as women contain yang. ‘The yin-yang dichotomy is extremely fluid because it expresses a relation rather than denoting two independent entities’ (R. Wang, 2012, p. 7). Therefore, while heterosexuality could be seen as a harmonious combination of yin and yang, homosexuality was often interpreted as the imbalance of yang energy (Mann, 2011; S. Pan, 1995). Hence, ‘same-sex relationships were only described as a sexual behaviour, not the core special nature of the person’ (Wu, 2003, p. 118). This philosophy was reflected in a wide range of attitudes towards homosexuality in ancient China.

In addition, strict gender segregation is believed to have contributed to the development of homosexuality in ancient China (Mann, 2011; Hinsch, 2003). The separation of the sexes was common in agricultural societies (Hinsch, 2003), and such customs gradually became formalized and reinforced by Confucianism in the service of the ruling class (Hinsch, 2003). Mann (2011, p.142) suggests that ‘social organisations also facilitated homosocial bonds among men of every social class.’ Due to this strict separation of the sexes, women were kept away from the public sphere, and so ‘same-sex relationship[s] were to be expect[ed], because there were no women available’ (Mann, 2011, p. 140).

Rich historical references have revealed that homosexuality in ancient China was not only relatively tolerated but even popular in feudal society (Samshasha, 1997), especially among the upper classes (Ruan, 1991; Chou, 2000; Kong, 2010). Homosexual activities within the context of courtly love among rulers and subjects are frequently mentioned in historical records. It was common for emperors to keep male consorts, and homosexual practices were regarded as noble virtues in ancient China (Hinsch, 1990; Guilk, 2003), reflected in ‘the passion of the cut sleeve’ (*duan xiu zhi pi*, 断袖之癖)[[6]](#footnote-5) and ‘the bitten peach’ (*fen tao*, 分桃).[[7]](#footnote-6) Between the Wei and Jin dynasties (220-420 AD), such behaviour spread from the royal family to the whole scholar class. Furthermore, historians (Ruan, 1991; Samshasha, 1997) have noted that it was fashionable for aristocrats to keep beautiful young males for the enjoyment of visiting guests, especially during the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE).

Homosexual acts among the lower classes are less well documented, but existing historical records indicate that ordinary people adopted these practices as well as the elite. One of the most prominent forms of homosexual activity was *qi xiong-di* (契兄弟). Originating in China’s southern coastal area, this custom became popular in Guangdong and Fujian provinces. *Qi* literally means ‘contract’ or ‘agreement’, and the word *xiong-di* means ‘brother’, with *qi xiong-di* implying an intimate same-sex relationship (Ruan, 1991). After two men took an oath before their ancestors, the older would be referred to as the adoptive older brother (*qi xiong,* 契兄) and the younger as the adoptive younger brother (*qi di,* 契弟). Each set of parents would treat their son’s partner as an in-law. According to Guangdan Pan (1947), the custom of *qi xiong-di* began with a close friendship between two men which then evolved into a sexual relationship. Those involved in *qi xiong-di* also remained entitled to enter into heterosexual marriage (G. Pan, 1947; Fei, 2002). Such customs in ancient China indicate a propensity towards male homosexuality ( Li, 2003b; Chou, 2000).

Personal identity during this period was constructed by social roles rather than by sexuality (Chou, 2000). Social morality under Confucianism was primarily concerned with social and gender roles, emphasizing that the individual should stay in the correct gender and social hierarchy and play her or his appropriate role (Kong, 2011; Ruan, 1991). Hence, the ‘gender of the sexual partner was not a matter of concern’ (Kong, 2011, p. 158), and, consequently homosexuality posed no threat to the Confucian hierarchy. Interestingly, keeping a male companion was almost a privilege for the elite class (G. Pan, 1947). As Mann (2011) claims, same-sex relations, especially male homosexuality, can be understood as a way of demonstrating hierarchical power. In other words, homosexual practices can be interpreted ‘in terms of social relationship rather than erotic essence’ (Hinsch, 1990, p. 21). On the other hand, even though *qi xiong-di* practices were popular among ordinary people and believed to be ‘an institutional practice of same-sex “marriage”’ (Jackson and Sullivan, 2013, p. 114), the custom carefully avoided truly challenging the unshakable feudal marriage system. As Ruan (1991) explains, in *qi xiong-di* practices, both male partners were still required to be in a heterosexual marriage in order to continue the family line. Hence, the custom was only permitted when social obligations were also fulfilled.



Figure 5. Ancient Chinese erotic painting. This picture suggest that how same sex behavior between men exists in heterosexual marriage system and tolerant by wife in ancient Chinese family.  
Source://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Woman\_spying\_on\_male\_lovers.jpg

Scholars (Guilk, 2003; Chou, 2000) note that homosexual activity in erotic literature reached its pinnacle during the Song and Ming dynasties. The long tradition of homosexuality had encouraged the development of same-sex prostitution in ancient China (Kong, 2002). This was popular only within the royal court in earlier times, but with the developing economy during the early Ming dynasty, the newly rising moneyed classes developed the habit of hiring part-time prostitutes. Male prostitution became fully embedded in every social class during the 17th century (Guilk, 2003). Interestingly, contrary to the clients’ powerful, aggressive, dominant, yang energy, male prostitutes were young and feminine, and often took the passive role in sexual relationships (Hinsch, 1990). Male prostitutes were therefore discriminated against and placed at the bottom of the social hierarchy, on a par with women (Sommer, 1997).

During the 19th century, China suffered a period of upheaval, during which the restless Guangdong Delta region witnessed major events, including the first Opium War, the Boxer Rebellion, the Hundred Days’ Reform, and the 1911 revolution. The constant confrontation and conflict between Eastern and Western thought and ideology provided a great opportunity for residents in the delta region to learn from the Western world. The southern part of China became less dominated by Confucianism (which had originated in the Han culture on the Central Plain). During this period, the booming economy, especially the silk industry, required large numbers of women for the labour force. Hence, women became economically independent and began to pursue more freedom, attempting to break away from the shackles of the feudal marriage system (Topley, 1975). The native ethnic minorities in southern China had a custom called ‘delayed transfer marriage’, which allowed women to live in their sisters’ houses rather than move in with their husband’s family until the birth of a child conceived during a conjugal visit (Mann, 2011). This path to heterosexual marriage, which was dominated by oppressive patrilineal kinship, was more attractive to some of these newly independent women, as it allowed them a little more freedom prior to living with their husbands.

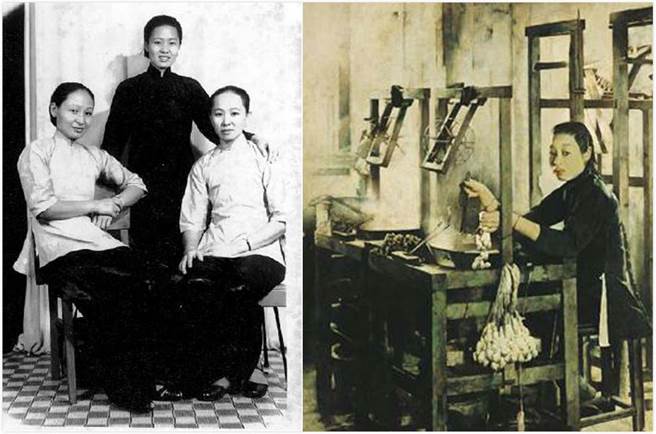


Figure 6. Zishu nin 19th century China.  
Source:http://hottopic.chinatimes.com/cn/20161114004379-260812

Same-sex relationships were also used as a strategy and encouraged by local customs among some Guangdong Delta women as an alternative to—and sometimes as resistance against—arranged marriages (Stockard 1989, cited in Mann, 2011, p. 140). This group of women was called *zishu nü*（自梳女）, which means ‘women who bind up their own hair’ (Mann, 2011, p.140), since the chignon is the symbol that distinguishes married women from unmarried girls, who wear plaits (Topley, 1975, pp. 82–83).[[8]](#footnote-7) Through certain rites involving binding their hair, these women declared themselves permanently unmarried. As scholars (Mann, 2011; Ruan, 1991) conclude, the rites of *zishu nü* can be understood as equivalent to a same-sex wedding ceremony.

The rites of *zishu nü* were often held in their ‘family home’, which was called *gu po wu* (姑婆屋，‘sisters’ house’, or literally ‘the house for gossiping women’). During the ceremony, a respectable elder from the *zishu nü* family helped to bind the woman’s hair into a small bun, after which the woman would take the oath and salute her sisters one by one, thereby completing the ceremony. When the woman became *zishu nü*, she declared herself unmarried for the rest of her life, without regret. A *zishu nü* continued to live with her natal family after these rites, and worked to support herself and her family. The *zishu nü* group often gathered in the *gupo wu* and supported each other spiritually and economically. In addition, *zishu nü* would die in their natal family home. It can be argued that the whole life of *zishu nü* was bound to the self-supporting community: they often signed a *jin lan qi* (金兰契， ‘golden lotus contract’), voluntarily tying themselves to the sisterhood, and this was considered a lesbian practice:

When two women live together, although they cannot be like a man and a woman in every respect, in fact they do enjoy the pleasures of a man and a woman. Some say they use rubbing pressure, others say they use a clever mechanism [i.e. dildo]. These kinds of words are crude and difficult for highly educated men to discuss. Such couples will even select a female heir to inherit their property. Later this female heir will likewise sign a ‘golden lotus contract’ like a daughter-in-law, just as if they had a blood relationship. Indeed but it is strange! (Hu Pu’an, 1968, p. 234, cited in Mann, 2011)

The republican era in China witnessed a major shift in attitudes towards homosexuality; as Kong (2011, p. 31) concludes, this shift was ‘an outcome of the impact of modernity’. Alongside the arrival of Western technologies, an abundance of Western studies on sexuality were translated directly into Chinese, offering profound insight into homosexuality. Of this Western literature, one text in particular attracted the attention of Chinese intellectuals: Havelock Ellis’s theory gradually became accepted by the Chinese medical community, and eventually became the dominant medical approach to understanding homosexuality (Sang, 1999, 2003; Kang, 2009). The May Fourth period was an era of surging tides of individualized liberation. Advanced intellectuals borrowed the fire of civilization from the West to illuminate the deep night of traditional Chinese society. Since the May Fourth Movement broke the traditional Chinese concept of sexual imprisonment, for a time, 'sex' became a hot topic in academic. In this era of time, Pan Guangdan began to read the works of Western sex science. Pan Guangdan (1899-1967) is a famous sociologist and eugenicist in China with very emancipated thoughts. He especially into the problem of homosexuality. He was soon attracted by Ellis’s work and was self-proclaimed as Ellis’s apprentice to translate and introduce Ellis’s work into China. To prevent readers from feeling the difference between China and the West, Pan Guangdan has found rich illustrations from ancient Chinese classics with exquisite Chinese scholarship and has made a good comment for this famous work. To this day, the far-reaching impact of Ellis’s medical approach still affects the ways in which Chinese society understands homosexuality (Chou, 2000).

After 1949, to demonstrate socialist superiority and further consolidate the newly established regime, Mao’s state defiantly broke its connections with its Western capitalist and feudal past, and sexuality became a powerful tool of the state. Described as the ‘declining evil of western civilisation’ (Ruan and Tsai, 1988, p.190) and a decadent feudal remnant (Pan, 1995), homosexuality—together with prostitution, bigamy, and other sexual behaviours outside the institution of heterosexual marriage—was erased from official discourse. The state published the Marriage Law in 1950 and set monogamous heterosexual marriage as the ideal, sacred and protected by law; thus the heterosexual marital reproductive model was reinforced (Evans, 1997). All sexual acts outside this model were considered morally decadent and condemned by society. As Evans (1997) states, the socialist model of sexuality left no room for “outside” sexualities.

Endowed with great power and superiority, the family and *dan wei* (单位，‘work unit’) were the basic cells that formed socialist China. Non-marital sexual behaviour and people who had no work unit were excluded and forsaken by mainstream society. During Mao’s regime, homosexuality and other forms of social misconduct, particularly sexual misbehaviour, were often described as ‘hooligan’ (*liu mang*, 流氓), a term that stigmatized homosexual groups. While the socialist marriage ideology suppressed other sexualities, the Western medical approach that pathologized homosexuality remained the primary understanding of homosexual behaviour. Within such a context, homosexuality was increasingly stigmatized and isolated from mainstream society, not only considered criminal but also treated as perverse (Wu, 2003).

Following the end of the Cultural Revolution, and in order to restore social order and justice after 10 years of turmoil, the state passed the 1979 Criminal Law. The term ‘hooligan’ became legally recognized, and homosexuality was punished as a crime termed ‘hooliganism’ (*liu mang zui*, 流氓罪), along with other forms of social and sexual misconduct (B. Zhang, 1994). The punishment for ‘hooliganism’ could be 15 days of detention or up to seven years of imprisonment (B. Zhang, 1994). Along with the ‘crime of speculation’ (*tou ji dao ba zui*, 投机倒把罪) and the ‘crime of dereliction of duty’ (*wan hu zi shou zui*, 玩忽职守罪), hooliganism was one of the ‘three pocket crimes’, a phrase that referred to any crime that could be ‘pocketed’ into these categories. Because the provisions of the law were so general and vague, almost any crime could be prosecuted under these categories. In practice, without a clear legal boundary to define the crime, ‘hooliganism’ was often applied randomly, and this was largely dependent on the political atmosphere of the time and the enforcer’s individual attitude towards homosexuality ( Li, 2006, cited in Q. Zhang, 2014). For instance, anything from street fighting to homosexual behaviour could be prosecuted as ‘hooliganism’. During the ‘severe crackdown on crime’ (*yan da*, 严打) in 1983, the most severe punishment for ‘hooliganism’ was the death penalty. In 1997 a revised Criminal Law removed the term ‘hooliganism’. Consequently, consensual sexual acts between same-sex adults in private were no longer considered a matter of concern and so were no longer prohibited by law. This was considered as the official decriminalization of homosexuality (Kong, 2011 ).



Figure 7. A ruling on gay issues in 1980s China. The poisoner is kneeling with his name and crime ‘hooliganism and sodomy’.  
Source:http://dj.sina.com.cn/article/avxeafr8984428.shtml

During the reform era, China reshaped every aspect of its society, and attitudes towards sexuality changed drastically. The attitude of the general public towards homosexuality shifted again. Indeed, it is no longer appropriate to discuss the public’s attitude towards homosexuals as simply ‘pro’ or ‘anti’. People in contemporary China have complicated and diverse attitudes towards homosexuality: levels of education, economic development, the acceptance of new ideologies, and the mass media all have a role to play in how homosexuals are portrayed, and all of these factors influence how people view homosexuality. Consequently, the question of how society should view homosexual issues in a contemporary context has attracted fierce debate amongst the general public and the academic community.

Under the influence of the Western scientific approach, the Chinese medical community had medicalized and pathologized homosexuality, perceiving it as a mental illness. Homo-hetero duality remained the primary understanding of homosexuality, and the emphasis throughout the 1980s was on ‘treating’ the patient (Chou, 2000; Kong, 2011), especially within the context of anti-AIDS campaigns (Kong, 2010). First diagnosed in 1985, AIDS was widespread and became closely linked with homosexual behaviour in official discourse (Q. Zhang, 2014; Kong, 2010). Furthermore, homosexual behaviour, particularly among ‘men who have sex with men’, was under surveillance by the state during anti-AIDS campaigns from 1993 onwards (He and Detels, 2005). As such, homosexuals were increasingly depicted as mentally disordered, as ‘hooligans’, or as both (Kong, 2010).

The anti-AIDS campaign and the widespread nature of the disease further contributed to complicated attitudes towards homosexuality, in state discourse as well as the discourse of the general public. Homosexual groups were hit hard by the state’s anti-AIDS campaigns, as they were depicted as the primary source of AIDS and blamed for the increasing spread of the disease (Q. Zhang, 2014). Under the unprecedented threat of AIDS, homosexuals were increasingly portrayed as a deadly threat to the public (M. Bai, 2001; Ji, 2006; Zhang and Yu, 2009). Moreover, homosexual groups were often the targets of negative reporting in the mass media, and were associated with drug users and prostitutes (Chai, 2005; Chen, 2008; N. Ji, 2011; Z. Ji, 2006; Wei, 2009; S. Yi, 2007; Zhuang, 2009). This misinterpretation of AIDS in state discourse, as well as negative public discussion, inevitably contributed to a growing resentment towards and prejudice against homosexuality.

However, these harsh conditions for homosexuals gradually changedt. LGBT communities began to emerge, as individuals were awakened to their own identities (Wu, 2003; Rofel, 2007; Wei, 2007). On the state level, following the removal of ‘hooliganism’ in 1997, the reference to homosexuality as a mental illness was finally removed from the Chinese Classification of Mental Disorders in 2001 (F. Gao, 2001; Lee, 2001; Wu, 2003). In other words, homosexuality was no longer classified as a mental disorder in official discourse. Kong (2010) concludes that these actions freed homosexuality from the contexts of pathology and criminality.

Under these circumstances, sexual minorities could safely re-enter society. They not only appeared on TV talk shows (Wu, 2003) but also enjoyed the new gay bars and clubs in large cities, which became increasingly popular among LGBT communities, as Rofel (2007) observed during her field research in China. In addition, the rise of the Internet has made it much easier for LGBT groups to speak for themselves and seek their true identities. All these instances indicate that homosexuality is becoming increasingly normalized in contemporary China.

Nevertheless, despite the great advances around attitudes to homosexuality in the reform era, it is fair to say that misunderstanding and prejudice still exist in Chinese society (Zheng, 2015). In recent years, society has witnessed major improvements in terms of the human rights and social status of LGBT groups. Particularly with regard to social tolerance, as well as increased space in public discourse (Yinhe Li, 2008; Q. Zhang, 2014), scholars (Yinhe Li, 2008; Pan and Huang, 2011) have optimistically concluded that the social acceptance of homosexuality will continue to grow, in the context of both the family and the workplace. However, recent research indicates on the contrary and that there remains great misunderstanding about homosexuality among the general public (Zheng, 2015). Owing to this public misunderstanding and misleading media reports, homosexual people have been demonized and marginalized, and their existence has been attributed to ‘poor parenting, mistakes in child-rearing techniques, traumatic experiences with the opposite sex, and misidentification of gender roles’ (Zheng, 2015). Furthermore, the far-reaching effect of social media has also played a major role in guiding the public’s attitude towards homosexuality. As a recent study discovered, in order to reinforce the long tradition of the heterosexual marital reproductive model, homosexuality is often portrayed as ‘distasteful and deviant’ (Zheng, 2015). Interestingly, however, in contrast with the deep-rooted bias against homosexuality among the older generation, the new generation in China is showing a progressive tolerance towards homosexual groups (Kai et al., 2016).

Homosexuals are still marginalized and demonized in the mainstream media, especially in the state-run media (Wu and Jia, 2010). Scholars (Feng et al., 2010; R. Jones, 1999, 2007; Kong, 2010) observe that homosexuality remains under censure in mainland China, especially when it is associated with AIDS. Under the aegis of the state’s desire to ‘construct harmonious socialist society’ (*goujian shehui zhuyi hexi shehui*, 构建社主义和谐社会), gay-related literature, movies, and TV shows are either declared ‘inappropriate’ and forbidden (Wockner, 2005; Coonan, 2006), or targeted in the state’s ‘sweep yellow’ (*sao huang*, 扫黄) actions (Qu, 2013). Scholars (Tu and Lee, 2013) have concluded that traditional media channels, such as newspapers and television, ‘are the least ideal information sources to learn about homosexuality’: ‘under the state’s censorship and following the state’s stance, such media often deliberately neglected homosexual groups or depicted them as “abnormal”’ (Tu and Lee, 2013).

During the reform era, the lack of entertainment in the state-run media ran contrary to unprecedented demand among Chinese people, and many Chinese turned their attention to imported media through alternative channels (Chiang, 2009; Ho, 2008; Tan et al., 2009). Illegal copies of movies were everywhere, and Hong Kong movies were extremely popular amongst the new generation (Grossman, 2008). During the 1990s, gay-themed films became a new trend in the Hong Kong movie industry (Grossman, 2008). Homosexuality was glorified and romanticized in gay-themed films such as *Farewell My Concubine* and *Happy Together* (Grossman, 2008). Such positive images of homosexual groups in Hong Kong media and entertainment gradually became embedded in the younger generation in China (Grossman, 2008).

Ever since China implemented the open-door policy, Western ideologies and information have flooded in, inevitably reshaping the perception of sexuality (Wu, 2003). Especially during the last decade, the rapidly developing Internet has ‘changed the media landscape’ (Tu and Lee, 2013) as well as affecting the general public’s attitude towards homosexuality. Following the former Soviet Union, the Chinese state implemented media control from the 1950s onwards (J. Hong, 1998; Schell, 1995). During the reform process, the state shifted from a planned economy to a market economy, and these controls were relatively loosened. However, close surveillance of the mass media still exists (J. Hong, 1998; Zhao, 2008). The censorship programme ensures that the information received by Chinese audiences is not limited but filtered, especially when this information involves sensitive subjects such as homosexuality.

Chinese authorities are experiencing far more difficult and complicated struggles for media control in the era of the Internet, because the newly emerging communication technologies have rendered it almost impossible to block external information or contain ‘sensitive’ information (Hao and Li, 2001). Nevertheless, homosexual-related content is often defined as ‘obscene’ or ‘undesirable’ and subject to removal (Zhao, 2008). Despite this, the Internet is still considered, and most frequently used, as the best source for understanding homosexuality by the younger generation in China (Tu and Lee, 2013). Fung and Chen (2008) argue that the Internet has contributed to the Chinese population’s understanding of homosexuality. On the one hand, with the help of the Internet, homosexual groups are becoming more active and visible than ever before (Hou, 2004; Tu and Lee, 2013). With more proactive usage of various social media such as blogs and microblogs, LGBT groups are now promoting themselves with positive representations and thus contributing to the breakdown of barriers in the public domain (Kong, 2010). In addition, the free choice and balanced information provided by the Internet help sexual minorities to ‘circumvent the oppression of the heterosexual hegemony’ (Kang and Young, 2009). On the other hand, the Internet has helped the younger population to reshape the perception of gay and lesbian groups. Chinese youth have been exposed to a relatively free and open media environment, and it is suggested that they are not as prejudiced against homosexuals as their parents are (Tu and Lee, 2013; Kai et al., 2016). Moreover, not only do the young hold positive attitudes towards homosexual groups, but studies also show that they have a strong interest in knowing about gay or lesbian people (Tu and Lee, 2013). Such results are strongly biased towards developed cities; scholars (Tu and Lee, 2013; Hou, 2004) have concluded that this is not only because LGBT groups are prospering in developed cities compared with rural China, but also because contact with gays and lesbians, and relevant information about sexuality, is more prevalent in cities, and has resulted in more tolerance towards homosexuality.



Figure 8. A famous openly gay TV Presenter cried and said ‘we are not monster’(with the yellow words ‘actually no differences’ emphasises by post-production personnel) in a popular Chinese talk show with the theme ‘out of the closet’, which spark a lively discussion and obtain supportive from audience. However, this episode was cancelled after releasing for weeks.

Source:http://ent.ltn.com.tw/news/breakingnews/1436410

# Chapter 3. Boys’ Love

**The history of BL**

Unlike comics, which are primarily targeted at children and collectors in the West, manga in Japan is enjoyed enthusiastically by everyone, because it reflects real life and society. As an affordable entertainment, manga acted as an anchor to support people surviving in the devastated post-war society of Japan (Toku, 2007). Japanese manga can be generally divided into two categories: boys’ (*shonen*) and girls’ (*shojo*) manga. Boys’ manga mainly comprises action, suspense, adventure, and science fiction, and centres on the theme of how boys growing up face a series of challenges, including to protect women, family, friends, and the whole world, to finally become ‘real’ men. The stories in girls’ manga, on the other hand, offer an idealized romantic context from a female perspective. Generally speaking, it is easy to draw a clear line between the two categories simply in terms of style. However, as Toku (2007) points out, as a mirror to reflect women’s desires and dreams, girls’ manga has changed over time in Japan. Thus the development of BL as a genre of *shojo* manga is not isolated, but is best placed within the context of the history of girls’ manga.

Compared with boys’ manga, girls’ manga has a relatively short history, spanning the last 60 years. At first, all girls’ manga was created by male *mangaka* (manga artists), as this was considered a career for men only. The manga market as a whole was dominated by boys’ manga created by senior *mangaka*. To survive, newcomers to the industry often had no choice but to create girls’ manga when beginning their careers. Unexpectedly, this genre rose to prominence, meaning that girls’ manga has grown in importance in the comics market (Toku, 2007). However, although male *mangaka* working on girls’ manga try to innovate, they still unconsciously copy the strategies used in boys’ manga. A good example is the well-known manga *Ribbon no kishi* (*Ribbon knight*). *Ribbon no kishi* became a milestone in manga history as it presented gender ambiguity, which caused much controversy. Although the heroine, Princess Sapphire, defeats a conspiracy and finally takes over her kingdom in ‘another depiction of women in a non-subservient position’(Mautner, 2012), many critics state that this presentation simply offers a sex-switch story rather than androgyny or feminism.[[9]](#footnote-8)

Although there was an auspicious beginning to girls’ manga, women’s desires and demands were not fully articulated through the perspective of male *mangaka*. However, from the late 1950s onwards, more women started to become *mangaka*. To comfort and cheer people living through post-war hardship, girls’ manga in this era concentrated on reunion and love. The background was usually decorated with Western-style flowers and furniture, depicting an ideal fantasy life for women to dream about (Toku, 2007). The heroines in these stories were often cute, innocent girls. They had grown up in severe circumstances but had a strong will to change their lives by fighting obstacles, finally achieving happiness. Love gradually became the dominant theme as Japan recovered, and the theme of reunion faded from girls’ manga. A familiar trope established and followed by almost every female *mangaka* was that the heroine ‘follows the thorny path of love, ending either in a happy union or tragedy’ (Buckley, 1991, p. 170). As Japanese manga scholar Fojimoto (cited in Shamoon, 2007) points out, the Cinderella-style girls’ manga from the 1970s often present the girl as weak and passive, and as sacrificing herself for her boy in order to find true love and achieve her goals through the power of love; this is often termed the ‘love trap’ (Shamoon, 2007).

Heterosexual sex in Japan, similarly to other cultures in Asia, is structured in relation to the family, and anxiety about pregnancy is pervasive. However, the arrival of modernity after the war enlightened women. The depiction of heterosexual relationships in girls’ manga became questionable over the next few years, as women attained economic success and social rights during Japan’s recovery from the harsh post-war environment. Therefore, there was a marked rise in media meeting women’s demands for sexual self-expression outside marriage (McLelland, 2000).

The rebellion reflected in girls’ manga was a branch of youth radicalism rather than an accident. During the 1960s, Japanese youth rebelled against the existing political, social, and cultural arrangements through radical political movements and a broad range of new popular-cultural activities, especially including the now-expanded world of manga. Younger generations, youth culture, and young women ‘constitute a controversial and often entirely symbolic category’ and ‘became the focus of nervous discourse about the apparent decay of a traditional Japanese society’ (Kinsella, 1998, p.291). As a carrier and reflection of social change, more serious and realistic stories including sex and violence emerged in response to readers’ demands during this period (Toku, 2007). Against this background, as a form through which to enjoy equal love and relationships, BL manga came into being.

The first commercially published BL story, the masterpiece *The song of the wind and the trees* (*Kaze to ki no uta*,1976–1984) was created by Keiko Takemiya, a member of the prominent group 24 Nen Gumi.[[10]](#footnote-9) Love and hate coexist in the uneasy, complicated relationships among a group of male teenage characters. Instead of using female characters, the story uses extraordinarily beautiful young men to present an intricate and complex reality.



Figure 9. A poster of the first generation BL manga: The song of the wind and the trees.

Source: http://m.tuku.cc/comic/15898/n-1417862321-55631/

As Galbraith and Karlin (2012) point out, *kawaii*—the quality of cuteness—has become a prominent aspect of Japanese popular culture. The emergence of female artists in the manga industry in the 1950s and 1960s introduced a new graphic expression into a traditional market dominated by men. *Kawaii* characters gradually replaced the traditional female characters, often appearing helpless and vulnerable (Zanghellni, 2009). Shiokawa (1999) contends that this cuteness is generally indicative of the heroine’s moral character. Beginning to rise in the 1970s, the *kawaii* craze became immensely popular in the 1980s. However, although manga has become a form of entertainment with a huge impact on Japanese cultural patterns, including aesthetic conventions, it cannot simply be considered the origin of the cuteness craze (Schodt, 1996). Schodt (1996) states that other factors were as much the cause of a generalized *kawaii* craze, and also of the appearance of cute underage characters in erotic manga. Galbraith (2011) shares a similar point of view, arguing that the Japanese tendency towards cute characters in manga and anime is a rather complex cultural and social phenomenon. He explains this social phenomenal by examining the term *moe*.

*Moe* has become an increasingly prevalent term in Western cultural studies on Japan in the last three to four decades. This Japanese slang word’s origin and etymology remain unknown (Galbraith, 2009). It often refers to feelings of strong affection and is mainly used in descriptions of anime and manga characters. However, the term has also gradually started to refer to feelings of affection towards any subjects (Galbraith, 2009). As Galbraith (2009) points out, *moe* has become distinct from the term *kawaii*, which simply expresses a feeling of cuteness: *moe* expresses much more complicated emotions and is connected to personal and intimate expression and defines it as a term that describes attraction to a particular character and reflects personal taste. Saito (2008, cited in McLelland, 2005) agrees that moe is about communication, and about how characters provide readers with a way to communicate and express themselves. Galbraith (2009) argues that *moe* is a response to fictional characters or representations of them; in other words, it is concerned with virtual potential, and not real people. In sum, *moe* expresses why one likes particular characters and one’s relationship to those characters. More importantly, as Galbraith (2009) points out, *moe* provides a layer of protection to the user, who is enabled to objectify, visualize, and project their desire onto the *moe* object. In manga and anime, feelings of *moe* towards fictional characters often include sexual excitement or a sexually explicit context. In these cases, Schodt (1996) state that feelings of pure affection gradually become stronger over time and often lead to feelings of eroticism.

During the 1990s, with rapid globalization and the development of communication technologies, Japanese manga became a cultural phenomenon across the world. Large numbers of Japanese manga were imported to China through unofficial channels in the early 1990s. With exquisite drawings, interesting plots, and especially featuring BL stories, the works created by Clamp[[11]](#footnote-10) soon became a hit on the market and attracted a huge Chinese audience of diverse ages, with special attention from teenagers. Although their early representative work, such as *Tokyo Babylon* and *X*, was created in the name of brotherhood, the expressions and descriptions used implicitly point to same-sex love. Pure BL manga began to emerge in the mid-1990s, and Minami Ozaki’s *Absolute love* (*Zetsuai*) is considered one of the classics. With a more daring description of same-sex plots, it soon gained extensive popularity (Xu and Yang, 2013). Following the huge success of BL manga, BL literature was soon introduced to Chinese audiences.



Figure 10. A cover of the second generation BL manga: *Absolute love* (*Zetsuai*)*.*

Source: http://mangakakalot.com/manga/zetsuai

With the development of the Internet, BL fans became more visible and began to gather on Internet forums. Not satisfied with translated Japanese works, Chinese BL fans began to create their own manga and other literature, and gradually developed a unique style. As Xu and Yang (2013) observe, this writing by fans drew inspiration from Japanese works and the rich Chinese culture, and the originals produced by the Chinese BL communities gradually caught up in both quality and quantity. Notably different from the Japanese ‘European-style’ BL works, which often set their plots in secondary schools or offices, their Chinese counterparts looked back to a rich and extensive homosexual culture and skilfully combined historical allusion and myth, creating a distinctive setting.

Compared with the fully developed and commercialized manga industry, the Chinese manga business is still in its infancy. Despite some short comics, posters, and illustrations created by Chinese BL fans, most of the BL manga circulating on the market is still imported from Japan. However, Chinese BL literature has made extraordinary progress. Beginning with a focus on communication between and entertainment for BL fans, writers initially posted their works in online communities. After gaining huge popularity among fans, the writers began to publish their work. The professionalization of BL writing made a significant contribution to the booming BL culture in China. For instance, Chinese writer Feng Nong (风弄) gained huge success on both domestic and international markets with her novels, which were not only translated into Japanese but also adapted into a manga series (Xu and Yang, 2013). This indicated that the Chinese BL culture, once an imported cultural phenomenon, had now begun to have a profound impact not just in China but around the world (Xu and Yang, 2013).

**The relationship between BL and homosexuality**

The relationship between BL and homosexuality has long been discussed by scholars. Keiko Takemiya, writer of the first BL manga, *The song of the wind and the trees*, said that it was not about gay men, but that she used boys’ love to liberate girls’ sexuality (Lunsing, 2006). Some of the characters in BL manga do not identify themselves as gay (and, indeed, often deny homosexuality), but they fall in love with someone who happens to be of the same sex, and the bond between them is special and irreplaceable (Galbraith, 2011). The same point has been discovered by Thorn (2004): most of the characters in BL manga insist, ‘I’m not gay, I’m just passionately in love with this one person, who happens to be a man.’ Ueno (cited in Welker, 2011, p.852) contends that these beautiful boys are ‘neither male nor female’ but a ‘third sex/gender’, and ‘it is only a person’s mind, which is bound by the gender dichotomy, that mistakes that which is not a girl for a boy.’ Saito (2011) analyses BL’s popularity, concluding that it reflects the conflictual relationship between fans and mainstream media; to be specific, it is women’s reaction to the male-centred mainstream media, because women have to learn to wrest feminine paradigms of emotional realism from male-centred materials, which often ignore their demands. McLelland (2000) has found that this is true of newer manga situated in the present, but insists that the over-romantic depictions found in BL are not equivalent to real-life gay relationships. He also believes that BL is representative of women’s sexuality because they suffer huge pressure from the real world in which they live, including pressure to marry, and they lack freedom in sexual fulfilment (McLelland, 2000). It seems that there is a unanimous conclusion that BL is a female-oriented fictional genre which is created and consumed by female readers and also reflects and fulfils female aesthetics and desires, but that it does not correspond with ‘real’ homosexuality. Martin (2012) argues that BL characters are not meant to represent real gay men: BL is entertainment for women, not education for gay men.

Nevertheless, criticism has arisen from the gay community, which also denies any connection between BL and homosexuality. Gengoro Tagame, the most influential gay manga author in Japan today, claims that BL manga artists are mostly lesbian and that ‘lesbian women do not really care much about what genitals people have’ (Lunsing, 2006, p. 1). In 1992, gay activist Masaki Sato criticized BL fans and artists for failing to provide accurate information about gay men, and he compared the women to ‘dirty old men’ who watch so-called lesbian pornography that aims to entertain straight men. A strong example of BL manga imitating heterosexuality is that ‘a boy’s anus becomes wet when he gets excited, as if it were a vagina’ (Lunsing, 2006, p.8). In addition, Sato accused BL of creating and perpetuating a skewed image of gay men as beautiful and handsome, and for suggesting that gay men who do not fit that image should ‘hide in the dark’ like ‘garbage’ (Lunsing, 2006). McLelland (2000) observes that the ‘feminine’ images found in BL manga are rejected by gay readers, who prefer ‘hyper-masculine’ figures. Since BL could be categorized under *shojo* manga, and gay men have their own publications and do not need to read women’s publications, the depiction of two beautiful boys cannot stimulate the interest of gay men.

In addition to these aspects, women’s consumption of BL also suffers criticism in relation to its depiction of violence and force. Many BL fans take pleasure in seeing their male characters suffer. It is common for male characters to be raped, even (or perhaps most notably) by the men who love them. However, these elements appear in gay products as well, such as Gengoro Tagame’s work, which almost exclusively draws on stories of sexual abuse, including scat scenes and decapitation. Thorn (2004, p.177) argues that ‘there is an undeniable voyeuristic element, because most readers and artists are, in fact, females,’ and he explains the objections from gay men as arising from the fact that in BL the male body becomes an object of observation and entertainment. According to these critics, BL is not equivalent to real gay porn, and there is not much intersection between BL products and homosexual products.

Nagaike (2009) questions why Japanese BL always involves Caucasian and Arab characters. Welker (2006) has noted that the early-1970s ‘beautiful boy’ image in Japanese BL manga originated from 19th-century European aesthetes and decadents. Precedents for such images also include the Vienna Boys’ Choir and androgynous celebrities such as David Bowie. It could be argued that BL is a kind of ‘escapist fantasy’ for girl readers (Shamoon, 2007). To enable them to escape from reality (anti-realism), as McLelland (2000) insists, BL manga usually sets its stories in an ‘other’ place (often Europe or America) and another historical period (most often the past, but sometimes the future), and usually deals with boys who are also somehow ‘other’—aristocrats, historical figures, vampires, angels, or even aliens—to remove same-sex attraction from the realm of experience of the female audience.

However, a connection between BL and homosexuality can be found in previous research. Welker (2011) explores the long denial of the connection between ‘real homosexuality’ and BL by many critics, and he seeks to challenge it. He contends that BL is concerned not just with women’s fantasies but also with their (mis)understanding of ‘real’ male homosexuality, which challenges the power of male-female relationships and even helps them to identify their own same-sex desires or non-normative gender identifications. Artists and publishers of BL and related *shojo* manga explicitly aim to educate readers about Japan’s homosexual community, as has also happened through the introduction gay manga, gay bars, and other gay magazines. Some female BL readers turn to gay magazines and have sympathy with or show interest in gay men because of their disappointment with the real world, which is not as perfect as that depicted in BL manga. This has been expressed in some gay magazines, and in addition, some women have stated their same-sex desire in such contexts and have sought an introduction to lesbian clubs to find a sympathetic community.

**The representation of power in BL**

Many studies have argued that BL is a step forward for feminism. However, even in same-sex relationships between either men or women, power to some extent is unevenly distributed. Therefore, a critical attitude should be maintained while we examine whether BL is a pursuit of equality in the (possibly imaginary) realm of homosexuality and a resistance against unpleasant heterosexuality. In fact, in many BL works, the heterosexual norm lingers.

Nagaike (2009) explores the idea that the concept of foreignness is frequently used in Japanese BL manga. Nagaike(2009) examined BL manga magazines from 2004 to 2008, 100 of which he identifies as containing foreign characters. There are 63 foreign figures, who are mainly Caucasian, with the remainder being Arabs. The characters’ features are stereotypically portrayed to show them as superior ‘others’. Caucasians are generally depicted with blond hair and blue eyes, giving them high social status. Arab characters are often members of royal families with vast petrodollar wealth. These are two kinds of fantasy. Compared with successful Westerners, Arab characters have a rather erotic, amorous image that links to the fetishization of the harem.



Figure 11. BL manga with a Caucasian seme and an Asian uke

Source://baike.sogou.com/h6726658.htm?sp=Sprev&sp=l60859348

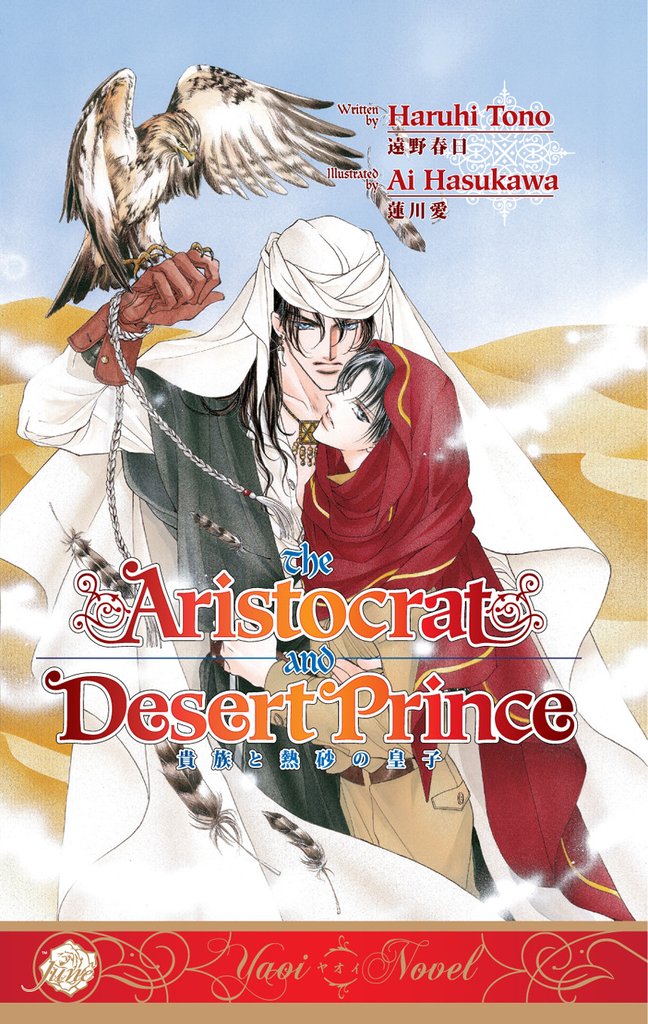


Figure 12. BL manga with an Arabic seme and an Asian uke Source:https://www.amazon.com/Aristocrat-Desert-Prince-Ai-Hasukawa/dp/1569700729

The construction of foreign characters is bound to privilege on the one hand and disempowerment on the other. In Japanese BL, both Caucasians and Arabs play the hyper-masculine role as the figure who supports, psychologically and financially, the Japanese *uke[[12]](#footnote-11)* character, and thus ‘reflect[s] the ideological necessity to reinforce the imperialist voice by feminizing the Orient/Japan’ (Nagaike, 2009, p. 1). This analysis of foreign BL characters enables us to recognize the specific construction in BL which reflects the racial power imbalances that remain prevalent in modern Japanese society. Ignoring the relationship between colonial and gender constructions would be dangerous, and so the power imbalances between characters in same-sex relationships must be explored.

Unlike Japanese BL stories that favour the foreign, stories set in ancient China are much in demand because of the brilliance of China’s ancient culture. As in the Japanese style, Chinese BL narratives involve dramatizing characters in terms of signs of their superiority. The elements of wealth and power are symbolic and, as Mitsu Saito remarks, ‘enhance women’s romantic motivations’ (Nagaike, 2009, p. 1).

A frequently occurring situation in the Chinese BL context is one that is slightly forced. The *uke* is the passive partner and accepts the *seme’*s overbearing eagerness (Zheng and Wu, 2009). Take some extracts from China’s most popular BL novel, *Phoenix Nine Days*（凤舞九天） by Feng Nong, as an example: ‘with the irresistible kiss suddenly falling on his lips, Fengming’s hair is pulled. He has no choice but to crane his neck to see King Rong’s face getting closer and closer. ‘Ow...’ Fengming’s lips are covered by King Rong’s ardent kiss, his mouth is forced open.’ It is obvious that Fengming is shocked: shyness and fear are writ large in his wide-open eyes.

In this BL novel, Fengming is described as a 17-year-old boy who looks ‘handsome’ but is ‘innocent’. Contrastingly, his partner, King Rong, is described using the word ‘iron’. King Rong is unruly and condescending, and uses a combination of threats and rewards to conquer Fengming step by step. This form of relationship is nothing more than a parallel of traditional heterosexual stories, with simply the sexuality of the characters changed, and so it is not in any way equal or mutual. Therefore, it can be argued that not every BL story is a feminist resistance to patriarchy and the heterosexual norm. Instead, some of these stories simply enable the female reader to ignore her own desire. Therefore, it can be argued that the depictions in BL in its current form construct characters such as the penetrating *seme* and penetrated *uke*. As such, it is also to some extent a reinforcement of the binary of oppositional sexuality within the heterosexual norm.

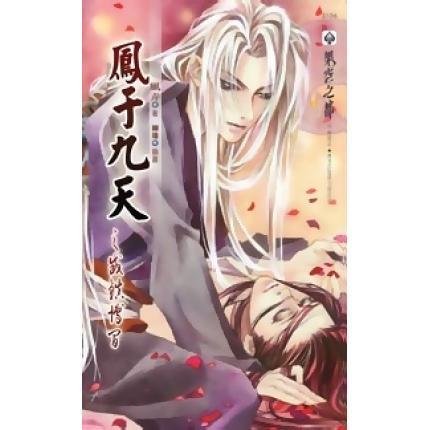


Figure 13. Chinese BL manga with an ancient emperor seme and a courtier uke

Source:http://www.motie.com/s/app/notes/302/note/2888

In fact, the heterosexual-parallel narrative has not come out of nowhere. It can be traced back to depictions of same-sex relationships in ancient China, from well-known ‘cut sleeve’ and ‘bitten peach’ stories about emperors and courtiers, to traditions about talented men gathering as ‘tent friends’, or as ‘guests’ to service officials and wealthy scholars and merchants. Rouzer (2006) describes such relationships as constructed hierarchically, in a kind of ‘service unto death’ that was based on favours extended and obligations owed. It was normal, and indeed fashionable, for elite men to keep the company of boy actors during the Wei and Jin dynasties. Qing rulers even provided houses for male prostitution, staffed by *dan* (旦，female) actors, or *xiang gong* (相公，prettyy male actors), to entertain scholar-officials (Chou, 1997, p. 137). It is obvious from such same-sex phenomena in pre-modern China that, as Mann (2011) points out, an elite man was always presumed to be the superior partner, or the penetrator, in any same-sex relationship. Status differences, rather than expressions of mutual love, are the key to understanding this form of same-sex practice. As Hinsch (1990, p.21) puts it, people perceived homosexual acts ‘in terms of social relationships rather than erotic essence’. Mann (2011, p.140) further explains:

Because phallic penetration was such a powerful status symbol in same-sex relationships, assumptions about hierarchy and power were implicit in most historical accounts of male-male sex. Fictional references to young male lovers were often patronizing or dismissive, sometimes noting that a young man who took a passive (inferior) role in male-male sex would eventually move on to heterosexual relationships in which he would be the penetrator, sometimes treating male lovers as a convenient substitute for inaccessible cloistered females.

**BL and censorship**

The legal status of pornography varies widely from country to country. Most countries allow at least some form of pornography, both online and offline. However, child pornography is banned in nearly all countries, and in the past two decades, many countries have stepped up efforts to combat such pornography, which has spread far and wide with the help of the Internet (Wortley and Smallbone, 2012). Many countries have already introduced domestic legislation and other measures to tackle child pornography, and possession of such has been criminalized in most countries.

The appearance of underage characters in Japanese manga and anime thus needs to be closely examined. The sex industry is highly developed in Japan and has contributed greatly to the country’s economy. However, the Japanese legislature has received domestic and international pressure to take action to combat child pornography and child abuse (Mei, 2014). Indeed, some extreme voices have claimed that Japan is the ‘international hub for the production and trafficking of child pornography’ (US State Department’s 2013 Report on Human Rights, cited in Eto, 2016; McCurry, 2013). In June 2014, a bill was passed to amend the Act on Punishment of Activities Relating to Child Prostitution and Child Pornography (1999), which rendered the possession of child pornography illegal, as well as the production, transportation, import and export of such materials. This finally closed the loophole in the nation’s legal system to combat child pornography. However, this law excluded manga and anime that feature explicit scenes of children. As Eto (2016) claims, there is still a grey zone left in the legal system. Indeed, as Zanghellini (2009) observes, the prevalence of underage characters in BL manga and anime with erotic and even sexually explicit subject matter is a target for Western countries’ censorship laws. However, such content has managed to escape legal prosecution in Japan.Like many Western countries, Japan has its own obscenity laws. Article 21 of the Japanese constitution guarantees freedom of expression and prohibits formal censorship. However, censorship does exist, and prosecutions are conducted under Article 175 of the Criminal Code of Japan. Maintaining sexual morality is seen as the key to balancing the tension between protecting free speech and battling obscene material (Zanghellini, 2009). Sexual morality, according to the Japanese Supreme Court, is modesty or a sense of shame shared by the average person (Zanghellini, 2009). While sex is quintessentially a private affair, this sense is disturbed by obscene material’s sexually stimulating nature (Zanghellini, 2009).

However, as Zanghellini (2009) notes, there have been very few arrests based on the Criminal Code. On the one hand, Japanese culture is rooted in social harmony and consensus, avoiding public displays of conflict and face-loss (Feldman, 2000). On the other hand, the industry is primarily left to regulate itself (Beer, 1984; Schodt, 1997). Historically, the Criminal Code of Japan has been interpreted in different ways in terms of prohibiting pornography; recent interpretations mean that all pornography must be at least partly censored (Zanghellini, 2009). The Supreme Court’s general idea is that sex is a private matter and material should not seek to sexually arouse audiences. The formal interpretation of these requirements is that adult genitals and pubic hair should not be displayed to audiences. As such, adult genitals and pubic hair are represented metaphorically, blacked out or concealed either by the characters’ positions or by items performing such functions (Zanghellini, 2009). More importantly, this single-minded focus on adult genitalia shows a lack of concern for all kinds of erotic representations in which adult genitalia does not feature explicitly (Schodt, 1997). Such tolerance suits large sections of the general population as well as publishers (Allison, 2000).

Zanghellini (2009) states that the legal ban on the representation of pubic hair and adult genitalia directly encourages artists to focus on characters whose nudity can be fully depicted, including children, specifically prepubescent children. Secondly, the absence of a law prohibiting child pornography and child abuse material has enabled the over-representation of children or childlike characters in manga and anime in the context of erotic cartoons and comics. Taken together, these two factors have contributed to the conditions for the emergence of underage sex and nudity as a theme in erotic manga and anime (Zanghellini, 2009). The eroticization of underage characters in manga and anime peaked in the late 1980s (Zanghellini, 2009). The Japanese authorities abandoned the traditional interpretation of obscenity, which had a single-minded focus on adult genitals and pubic hair, and a much more flexible approach was adopted to target obscene material based on ‘the overall degree of raunchiness and extent of sexual imagery’ (Kinsella, 2000, p. 186).

Yaoi-con (yaoi fandom), and other cultural phenomena such as Loli-con ( a Japanese slang describing an attraction to young girl) and Shota-con( a Japanese slang describing an attraction to young boys), have gained immense popularity in Western communities over the years, as well as receiving a great deal of criticism. These cultural phenomena celebrate materials that depict sexual images of minors. Scholars (Galbraith, 2008; Schodt, 1997) argue that neither loli nor BL work represents the interests of paedophiles, since characters in such works are not objectified in the same manner as actual images of children can be; rather, they express aspects of their creators’ or consumers’ identities. Kinsella (2000) points out that fans of BL and *loli* have an erotic investment in fictional characters that bear no direct relation to their sexual identities in real life. McLelland (2009) argues that *yaoi*, BL, *loli*, and other manga genres are self-consciously anti-realist, given the extremely stylized nature of their depictions and the fact that both fans and creators clearly understand the boundary between fantasy and reality. In other words, consumers prefer the two-dimensionality of manga and anime to the three-dimensionality of reality, and indeed they deliberately reject the latter. As such, it is a mistake to assume that the audience for these kinds of fictional narratives confuse fantasy with reality (Saito, 2007).

In China, the authorities have taken serious action to battle obscenity. In general, China has criminalized the production, duplicating, publishing, sale or dissemination of obscene materials, and the act of profit-making from such material is subject to even higher penalties under Article 363(1) of the Criminal Law. However, Mei (2014) points out that the definitions of ‘obscene’ and ‘pornography’ are vague in the Chinese legal system. While books, films, videos, audio tapes, or pictures may appeal to prurient interest, only those containing graphic depictions of sexual conduct or explicitly publicizing pornography are defined as obscene articles. Moreover, literature, scientific works, and works of art containing pornographic content are classified as having artistic value and are excluded from this list. However, the Criminal Law does not explain or define either ‘pornographic content’ or ‘artistic value’. In addition, the State Administration of Press and Publication, issued in 1988, provides relatively clear definitions of ‘obscene’ and ‘pornography’ compared with the Criminal Law provisions, including a detailed list of conducts, acts, and articles considered ‘obscene’. Most importantly, ‘graphic depictions of homosexual or any other abnormal sexual behaviour in an obscene manner’ are defined under Article 2 of the State Administration of Press and Publication as ‘pornography’ (cited in Mei, 2014). Therefore, publishing and distributing *yaoi* and BL manga and comics is illegal in China (Mei, 2014).

Another important piece of legislation that regulates pornographic materials in China is the Law on Administrative Punishments for Public Order and Security (LAPPOS). LAPPOS takes account of the online landscape, which the Criminal Law provisions neglect. According to LAPPOS, anyone who produces, transports, duplicates, sells, or rents any obscene articles via computer networks or telephones shall be detained for a period of 10 to 15 days and subject to a fine (cited by Mei, 2014). In China, LAPPOS has given police the power to punish without trial or conviction. Thus, anyone producing or disseminating obscene materials can be arrested and prosecuted, although this depends on the seriousness of the crime. Under normal circumstance, LAPPOS is applied to crimes that are not considered serious enough to attract criminal liability under the Criminal Law (Mei, 2014).

The arrival of the digital age has posed a great challenge to worldwide regulators in controlling the distribution of obscene articles, and China is no exception. The authorities have taken several measures to censor online information, from the ‘great firewall’ project, to issuing a self-regulation document that Internet service providers must sign, to using an army of human censors (Tsui, 2003). On the legislative level, the government issued the Decision on the Protection of Internet Safety in 2000, which allows the Criminal Law to be applied to crimes committed online (Mei, 2014). Additionally, the authorities use a series of legislative measures for strict control of Internet content, and Internet content providers have a responsibility to cease the transmission of obscene materials under Article 16 of State Council Decree 292 (Mei, 2014). Moreover, websites are liable for producing, duplicating, publishing, or disseminating any prohibited online content under Article 20 of Ministry of Public Security Decree 33 (Mei, 2014). In extreme circumstance, Internet access will be taken away and licences revoked (Mei, 2014).

However, none of this legislation addresses the issue of child pornography, whether offline or online (Mei, 2014), although some might argue that prohibitions imposed by the Criminal Law and LAPPOS already cover child pornography. It was only in 2004 that a judicial interpretation made plain that the act of producing, duplicating, disseminating, or displaying online obscene information graphically depicting the sexual conduct of minors was unlawful (Mei, 2014). However, this judicial interpretation appears to be very limited in terms of combating child pornography. Firstly, the prohibited actions listed in the judicial interpretation will only be punished if they are relatively high in number. Secondly, the acts of downloading and storing child pornography are not specifically prohibited. As Mei (2014) states, this implies that mere possession of online child pornography is not a crime. Although a 2010 judicial interpretation offers more severe punishments for child pornography offences, Chinese authorities still have much to do in tackling child pornography (Chen, 2014; Huang, 2011).

As Fenwick and Phillipson (2006) contend, in controlling online pornographic material, Chinese authorities have relied heavily on industry self-regulation, parental guidance, and the use of Internet filters. The government has launched several campaigns in the name of battling Internet pornography (Wallis, 2015), but such campaigns have triggered protests by Chinese Internet users. The ‘special campaign to rectify and control vulgarity on the Internet’, launched in 2009, was ostensibly designed to protect young Internet users and target ‘vulgar’ materials (Wallis, 2015). However, this censorship campaign resulted in much online content being deleted and websites being shut down. Although the government claimed that the closing of thousands of pornographic websites was proof of the success of its clean-up campaign (Wallis, 2015), politically sensitive content on the Internet was also deleted during the campaign. When the vast number of Chinese Internet users found that their daily online activity was affected by this campaign, outraged comments were posted on government websites, while others made derisive jokes (Wallis, 2015).

Another notable campaign is the Green Dam project (also known as the Green Dam Youth Escort, *lüba huaji huhuang* , 绿坝·花季护航). In May 2009, under a directive from the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, it became mandatory for all new personal computers sold in mainland China, including imported personal computers, either to have the Green Dam software pre-installed or to have its setup files installed (Xinhua News, 2009). The aim was to provide a healthy Internet environment for teenagers and protect them from Internet pornography. However, the project received much criticism along the lines that ‘the Green Dam is a violation of privacy, and [tantamount to] spying on people’s online activities’ (Mei, 2014, p. 126). The programme targeted not only obscene or pornographic but also ‘vulgar’ and ‘undesirable’ online content; however, the latter two terms cannot be found in any legislation and are not legally defined (Mei, 2014). Moreover, the programme had many technical faults and could even cause personal computers to automatically reboot or become corrupted (China Daily News, 2009). Due to severe opposition, the Green Dam project was quickly shut down (Xinhua News, 2009). In response, Chinese Internet users created a manga-style character, Green Dam Girl (*lü ba niang*, 绿坝娘). The character wore green dresses and river-cab hats, and ironically she soon became an Internet phenomenon. Hongmei Li (2011) argues that the Green Dam Girl is a great example of user-generated content voicing discontent at state control. This cartoon image represented the political protest that temporarily halted the government’s attempt at censorship (Wallis, 2015).

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Figure 14. ‘Green Dam Girl’,  the Chinese netizens' [Moe anthropomorphic](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moe_anthropomorphism" \t "https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/_blank) response to the release of the-developed content control software.

Source:https://zh.moegirl.org/%E7%BB%BF%E5%9D%9D%E5%A8%98

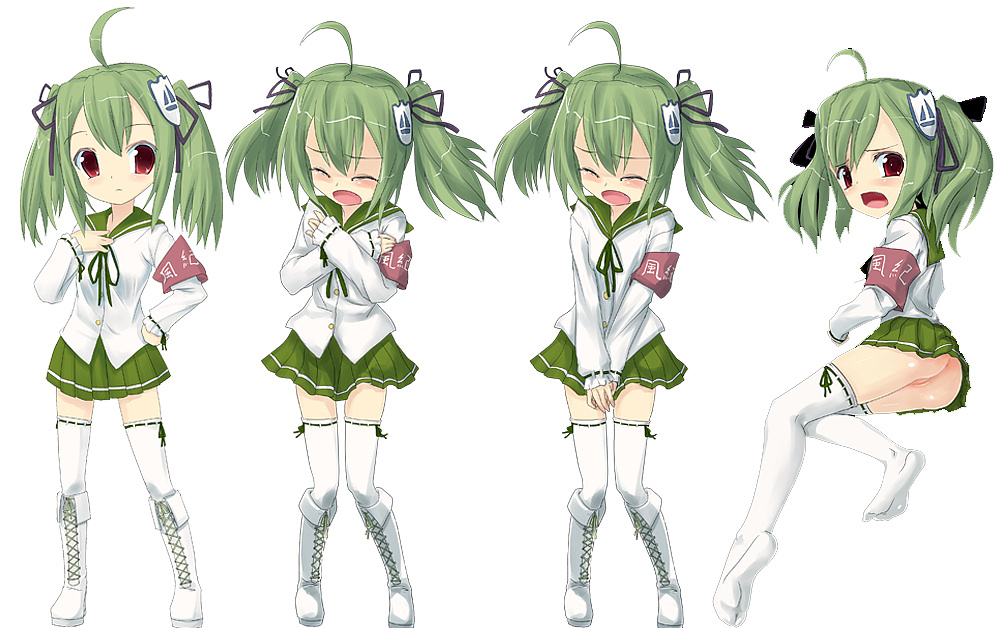
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Figure 15. the fan-created manga with molesting the Green Dam Girl to show netizens' negative attitute towards Chinese government’s censorship.

Source:http://www.zcool.com.cn/work/ZMTE4ODMyOA==.html

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# ­­­­­Chapter 4. Methodology

**Research design**

*Choosing research methods*

Inspired by Kelly, Regan, and Burton’s argument (1992, p. 150) that ‘what makes feminist research feminist is less the method used, and more how it is used and what it is used for,’ I realized my methodology should serve to reveal and present women’s lives and experiences in an honest and sensitive way. As Ferguson (1993) explains, feminist interpretation is concerned with articulating and analysing women’s experiences and voices, or enabling the silenced to speak as Cottle (1978) indicates, enabling women to tell their own stories.

Harding (1991) argues that people’s different world views are shaped by their different material experiences. The rulers build up a system of discourse, and there is therefore no doubt that their knowledge is claimed as ‘truth’, whether it is correct or not. This knowledge is doomed to be partial, prejudiced, and distorted. In China’s current social environment, the right to speak in mainstream society is constrained by patriarchy. My participants were considered outrageous and ‘abnormal’, and therefore they were stigmatized and unjustly labelled. Continuing to remain silent did nothing to improve this situation. Thus, letting their voices be heard is crucial to contesting their stigma, which arises from the ignorance associated with dominant patriarchal discourse. These viewpoints helped me, as a feminist researcher, to not only focus my analysis on each individual separately, but also to locate my findings in the wider social context.

Qualitative research allows the researcher to discover the meaning of things, concepts, definitions, features, metaphors, symbols, and descriptions. As a result of this, researchers are able to explore participants’ ideas and feelings, arising from their experiences, that have not been revealed previously. Qualitative research methods, such as in-depth interviews, allow researchers to detect participants’ motives, meanings, actions, and reactions in the context of their daily lives. Feminist researchers, who share common experiences of oppression as women, are not simply ‘data-collecting machines’ or ‘objective’ researchers (Oakley, 1999; Mies, 1999). Walkerdine (1990), in particular, suggests that empirical research on subjectivity makes an important contribution to feminist research. She hopes that feminists will give their attention to this aspect, because such research may help to transform women’s lives.

The intention in my research was to explore the lives of *fu nü* in China and the reasons behind their interest in male same-sex love and relationships. The subject of this study was thus a certain social fact which was worthy of exploration. The reasons for my participants’ choices clearly came through in their stories. These women’s evaluations of love, and their expectations about relationships and partners, are also fully present in their stories. In this study, I try to listen to the voices of these women. I seek to understand their comments on their own lives as women and *fu nü*, their expectations of love based on BL and existing relationships, their hopes and dreams, by drawing attention to their life experiences in the current cultural atmosphere. Thus, qualitative research methods were chosen because they allowed me to explore what these women had experienced in their lives, how they perceived their social environment, and how they made their own choices regarding sex, love, and life. With this background knowledge about research methods, I reflectively planned to conduct face-to-face semi-structured interviews and focus groups to collect data on 30 women’s personal experiences and feelings about reading BL manga.

I used focus group discussions to stimulate ‘personal and conflicting viewpoints’ (Kavle and Brinkmann, 2009, p. 150). These were conducted with my participants’ consent. I recognized that my research had a sexual focus, which could be considered a highly intimate matter, but I nonetheless decided to do the study, since differences in opinion about a sensitive topic are worthy of recording. Besides, attending a focus group was convenient for some interviewees to whom I was introduced by one of my participants. To my surprise, the focus group became a phenomenon, and I will discuss this aspect later in the section on conducting interviews.

*Designing the questions*

Before I conducted my fieldwork, my supervisor and I discussed how to make the interviews go smoothly, since they would include talking about intimate and sexual issues. We both agreed that since asking direct questions about personal attitudes towards sex might be embarrassing, the interviews could start in a more general way, that is, by showing BL manga pictures of various styles, which would make it look as if we were just talking about those pictures, and not about my participants’ personal experiences. These pictures included images related to (1) ‘pure love’, with no sexual action, just being together in a beautiful romantic scene; (2) kissing and hugging; (3) some sexuality and nudity, without exposed genitals; (4) sexual intercourse with no genitals exposed; (5) sexual intercourse with genitals exposed; (6) BDSM; and (7) tentacles, animals, and some other images. I would first ask general questions such as ‘which kinds of BL manga do you usually read?’ and ‘what are your feelings when you see these pictures?’ Then I would gradually explore deeper meanings and focus on personal attitudes.

In order to gather high-quality research data, instead of using a very structured framework of questions, I designed flexible, semi-structured questions, in order to leave space for my participants to express their unique experiences freely. My interview questions were designed to cover all aspects of BL’s potential attraction for my participants, and their personal experiences relating to BL. I initially categorized my data in terms of the *fu nü* group’s attitudes, feelings, identities, and pleasures, and hoped I would be able to do well-organized data collection, which would then be the basis of my discussions in the analysis chapters. Then I developed specific research questions based on the themes that I had identified. These questions were as follows:

* Who are BL manga readers?
* Do they identify themselves as *fu nü*? Why/why not?
* If yes, then what is the meaning of being *fu nü* for them?
* Do *fu nü* read other kinds of manga (such as heterosexual manga or lesbian manga)? If yes, what are the differences among them?
* What kind of pleasure do *fu nü* gain from BL manga? How do they feel about this pleasure?

To test whether this plan would work, my supervisor advised me to conduct a pilot study before beginning formal fieldwork. The pilot would include three interviews and one focus group (of four or five people). After each pilot interview, the interview schedule was amended and supplemented. A formal interview schedule was established after several revisions.

To gather high-quality data, I slightly amended the interview questions according to participants’ characters and interests. I followed neither a thematically structured questionnaire nor a particular question order. I preferred to explore and be surprised by new information. I would look for themes during analysis.

**Finding the interviewees**

The process of finding interviewees did not go as well as I had expected. Indeed, it was even a struggle. My fieldwork lasted for four months, but in reality the process took more than half a year if we take into account the participant-seeking stage, when I posted advertisements and connected with potential interviewees online. At first, my idea was simply to find respondents through the Internet. The *fu nü* group’s hobby is considered relatively sensitive and private, and the online community is the best place for them to be active. They come together because of their shared attraction to BL. Thus, there was a risk that looking for participants in this relatively closed online community (Dunne, 1997) might result in ‘a highly self-selected sample’ (Burgess, 1984, cited in Dunne, 1997, p. 27).

I had assumed that *fu nü* would be willing to talk to me freely because we were peers, that is, in a similar age group, and because I was interested in their hobby and I would make sure that the data was kept strictly confidential. However, I found that I had underestimated the difficulties of my interviewee-hunting process. Firstly, I expected that anyone who saw my advertisements (which included colourful, beautiful, erotic BL pictures and words) online would feel like participating in my research right away and would contact me. I had thought the use of advertisements, rather than snowball sampling, would be a good way to obtain a random sample of women with diverse characteristics. It was quite embarrassing that I received no replies to the advertisements online.

When I checked the websites where I had posted the advertisements, I found that some of the advertisements had been deleted. I contacted the administrators of those websites, and most of them gave me a similar answer: with regard to the relevant Chinese laws and rules about censorship, my advertisements included adult content and were forbidden. This was despite the fact that the BL products I used in my advertisements on these websites did not directly illustrate genitals or sexual scenes; they just gave the names of some products, with a few ambiguous illustrations—not as explicit as those I was planning to use at the start of the interviews—and offered links to other websites where the BL products in question could be downloaded (this being the most useful way for BL fans to obtain BL resources). Other website administrators said that they had deleted my advertisements out of safety considerations, because they could not verify my real identity, but that I could contact their users on an individual basis (but not using the name used by the person on that website).

A possible explanation for my difficulties is that the Internet in China is strictly regulated by the authorities. As Tu and Lee (2013) found, ‘undesirable’ content such as online forums for the homosexual community or social networking sites can be ‘blocked or banned at any time without reasonable explanations’. As a similar topic, BL can also be subject to censorship as regards user-generated content. Another possible reason was that the moderators of the forums might have thought my advertisements were fake.

Thus the outcomes of my online participant search were not ideal. I therefore changed my strategy, and I decided to be more active in contacting people rather than waiting for them to reach out to me. I searched online for relevant terms and keywords to seek potential participants, as Yinhe Li did in one of her studies, a sex-related Chinese study in which she knocked on every door, one by one, in order to get positive responses (T. Liu, 2009). I talked to BL website users, one by one, and I used Weibo (the most popular [Chinese](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_language) microblogging site, akin to a hybrid of Twitter and Facebook) to follow updates that used hashtags such as #BL, #*fu*, #*danmei*, etc. However, this approach was also mostly ineffective.

In sum, I received few responses to my attempts to find participants through the Internet. During my trial chats online, many women were alarmed when they heard there would be a face-to-face interview and that the conversation would be recorded. I said I understood that they were deeply concerned about their privacy when talking to a stranger like me, even though I had explained what my study was about and where I was from. Thus, although I tried very hard to find participants online, only a few women were willing to be part of my research.

But fortunately, through this method I found my first candidate (Sensen, aged 19) after a series of failures. Without being too suspicious of me, she said she would like to give me an ‘easy introduction’ to Chengdu comic-con, which she was about to attend and where she would be cosplaying Harry Potter. This was a huge breakthrough for my study, because with the help of Sensen, I was able to establish a connection between online space and offline reality. Sensen was quite famous in the cosplay community; this explains why she was more open in public and was willing to talk. She also had many friends who shared her great enthusiasm for animation, comics, and games (ACG). By attending the comic-con with Sensen, I had the chance to transform myself, from an outsider seeking any opportunity to approach the *fu nü* group, into a field observer.



Figure 16. The ticket I bought in Chengdu Comic-con, 2014. (photo by Ni Lu, 2014)



Figure 17. The *fu zone,* a large and important exhibition areain Chengdu Comic-con. (photo by Ni Lu, 2014)



Figure 18. To fulfil audiences’ request, two male cosers to make *fu* posing by feeding each other to attract people’s attention. (photo by Ni Lu, 2014)

However, this good start with the comic-con did not mean that I successfully blended into the *fu nü* community. While Sensen was busy with her cosplay, I was wandering around in the main hall, trying to find potential participants. Many turned me down before I could even finish the introduction. In one extreme case, one of the comic-con attendees showed her contempt and said, ‘why study us? Aren’t we normal to you?’ Hence, I realized that to the true *fu nü* enthusiast I was still an outsider and had no contact with them. Luckily, Sensen offered her help. ‘Would you like to join my friend’s study on *fu nü*?’: this simple question from Sensen made many ACG fans very interested in participating in my research. Unfortunately, many potential participants were neither from the local area nor had the time to participate. But at least I was able to find my second candidate, Bubu (24).

Therefore, due to the sensitive nature of the subject, and in order to find potential participants more efficiently, I abandoned the random sampling method. The most efficient way to find participants, I discovered, was to maximize the reach of snowball sampling. To achieve a diversity of participants from within a relatively small community, I did my best to use snowballing among my different friendship networks in different cities. Firstly, I contacted friends who I already knew were *fu nü* and asked them whether they knew any more BL fans. My *fu nü* friends said ‘no problem’. In the meantime, I also attended some parties with former classmates from my lower- and upper-secondary schools. I was glad to find some new ‘hidden’ *fu nü* among my former classmates. After the parties, I invited them one by one and asked if they would let me interview them. Some of them were very interested, especially when I mentioned that my topic was relevant to women rights research in China, although others still felt too shy to participate in my study. My former classmate Deng, an openly *fu nü,* was unable to attend my interview due to her tight schedule, but she intrduce her friend Jiajia (25) to take part in fervently. This also made me realize that well-educated young Chinese women appear to be more and more concerned about their status and rights, and the term ‘women’s rights’ is no longer an abstract concept even in China. Through snowballing I met Panpan (25), Wenwen (25), Lingling (24), Arar (24), and Longlong (19).

It has been suggested that insiders know more about the lives of their participants and are therefore ‘in a strong position to conduct ethical research which keeps (often marginalized) participants at the top of the research agenda and represents their voices’ (Hayfield and Huxley, 2015). As Dunne (1997, p. 24) mentions in her research on lesbians, during the participant-recruiting process, the more knowledge one has about the participant group, the easier it is to build up high levels of trust, as one is deemed an ‘insider’. This is a crucial strategy for conducting sensitive personal research. During the process of finding potential participants, I too learnt that it is much more efficient and effective to deal with people with ‘insider’ status in the *fu nü* community. I found that those who could offer the most help were those who were more or less associated with *fu nü*. For instance, a second-year student who guaranteed that she could find a dozen *fu nü* for me (‘*fu nü* are everywhere among young people like me!’) did not actually introduce me to any participants. It may be that, even though she perhaps knew many people who read BL or were part of the *fu nü* community, the fact that she was not a *fu nü* herself meant she was speaking as an outsider to that community—or maybe she just did not take my request seriously enough to put it on her to-do list (although I do not want to think that).

My friend Lee, an *otaku*[[13]](#footnote-12) who is interested in ACG, introduced his cousin Xinxin (23) to me. He and his cousin share their ACG collection. Then Xinxin introduced all of her *fu nü* friends to me; their friendships had begun with sharing BL manga after class as teenagers. Thus I met Maomao (23), Riri (23), Juanjuan (23), Miaomiao (23), and Yinyin (23). Two male friends of mine, who are quite good-looking, had *fu nü* friends who would joke that they were BL heroes. With their help, I met Chenchen (21), Zhuzhu (25), Huohuo (24), Nana (19) and Urur (19). Another male friend, Gaogao, who is gay and out to his friends, introduced his own *fu nü* friends to me, and thus I met Huahua (24), Pinpin (23), and Rongrong (23). Gaogao was happy with these *fu nü* friends, who were not judgemental but supportive of him. He believed my interviews with them would go smoothly. After one interview, Pinpin (23) said she had found it interesting and that she would like to talk more. At her second interview, she kindly brought along her roommate Fafa (23) and cousin Weiwei (21). My interviewees, introduced by their *fu nü* friends, showed great enthusiasm. Not only did we arrange meetings quickly, but they were also proactive during the interviews, which indicated that they wanted their voices to be heard.

In the meantime, I found that another effective way to find interviewees was through my friends who worked as university lecturers. Due to the hierarchical relationship between teachers and students, students often tend to believe that a positive response to a teacher’s request might be helpful in improving the student and teacher’s relationship. For example, Liu (2011) mentions in her research about mothers and daughters that one interviewee, a mother, made a plea to her to say something nice about her daughter in front of other lecturers. But this is not always the case, and in this process I had a different experience. First, I asked a friend who is a university lecturer in agriculture to help me. I told him that all he needed to do was simply to mention my research in his class and wait for students to respond. However, he merely handed out my flyer requesting participation in the research to his teaching assistants, without further involvement himself. When I asked why, he responded that my research topic was too sensitive for him to help me find participants in China. He felt embarrassed by doing me this favour. On the one hand, maybe that was why he did not offer further help; on the other hand, he was teaching a course that was irrelevant to my research, and his students did not need his approval to participate in an interview which had nothing to do with their major.

However, elsewhere I was successful. I contacted a lecturer, Dr Wang, who had taught me gender studies at university when I was undergraduate. His PhD supervisor had been Suiming Pan, the renowned specialist in sexuality in China, and his research had focused on *xiaojie* (women prostitutes). He was interested in my study and announced my request in his lecture. With his help I met six participants in one day: Yueyue (19), Pipi (19), Meimei (19), Shishi (19), Liuliu (19), and Fangfang (19). Because Dr Wang has been an expert researcher in Chinese gender studies for several years, I think there were many reasons why he helped me enthusiastically. In addition to the reason that he is an insider in gender studies, he also understood my great anxiety and pressure as a PhD student. More importantly, as an expert in gender studies, he had conducted similar research on stigmatized women in China. He was fully aware of the women’s status in the current social context in China, and he was also concerned about how to give a voice to these silent women and their own ways of telling their stories.

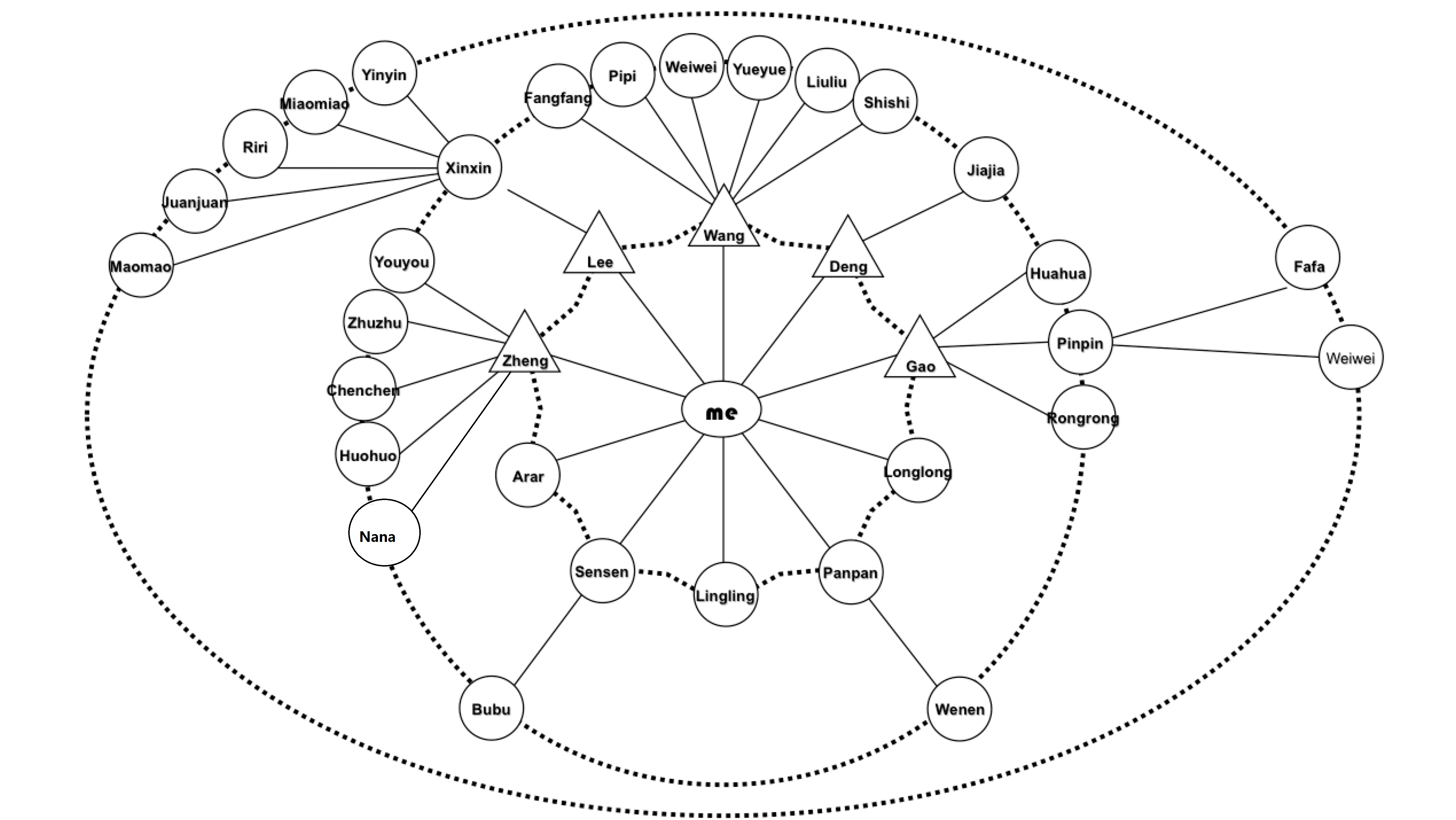
Thus, I gathered 30 participants, including four focus groups with three participants among them. They are aged 18–26, and all were educated: undergraduate and postgraduate students, young women in the workforce or self-employed with at least a bachelor’s degree, including white-collar workers, schoolteachers, a painter, a singer, and so on. The interviews were conducted in four cities: Beijing, Guangzhou, Chengdu, and Nanning. These are two first-tier cities and two second-tier cities in China, and they share a common characteristic: a high degree of sexual openness, sexual freedom, and acceptance of homosexuality compared with other cities in China.



Figure 19. Interviewing locations.

Reflecting on my participant recruitment process, I realized that the friendship network or *guanxi*[[14]](#footnote-13) is very important in Chinese culture. It was more effective to make good use of snowballing among friendship networks. This is also better for dealing with culturally sensitive issues in qualitative research. When researching Chinese women’s personal lives, especially in relation to private sexuality issues, it is important to gain the trust of the potential candidates. Previous research shows that China is a low-trust society as regards strangers, whom we can call ‘outsiders’ here. As Ting Liu (2009, p. 63) points out, ‘social research in Asian societies [particularly China] proves to be much more difficult in terms of collecting empirical data, particularly from face-to-face interviews, compared with Western societies.’ The utilization of *shengren guanxi* (Song et al., 2012) or strangers for external management, research, and information is traditionally alien to and disapproved of in the Chinese context (Chen, 2001). To avoid this, Jieyu Liu (2007, p. 17) used informal networks as a strategy and found that if the interviewee was close to the intermediary, the interviewee viewed the researcher as reliable and was willing to talk easily and openly.

Figure 20. Network for snowballing



Note: This diagram demonstrates how I used my friendship network to conduct snowball sampling. I use◯ to mark participants, Δ to mark non-participants, and place ‘me’ as researcher in the centre of the net. The first level is people to whom I was connected directly. The second and third levels refer to participants who were recruited by snowballing.

Table 1 Basic information about paticipants

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Location** | **Name** | **age** | **job** |
| Chengdu | Sensen | 18 | student |
|  | Bubu | 24 | white-collar |
|  | Xinxin | 23 | artist |
|  | Maomao | 23 | white-collar |
|  | Riri | 23 | student |
|  | Juanjuan | 23 | artist |
|  | Miaomiao | 23 | artist |
|  | Yinyin | 23 | teacher |
| Naining | Panpan | 25 | student |
|  | Wenwen | 25 | lawyer |
|  | Lingling | 24 | govement officer |
|  | Arar | 24 | white-collar |
|  | Longlong | 19 | student |
| Guangzhou | Huahua | 24 | self-employee |
|  | Pinpin | 23 | white-collar |
|  | Rongrong | 23 | student |
|  | Fafa | 23 | self-employee |
|  | Weiwei | 21 | social worker |
| Beijing | Chenchen | 21 | student |
|  | zhuzhu | 25 | white-collar |
|  | Huohuo | 24 | white-collar |
|  | Urur | 19 | student |
|  | Yueyue | 19 | student |
|  | Pipi | 19 | student |
|  | Meimei | 19 | student |
|  | Shishi | 19 | student |
|  | Liuliu | 19 | student |
|  | Fangfang | 19 | student |
|  | Jiajia | 25 | white-collar |
|  | Nana | 19 | studnet |

**Conducting the interviews**

*Pilot study*

The charm of qualitative research is that there will be unexpected situations. Thus, in my fieldwork, the interview process did not always follow my plan. During my pilot fieldwork, the first one-to-one interview with Sensen went smoothly. There was no need to start the interview tentatively; she quickly looked at the pictures I had prepared, and then put them to one side and talked straightforwardly about everything I wanted to discuss. The first focus group went well too. These two experiences built up my confidence that the participants would be willing to talk, and that showing pictures along with asking probing questions might not be necessary—indeed, it might make me look clumsy and like an outsider. Therefore I abandoned this procedure and decided to ask questions directly, as if they were as normal as questions about one’s everyday life.

One joint interview with two participants shook my confidence about focus groups. The interview, which I had arranged myself, was with a classmate from secondary school and another person who was her friend. Inviting them to such an interview was not so difficult, because we were acquaintances. However, the interview was not ideal in terms of the depth of discussion of the topics we covered. My schoolmate was an eloquent speaker and open to talking about BL, but she became introverted when her friend was there. When I asked a question, she would listen to the other woman’s answer quietly, without giving any opinions or talking about her own thoughts. When I asked her for her views on the same question after her friend had answered, she would say she also felt the same and had nothing to add. To some extent, I felt that she was not saying what she really thought, even though she may have had different opinions from her friend. However, when I did further interviews, my confidence in focus groups grew again. Four groups of participants (11 participants in total) each participated in one focus group interview. They were total strangers to me, but they knew each other very well, and thus they could talk in front of me as they always did during ‘girls’ afternoon tea’. Without embarrassment or reticence, they talked about whatever they wanted to, and said how they really felt in response to my questions, triggered by and reacting to each other’s answers. They were always bringing in examples from their daily lives, such as complaints about boyfriends who misunderstood them, or about mothers pressurizing them to get married. It was just what I had wanted when I decided to conduct focus groups.

Based on the two opposite experiences above, I think there are definitely differences when conducting focus groups among different people. A focus group may be inefficient and lead to bias when it is applied to a certain group of people, as the participants may care about their public image among friends and relatives. This is similar to the case with teamwork writing assignments, where some team members tend to make less effort and rely more on others’ input. Therefore, I was worried that focus groups might not reveal enough relevant information that would be helpful for my later interviews, in comparison with individual interviews. The outcome of a focus group depends on people’s different characteristics: they may be extroverts or not; they may feel free and be willing to talk in my presence, as a total stranger and ‘outsider’; or they may want to avoid humiliation and embarrassment if we already have some knowledge about each other.

*Interview ethics, informed consent, and audio recording*

To ensure that everything would go smoothly, I did not start the interviews until after much deliberation. Ethics, informed consent, and audio recording issues could not be ignored.

The discussion of problems in research ethics generally involves specific issues that can be divided into the following realms, according to Diener and Crandall (1978): firstly, whether the research will cause harm to the participant; secondly, whether the participant consents; thirdly, whether the research will violate their personal privacy; and lastly, whether the research is deceitful. Ethics-related topics in qualitative research also especially involve the narration aspect. Smythe and Murray (2000) point out that traditional guidelines on research ethics often failed to provide necessary support in the field, because such guidelines had the cognitive theoretical problem that they treated respondents merely as a database. In this traditional model, the researcher only tried to observe and manage the respondents from an outsider perspective. This fails to recognize the important role of respondents themselves during qualitative research, where respondents are not only the narrators of the story, but also the interpreters.

From the cognitive perspective, Smythe and Murray (2000) state that, during qualitative research on sensitive topics, the key ethical concern focuses on the ownership of the narrative: in other words, who controls the conversation, and who interprets the respondent’s story. Smythe and Murray (2000) provide precious detail about their experiences regarding the processes of recruitment, consent, and analysis. For instance, they critically point out the importance of Munhall’s (1989) ethical consideration that the informed consent of interviewees is in play not only at the stage of interviewee recruitment, but also throughout the whole process. During this process, consent revolves around a sense of equality between the respondents and the researcher, rather than simply a signed paper agreement.

All of my respondents were recruited on a voluntary basis. When I recruited respondents, the potential interviewee (or intermediary contact person) was informed at the outset that the content of their conversation would only be used in this PhD research, or in academic papers derived from this thesis. Although their stories might be told in a research paper, their true identity, and any details in the conversation that might compromise their identity, would be concealed. Before I started the conversation, all interviewees were informed of their rights and assured of total control during the conversation, which meant they could stop the interview whenever they wanted and could refuse to answer any question that made them uncomfortable. Furthermore, in order to encourage the respondents to participate in the conversation, I assured each of them that their identity would not be revealed to the public, and the content of the conversation would be kept strictly between them and me.

A consent form was necessary because it informed participants of my research aims, the risks and benefits they might face as a result, measures to protect their privacy, confidentiality, consent, and their right to terminate their participation at any time during the interview (Kavle and Brinkmann, 2009). Presenting an informed consent form, as Thorne (2008, pp. 461–462) puts it, can also be seen as revealing the attitude of the researcher towards his/her interviewees, showing respect for interviewees’ autonomy and dignity, rather than treating them as just research objects. Before starting my fieldwork, I was very optimistic about my interviewees’ willingness to sign the form. However, during my pilot study, I found that my rigorous design seemed a little disturbing to the participants, and they showed me their concern in a variety of ways. One participant did not take the form seriously and asked me to sign for her because ‘you know who I am anyway’; another one said that she was confused because I had promised them that their names would be kept secret, so what name should she sign? If she signed with her real name, her anonymity would not be guaranteed, but conversely, if she signed with a pseudonym, would the consent form still be valid?

I totally understood what they were thinking. The situation was similar to Ting Liu’s (2009) experience, in which female Chinese participants were not willing to sign a consent form. According to Jieyu Liu (2007, p. 37), doubts and concerns among interviewees can be reduced by stressing the professionalism of the researcher, and by explaining the difference between academic interviews and public media interviews which might reveal personal information. I clarified to the participants that the individual interviews were not being conducted to look for contradictions between individual and focus-group accounts, but to explore individual histories. Since participants felt they were participating in the research with the assurance of secrecy, but at the same time they knew that all the information gathered would become available to the public, they could choose to reveal only the information they wanted to share with the public. Thus confidentiality and anonymity were assured before I gained the participants’ consent. To assure them that their information would be protected, I recorded their oral consent instead of having them sign a formal consent form. Any details relating to names, emails, addresses, and other sensitive information were separated from the recordings and transcripts. All names have been changed in the thesis.

In the interests of democratizing the feminist research process (Kelly et al., 1994), the interviewees were informed that they could refuse to answer any question that they felt uncomfortable with or did not want to talk about. I also assured them that the information given in individual interviews would be kept strictly confidential and would not be shared with their fellow participants. The participants were encouraged to tell their stories as completely as possible, but they knew that they could stop at any time if there were any concerns. If a respondent appeared distressed, I halted the interview immediately and switched off my recording device. Sometimes they were too absorbed in the topic and talked about personal issues by accident. Then I would ask them if they were happy to share this information; sometimes they asked me to delete it. I also promised that I would delete that specific part if they requested it. This type of pressure has the potential to cause participants’ distress, but I am confident that I have good support structures around me in the university and outside it.

Another problem I faced was how to make an appointment in an appropriate place. An ideal interview location should be private and quiet, to allow both interviewer and interviewee to concentrate and for the best-quality recording. However, this is not always possible in actual fieldwork situations. All the interviews I conducted in a quiet place faced some awkwardness. My participants felt nervous and embarrassed because that kind of environment made them feel as if they were being investigated, like being on trial. When conducting fieldwork on private sexuality-related issues, Chen (2003, pp. 68–69) noted the inevitable difference between doing interviews in public and in private (or without interruptions). In her interviews, she was concerned that the conversation might be easily overheard by other customers if it took place in a coffee shop: as talking about sexuality in public is considered taboo in Asian culture, it is quite challenging to conduct interviews in this setting. But my experience was just the opposite. My participants were more willing to do their interviews in public places, such as Starbucks cafés. Even though the topic was about sensitive and private matters, they thought that the public atmosphere made chatting more natural. Feminist methodology encourages interviews to be more like conversations between friends. The form of ‘girls’ talk’ makes the interview a site ‘where women converse, reciprocate self-disclosure, and develop a relationship more akin to or resembling friendship or sisterhood than the conventional middle ground between stranger and friend’ (Bloom, 1998). According to Oakley (1981), an interview is a mutual interaction. In this context, being a ‘good researcher’ meant that I too talked about myself while I also encouraged my interviewee to talk about herself. Our success in doing this would be apparent in an equal amount of self-disclosure between us. But this situation was not perfect. Although a public environment made an interview feel relaxed, it made the transcription hard because of the loud background noise. This taught me the lesson that I should keep a balance between conducting a smooth interview and transcribing effectively later. But from a more positive point of view, and just as Bloom (1998) noted, ‘I do like the more conversational approach where we would just talk and the stories would just come out even though it is a very inefficient way to do things.’

Good stories yield rich data, so the other concern for me was how to generate good-quality data from my interviews. Feminist methodology asks researchers to be restrained, listen carefully, and respect interviewees’ feelings (see Kvale, 1996; Maynard and Purvis, 1994; Finch, 1984; Oakley, 1981). The ‘participatory, interactive, and conversational’ feminist methodology also attempts to diminish role differentiation, breaking down the difference between the roles of researcher and respondent (Bloom, 1998). To make the interview go smoothly, I tried to create a space where my participants could feel free to speak and express anything. I maintained the appearance of a curious and accepting attitude, whatever they told me. Some stories or ideas may have been beyond my experience, but even if I had not thought about the issue before or did not share their feelings about it, I still kept exploring it, as I was really interested in what they had to say. I also used this as a strategy to encourage my participants to talk more deeply.

For example, in one of my participant’s narratives, she talked about sex and love between twins in BL. My questions to her then was, ‘What do you think about it?’ Then she told me that some people might have found it sickening, but it touched her. I then repeated, ‘Sickening? Why?’ and asked, ‘Could you talk more about what kind of “touching” it is?’ Such questions were asked in order to encourage respondents to talk more extensively about how they interpreted their own attitudes and experiences.

The additional questions I asked were quite straightforward and were used simply to clarify or elicit information. Such additional questions encourage the researcher both to focus attention on the respondents and to conduct non-judgemental validation of their experiences (Bloom, 1998). I knew that in the interviews I had to try to stay ‘neutral’, but I always encouraged my interviewees to have no qualms and provide me with as much information as possible. In the interview, I would often nod and smile, use encouraging language such as ‘right’, ‘good’, or ‘definitely’ to show I was satisfied with their answer, or use ‘umm’ or ‘ah’ to show them I wanted them to talk more about a particular point. I was trying to create an atmosphere where there was nothing they could not tell me. The data I collected from them proved that my participants did not regret sharing their most intimate experiences with me. What was more, they were happy and empowered after their interviews.

Pei (2013) sees personal storytelling as a process of empowerment, healing, and social change. When these women told me their personal stories, what they were doing was producing a new sexual autonomy rather than marginalizing themselves as an inferior minority or ‘other’. This production of autonomy in their personal stories needs to be recognized and respected. As the famous feminist argument asserts, ‘the personal is political.’ When storytelling becomes a personal and social-political action, as Ho and Tsang point out, the interview is not just a research process. It is also a process of mutual political construction between researcher and participants. It is a social affair, the starting point of political action, and has potential for social subversion.

Some participants were interviewed repeatedly, while some were only interviewed once. There were no follow-up interviews if an interview lasted a long time, or if the data had been fully obtained. In some cases, we hit it off easily. If there was a lot of interesting and inspiring information that I wanted to explore further, I would invite the interviewee to have a second interview. At the end of the research process, I had gathered stories from 40 women.

**Analysis of the data**

I conducted all my interviews in Mandarin Chinese. However, occasionally participants would use English or ACG terminology (which has its origins in Japanese) to express themselves. This was especially common when my participants were talking about certain BL works or related ACG products. Familiar expressions in the language of their two-dimensional world, rather than Mandarin, could help my participants to explain their ideas better. In such cases, I would confirm with them in Mandarin, or ask them to further explain some terms in Mandarin, to make sure I had not misunderstood them.

Pope, Ziebland, and Mays (2000) point out that qualitative research can produce an enormous volume of information. The volume of interview recordings for transcription can be staggering. The total length of my 35 interview recordings exceeds 100 hours, and there were also some extra notes which I took during the interviews. To transcribe all this data into text could produce 30–50 pages per person/focus group. In the face of such a huge amount of information, Pope, Ziebland, and Mays suggest that researchers should leave a position for meaningful parts when reading or elaborating information. To get a better understanding of the material, and to capture the original information as much as possible, I did not translate transcript extracts into English until they were being coded.

In many qualitative research projects, the analysis process is often carried out at the beginning of the data collection. Thus the subsequent data collection can be more efficient and focused. Qualitative research allows the researcher to check their information from time to time, elaborate data, develop possible conclusions or assumptions, and prepare for future data collection. Compared with quantitative research, this method has a distinct advantage in that it allows researchers to return to the beginning of their research, to see whether their research questions can be optimized, to plan future enquiries, and to consider whether there might be another, better path (Pei, 2012).

Having gathered all the data, my next step in the research was to transform the data from raw material into more systematic organization. This required me to read the data over and over to find anything inspiring that I should categorize, such as specific phrases, events, or behaviours. To organize qualitative material is a time-consuming, sometimes daunting process. The translation of quotes became difficult when I tried to keep as much of the casualness of the original conversation as possible but could not find equivalent idioms and expressions in English. However, such gaps between the two-dimensional world and real life could themselves become a valuable part of the research. Some interesting words, especially ACG terms which are not familiar in most people’s everyday lives, served as a starting point for my analysis. For example, the word *rou*, which frequently appears in my data, can refer both to young, fresh, and beautiful characters, and to the porn aspect: in other words, either the characters or the plot can make female readers sexually aroused.

I coded the transcripts manually, and I demarcated layers of themes associated with my research questions and in relation to debates in the existing literature. Guest and MacQueen (2012) point out that the coding process is not a one-time thing but a cyclical process. It involves going back and forth between phases of data, from which codes emerge throughout the raw material until the researcher becomes satisfied with the final themes by adding, subtracting, combining, or splitting potential codes. Three main themes emerged from my repeated reading of the texts: the appeal of sex in BL; the appeal of love and relationships; and self-identity and construction related to BL-reading. As themes emerged from interview quotations, I wrote them on the wall as headings. Then I selected relevant quotes from transcripts, wrote them down on Post-it notes, and stuck the notes under the headings on the wall. Like a map of each interviewee’s life history unfolding steadily before me, this procedure provided me with neat clues as to how to manage their stories. I also wrote down potential arguments beside the quotations, and I developed meaningful comparisons. The Post-it notes made it easy to move my data from place to place. And I have say, I gained a strong sense of accomplishment when looking at this wall.

# Chapter 5. The Appeal of Sexual Aesthetics, Sexual Satisfaction, and Sex Education

The sight of women’s short sleeves at once makes them think of bare arms, of the naked body, the genitals, copulation, promiscuity, and bastards. This is the sole respect in which the Chinese have a lively imagination. (H. Lu, 1956, p. 889)

Like other writers of the May the Fourth Movement, Hsun Lu saw China’s old society as rotten and corrupt. Only after radical reform, he felt, would the Chinese be able to realize their human potential. Although many scholars believe that sex and sexuality were heavily repressed in China for thousands of years, the erotic imagination has never been absent from public discourse. As Lu Hsun wrote, the Chinese could use ‘short sleeves’ as a symbol to signify their rich imaginings of sex. From the ‘three-inch golden lotus’ in feudal China to high-heeled shoes today, such signifying objects allude to the secrets of sexual attraction in a veiled manner. However, expressions of desire, definitions of ‘sexiness’, and symbols of the ‘object of desire’ are usually based on the perspectives of men. In Chinese culture, similarly to any other patriarchal culture, one of the important characteristics of female existence is to always be in the position of being observed and consumed. The female image only exists in the form of an object; the female as a subject, proactively observing and assessing the opposite sex, is rare. That is to say, what women’s desire is, and whether it has an opportunity to present or express itself, have previously been neglected questions.

By contrast, BL as the product of women’s creation and consumption is completely divorced from patriarchal-centred references, and this enables women to gain the initiative and become proactive in redefining their roles, away from being watched and defined. For the participants in this research, this role reversal has a profound and far-reaching impact, with many connotations. It is not about drawing sharp contrasts and becoming a rival group to the opposite sex; on the contrary, it can be considered as women’s attempt to take control of their own desires. By adopting BL culture as a unique, effective narrative form, this female group can confront and express their own desires. They are becoming evenly matched with the dominant male group in this regard.

Literature on sex or sexual descriptions has a long and rich history in China, whether in instruction books on sexual positions or in erotic novels; however, the male has rarely been the object of discussion and consumption. Even if there is a direct description of the male body, it often reveals the oppression of the female. On the other hand, when similar descriptions are applied to the female body, this often indicates that the female in question is ‘decadent’, with sexual lust overcoming the mind. Influenced and regulated by the dominant Confucian doctrine, female desire, especially sexual desire, is described implicitly in classical Chinese literature. In the 1990s the rapid emergence of female writers such as Wei Hui, Mian Mian, and Muzi Mei attracted great attention in the mass media and among the general population. Their bold, direct descriptions of female sexual desire and experience challenged the male-dominated public discourse about sexual relationships. However, this kind of avant-garde writing based on female perspectives was not accepted by mainstream society. In the face of public condemnation, this trend in female writing eventually led to the alienation of male readers used to consuming the female body, and it therefore ceased.

The central purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate the role of *fu nü*’s sexual desire in their reading of BL. Surprisingly, most of my participants told me unreservedly all about their imaginings and experiences related to erotic stars and the topic of BL. I will explore this rich data in relation to BL: what the women’s desires are, how these are formed in each participant’s individual experience, and what it means to them. Some of my participants explained that their desire had been suppressed in the realm of real life due to several reasons. I will look further into the developing processes of Chinese women’s sexual desire, and the obstacles to these processes in the traditional social context. I will examine how these desires make Chinese women uncomfortable, uneasy, and even insecure in the current social context. Then I will examine how BL offers support for female desire with a different narrative form. This chapter will provide an insight into how Chinese females gain control of their sexuality and retake the initiative from male-centred culture through the form of BL, in three respects: sexual aesthetics, sexual satisfaction, and sex education.

**‘Masculine’, ‘slim’, and ‘clean’: *fu nü*’s sexual aesthetics in relation to BL**

When my participants pick up a new book for the first time, the depiction of characters is the initial deciding factor in whether they will continue or stop reading. This is obvious in manga: the artwork on the cover directly impacts whether the reader will be attracted and choose it—especially when they have to pay for new books encased in laminated wrappers. The impact of character portrayal in fiction novels is not as direct as in manga, although it is still a key factor in readers’ satisfaction. As they read the textual descriptions, strong images and imaginings will form in readers’ minds.

Most of my participants agree that they are very concerned about how these images are presented to them. For them, one of the important purposes of reading BL is to consume ‘man beauty’. A shared idea among my participants about their ideal BL character depiction is ‘man’.[[15]](#footnote-14) The word ‘man’ is a comprehensive expression of ‘manhood’, ‘masculinity’, or ‘virility’ here. However, my participants have different demands about characters’ masculinity, and the definitions of ‘man’ are diverse in this respect. In BL works, both main characters are male, but my participant Manman only needs one of them present the ‘man’ identity, while the other is relatively feminine:

Manman: I do not like that if both of them are strong—they are [in different positions as] *seme* and *uke*—it is not beautiful [if they present in the same way]... I might be girly… I am a little girl who is expecting something romantic… I prefer the product with some feminine elements. [A story with two strong characters is] just as weird as a sissy man with a girl, I would rather see a girly man go with a strong man.

Manman’s description initially points to the differences between ‘top’ and ‘bottom’ in male same-sex sexual relationships. These comprise the insertive/powerful role and the inserted/inferior role, and thus differ from masculinity and femininity. In the same way, she is not interested in a setting where both characters are feminine, or ‘girly’. She explains that this is because she is ‘girly’ and ‘is expecting something romantic’. These words show that Manman considers the romantic to be reasonable only in heterosexual relationships, and BL is a form of heterosexual women’s fantasy. This idea is widely described in the existing literature. In the typical Japanese BL genre, the *seme* is usually portrayed with more so-called masculine elements—as older, taller, and more masculine-looking. On the other hand, the *uke* is more feminine in looks and behaviour, shorter, less muscular, and younger (Fujimoto, 2007, p. 42). The *bishoonen* (beautiful youths) are ‘feminine’ because this is a vicarious women’s fantasy based on women’s experiences. It sets women free from a fantasy that dares to imagine but is scared to take action, and further allows them to act out the male identity as ‘gender play’ (McLelland, 2000).



Figure 21. BL manga shows the uke with girl school uniform to seduce the seme. With the Japanese words ‘popular, boy in a transparent girl suit’.

Source:https://www.duitang.com/people/mblog/458755167/detail/



Figure 22. BL manga shows the BL couple became pregnant and gave birth to children and live the same as heterosexual couple.

Source:https://www.bilibili.com/video/av3319831/?redirectFrom=h5

This is an obvious example of BL readers taking BL as a parallel or variation of heterosexual life in the same-sex world, a stance that is strongly criticized by scholars and the gay community, and which is considered a denial of homosexuality in Japan (Shamoon, 2001; Welker, 2011). In this common and positively received Japanese medium, the ‘feminine’ image is actually a heterosexual representation, and the characters are not really gendered as male but are shown as more feminine, both in sensibility and in the situations within which they are inscribed (McLelland, 2000). Among readers who prefer one character to have a feminine identity and one to have a masculine identity, BL is considered another type of girls’ comic—precisely its original purpose—designed to make a difference in the competitive comics market and to serve those women who cannot get satisfaction in the real heterosexual world (McLelland, 2000).

However, Manman’s viewpoint is different from those of my other participants, who do not regard BL as a parallel of heterosexual relationships. Just as Welker questions this parallel as ‘drag’, Juanjuan also strongly objects to this heterosexual view of BL: ‘This is so weird to me.’ Most of my participants share Juanjuan’s opinion that although BL belongs to girls’ manga, it is an independent genre which deviates from traditional boy-girl (BG) manga and is fully developed. It serves women’s fantasy, indeed, but not necessarily in the form of paralleling heterosexual relationships as ‘gender play’. ‘I would rather read traditional BG manga,’ Juanjuan would say if she found a BL written in a BG style.

Maomao, Juanjuan, and Riri describe a process of change in their sexual aesthetics with regard to BL. Whether they liked it or not, their first experience of reading BL started with the classic Japanese manga created in the 1960s and 1970s.

Juanjuan: The old-style manga, which has characters with sparkling eyes, long hair, pale and skinny bodies… quite strange to me and made me confused… [the feminine part] is a girl indeed! I would rather read boy-girl manga.

In these older works, which parallel heterosexual relationships, external appearances are clearly defined in terms of dualism as well as inserting/inserted identities. Maomao explains, ‘This is because the manga artists have to paint it like these to make their work acceptable to readers.’ Zhuzhu, in another individual interview, also presents a similar explanation. She considers the heterosexual-parallel style in this type of BL as ‘working around the edges’ to cater to the needs of the business. Indeed, if we review BL’s history (discussed in Chapter 3), girls’ manga was a creative innovation made by junior manga artists to attract readers’ attention away from work created by senior manga artists. BL was an even more revolutionary experiment, a fresh style of girls’ manga on the manga market. Being limited by the then-popular artwork and by the social environment, the early Japanese BL that parallels BG manga can be seen as the symbol of an era.

However, times and environments alter, and the BG-parallel-style BL work imported from Japan is not popular any more. Most of my participants show an interest in characters with obvious masculine traits and male characteristics. Chenchen gives examples:

Chenchen: I am a girl, so I like to watch good-looking men, and basically in the manga they are handsome, right?

NL: What kind of handsome do you mean, for example, neutral, feminine, or muscly ones?

Chenchen: The more masculine ones, of course. Because if it is presented with femininity, I think there is no difference with boy-girl stories. Thus I prefer the masculine ones.

NL: Could you describe what a masculine character is like?

Chenchen: The masculinity... It is not necessarily with exaggerated muscle, since there are many relatively slim and thin characters in manga, but he should be powerful, or with a relatively firm mind, in general his mind is more ‘manly’.

NL: Can you describe ‘manly’ some more?

Chenchen: Possibly... Let me take their behaviours, for example, girls would be flighty and affected, but men are more straightforward, or make strong intense movements like pulling or dragging.

The participants are more attracted by characters’ ‘manly’ interactions; they do not think of themselves as the character, or identify empathetically with the character, but rather enjoy it as an audience. Compared with women, as Chenchen explains, the characters with masculine traits are able to express their feelings and sexual desires in a clearer and more direct way. These female readers hope to see the presence and interactions of men with distinct male characteristics, which are different from female interactions, even if only in imagination. The readers choose the setting, and they have their expectations; if the characters present feminine identities which do not meet their expectations, the readers feel disappointed.



Figure 23. BL manga shows characters pulling and dragging in a tense situation.

Source:http://www.fmhua.com/manhua/332/4955.html

These female readers want to see a way of interacting with (apparently imaginary) men that have distinct male characteristics and are different from women. Because BL is not a parallel with heterosexuality, readers often do not wish to see fictional characters in BL showing the characteristics of female appearance.

Furthermore, they have their own preferences about appearance. Although my participants express their preferences for ‘man’ characters, their definition of ‘man’ does not necessarily follow the rules of social fashion. A general expectation of BL characters among my participants is a slim body with clear muscle lines—they do not like too much muscle. The highly praised hunk is not attractive to them: ‘Arnold Schwarzenegger is frightful!’ The focus group of Maomao, Juanjuan, and Riri displayed an attitude of opposition to highly masculine characters, as Maomao explained: ‘There is a boundary, if (the presentation of masculinity) goes beyond this line, BL will turn into *bara*.’ As discussed in Chapter 3, *bara* is a form of Japanese manga targeting gay groups, and many scholars treat it as the same style as BL because of the shared context of male same-sex sexual practices. However, the *bara* style is too heavy for my participants. ‘They seem like hairy bears!’ as Manman put it.

This aesthetic of male idealization sometimes separates reality from fantasy, even to an extreme degree. For instance, many of my respondents considered the film *Brokeback Mountain* a romantic same-sex love story. However, for my interviewee Manman, the film did not fit the ideal image of BL love: she thought the characters should have been innocent, slim, and pale-looking youths, instead of fully bearded adults:

Manman: The BL novel and manga I have read previously present me with dreamy scenes, the stories are romantic, and the heroes are fabulous. However, when I watched a film the first time, *Brokeback Mountain*, that presented real homosexuality, the image was not as beautiful as I expected… it is not unacceptable, but they are strong, stout men with a bushy beard, and not pretty at all.

NL：Could you further describe what you expect of homosexual heroes in the film? Like… external appearance, temperament…

Manman: I am influenced by the fictional BL works, the image of homosexual people… should be delicate and clean. Especially the *uke* should be small, white, and tender, just like southern boys.[[16]](#footnote-15)

As discussed above, Manman shows a strong preference for bringing heterosexual relationships into her BL fantasy. On the one hand, she describes the homosexual people of her imagination: ‘delicate and clean’, ‘the *uke* should be small, white, and tender.’ This is a typical opinion among the *fu nü* group and has provoked criticism from the gay community, which denies any connection between BL and homosexuality.On the other hand, Manman’s words redefine homosexuality as part of heterosexuality, as well as defining the idea of ‘southern boys’ through her own identity and understanding as a girl from northern China. This is similar to Beauvoir’s description of woman as ‘the Other’ in male-centred relationships. Beauvoir developed the concept of ‘the Other’ to describe a male-dominated culture that represents woman as the sexual other in relation to man in a sexual binary system. Women are silent and passively defined, and unknowingly accept subjugation as part of their own subjectivity in the face of men’s demands. In a culture that operates the man-woman binary system, compared with the identity of men—who have a voice—women as the sexual other are a minority, the least-favoured social group: ‘a man represents both the positive and the neutral, as indicated by the common use of [the word] Man to designate human beings in general; whereas [the word] Woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity’ (Beauvoir, 1949). Manman’s descriptions of her ideal homosexual boy, and of the differences between boys from southern and northern China, are all based on her personal experience and perspective. The progressive aspect here is that through reading BL women have a chance to put themselves in the active position of seeing, and of taking discursive power. Females were once the objects of observation and definition, but now they have the opportunity to express their own definitions of the opposite sex. As Jemmer (2010) points out, ‘othering’ arises accidentally and passively from natural and unavoidable intersubjectivity. Manman’s definition of her ideal image of men, which is not deliberate but is encouraged by BL, is a strong counterblast to the harm of ‘othering’ that arises from the asymmetrical nature of sex and gender roles.

In any event, whether such definitions are correct or not, they offer a wonderful image which my participants had never experienced before. As my interviewee Pipi described, her appreciation of BL characters is of two perfect males in a perfect relationship: as the old Chinese saying goes, ‘this man should only exist in heaven.’ Such perfect fantasy images are highly idealistic and isolated from reality.

In real-life scenarios too, the *fu nü* group often evaluate men according to their appearance. During the interviews, I found that my participants’ perceptions of BL influenced their perceptions of men in reality. In some cases, idealized fantasy characters from fiction made women more demanding of men than their peers, and they showed dissatisfaction with those who did not fit their aesthetic. But the idealization of the BL aesthetic was not the only criterion for their judgements of men in reality. They could still rationally separate fantasy and reality. Despite their expectations of male aesthetics in both fiction and reality, their scrutiny of real men was not made according to impossible standards.

Youyou: It [external appearance] didn’t matter when we were friends… we share similar interests. However, everything changed when we really started a relationship. I felt my life was heavily under his influence, appearance, habits, even lifestyle. For instance, one day he didn’t tidy himself up before a date, I don’t feel so much I want to be with him. I think the romantic relationships of secondary-school students are more or less the same, unstable, different from my ideal. Perhaps the relationship I want or I imagined is that two will be together for quite a long time.

NL: Appearance is one of the key considerations when you choose your partner, so do you try to find satisfaction in BL comics?

Youyou: Yes, I do admit I like boys with delicate and clean looks, and it makes me feel happy. However, I think most boys in real life do not really care about their appearance. As a matter of fact, most boys are untidy, or they just don’t care. In many instances, they don’t dress well, they don’t shave, or worse, their hair’s a mess. I don’t have high expectations; boys don’t need to dress like a pop star, but at least they should keep their odour and sweat to themselves.

From Youyou’s words I learnt that many adolescent Chinese males do not really pay attention to their appearance—or worse, to their personal hygiene. Body hair, sweat, and strong odour are often considered important parts of their masculinity. Ironically, cleanliness and tidiness are viewed as feminine characteristics. In this context, pure masculinity is preferred and femininity rejected: men who behave in a feminine manner or possess feminine characteristics are often subjected to social prejudice and even discrimination, depicted as ‘perverts’, ‘ladyboys’, or ‘sissies’. Sexism is used to strengthen masculinity. As Kimmel (1995) points out, men are defined by confrontation with a series of ‘others’, including ethnic minorities, sexual minority groups, and most importantly, women. Male identity is based on the absolute rejection of femininity rather than the affirmation of masculinity, and as a result the gender identity of males becomes vague and fragile. Hence, in order to prove their self-identities and gain social recognition, males are constantly required to demonstrate their valour and heroic behaviour, and to take huge risks.

Connell (2014) also states that masculinity is a concept developed on the basis of the early European ideology of individuality, accompanied by the colonial empire and capitalist economy. In contrast to femininity, the very existence of masculinity is relational, categorizing men into different types of masculinity along lines of power, class, race, and sexuality. Within this plural masculinity, there is hegemony, subordination, complicity, and marginalization. In any given historical period, there is always a masculine temperament that is the most celebrated and thus occupies the hegemonic position in culture. Such a tradition provides a widely accepted answer to the legitimacy of patriarchy, ensuring the dominance of males, and reinforcing the subordination of females. Thus, in order to exaggeratedly demonstrate their masculinity, many Chinese adolescent males—as Youyou describes—use carelessness about their appearance as a strategy to distinguish themselves and avoid being judged as ‘sissy’.

However, this full-of-androgen masculinity, in this case, is clearly not welcomed by females. On the contrary, according to Manman’s description, the gentle, sensitive, sentimental, decent-looking ‘southern boy’ is much more popular among females. In fact, inattention to one’s own appearance and the dismissal of anyone who tries to tidy themselves up as ‘sissy’ are outdated and abandoned ideas—part of an ideology that takes the male perspective and ignores and disregards the feelings of females. Men ask women to be aesthetic objects, but they do not respect women’s own aesthetics. This neglect of women’s feelings also biases sexual satisfaction. In contrast with the frequent image of masculinity as hairy and sweaty, the neat and clean descriptions in BL are much more popular in the female-oriented market. Thus the latter presentation of masculinity is defined through a female perspective. Whether in Jingjing’s description of ‘neat and tidy’ boys or Manman’s image of ‘clean’ men, these ideal images depart from the masculinity that is socially expected. Hence it is fair to point out that the male characters in BL represent an ideal image from a female perspective, rather than presenting masculinity from a male angle—whether heterosexual or homosexual.

In fact, traditional Chinese culture defines ideal masculinity differently from the West. [Louie](http://www.worldcat.org/search?q=au%3ALouie%2C+Kam.&qt=hot_author) (2002) argues that traditional Chinese masculinity is manifested through the different and intertwining ideals of *wen* (文) and *wu* (武). While *wu* represents the heroism and valour of masculinity, *wen* emphasizes wisdom and rationality. For thousands of years these two ideals represented the mainstream understanding of masculinity in China. Each of these two masculine temperaments was treated differently over a long historical period. For instance, the characteristic of *wen* was extremely popular during the Ming and Qing dynasties: the image of the weak but wise *cai zi* (才子, talented man) or *wen ren* (文人, well-educated scholar) is often seen in novels from these periods, and enjoyed enormous popularity. To achieve general individual ambitions, Chinese tradition emphasizes the balance of these two temperaments.

Fang (2012) offers a different view of this duality of masculinity. He argues that the classification of Chinese masculinity as *wen*/*wu* is not clear enough to demonstrate the essence of Chinese philosophy; the dualism ‘rigid/flexible’ more accurately corresponds to the constructions of ancient Chinese philosophy and masculinity. Rigidity and flexibility characterize the individual’s actions, appearance, temperament, and personality embodied in the practice of masculinity, and most masculine practices will move between these frameworks. Hence, the most popular interpretation of masculinity under the Confucian system features both *wen*/*wu* and rigid/flexible. [Louie](http://www.worldcat.org/search?q=au%3ALouie%2C+Kam.&qt=hot_author) (2002) explains that the traditional interoperations of masculinity were based on the ‘golden mean’ of Confucian philosophy, unlike the binary oppositions of traditional Western culture and ideology such as male/female, masculinity/femininity, and heterosexuality/homosexuality.

During the 20th century, as modernization and Westernization completely changed China, the understanding of masculinity became increasingly complex. On the one hand, the traditional wisdom and weakness of *wenren* remained deeply rooted in the minds of many Chinese. Other on the hand, with the immense pressure that was constantly challenging traditional ideals of masculinity, Chinese intellectuals began to lose confidence and to sense a strong identity crisis, especially during the late Qing period. All the evidence shows that weakness, wisdom, and flexibility as part of masculinity were gradually rejected by mainstream society. More recently, in the 1980s, Western thought and ideologies again flooded into China with the open-door policy. The Western ideal of masculinity became dominant, while the Chinese population desperately sought self-identities. American actors such as Stallone and Schwarzenegger and their impenetrable, dauntless image became the model of masculinity, and gained massive popularity right up to today.

Aside from its capacity to stir readers’ sexual interest, BL is the subject of another view among *fu nü*: that it is neither a homosexual parallel to normative heterosexuality nor a same-sex expression. Longlong explained:

Longlong: In BL manga, there are many boys with clean bodies. I feel it is aesthetically pleasing to see two beautiful and clean boys have intimate behaviour, just like looking at two kittens or puppies playing together, which makes me feel pleased and quite happy... I feel disgusted by a ‘beard’ between two legs… I like clean genitals without any sexual intimation.

For Longlong, the BL aesthetic is one that no previous research has talked about: a new way to appreciate BL as a ‘third gender’ or ‘non-gender’ object. I discuss this further in a later chapter.

My interview data did not reveal a unified standard according to which *fu nü* understand the relationship between heterosexuals and homosexuals. For them, there is no definite boundary to define these two worlds. In my understanding, *fu nü* are choosing a way to present their own aesthetics and desires: they like to create, see, and imagine expressions which make them happy, no matter what those expressions are like—and they can be as multifarious as they want. As BL serves *fu nü*’s sexual-aesthetic imagination, no matter what form it takes—heterosexual or homosexual—it works to provide sexual appreciation and stimulate sexual interest. These young women can create, read, and talk about the beauty of the human body in a natural way. I believe this constitutes progress in young Chinese women’s sexual expression today.

As Li (1991) argues, it is probably only in a few cultures—such as Chinese culture, which she calls ‘over-civilized’—that questions would be raised as to whether sex is beautiful or ugly. Having been indoctrinated so much and for so long, we Chinese are far from our animal natures. According to Li, the most terrible curse words in Chinese culture are all about sex, while in polite circles sexual words are seldom used because it is easy for such words to expose or emphasize humans’ animal sexuality. Sex in Chinese culture is therefore in a particularly awkward position. The basic moral rule is that since we are civilized people, we should get far away from animal activities, sexual activity included. This ‘over-civilization’ makes Chinese people feel that sex, or some forms of sexual activity or attitude, is ugly; this may cause some to feel moral superiority, and others—especially young women—to feel degraded. This culture has led to a long-term environment of sexual repression. However, my interviews suggest that this situation is changing. Most of the highly educated young women who were my participants were brave in their pursuit of sexual aesthetics.

In modern China, the gender hierarchy has undergone great turmoil, and attitudes towards homosexuality have drastically changed. In this context—where the culture of *fu* *nü* began to emerge in modern China—sexual repression and the hierarchical order are actually a hybrid of Eastern and Western cultures. It is not the focal point of this chapter to determine which repressive factors are indigenous and which are from Western culture. Regardless of cultural background, patriarchal society maintains its control by constantly building the ideal image of male authority. Although such images change with historical and regional factors, their relationship with power is relatively stable. Therefore, Song (2011) states that masculinity is intangible and exists in every corner of society. Masculinity is not an essence, but a series of models of social practice through which males secure their own position. This means that changing the activity of symbolic construction in the distribution of power, and breaking down the hegemony of male characteristics, is not an impossible task.

**‘Real’ and ‘safe’: sexual satisfaction in BL**

Most BL works contain a lot of sexual scenes or descriptions. The word *yaoi*, also widely used to refer to the genre, especially focuses on works that feature sexual stimulation and satisfaction. The first *yaoi* works were created by Yasuko Sakata and Akiko Hatsu in the late 1970s. The term itself, coined in the 1980s, is an acronym that stands for the Japanese words *Yama nashi, Ochi nashi, Imi nashi*, which means ‘no climax, no point, no meaning’ (see Toku, 2007; McHarry, 2003). *Yaoi* works are so called because they are likely to show emotional interactions or physical contact—even sexual images, such as sweating skin—between two males. Most are fan-created works based on original manga material, focusing on the ‘yummy parts’. They are presented as short sections rather than fully developed storylines, and hence there is an alternative, joking interpretation of *yaoi* as meaning *Yamete, Oshiri ga Itai* (‘stop, my bum hurts’) (see Thorn, 2004; Lunsing, 2006).

According to my data, most of my participants gain sexual satisfaction through reading BL, and they consider this an indispensable or even the main feature of BL. This is especially true for young women who have less sexual experience. Some *fu nü* use the term *xiao rian rou* (小鲜肉, ‘little fresh meat’) to refer to the young, fresh, and beautiful characters, and the porn aspect is also called *rou* (肉), which literally means ‘meat’. They use these words because a fresh body is ‘eye candy’ and delicious meat. Many of my participants revealed similar views on this point. Glass said: ‘If I have a chance to watch two handsome guys, why would I just watch one in a boy-girl story?’ Panpan said that BL is ‘double *rou*, double fun’. Qiqi said that, unlike with heterosexual porn, ‘I could watch them with a woman’s taste.’

To my surprise, most of my participants were honest in reply to my questions about sex. I had assumed that the highly personal questions about sexual attitudes and experiences might be a part of the research that would be difficult to conduct, since talking openly about sex is traditionally regarded as culturally taboo in East Asian societies, as Jackson (2008) points out. I was prepared to deal with my participants’ occasional silences on sensitive topics they did not want to discuss. However, most of the time my interviewees were willing to share their true feelings with me; without my having to try very hard to get them to talk, they just told me everything frankly. I became excited about the quality of the data. Their courage to accept new knowledge, speak out about sex, and explore their own bodies and desires reflects a revolution in women’s sexual attitudes.

My participants told me very explicitly that sexual satisfaction is one of the essential functions of BL. They made it obvious that they regarded the release of sexual tension as a biological need, prompted by instinct and necessity. Maomao talked about her sexual needs in a calm voice, just as if she were talking about other bodily needs such as eating or sleeping: ‘When I feel my body is suppressed, I will read it [BL].’ Shishi agreed with this and made it more specific in another interview: ‘I crave it near my periods.’

Pei (2014) considers starting and expanding a discourse about masturbation as the first step in talking about sex. Understanding and experiencing masturbation can be helpful for women learning how to choose a lifestyle, create meaning, and situate their own identities. In my interviews, some women shared their experiences of using BL as masturbatory material, ‘to find the *lu* (撸) point in BL’ or ‘pull off the wizard power (Jiangjiang)’. Zhuzhu considered BL to be good material for arousal:

Zhuzhu: Generally it is delightful to find *rou* in a BL work. It caters to popular taste… thus you can see where the readers’ G spot is. If it is forbidden by online censorship and no *rou* shows, people can get annoyed.

The terms *lu* and ‘pulling off the wizard power’ are newly emerged discourses to refer to sexual behaviour. *Lu* describes an up-and-down ‘hand job’ for men, while ‘pulling off the wizard power’ means masturbating to ejaculation. The general usage of these terms can also refer to women’s sexual arousal and behaviour. I do not intend to discuss my participants’ masturbatory practices in any depth. What concerns me more is that the usage of these new expressions allows my participants to talk straightforwardly about the personal issues of their bodies and desires. Using the formal word ‘masturbation’ might be awkward. Similarly, they use *rou* to indicate pornography, and the term ‘G spot’ with an alternative meaning to refer to things that get women excited. These discourses reveal that the use of language is a strategy for young women to identify, construct, and express their sexuality and desires. Their attitude is open to talking about sex; however, formal usages and definitions are too stressful, and they would rather use more ambiguous and playful ways to define sex.

Evans (1997) reviews Chinese literature on masturbation from the 1950s to the 1990s. Although the fact of women’s masturbation was admitted by Chinese scholars (Li, 1956, cited in Evans, 1997), who referred to Western research to prove that it was a normal phenomenon (Li and Liu, 1992, cited in Evans, 1997), the view of masturbation as an uncontrollable physical and mental force still implied that it was morally reprehensible and potentially dangerous. It allegedly wasted the energy of the young adult’s body, leading them into wrongful attitudes towards love and sex, and could be harmful to their future sexual pleasure and harmony in marriage (Liu, 1993; Feng, 1995; Yu, 1954, cited in Evans, 1997). Jackson, Liu, and Woo (2008) contend that with the passing of time, women’s consumption of pornography and masturbation are becoming common forms of sexual pleasure, and the content of the category of ‘the sexual’ in East Asian sexual politics has gradually become extended and enriched (Byeon 2006, cited in Jackson et al., 2008). I attempted to normalize the issue of sex, including masturbation, with a strategy that balanced social expectations with participants’ willingness to engage in self-expression.

Zhuzhu gave me a more detailed explanation of her interest:

Zhuzhu: It is similar that some men would like to watch lesbian porn because it is very hot, two hot ladies doing sexual activity is a great excitement for men. We women are the same, I like men so I of course like to watch two handsome guys in a sexual scene. I have no feelings about girls. Yes, I can feel the love and emotion of a lesbian couple when shown in a movie, but it is not hot for me at all. Sometimes readers would be very critical about the writer’s writing style; however, unless it’s an extremely stupid setting, everybody loves to read the ones that have *rou*. Thus it is obvious to find where *fu nü*’s point lies. I believe that if someday online censorship were to forbid *rou* in BL, BL would become extinct.

For these women, *fu nü* is about an interest in sex: they admit their sexual needs honestly, and they are looking for sexual satisfaction through BL. But why they do not do this with heterosexual porn? One of my focus groups told me about their experiences of watching porn videos:

Shawl: Because I can feel that the female porn star has a fake orgasm, her sexual moaning is very phony, and it is clear to see that she is not that wet, it’s lube, she has no feeling at all. I just want to tell her I know you are unhappy already, why do you still pretend?

NL: How do you know that the man in gay videos is not pretending to be happy?

Ponytail: You can see his penis! Basically that gay porn stars cannot ejaculate through inserting, they should use their hands to help, as we can see in novels as well, men could have pleasure while being touched on their prostate, 90 per cent of men can get their orgasm using hands.

NL: But you have no idea how he feels?

Ponytail: You know, for a woman it is very hard to get an orgasm. I know what a woman feels since I myself am a woman. The porn star cannot get an orgasm and is trying hard to pretend. I feel uncomfortable for her. I prefer to watch gay porn, at least they have real pleasure. If the [heterosexual] video would make me unhappy, then why would I watch it?

In the interview data above, my participants explain why they prefer male same-sex behaviour in relation to sexual pleasure. Women occupy mainstream heterosexual porn as objects of the male gaze and to entertain men. But their real feelings have long been ignored in the male-dominated market. Faking orgasm is very common, not only in porn videos, but also routinely in heterosexual sex. Thus, for these women who are seeking their own sexual satisfaction, traditional sexual material does not work; they want to express and satisfy their own sexual desire in a new way, a way which comes from their own perspective and pleases them. BL producers have developed a mature method to accomplish this purpose. As Dandan says:

Dandan: Actually, many of those BL producers have read other kinds of porn material and they are familiar with women’s interests, they know how to produce work which may stimulate women most, they just grab the most stimulating parts and transfer them into BL products. So BL products can work for women, many readers could have a feeling of identification [with the sexual pleasure present in BL].



Figure 24. Force sex in Japanese adult manga; it is a familiar scene in the work which created by male artist and target to the whole market with a male angle.

Source:https://doujins.com/hentai-manga/bai-asuka-impregnated-mother-33811#1tnq3ads



Figure 25. Gentle sex in BL manga with thoughtful words and soft foreplay.

Source:https://www.mangatown.com/manga/shishunki\_no\_zawazawa/c005/31.html

In addition, my participants claim that BL can give them purer sexual pleasure than man-woman porn. Not only does BL offer ‘double *rou*, double fun’ in Panpan’s words, but it also provides a safe distance from which to enjoy sexual scenes without excessive identification. Several participants mentioned this to me:

Dandan: I read a little about BG production. Especially when I saw a man kissing a woman’s nipple, I would take myself into that woman character and feel bad and ashamed. When I read BL, I just enjoy the pure sex scenes; I do not need to think about other things which would distract me.

Zhuzhu: [Reading BL] we will not bring ourselves in, so we would not feel ashamed.

NL: Why do you say ‘ashamed’?

Zhuzhu: Girls are taught to ‘know shame’ from childhood, she will know how to protect herself [her sexual parts]. When watching [heterosexual] porn you will feel like you’re watching yourself and think ‘how could I be watching?’ and feel bad. Although it is not you, but you will know it is a bad thing instinctively and you have to avoid this happening. But if it is a performance between two men, firstly you feel visual pleasure, secondly you can avoid bringing yourself in and feeling ashamed.

Looking back through history, we can see that medical discourse opened an important outlet for ‘sex’ and therefore occupies an important position in sexual research. However, medical discourse also has its negative effects, as it exacerbates biological determinism. Under the influence of scientific discourse, people’s knowledge about sexuality is constructed from medicine, anatomy, and physiology, and constantly reinforces the idea that men and women are born with different sexual characteristics. These essentialist conceptions see men and women’s gender differences as ordered by biology, ignoring the effect of social construction. Under this presumption, people’s sexual performance is believed to derive from a natural driving force. From the perspective of biological determinism, women are considered more passive and obedient sexually. This has an effect on the tone of education, emphasizing men’s initiative and power while presenting women’s sexual desire as weak. Thus, sexual pleasure has become the exclusive property of men; women—especially those who are defined as good women in traditional Chinese culture—have nothing to do with it

Chenchen, who had never had a boyfriend or any previous sexual experience, talked about the kind of BL she read and why it was interesting.

Chenchen: I am a girl. So I prefer to watch men. I like the BL characters with obvious masculinity. I can see that they feel good through their facial expressions [when having sex] and I feel good as well. Unlike watching man-woman, sometimes you will think of yourself and put yourself into that character, feel that you are naked in front of others, it is embarrassing and shameful.

NL: What do you think is the source of this embarrassing feeling?

Chenchen: Maybe it is my zero experience.

NL: What makes you still insist on your virginity?

Chenchen: I think it must be the potential impact of the family environment and traditional conservative concepts, which educate us to keep our virginity for our future husband.

NL: Do you think it is important?

Chenchen: Yes, I have my own requirement of myself, I think I should be this way.

In Chenchen’s case, there was an underlying reason behind the erotic appeal of BL manga. For her there was no possibility of getting sexual satisfaction through intimate relationships before marriage. Although she did not mention the source of the power that forced her to obey this rule, she admitted the ‘potential impact of traditional concepts’ as encouraging her to remain a virgin. In traditional Chinese society, when a woman married a man she would leave her original family and belong entirely to her husband and his family. Thus virginity was a symbol of total belonging and submission. Chenchen regarded this as a natural thing and restricted herself without feeling discontented, keeping a strict distance from the opposite sex. Even in today’s Chinese society, women’s virginity is important for building solid relationships: there are many men who regard virginity as a primary consideration when they look for marriage partners. This has a profound impact on the behaviour of women, some of whom might regard it as an inescapable rule. Hence, as Chenchen told me, with its obvious facial expressions, explicit language, and intense sexual action, BL gave her a way to imagine the sexual pleasure she had never experienced herself.

In the cases discussed above, my participants enjoy the erotic pleasure of BL in a heterosexual way. These young women focus on the ‘handsome appearance’, ‘shapely body’, and sexual behaviour presented by the opposite sex: they are watching erotic scenes between two men, but they are not interested in whether it is a gay couple. Their sexual arousal arises directly from the fact that they are watching men, on the basis of their own heterosexual experiences or perceptions, rather than from the ‘pleasure’ the BL heroes themselves give and receive through homosexual behaviour. As Matthew Thorn (2004) argues, ‘there is an undeniable voyeuristic element, because most readers and artists are, in fact, females’: the emphasis is away from gayness, and the male body becomes an object of female observation and entertainment. This is confirmed by my participants’ words. Since BL was initially created by women to fulfil women’s aesthetic and erotic needs, this has been an unavoidable element in BL’s popularity. In BL readers’ world—compared with the real world, which is full of the consumption of women in advertising and pornography—men have become the objects to be gazed at. However, many girls do not consider that they are ‘observing’ or ‘consuming’ men; on the contrary, they are more likely to experience BL characters as bosom friends and confidants fighting for sexual pleasure and orgasm.

The topic of sex is always hard to talk about in Asian countries (Jackson, 2008), and many unmarried Chinese women still consider that talk about sex is improper. Even young women often think that sex is dirty, shameful, and not part of their lives: although man-woman sexual behaviour might happen for them one day, they try hard to stay away from it in order to keep their virginity and purity. It is therefore safe to watch the opposite sex engage in sexual behaviour, because that behaviour could never happen to them.

During the reform period, especially throughout the 1990s with the development of the market economy, a cultural market gradually emerged in mainland China. According to the most basic economic principles, the market is influenced by demand; on the other hand, lifestyles, cultural heritage, and standards of living all shape people’s needs on the cultural market. When the factors that influence the market change, the balance shifts. In what seemed to be some kind of compensation for the long suppression of public discussions of sex, a culture of sex soon flooded the cultural market, in a chaotic and disorderly manner. Soon the Chinese cultural market was full of low-class, obscene materials. Driven by the pursuit of profit, a large amount of erotic literature was created to satisfy less-educated readers such as workers and farmers. In the immature literary market, erotic literature became a mass hit; in such works, the expression of love became an empty shell, and love and sex were separated. Sexual expression was reduced to the mere consumption of goods and to entertainment for the general population. Expressions of love and sex alike were driven by profit. Behind this market demand, which was dominated by a large number of male readers, the effective demand of women was inadequate.

According to previous research, the first reason why women read BL is that it offers a temporary escape from the strict patriarchal society in which they live. McLelland (2000) believes that Japanese society’s double standard regarding the sexual expression of men and women is an essential reason for BL’s popularity. Women have to marry to ‘survive economically’ rather than to express love or sexuality, and they live in abstinence because their society believes that non-reproductive sex is damaging, both morally and physically. Thus manga, which contains diverse elements including sex, is embraced by these women as an inexpensive entertainment. As a product mostly created and consumed by females, BL occupies the position of a female-created space which allows girl readers to express and fulfil their desires and fantasies (Thorn, 2004). It is obvious that Chinese BL readers are facing a similar situation.

Another finding is that my participants talked about sex in a more open way than I had expected. They did not just talk about it with simple phrases such as ‘I like it’; they gave evidence to support their opinions, speaking in depth and detail. It is a sign of progress that these young women in modern China have sufficiently open minds to watch, learn, and talk about sex today. This open-mindedness did not apply to cultural products in China until the end of the Mao era and the rise of the Deng era. The sexual puritanism imposed for decades by the Communist Party was then no longer enforced. Sex—as the ultimate joy and experience of life, and as part of the complexity of human nature—lies behind the veil of expressions of love (Zhang, 2009). Life without sex is imperfect and incomplete, as Zhang (2009) points out, and literature without the expression of love is twisted, deformed, even false. Love and sex are an inseparable whole, and the exploration of loveless sex and asexual love may help us to find the root of human suffering. The expression of sex in literature is not about obscenity, sin, or ugliness, but aesthetics and dignity—women are positioning themselves as the subjects, and facing up to their own desires.

**BL as sex education**

Methods of sex education are closely related to their social and historical environments. The more abstinence is promoted, the more obstacles appear in the way of discovering the truth about sex. Thus people who live in such eras or societies have more difficulty with the learning process in relation to sex, and are prone to more distortions and misunderstandings when exploring its actuality. Generally speaking, there are diverse ways to get sex education—by consuming books, TV, movies, or other mass media, or through family, school, or peer groups, or by other means. However, as Li (1991) argues, parents and schools have not taken on this responsibility, although they are supposed to be the main source of sex education for the younger generation. Thus other forms of sex education replace or supplement the weakness and insufficiency of schools and parents in this regard. Since BL works contain a large number of sex- and love-related activities, not only do they stimulate desire for the purposes of sexual pleasure, but they also imply the author’s (and, to a broad extent, mainstream consumers’) attitudes towards sexual organs, sexual physiology, and sexual relations. In the course of the reading process, readers will accept the information. But this process is not passive; it is an active selection and learning process. My aim now is to look at how BL readers process and ultimately receive information, and how this combines with their own self-awareness—that is, my question is about the nature and causes of the deficiency of Chinese sex education, and about how BL forms part of the self-education process.

According to my data, although BL is not intended to be used as sex education material when readers first start to engage with it, it unexpectedly achieves this effect in practice. For instance, when I interviewed Uu we talked about an ‘unsolved mystery’ in her experience:

Uu: It is quite coincidental that most of the *fu nü* I know are much more mature in their understanding of sex, or like to know more about sex, or know a lot about sex. I have been thinking about this for a long time; it is quite an unsolved mystery, ah?

NL: What possibilities have you considered so far?

Uu: Hum... Maybe girls like me know about sex earlier. We read BL at first and are seeking those with great erotic sexual descriptions, it is more open than boy-girl novels, and not too romantic to be unreal, and the boy-girl novels are too literary, we are seeking for more excitement and stimulation at that time… Besides, I don’t know why some girls became too affected, then we dropped them, then we began [to read BL].

NL: So what do you think makes you mature in your sexual understanding?

Uu: I think we [*fu nü* and other girls] are almost the same, but *fu nü*, unlike those cute and affected girls, are more natural. We fraternize with boys and know what they are taking about [in relation to sex], then I read BL, and found it was more acceptable.

The ‘unsolved mystery’ is the unconscious educational effect of choosing and reading BL. Because they are braver than other girls, *fu nü* have the courage to choose ‘more excitement and stimulation’ as a pastime, and are more adventurous about talking with the opposite sex in a way that goes against the traditional expectation that young women should be ignorant of and resistant to sex and should want to preserve their own purity. Through reading BL, *fu nü* have found that sex is not so bad, and that it is OK to talk about sex in public. As they gain more understanding and acceptance of sex through reading BL, they gradually form a natural attitude and gain some sex education.

The peer group is another important factor in prompting this education process. Communication between female friends is an effective means to help teenagers become mature with regard to what happens between boys and girls. Furthermore, same-sex communication is more open. My data reveals a unique environment that favours young women’s creation and communication of an interest in BL: *wen ke ban* (文科班, ‘liberal arts class’). In its original conception, this is a neutral term—it is just a matter of one’s educational interests. However, in contemporary China it has more implications. It is an unwritten rule that females are more suited to a liberal arts education because of their romantic and unrealistic characteristics. Unless they have a highly intelligent brain and strong personality ‘like a boy’, girls can be forced by their parents to take liberal arts. My group interview with three *fu nü* shows how *wen ke ban* fostered their interest in BL:

Ponytail: The key is that we were in *wen ke ban* in secondary school, then basically ... you know what *wen ke ban* is like?

NL: Yes, I was in *wen ke ban* as well.

Ponytail: Right, you know the environment… only very few of the boys were in our class... Almost every girl in my class was a BL fan… Maybe that was why I introduced you to reading BL when we first met at university… since there were all *fu nü* around me before, and no one talked about this with me at university.

Shawl: Yes, I know it.

NL: So your everyday topic was all about BL?

Shawl: Not deliberately.

Ponytail: But we would recommend good new works to each other.

Shawl: Right, and that would lead to a series of conversations based on this text.

Glasses: And sometimes we chat about other things, accidentally our topic would turn to it.

In China, secondary school is the time to choose between liberal arts classes and science classes. This means a separation of male and female adolescent students. In *wen ke ban*, it is normal to find fewer than 10 boys in a class of 60 or more. The young women who almost live in the surroundings of *wen ke ban* have less chance to get close to boys of the same age. Thus they are more likely to obtain knowledge and fulfilment with regard to the opposite sex from the specific, fictional material of BL.

Moreover, the gendered phenomenon of *wen ke ban* rests on the typical gender stereotype that men are more competent in a broader field and can create more social value than women. Dustin B. Thoman et al. (2008, p. 58) hypothesize that ‘the sociocultural salience of ability versus other components of the gender-math stereotype may impact women pursuing math’, and this is reflected in the system of separate classes in China. Chinese students’ educational choices are still dogged by stereotypes, such as the idea that boys study science and girls study liberal arts, or that boys have to choose a promising major in order to get a good job and salary to support a family, while girls can choose whatever they like, since they will go back to the family anyway. These stereotypes give women lower self-esteem, limiting the formation and display of individuals’ personality traits. There is a belief in the traditional social system that understands the differences between men and women in terms of qualities that are supposedly innate and inherent in the genders: women’s logical thinking is inferior to men’s; females are more focused on feelings, while males are more rational. Are women really more focused on feelings than men? People think this is an a priori truth, although in fact there is no evidence to prove it. Thus it is obvious that when *fu nü* criticize traditional boy-girl romantic stories (and when they insist that they are totally different from the young women who only read boy-girl stories, as I will discuss in a later chapter), this is a revolt against the stereotype—especially if they are forced to live in the *wen ke ban* environment, which is product of this very stereotype.

Young women’s involvement in *wen ke ban* also has a historical background. There is a famous saying about uneducated women: ‘woman without talent is virtue’ (*nü zi wu cai bian shi de*, 女子无才便是德). Before marriage, a woman was traditionally family property (Liu, 1968). Education was never a basic right for women. However, as mentioned in Chapter 1, there was another tradition of education for women under the feudal system, often known as *nü jiao* (女教,‘female textbook’). This textbook included topics from painting and calligraphy to a set of rules for moral conduct: how to behave in the family, in society, with one’s husband, etc. *Nü jiao* reached its peak under the Ming dynasty, and there were various female textbooks circulating in Ming society. As discussed in Chapter 1, the core doctrine of these female textbooks can be summarized as the Three Obediences and Four Virtues (*sang con si de*, 三从四德). When it comes to today, there are still many cases where young women, especially in rural areas, are not considered clever enough to master sciences such as maths or physics. Their parents would rather ask them to go to *wen ke ban* to learn something easy, and to get married one day to someone in a good financial position. Conversely, boys are asked to take science courses, whether they like it or not, since this will help them to get a well-paid job in the future. For these reasons, boys and girls are separated into different classes when they are in puberty.

For young women in *wen ke ban*, male bodies and sexual techniques are not the only things they can learn about in BL. Take Aa’s words as an example:

Aa: [The BL story that impressed me most] is mainly about three love stories. It contains sexual scenes, but does not expose a lot, and that was not the key point. The first storyline is about a college student and a famous writer, the second is about puppy love between a gay couple, and the third is about an older man and a young boy. These six people have their own unique personalities and characteristics, and their relationships are different, like inferior bottom versus superior top, equals in ability, and superior bottom versus inferior top. In general, it shows three kinds of relationship.

NL: So it demonstrates relationships from different angles?

Aa: Yes, *fu nü* as well as I think this is the classic manga and very popular. I think the most important reason is that it represents different characters and relationships, there is one that you need.

...

NL: Since you have experience of heterosexual sex and relationships, why do you still try to understand the opposite sex through BL?

Aa: Because I think BL describes men’s feelings and mental activity in a more realistic way. In my own experience, I might just [be] the one as bottom, but I have no idea what a top feels like.

Aa’s words suggest that for *fu nü* BL resembles a textbook about sex, love, and relationships. They want to know what a man experiences and thinks during sexual behaviour and relationships. Boy-girl stories are always too idealized to meet women’s needs; BL is more realistic and straightforward. Especially for young women who have little or no experience of being in love, as well as for those who have less chance to practise in real life, BL is good educational material for understanding the opposite sex in all aspects.

Significant others have an important influence on the processes of a person’s socialization and personality formation. Li (1991) criticizes Chinese parents for failing to assume responsibility for their children’s healthy sexual development, arguing that in extreme cases this can cause serious damage to the child’s psychological health. I saw this conflict in my participant Longlong, who had had a lot of sexual experience but also had an extreme longing for pure sex and love. She told me how her inner conflict over sex and love had been formed:

Longlong: I have always had specific interest in big breasts, or I would say, it is reproductive worship. When I was too young to have a concept of sex, I was always peeping when my mother or aunt changed their clothes when they went shopping at lingerie shops. It has a straightforward sensory and psychological impact on me, I do like to watch women’s bodies.

NL: That impact... Do you mean sexual arousal... in the genitals?

Longlong: I do have pleasure about it... well, not very sure because I never tried to have sex with a woman. I like beautiful things, and I judge things from their appearance, it is almost instinctive. Just like everyone else fancies sexy things. But consciously I feel this behaviour is dirty, while instinctively I feel visually excited.

NL: Where does this ‘dirty’ perception come from in your conscious?

Longlong: My mum. She is a traditional and conservative woman. She caught me reading a porn cartoon once when I was in primary school... It was a BL manga circulated among classmates, it was popular but still minority. I read more in junior school since the *fu nü* group became larger. In fact we knew what it was at first, just two men biting each other’s neck and leaving love bites, we did not even know what a love bite was. Those manga were censored by covering the genitals. We did not know what that was until lower secondary school.

NL: Would you describe it in more detail?

Longlong: Just feeling my behaviour was dirty. Porn cartoons, magazines, and my father’s web browser history—those body art photos on the forum. The first feeling was very beautiful, the second feeling was visual stimulation. Although I was not mature at that time, I felt dizzy when I saw that. My mum has very strict taboos about sex, her response [to catching me reading a porn cartoon] was very intense. She said I was dirty-minded, very disgusting, and asked me whether I was abnormal. But things became normal when I grew up. They [parents] got used to it and I found it did not matter as well.

Longlong could only become self-educated from porn manga such as BL. It is clear that the attitude of Longlong’s mother towards sex had a profound impact on her. Longlong’s sexual ignorance should have been managed by her mother; instead, her mother’s intense reaction made her feel guilty and gave her no chance to learn. Due to this early experience, her first impressions of sex were dirty. Suiming Pan (2011) believes that, unlike in the West—where guilt is at the centre of Christian doctrine, and has come to regulate sexual behaviour and expression—shame is the key to the Chinese moral code that has suppressed the expression of sex in China. Shame does play an important role in Chinese ethics and morality. The dubbing of certain cultural products ‘dirty’ is derived from the feeling of shame:

Unlike the medical perspective that defines ‘dirty’ or ‘clean’ from an objective and scientific angle, when ordinary people in a society or culture judge sexual expression as ‘dirty’ they are doing so according to their inherited cultural standards, as a snap judgement. Such standards of ‘dirt’ are created by the whole culture of a traditional society. This is a convenient tool to manage and suppress sex: for instance, menstruation is dirty, secretions are dirty, prostitution is dirty, any sexual behaviour that is not confined to reproductive purposes is dirty. All in all, sex is dirty.

Longlong’s story is not unique; it could have happened in most Chinese families of her generation. Her experience can be seen as a conflict between the ‘Mao generation’ and the ‘Deng children’. The population referred to (among Western scholars) as the ‘Mao generation’ (also referred to as ‘educated youth’ or ‘sent-down youth’) is a specific demographic identified by some Chinese scholars: people who were born between 1947 and 1957. Almost three decades later, the children of these sent-down youth were called ‘Deng’s children’ (Su, 2011). Longlong’s mother, who was born in the late 1950s in China, is now in middle age. The experience of women who had their adolescence in the 1950s, 1960s, or 1970s in China—the ‘Mao generation’—is the most unique in Chinese history. They experienced fear and resentment about sex, both before and after puberty, even in relation to man-woman sex, love, and relationships. This can be traced back to Chinese revolutionary ideology in the 20th century, and is especially related to the ascetic social atmosphere in the decade when the Cultural Revolution was at its peak. In the decades after the reforms of the late 1980s, the Chinese social atmosphere became a lot more open than it had been in the past. Longlong, like all the other participants in my research, was a part of the ‘Deng generation’, born to and educated by the ‘Mao generation’. The ‘Deng generation’ grew up during China’s transition, and experienced an unprecedented explosion of information. Heterogeneous social trends continue to proliferate and diversify today, and young people continually have to recognize and choose their own ideologies through communication, understanding, adaptation, cooperation, and friction. They have a much larger space and more choice, and have significant individual differences due to their different personalities. The younger generation has a very open attitude towards sex, but nonetheless the atmosphere of abstinence caused by Confucian culture and decades of revolutionary ideology should not be underestimated. To some extent, sexual repression has been transformed into folklore and unspoken rules transmitted along with education by the ‘Mao generation’. Thus there is conflict when people talk about sex.

According to Weber’s observation, in an increasingly wealthy and open Chinese society, young people are faced with many turning points. In this society, young people with personal style and independent spirit are encouraged in certain ways—for example, to be more enterprising and more competitive—but they are not encouraged to express their personality other than that. Many young people do not know what their ultimate future will be. Faced with a powerful materialism which is almost a decisive force, some people struggle to maintain their own intellectual values, some take up a self-deprecating or self-denying cynicism, while some fall completely into a hedonistic lifestyle. For this young generation, no matter what their social position, talking about sex has become the best form of self-expression. As the famous women writer Wei Hui said in an interview for the Western mass media: ‘We cannot change, so we pretend to know nothing, just take pleasure, looking for love and sex.’ From this point of view, these young women’s creation and consumption of sexual writing highlights the intergenerational differences which have been caused by China’s economic and social transformation. These transformations affect the lives of young women, including their sexual lives.

**Conclusion**

During the era of reform in China, there were two major events that helped to spark a sexual revolution. One of these was the large-scale social investigation of the topic of sex during the late 1980s. The other was a string of policies and laws, such as the revised Marriage Law (1980) and the implementation of the one-child policy. As Pan (2011) states in an assessment and summary of this sexual revolution, sex was freed from the traditional ‘sex-for-reproduction’ model, and the value of the institution of marriage is now widely recognized. Furthermore, during this sexual revolution, the idea of romantic love and the concept of ‘sex for pleasure’ became widely accepted by the young generation. Most importantly, females became more and more proactive in their relationships. During the reform era, people’s primary circles and interpersonal relationships were heavily affected by the political culture, leading to change and interaction, and forming an unstoppable revolutionary force.

It is noteworthy that the young generation of Chinese who were born and grew up in this period coincides with this intensive social transformation and sexual revolution. They became not only a mirror that reflected tremendous social changes, but also a barometer that represented the force pushing social change forward. Their new ideas of sex and love bear a clear imprint of this era and reflect the remarkable progress of the times. Their perspectives on sex are an important part of the subcultures of the young generation and the progress of the whole society in China.

My study examines how BL works as an expression of gender politics and a challenge to normative heterosexuality in general. By paying attention to the connections between young Chinese women’s reading experiences and their personal experiences, I argue that BL is more an expression of women’s revolt against patriarchal society than a campaign about homosexuality. Although still restricted by its traditional culture of asceticism, China is experiencing a transformation in sexual ideology, and *fu nü* is a good example. These women are changing themselves from objects to subjects of the gaze, and they are freer to both express their sexual needs and actively fulfil those needs. They are also more willing to show concern for their own bodies and feelings, which have been ignored for decades. Today young Chinese women are brave enough to learn and talk about sex and negotiate with the society they live in—a society that in some respects still clings to sexual repression, and where women are still drawn to men with power.

# Chapter 6. The Appeal of Ideal Lovers, Loves, and Relationships

Fromm (1957, cited in Johnson, 2005) defines love as ‘an active power in man’, and it is an eternal subject that has been discussed throughout human history. For my participants, love is also an essential topic in BL. They not only regard BL as reading material for entertainment, but they also project their attitudes to true love onto the BL world, which is entirely created and consumed by women.

When reading BL, readers to a great extent are influenced by the characters’ personae, the emotional interactions, and the plot development. Since it is motivated by market demand, a BL work—especially one with a popular reputation—not only presents the author’s imaginings of a relationship, but also reflects some women’s expectations and demands for perfect love. My interview data shows that most participants feel that BL presents deeper feelings, better lovers, and more equal romantic relationships than BG stories. Hence BL enables them to approach things they admire but cannot achieve in real life. Moreover, some readers might adjust their self-presentation in their relationship on the basis of things they have learned from a BL work. In this chapter, I will explore *fu nü*’s views about love, romantic partners, and relationships in BL. I will also discuss how they balance ideals and reality in order to make choices about their own future love lives. It can be argued that on the one hand, BL *reflects* women’s views of love, while on the other hand it also plays a significant role in *influencing* women’s views of love and how to manage relationships.

Unlike other readers who want to acquire romantic fulfilment from love stories, *fu nü* choose stories about same-sex love and relationships to achieve this purpose, instead of reading BG stories. Thus arises the question of whether the effect of BL is different from that of BG. When I raised the question ‘what are BL loves/relationships like?’ I received diverse answers from my participants, but not surprisingly, those answers shared some common points.

**Forbear and endure: BL love and relationships**

First, highly idealized romance is the primary attraction for these female readers. Previous research describes BL as a kind of product which is mostly created and consumed by women, or generalizes it as ‘girl-directed’ (*nüxing xiang*). It is a woman-created space and feminine fantasy world which allows its female readers to express and fulfil their desires and fantasies (Fran, 2012; Thorn, 2004). According to readers, BL writings are marked by an extraordinary lucidity and elegance of style, presenting the most beautiful and subtle emotions and feelings within a setting of same-sex love. This style emphasizes and exaggerates the subtle and delicate aspects, which are too highly romantic, gentle, loving, and dramatic to be found in daily life. As Lingling said, ‘It is like... you make someone as your ambition, your ideal, your dream... here [in BL] he defines someone as an ideal, whatever he does... is to get closer to the one he loves.’ This feeling is also not uncommon in BG stories. However, for *fu nü* the romantic elements of a same-sex love setting are different from heterosexual ones. Take Qiqi’s words, for example: ‘The feelings and emotions between a same-sex couple, especially men, could be more profound or more passionate... just because of love, they can stay together no matter how hard it will be. It is more dramatic and romantic [than BG].’ This is especially true in relation to certain objective obstacles which only occur in same-sex love, by comparison with the dominance of heterosexual love:

Yaoyao: I think the love in BL forbears more to speak, which strikes a deep chord in my heart… unlike heterosexual lovers, who are free to speak their love louder to the whole world, they can only keep silent and survive hurt alone… Once they decide to come out, they have no chance to go back. Thus, they must be much braver… they might struggle, and they might feel humble, but their love is extraordinary and great.

Maomao: What I admire is, although facing the irresistible pressure of reality, they still hold out some hope... the ending is that they love each other until they die… they abandon everything for this. If this place cannot tolerate them, then they will find another place… until they find the place where they can live. This love is deep-rooted and unforgettable.

Figure 26. Against the presure to ‘being normal’ as heterosexual, the character choses to get back to his BL lover.

Source:https://aminoapps.com/c/yaoi-stop/page/blog/manga-recommendation/51EV\_V0IVuLlxJemEZopn46DPnWjk

As these descriptions of BL love and relationships reveal, *fu nü* believe that BL has many distinguishing features. These features cannot be found in heterosexual relationships, which makes them cherish this kind of love more than the heterosexual love found in BG. BL characters are ‘unlike heterosexuals’ because they have to ‘forbear to speak’ and face the ‘irresistible pressure of reality’, making BL more touching as a dramatic representation. Because this kind of love and relationship is not widely accepted by current society, it suffers pressure and criticism from traditional morality and values. It deviates from the generally shared social consciousness that has been formed over centuries. Therefore the strategy for most sexual minorities is to hide or keep silent in order to be ‘normal’. Thus it is easy to presume that such minorities are extremely vulnerable and have to stay in the closet, be ‘silent’ and ‘lonely’ and ‘forbear to speak’ in order to keep safe. This point of view is clearly a biased one that fails to evaluate LGBT people fairly. However, for BL readers this is a way to project their expectations of ‘forever love’ even when it faces obstacles from the outset.

Enduring love, and the courage to break taboos for love, is another factor that inspires *fu nü*. As Zhuzhu told me, ‘It breaks something, this courage to break something makes BL different.’ Homosexuals as a group face great pressure, as they objectively represent a relative minority. This is a distinguishing feature that makes their love special according to *fu nü*, as my participants describe.

**Brotherhood**

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Figure 27. Brother BL manga.

Source:http://wo.poco.cn/8610972/post/id/3920206

As Mann (2000) points out, the division of labour and the social conventions of a separation between the genders meant that people spent most of their time in same-sex company. Young adult men’s ‘social skills, their emotional bonds, and their talents—whether physical or intellectual—were all developed in the company of men’ (Mann, 2000, p. 143). By sharing the same experience of attending school, fighting, and living together, men developed a sense of trust and strong sympathy. This was a strong form of male bonding, and men became fiercely loyal to their closest pals, sometimes referred to as ‘intimate friends’ (*zhi ji*, 知己 ‘one who knows me’). Famous novels such as *Romance of the three kingdoms* (*Sanguo yan yi*) and *All men are brothers* (*Shui hu zhuan,* 水浒传) celebrated comradeship and brotherhood. They showed how the heroes gained each other’s admiration, were bold and fearless in battle, and developed emotional and intellectual intimacy (Mann, 2011). Since women had no access to this form of relationship, they were largely absent from the narratives.

Bao (2011) uses the term ‘spiritual homosexuality’ to sum up this ‘brotherhood’. He describes spiritual homosexuality as emotional rather than physical: the men do not have sexual desires for each other, but they do have profound feelings which go beyond the usual. Thus ‘spiritual homosexuality’ is more than just friendship. It is hard to define the extent of such a subtle emotional connection, or to predict whether it might transform into love someday. The commercial entertainment industry uses this as a strategy to inspire female audiences to stretch their imaginations in the attempt to look for hints of love. In BL stories, this ‘brotherhood’ is expanded further to create an emotional impact. However, the celebration of brotherhood also presents a level of misogyny in which women themselves acquiesce.

Zhuzhu: The Japanese video game series Hakuoki tells a story about a little girl and several handsome, talented male warriors. In the game, you are the little girl, who can develop a relationship with any of them. However, when the animated film adaptation of this story was released, she became a fifth wheel, and that disturbed *fu nü*’s fantasies about the other male characters.

In the story, the main female protagonist has to complete a series of tasks with the assistance and protection of the male characters. According to Zhuzhu, this little girl is popular in Nordic countries, where she is regarded as an adorable girl who is doted on by many handsome men, like a princess. The relative gender equality found in Nordic countries means that this storyline does not look unreasonable to Nordic audiences. But what Zhuzhu emphasizes is that the brotherhood generated from fighting and living together makes the heroes’ relationship sincere and solid.

In BL works, the female characters’ presence is played down on purpose in order to emphasize the interaction among the male characters. However, despite the absence of female characters, my participants still can obtain satisfaction from the position of male characters in BL. In this regard, Butler has a very incisive understanding that we cannot assert that the construction of ‘men’ is a natural result derived from the male body, or that ‘women’ can only be embodied in the female body. We also have no reason to think that there are only two forms of gender. Therefore, the construction of gender is essentially independent from biological gender. It is free-flowing. This is a direct challenge to essentialism.

**The meaning of heterosexual relationships**

Under Confucianism, male and female constituted yin and yang: women stood for the negative and inferior part, while men represented the positive and superior (Lang, 1968). Confucius’s followers also developed more complex theories based on Confucianism. For instance, based on Confucian ethics, Shu Zhong Dong (179–104 BCE) developed the Three Cardinal Guides and Five Constant Virtues (*san gang wu chang*, 三纲五常). While the Five Constant Virtues (benevolence, righteousness, propriety, knowledge, and sincerity) set the principles of feudal moral conduct, the Three Cardinal Guides (ruler guides subject, father guides son, husband guides wife) emphasized absolute obedience to one’s superior, which strengthened the feudal hierarchy and fixed the moral principle that women were born to naturally serve men (Chen, 2003). This idea still has a profound impact today and continues to regulate women’s lives.

Yaoyao: I think this kind of people are born lonely. They are not resigned to finding someone who is not satisfied with them; they need someone who can understand them heart and soul, who can share their happiness and sorrow.

Ponytail: If I were a gay who was not getting along well with my partner, I think it would be hard for me to find another one I would love as much as this one. I would rather sit down and think about how we could solve this problem together and make our relationship more solid. But in a heterosexual relationship, it is easy to break up when couples are facing a small problem, which is why I have more than 20 ex-boyfriends. This is impossible in gay circles, the circle is small, and they can have news of each other easily.

According to my participants, the relatively small, close, and exclusive circle of potential lovers places an emphasis in BL on finding ‘the one’. As Shawl explains, ‘If you already know you will face a huge amount of problems when you make this decision, will you still go through fire and water for someone you do not love a lot, without hesitation?’ Thus BL represents an ideal of ‘irreplaceable love’ for women who may be worried about unstable marriages because of their inferior status in male-dominated relationships under a patriarchal society.

Besides this struggle, in China the other primary traditional bond—which constrains not only homosexuals but all young people—centres on the issue of reproduction. Rubin (1993, cited in Kong, 2011, p. 231) argues that in a hierarchical system of sexual values, ‘good’ and ‘normal’ sexuality is ideally ‘heterosexual, marital, monogamous, reproductive, and non-commercial’, while ‘homosexual, unmarried, promiscuous, non-procreative, or commercial’ sexuality is regarded as ‘bad’, ‘abnormal’, and ‘unnatural’. Sugiura (2006, cited in Galbraith, 2011) indicates that Japanese *fujoshi* (*fu nü*) are criticized for pursuing fantasies of non-reproductive sex and relationships through BL in a country where patriarchal family values persist. In many traditional families in China, carrying on the family line is still a primary responsibility for the couple. In many cases, childbearing is also a key issue for building and maintaining a solid and harmonious marriage.

Ponytail: In heterosexual relationships, for example, I am a man, and I like a woman very much, we get married, but this woman cannot have a baby, but I have the pressure to continue my family line, then I might find another woman, at least I could have my baby…

Although Ponytail is a woman, when she imagines herself in the male position she assumes that she would give up a sterile female lover for reproductive purposes. This is not because she agrees with or supports this attitude, but because she would have to accept it because of family pressure.

As discussed in Chapter 1, family and marriage practices have historically been the key elements that shape women’s lives in China. Ebrey (2003) states that Chinese women’s history is closely related to the history of family. To understand the role of women in ancient Chinese society, it is important to examine their role in marriage and the family. Men and women were never equal in the Confucian system (Hall, 1997). The *Book of changes* （周易) states that ‘great righteousness is shown when man and woman occupy their correct places.’ Heaven and earth, moon and sun, day and night, yin and yang, man and woman: gender differences were associated with other universal, natural states integral to the cosmic order (Croll, 1983). Confucianism not only stated that women were inferior to men (*nan nu you bie*, 男女有别), but also stipulated that ‘a woman should take no part in public affairs.’ Susan (2012) emphasizes that *nan nu you bie*, the foundational idea of the separation of the sexes, was an integral part of classical Chinese thought. According to this doctrine, men were defined as breadwinners, while women were strictly bound to the family. Being good at housework and strong in reproduction was proof of a woman’s value. Confucian scholar Mencius (372–289 BCE) argued that that while men worked outside in the field, women should confine themselves to the domestic space of the house and its gardens (Susan, 2012). Moreover, in Mencius’s model, men took charge of grain, wheat, and meat, while cloth and housework were women’s main concern.

Traditional Confucian ideology emphasizes the production of male offspring, as reflected in common sayings such as ‘the more children, the more blessings’ and ‘there are three forms of unfilial conduct, of which the worst is to have no descendants.’ Furthermore, it is mostly women who take responsibility for reproductive issues. In an essentialist world view, anatomy plays an important role in ‘proving’ women’s inferiority, and so childbearing ‘is taken to define the natural role of women’ (Rahman and Jackson, 2010, p. 17). Hongmei Li (2011) points out that this ancient model of the gendered division of labour persisted and could still be found in China in the 1980s.

In the context of such social pressures, it is understandable that my participants admire non-reproductive BL relationships. Qiqi told me that she admires BL because ‘it is not about handing down his DNA, not about reproducing and carrying on the family line. It is just about love.’ However, despite the assumption that men are less pressured than women, nonetheless it is an illusion to believe that gay men have no worries about reproduction. Indeed, as Kong (2011) points out, this is one of the reasons that Chinese gay men find it difficult to come out.

This argument leads to another question: whether BL offers illusionary images of gay men. Among other kinds of BL product, there is a buoyant market in China for BL fiction accompanied by exquisite illustrations to further gratify the readers’ tastes. In this respect, BL is generating highly idealized same-sex images, such as the ‘irreplaceable love’ discussed above, to capture the market and give customers visual pleasure faster than ever before. When I asked whether these products also offered true representations of the gay world, my participants replied that they thought that between 20–30 per cent and 60–70 per cent did so. Talking about the differences between two-dimensional BL and three-dimensional real gay men, Yaoyao told me: ‘They [gay people] may have problems such as promiscuous sex or cheating, there is much information that we can see online... I cannot accept these.’ Rongrong expressed a similar opinion: ‘I knew gay issues when I was very young, the social evaluation of this circle at that time was “dirty, promiscuous, and bad”, because they have no possibility to have same-sex marriage, change partners easily, even have been highly linked to AIDS for a time.’

The stigma against homosexuality has been long-lasting, especially stereotyped images of male homosexuality as vulnerable to sexually transmitted diseases, hepatitis, and AIDS. These images are less frequent in BL works. Scholars have long argued this point. In fact, most *fu nü* can differentiate between real gays and BL characters, but to a large extent the question of what a ‘realistic’ gay image would be like is not a central concern for *fu nü*. This is especially the case when they are immersed in the romantic stories that BL creates, as Zhuzhu explains:

Zhuzhu: In fact, unlike the pledge of eternal love in BL, it is common for real homosexuals to go through several partners. What is more, BL contains many female fantasies, it [same-sex love] cannot be as fancy as they imagine, ugly men could fall in love as well in the real world. I never see a *fu nü* become intoxicated by two fat, bald old guys; even they might have the most moving love. In real life, there can be various kinds of gay men, not everyone and every love among them can be as beautiful as BL.

To some extent, BL de facto gives people outside the homosexual community more information about same-sex love and relationships. For these outsiders, such understandings are very useful in helping them to develop an unprejudiced conception of homosexuality. As Glasses says, ‘I think it is about understanding… it seems abnormal to me… But I realize that it is not true when I have some understanding.’ Kong (2011) points out that the younger generation today is more accepting of homosexuality and even has a campaigning attitude towards homosexuality. *Tong zhi* (gay men) have slowly become dissociated from the image of pathological and deviant subjects, and have been transformed into an image of the good urban citizen who is knowledgeable, civilized, cosmopolitan, and valued. BL as well as mass media and culture have contributed to this progress by making the general public more open to and recognizing of homosexuality.

The balance between ideals and reality in BL creates a fantasy world for women. In this world, as Saito (2011) points out, such feelings and emotions are ‘clean and honest’ because they originate from mutual caring or equality and sympathy. Also, they are ‘truer and purer’ than ‘real’ homosexual and heterosexual relationships, which are ‘corrupted’ by erotic motives. So how would my participants describe this ‘purity’? Longlong simply used two words to define it: ‘basic instinct’.

Longlong: It’s utopia. It may be far away from reality, but it still has a little chance to exist, and it allowed me to aspire. This is an ideal state, a kind of perfectionism. It is pure, out of reality and without any other external disturbances... It is all about hormonal attraction... all about basic instinct.

When distinguishing true love in BL from love that relates to other social conditions, Longlong uses terms such as ‘hormonal’ and ‘basic instinct’ to express her viewpoint. Although she might not fully understand the scientific meaning of these terms or their place in the functioning of the human biological system, she uses them artlessly to define the love portrayed in BL. In Longlong’s description, hormones or instincts happen inevitably and naturally. They cannot be consciously controlled or influenced by other situational conditions. She uses this to explain the purity and strength of love in BL.

This kind of terminology is adopted to understand and express everyday phenomena. People accept certain scientific definitions and take them for granted. Despite the fact that they are not scientists, people believe in science and use it to interpret and understand the world. The result is that scientific essentialism is still influential.

Essentialism provides interpretations of behaviours and cognitions based on biological explanations (Rahman and Jackson, 2010). It treats all behaviours and identities of an individual as ‘the essence’ of him or her—as biological or psychological traits. Such traits are pre-social and cannot be changed. For example, one of my participants, Ponytail, used an anatomical concept to express her thoughts about inequality between men and women: ‘Equality between men and women is just bullshit! As long as a woman has a uterus, there will be no equality!’ She thinks that having a uterus is the fundamental factor preventing women from acquiring true gender equality. She uses ‘uterus’, a biological term, in an oversimplified way—as a sign with a social meaning to define the low status of women. For her, the biological differences between men and women determine their differential social status as something inevitable.

Other participants also express similar viewpoints, thinking that women’s status and roles are determined by biological functions and are unchangeable. Therefore, even though they might curse this inequality, all they can do is accept it silently, since it is all determined by ‘nature’. For example, Shawl treats biological factors as the origin of inequality between men and women:

Shawl: Even in the issue of having affairs, if it is a man, his wife would think ‘I have to forgive him because I don’t want my child to have no father,’ but if a man is *dai lü mao* (戴绿帽, being cuckolded) things would go differently. So sexual equality is impossible unless advanced technology enables men to get pregnant.

Shawl thinks that sexual inequality is determined by nature and difficult to escape. According to her, in the situation of ‘an affair’, there are different moral standards and obligations for men and women. It is forgivable for a man to have an affair. Moreover, a woman would choose to compromise, since she might worry that the father of her child would leave her because of the affair. However, Shawl did not say that she would worry about the child losing its mother if it were a woman having an affair. The only solution to this inequality would be to ‘enable men to get pregnant’. In her opinion, a woman’s reproductive ability determines (and limits) her reproductive function in intimate relationships. Reproduction seems to be an obligation for women. For women, the ultimate purpose of having sex is reproduction. The labour of birthing and nurturing children is regarded as women’s work for biological reasons. Men can simply escape this labour because they do not have a uterus. When it comes to giving birth, nurturing children, and maintaining marriage and the family, women have more responsibility than men do. Therefore, women have to compromise in order to maintain their relationships.

Evans’s (1997) research on Chinese marriage indicates that wifehood is defined by two aspects: the relationship with the husband, and the raising of children. This formation of women’s role in marriage can be found in sex education in China. Evans points out that since 1949, the official sex education in China has been based on heterosexist assumptions and biological ‘truths’, a system deriving from the modern biological sciences in the Western world. Modern technology in China is deeply influenced by Western scientific theories, and this kind of scientific knowledge has long been regarded as truth. Although biological essentialism has been challenged by the idea that gender is a social construction—where science is more about securing the authority of existing gender values than maintaining objectivity—the impact of this challenge is still fairly limited.

Rahman and Jackson (2010, p. 120) argue that ‘gender difference… is prejudged through the existing essentialist cultural framework.’ The ‘natural’ gender differences accepted by the public play out as the core of biological explanations of sex and gender. Most Western scientific understanding constructs the binary of masculinity and femininity, positing that it is the hormones, brain, genes, or evolution that contribute these ‘natural’ differences and determine women’s subordination to men in relation to reproduction, nurturing children, physical strength, psychology, and emotions. Thus science includes biological essentialism and regards biological differences as the cause of gender responsibilities. It also contributes to the presentation of wifehood, and to different moral evaluations of men and women in the matter of sex, such as Shawl’s double standard regarding infidelity.

Besides meaning that a man is unfaithful in marriage, the connotations of the term *dai lü mao* (‘being cuckolded’) reveal a harsh attitude towards the woman for damaging her husband’s male dignity by causing a scandal. A woman is more vulnerable to moral criticism than a man is. In China the role of a woman in marriage is defined as being supportive and caring towards her husband, rather than suspicious of him (Evans, 1997). If a wife knows that her husband is having an affair, she should understand rather than blame him.

In imperial China, women’s behaviour was strictly governed by a set of moral codes and certain customs. As discussed in the previous chapter, among these moral codes, the most famous are ‘husband as guide’(*fu wei qi gang*, 夫为妻纲) and the Three Obediences and Four Virtues (*san cong si de*, 三从四德). After getting married, the obedient subjects were transferred to their husbands. According to traditional Chinese values, three or four generations living under same roof was the family ideal. Therefore, married couples often lived with their parents in a joint household. The traditional Chinese family greatly valued *bei fen* (辈分, ‘seniority in the family’) (Chen, 2002). For example, Wang (1995) states that the wife had to show respect and obedience not only to her husband, but also to other senior family members, especially her in-laws. Being an obedient and caring wife and mother was the only way to improve her status in her husband’s family. Once married, the wife had no rights to remarry or divorce, but had to be blindly obedient and put all her faith in her husband. One common Chinese saying can be directly translated as ‘married cock follows cock, married dog follows dog’ (*jia ji sui ji, jia gou sui gou*, 嫁鸡随鸡，嫁狗随狗), or less literally, ‘where the needle goes, the thread follows.’ The deeper meaning of this saying is that once a girl has attached herself to one man, she must be faithful to him forever, regardless of circumstances (Chen, 2002).

Li (2010) emphasizes that such moral codes are the gold standard for women in China, and that they still influence modern Chinese society. The ‘husband as guide’ doctrine has been one of the cardinal principles underlying the relationship between husband and wife (Wang, 1995). Under this doctrine, the wife is required to be absolutely loyal and obedient, while the husband is the dominant partner in the marriage. According to the *Nü jie* (女戒, *Book of women’s indoctrination*):

The husband is god, thus a husband has the right to remarry whereas a woman does not. To the god we show respect and loyalty, and to the husband a woman must remain faithful. God will punish whoever disobeys or betrays him. And women who act disgracefully will find themselves falling into disfavour with their husband.

Wang (1995) therefore points out that docility and timidity were considered the great qualities in feudal China.

Furthermore, during an affair, it is usually the ‘other’ woman—the so-called *xiao san* (小三, ‘third party’)—who is regarded as the threat to the stability of the marriage and family. She is the one who causes the damage. In her study of contemporary Chinese newspapers, magazines, TV programmes, and mass media, Evans (1997) finds that when a story is published about a woman having an affair, the readers tend to criticize the woman, regardless of what kind of love affair it is. It was Josephine Butler (1982) who first dubbed this moral stigmatization of women the ‘double standard’. Women are forced to take responsibility for the sexual behaviour of men and also its consequences. The double standard means that a biological essentialist will assume that a man has ‘compelling, natural sexual needs and could not be held responsible for trying to satisfy them by using prostitutes’ (Rahman and Jackson, 2010, p. 21). When a woman is involved in any sex-related event, she will be regarded as immoral because she has violated ‘the ideal of women as non-sexual and innocent of sexual ideas’ (Rahman and Jackson, 2010, p. 21). This viewpoint constructs the inequality of gendered roles on the basis of biological nature. As the discussion above shows, the double standard has been regarded as reasonable or even unquestionable in Chinese traditional marriage. My participants grew up in an educational system that adopted this theory. Although they feel frustrated about it and even question it, they still recognize and accept it.

**Get married or be alone: *fu nü*’s choice**

Marriage in the feudal system was not only the means of human reproduction, but was also seen as a stabilizing agent by the feudal rulers (Chen, 2002). According to Confucianism, every person was supposed to get married and continue their bloodline by rearing sons. However, in fulfilling this expectation, wealthy men had a better chance than poor men, and women had a better chance than men (Susan, 2012). Susan (2012) indicates that in 19th-century China, while nearly 100 percent of females married, 20 percent of males never found a wife. This was a large proportion of the Chinese population, and these unmarried men without children were called ‘bare sticks’ (*guan gun*, 光棍). These free-floating men, who were mostly poor and young, were feared in their neighbourhoods and regarded as a threat to society. Feudal rulers tried many methods to keep them contained, of which getting them to settle down in a marriage and set up a family seemed the best (Susan, 2012; Chen, 2002). According to the *Book of Song* (*Song shu*, 宋书), if a female reached statutory age and was still not married, she and her family would be punished (*nü zi shi bu jia, jia ren zuo zhi*,女子十五不嫁，家人坐之) (Chen, 2002). ‘When a man is born his parents hope he will find a wife; when a woman is born her parents hope she will find a husband. All parents feel like this’ (Mencius, IIIB). In many traditional Chinese families, these sayings still have an impact.

Thus when it comes to inequality in premarital relationships and married life, women are frustrated by romantic relationships in the real world today. BL is a strategy for them to maintain their expectations of true love. In the meantime, these young women, who are in their early to mid-20s, are entering what is considered a suitable age for marriage. They are beginning to suffer the pressure to marry from all angles. Facing the conflict between idealized romance and petty marriage, they develop two different ways to deal with the conflict.

One solution for the young women in my study was to stay single in order to avoid the complications of marriage. The young women who decided to stay single did suffer pressure to marry, without exception; however, they could handle this pressure and defend their choice through their persona as a modern woman. This persona is the opposite of what Chinese tradition expects from women. The primary aspect of this persona, as my participant Huahua says, is financial independence:

Huahua: I will define my love life as I would rather go without than have someone shoddy. Not to say success in my work, at least I can support myself and I am not a burden on my family. Making this decision will not destroy me; it is good enough for me.

In Huahua’s words, the condition that supports her decision to stay single rather than be ‘with someone shoddy’ is her ability to support herself and not be ‘a burden on my family’. Thus she can overcome the threat of her family using financial problems to force her to marry.

Moreover, on the basis of financial independence, women who have strong personalities are likely to obtain more understanding from others. Zhuzhu told me why other people did not ask her to find a partner, even in her ‘embarrassing’ mid-20s:

Zhuzhu: I will try hard to break [these bonds of tradition], I can say proudly that wherever I go, the people there would say this woman is special even when they first meet me. Thus, everybody has a special expectation of me. Nobody asks me why don’t you find a boyfriend, because they understand this is not a problem for me. I am very confident that I have this power to make people not point at or talk about me [being single].

It is obvious that Zhuzhu is proud of her strong mind, which makes others reluctant to ‘point at or talk about’ her, even making them admire her. Her independent spirit and self-confidence give her a ‘special’ escape from the pragmatic destiny of marriage.

In short, according to my interview data, these young women are likely to have the courage to make the decision to stay single, and to receive more understanding and tolerance from others. However, it is impossible for everybody to win this battle. There are many other young women who have less powerful personalities and who lack an independent spirit, and although they are financially independent, they do yield to pressure from others and regard marriage as compulsory. This is especially true for young women who live with their parents. One of my participants, Glasses, expressed to me the agony of her resignation in the face of her mother’s concern with marital issues:

Glasses: I was having a long, tough time because my parents never stop talking about this [finding someone and getting married soon] around me… I’m getting crazy, and was depressed. I begged my mum not mention this any more and say ‘do you know how much pain I am in?’ I even struggled to stay at home at that time. Can you imagine that, while you are still sleeping in the early morning, she [my mum] sat on your bed and began... When I went back home exhausted after work, she started again, exhausted, prattled on about this till I wanted to scream...

As the traditional Chinese saying goes, ‘when a son is grown he takes a wife, and when a girl is old enough she goes to her husband’ (男大当婚，女大当嫁). It is taken for granted that everyone should have a partner when they reach the proper age. If not, they are revolting against the traditional idea of morality. In contemporary society, the moral criticism of those who stay single is weaker, but single people are still commonly regarded as ‘losers’ because they cannot find anyone who is willing to be with them. What is more, families still have a strong influence on the individual’s personal choice. Especially today, due to the one-child policy, family bonds are much tighter on every family member. Most of my participants were the only child in their families, and the question whether they would eventually marry became a heavier burden on the parents than on the young women themselves.

Therefore young women who are less independent suffer various pressures which force them to worry about marriage, and this is the case for most young women in China today. The fictional world of BL serves as an active strategy to fight that pressure, as well as a self-pacifier to protect women from the pressure.

**Conclusion**

The definition and function of ‘love’ in Chinese society has beenchanging over time. Within a few decades, love—this eternal subject threaded throughout humansocial history—seems to have changed substantially. It is now regarded as important. However, for too long it was ignored or denigrated because of the political climate.

The time between the1950s and 1970s witnessed Mao’s Cultural Revolution, the political purpose of which was to control people in a society living under a collective ideology. As Evans (1997) points out, romantic love in China at that time was regarded as anerroneous expression of bourgeois mentality, ‘subjected to shame and suspicion’ and regarded as an ‘exaggerated abstract and individualistic view’. True love could not exist in a bourgeoissociety because it was based on ‘individual wealth’. By contrast, love could only develop in asocialist society on the basis of ‘shared ideological interests, mutual respect, and trust’. According to thisdefinition, Chinese women had to deny spontaneous love in order to avoid ‘bourgeois indulgence’, and had to turn tosomeone who was politically correct. The party-state controlled people’s sexualbehaviour in a restrictive moral atmosphere where there was reticence about the emotional, sensual, and romanticaspects of love. Thus Chinese women born between the 1950s and 1970s suffered an oppressive lack of expectations of love. Romantic love to them was an ‘ideologicallyunsound illusion’. Almost without exception, all of my participants’ parents, and most of their primaryeducators, were born and grew up in this era. That is to say, myparticipants had partly inherited this ideology because they had been educated by educators who held theseconcepts. With the introduction of different economic principles through the open-door policy of the 1980s, this highlycollective ideology gradually became less prevalent, and individual issues became valued. Lovegained a new status, and as a symbol of the young generation’s dreams and aspirations, thedemarcation of individual emotional and sensual interests was removed from any necessary association withthe public sphere (Evans, 1997). Although my participants, who were mostly born in the late 1980s and 1990s,were partly affected by the earlier repression, they have more opportunity to embrace new meanings of loveand relationships that are more connected to individual responsibility.

This is a battle between ‘Deng’s generation’ and ‘Mao’s generation’ in the emotional field. This intergenerational collision of ideologies is chiefly responsible for the intense desires of the younger generation. These young women are more concerned with their own emotional and sexual interests, and value them more. One piece of evidence for this is the omnipresence of love-related matters and stories in popular film, novels, magazines, mass media, and advertising. These affirm that individual romantic passion is noble, worth defending against social pressures and pragmatic considerations (Farrer, 2002; Evans, 1997).

Romantic feelings (*ganqing*) are now accorded great moral authority in public discussions of sexual relationships—for example, the 1980 Marriage Law stipulates that *ganqing* is the basis of marriage (Farrer, 2002). However, pragmatic marriage is still a reasonable decision for most women in China today, who take a cynical attitude. The problem is the moral and practical difficulty of being faced with too many contradictory choices and opportunities. The moral order shown in Chinese magazines since the 1990s has been confused and contradictory, although it is changing with time. Liberalism and consumerism, as Xu describes it, alongside a collective anxiety about the difficulty of achieving a balanced heterosexual relationship in an ‘open’ society, have given rise to what could be called ‘romantic irony’ (Evans, 1997). As a genre of products targeted at women, BL creates a highly idealized romantic world that emphasizes love from a new angle and with new expressions, and fulfils women’s emotional and sexual needs.

Thus personal independence, freedom, and sexual equality are what animate the aspirations of the *fu nü* group. In the reality of modern China, it is the male’s responsibility to provide the necessary conditions for marriage; however, in the BL fantasy world, this type of relationship would be regarded as sexist by BL fans. In their imagination, regardless of sexuality, individuals should be independent and be free.

# Chapter 7. *Fu Nü*’s Self-Identification and Self-Construction

She has been staring at the computer screen all day long. She is not worried about being seen by anyone; no one ever drops by. Her face has turned greasy and her glasses have slipped down her nose. Her wiry hair has been pushed up on top of her head in an untidy bun. The flab around her arms shows through a cheap t-shirt covered in grease marks. Dirty fast-food boxes litter the desk in front of her, and manga books are scattered around the room. Although she looks a little weary, she is typing is as quickly and accurately as possible in order to keep up with her online chat with other young women like her. At the same time, she is searching the web for updates on her favourite BL serials. When a picture of two beautiful men sparks her interest, she immediately shares it with her friends, a creepy smile hovering on her lips…

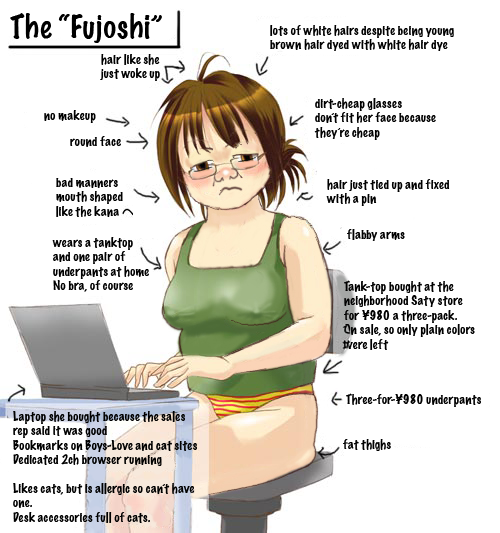


 Figure 28. Stereotype of fu nü. Source:https://myanimelist.net/forum/?topicid=1148413

This is a popular image of what a *fu nü* is like—according to those who know little about the group. *Fu nü* are routinely described as obese and lazy women who desire love and men but have been left on the shelf in the relationship market. It is assumed that they are frustrated women whose faith in love has been destroyed, turning them into warped weirdoes and losers.

So I felt confused when I met my first participants in person. Maomao, Jingjing, and Benben were different types of women. Elegant Maomao had long, straight hair and a clear voice; with her short, curly hair and large-frame glasses, Jingjing was like a character from a comic book, a cute young woman in typical Japanese *kawaii* girl style; Benben seemed knowledgeable and level-headed, someone who would always be in control thanks to her clear thinking. I could not find any points of similarity between these three young women and the popular *fu nü* stereotype, or among the women themselves—apart from their shared confidence. As my research went deeper and I met more and more *fu nü*, I could see that it was unfair to define *fu nü* as weirdoes or losers. They were excellent young women, even outstanding among their peers. As Maomao put it, ‘We believe in ourselves, we amuse ourselves and we enjoy ourselves.’ Their confidence and happiness did not come from the outside world, but was something they had built up by themselves.

BL can be understood as a fantasy world constructed through cultural phenomena. On the one hand, it acts as a bridge that connects imagination and reality. On the other hand, it is a world inhabited by a group of female adolescents indulging in homoerotic fantasies. In order understand this cultural phenomenon, in this chapter I will outline its development in China and reveal its characteristics. I will also explore whether *fu nü*’s personal confidence has any relationship with their reading of BL, and if so, how BL interacts with their identities.

**The world of *fu nü* as fans**

Fan culture emerged rapidly with the fast development of the Internet and other communication technologies. As the entertainment industry became aware of the power of such cultural phenomena, fan culture gradually broke away from its subcultural status. As Matt Hills points out, fans are no longer regarded as ‘textual poachers’; indeed, in many cases they have become the ‘guardians of texts’, and fans have become a target audience that the entertainment industry is eager to please. Jenkins (2006) has coined the concept of ‘convergence culture’ to argue that the power of ‘grassroots fans’ is now converging with official media discourse, with producers and consumers constantly propelling the content. However, their respective gains are not always on the same level: content producers are pursuing profit, while the fans are seeking pleasure. This creates conflict, and the trends in the relationship between the two are unpredictable.

An example of this conflict is the tangled relationship between the author Nanpai Sanshu and the *fu nü* community. The *fu nü* community represents a grassroots female fan culture, while Nanpai Sanshu represents the male-dominated entertainment industry. This division leads to inevitable conflict. Nanpai Sanshu is the author of *The grave robbers’ chronicles*, the main plot of which follows the grave-robbing adventures of fictional male characters. With its absence of powerful heroines and its avoidance of romantic heterosexual relationships, this plot offers perfect conditions for *fu nü* fantasy. Although there are no direct descriptions of homoeroticism, the emotional entanglement between two male characters, Qiling Zhang and Xie Wu, and the development of their relationship from indifference and hostility to companionship and mutual support, has become extremely popular and attracted a great number of *fu nü* fans.

When Nanpai Sanshu signs autographs for his fans, he describes himself as *fudanshi*. However, this cannot be seen as an active claim on such an identity, but as a role passively taken to suit the needs of the *fu nü* community. As he wrote in a letter to a *fu nü* fan, *fu nü* are the most enthusiastic fans; he says that one *fu nü* fan is equivalent to a million soldiers, and whoever wins the support of the *fu nü* community will stand out from the competition. This view has already become a golden rule in the entertainment industry.

Nanpai Sanshu has complicated feelings towards the *fu nü* community, however. He enjoys the tremendous profits the community has generated, but he also fears and even resents the *fu nü* group. It all comes down to one word: money. The massive popularity of *The grave robbers’ chronicles* (especially the TV adaptations) is to some extent due to the *fu nü* community; however, the development of this kind of popularity is beyond the prediction and control of the entertainment industry in general and the author in particular. Nanpai Sanshu is especially afraid that he might lose business opportunities by pandering to *fu nü* fans and thereby offending other audiences. In other words, excessive homoerotic descriptions may give rise to resentment among the more general audience.

Implicit in the *fu nü* community is the immense power of consumption, and entertainment content producers do not fail to cash in on it. The TV drama *Sherlock* received unbelievable popularity in China. As soon as season three finished airing, the fans were already expressing their high expectations for season four. The *fu nü* group is a force to be reckoned in the massive popularity of this TV drama. The BBC was already aware of the amazing potential of the *fu nü* group, and encouraged the writers to cater to their tastes ( see figure30). The first two seasons give constant hints of homoerotism between Sherlock and Watson, and there is even a scene of Sherlock kissing his nemesis Moriarty. The third season of *Sherlock* is even fuller of such hints. For example, when Sherlock returns from his feigned death, there is a conversation between him and his brother Mycroft; when Mycroft tells him that Watson has already begun a new life after Sherlock’s apparent death, Sherlock stops him and says: ‘How can he live without me?’ In a later episode, Sherlock is the best man at Watson’s wedding; he constantly appears in the spotlight around the bride and groom, as if he were the one marrying Watson. When the photographer tries to take a photograph of the newlyweds, Sherlock remains standing next to the groom until he is asked to leave. The director of this show often uses close-ups to show Sherlock and Watson’s eyes full of silently conveyed tenderness. During Watson’s wedding, Sherlock appears envious, lost, disturbed, and panicked in these close-up shots.

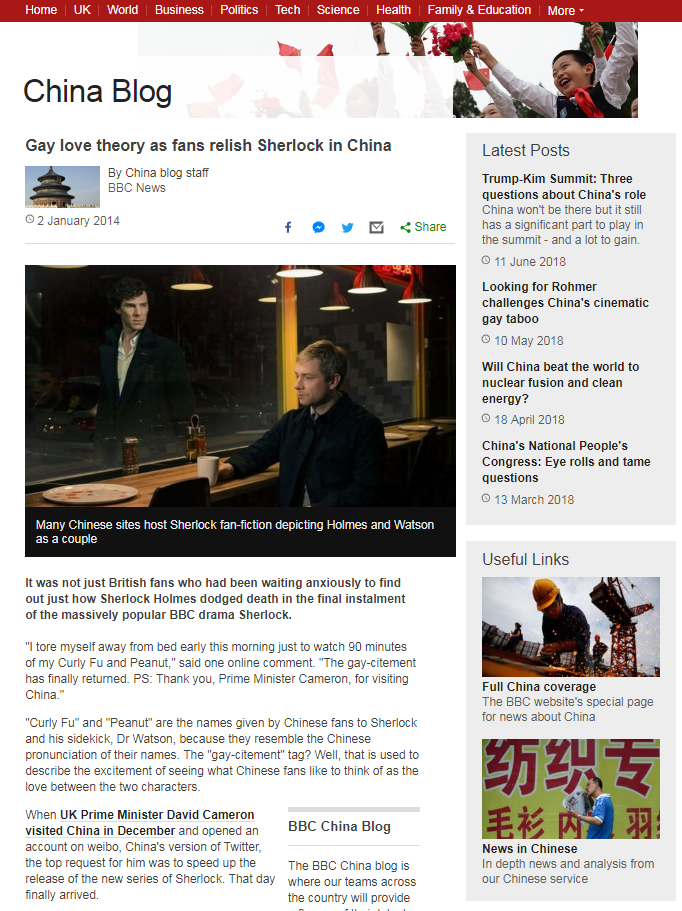


Figure 29. BBC report of fans turn Sherlock into BL in China. Source:https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/blogs-china-blog-25550426

American scholar Penley has already affirmed male homoerotic literature produced by women as one of the most radical and interesting trends in popular culture. Thorn similarly argues that homoerotic literature produced by women is a daring challenge to patriarchy’s repression of women. Through such erotic literature, sex comes to no longer represent fear, threat, and shame, and the female writers are confronting the injustices and oppression faced by women. However, such sympathy for *fu nü* fans from a female perspective does not represent the views of mainstream society. In particular, such viewpoints are on the opposite side from the male-led entertainment industry; from the latter perspective, the eroticization of original works is greatly disrespectful.

At present, the Chinese *fu nü* group faces harsh survival conditions. Homoerotic themes have become a hyped trend in the entertainment industry, and the entire industry is trying to jump onto the bandwagon because of the potential purchasing power and topicality of *fu nü* culture. On the other hand, however, the entertainment industry cannot tolerate such trends because they cannot predict or control them.

As a matter of fact, due to their small numbers and dispersed distribution, the early audiences of BL culture cannot be referred as ‘group’. They lacked any of the necessary conditions for further development, especially communication technology. Early BL communities in China were often invisible, isolated, and lacked communication with each other. Furthermore, most people came into contact with BL works only by chance, and often began with BL comics. BL comics and literature were rarely seen in official channels such as state-own bookshops and public libraries. However, such works were circulating and flourishing through underground channels, for instance in pirated versions and illegal copies.

To meet the unprecedented growth of demand for entertainment during the reform era, book rental shops emerged. These book rental shops soon became a huge hit, and shops opened across China, even in rural areas. In contrast to the large state-owned bookshops located in city centres, these privately owned book rental shops were relatively small and often located near residential areas or schools. Book rental shops offered a wide range of reading materials, from textbooks to comics. Among all these titles, illegal copies of Japanese and Hong Kong comics and fictional novels were the most popular. Readers could choose to read them in the shop or rent them to take away, and the cheap rental fee further contributed to their great popularity among students. Although extremely popular with students, these book rental shops were considered ‘undesirable’ in the eyes of teachers and parents, especially in relation to primary and secondary school pupils. The fictional comics and novels often contained ‘indecent’ materials, and hence were considered taboo under school discipline. Students who were found visiting book rental shops were often subject to punishment at school.

Under these circumstance, adolescents’ first encounters with BL-related comics or fictional novels have a certain contingency as well as inevitability. On the one hand, as bestselling titles, Japanese comics and fictional novels were commonly found in the rental shops. Inevitably, adolescent readers would encounter BL-related titles from to time to time. On the other hand, whether readers would continue to read BL comics depended on their personal acceptance of the content. Once demand for BL titles increased, the owner would increase the proportion of such titles to attract more readers. Hence, the book rental shop became a base not just for comic readers, but also for BL fans.

The development of BL culture in mainland China can be divided into three stages. The popularity of book rental shops throughout the 1990s, which brought BL comics and novels into China, is often considered the initial stage of BL culture in China. The establishment of an online community called the Lucifer Club was deemed a milestone that ‘made a significant contribution to the initial boom of BL culture in Mainland China’ (Xu and Yang, 2013). The Lucifer Club was the first online forum dedicated to BL culture (Xu and Yang, 2013), and the website helped to gather BL fans all over China. All in all, the Lucifer Club pushed the BL culture in mainland China, from fans reading BL towards fans making their own original creations. Following the huge success of the Lucifer Club, a list of new websites dedicated to BL culture gradually emerged, such as Jinjiang BBS. BL communities became visible as Internet technology emerged throughout the 1990s. The spread of BL works both online and offline triggered controversy among the general public. BL culture became increasingly deviant in the eyes of public, and also became a target of the authorities’ censorship programme. Nevertheless, from 2000 onwards, the development of the Internet contributed to the rapid spread of BL culture in mainland China.

Since 2004, mainland China has witnessed a steady development of BL culture. The introduction of new communication technologies and various web applications has provided unprecedented convenience for those seeking new information, as well as having created a new virtual network through which to communicate. Benefiting from the Internet and economic growth, adolescents in highly developed cities are more likely to come into contact with BL culture. On the other hand, in the less-developed cities, the ages of first-time contact with BL-related materials might well be later, often postponed until university years. Statistics show 65.4 per cent of adolescents from developed cities have heard of BL culture, while only 0.7 per cent of respondents in rural China have heard of it. In the extensive research on the age structure of BL fans conducted by Ge and Peng, the findings show that 18–21-year-olds accounted for 42.5 per cent, followed by 15–17-year-olds at 31.2 per cent, Moreover, the research also indicated that the age distribution of BL groups was mainly concentrated in the 13–25 group, especially the 18–25 group. This indicates that most BL fans in China are adolescents. These young BL fans are well educated, often live in developed cities, and are keen to communicate with each other through the Internet.

**Minor roles and inferiority: gender norms in China’s patriarchal society**

In previous chapters I have argued that women’s production and consumption of BL is an act of resistance against traditional norms in a patriarchal society. I have analysed the situation with regard to sex and love, and have found that this society as a whole truly limits women in many respects. There are restrictions and expectations placed on women’s ‘good’ behaviour, and in this regard their education from a young age affects them profoundly. They take it for granted that the social rules are correct, and feel guilty if they violate those rules. Women are defined and constricted by social norms in patriarchal society. They are regarded as inferior—as men’s vassals, accessories, or property.

I asked my *fu nü* participants about their self-identities as women in China. For historical and cultural reasons, women retain their inferior social status. They are not treated equally or respected as women in their daily lives.

Pipi: My grandpa told my parents before I was born, ‘If it is a girl, don’t bring her to visit me. If it is a boy, come and get your reward.’ When I quarrelled with my younger male cousin, it was always my fault. And they always brought him gifts, but I was never treated like that.

Pipi seems to have been an unexpected new family member when she was born. Her grandparents’ attitude is not uncommon in many Chinese families, especially in less open-minded areas. In feudal China in the 18th century, having a newborn daughter in the family sometimes could mean disaster (Zhang, 1986). Not only did Confucianism categorize women as inferior to men, but Chinese tradition also greatly valued sons in the family (in the tradition Chinese phrase, *duo zi duo fu*, 多子多福). Shek (2006) states that in feudal China, it was believed that a husband should divorce his wife if she could not give birth to male heirs. From her family’s viewpoint, a daughter would eventually marry and separate from them; once she was married, she would not be allowed to return home (Zhang, 1986; Zhou, 1982), so why help someone else (i.e. her future husband) by raising a daughter? In the famous Chinese phrase, ‘a married daughter is like poured-out water’ (*jia chu qu de nü er, po chu qu de shui,* 嫁出去的儿女，泼出去的水). Moreover, from the government’s point of view, males could provide labour and food, and could be recruited as soldiers and officials; this gave the government a particular interest in males (Susan, 2012).

As the heirs according to Chinese tradition, young male family members receive more attention, care, and tolerance, and develop better life chances. A young female family member is considered an unnecessary extra, as well as the future property of another family. Because of this, many women have less chance to obtain equal attention in their families. Although the Chinese government has declared that it is the same to have a girl or a boy and has strictly carried out the one-child policy since the 1970s, many Chinese families still favour male heirs because of their beliefs and values about carrying on the family line. Thus it is understandable that Pipi seems to have been an unwanted baby girl for her extended family. Especially compared with her male peers in the family, her status is obviously greatly inferior. It is clear from her words that in the extended family she could not enjoy equal rights with her male cousin simply because she was female. This imbalance in the family of origin has a great effect on an individual’s personal life. It might leave someone with an ‘unwanted’ identity, and feeling guilty about being a woman.

Social expectations of women also rest on gender stereotypes. It is emphasized that a woman should have ‘feminine’ qualities such as being gentle, soft, loving, and caring as part of ‘wifehood’ and ‘motherhood’. These ‘feminine’ qualities are overemphasized in definitions of what makes a ‘good’ woman, rather than expectations with regard to their performance at work. These definitions limit women to stereotypes, and may be particularly troublesome to those with different personalities. Take Lanlan’s words, for example:

Lanlan: Those girls with soft personalities are more pleasing to boys. But I don’t think they truly know what those boys are thinking… I think I know boys better, but we became bros at the end… If things go wrong, all those girls need to do is act in a pettishly charming manner and croon to their male boss or partners, it is more efficient than solving the problem alone and desperate, and you will get the nickname *nü hanzi* as well.

Lanlan condemns the overemphasis on women’s ‘feminine’ qualities and the neglect of other valuable personality traits such as strength of mind, diligence, or thoughtfulness. What is more, women who have a ‘feminine’ personality can take advantage of that, even to the detriment of women who have other kinds of personality. This means that the standards by which women’s success is judged are not about their performance or personal achievements, but about whether they are pleasing to men. To be more specific, women are always related to the family sphere, but less so to other fields. It is assumed that they should centre their lives on the home to support their husbands and care for their children. A woman’s role is to be functional for a man—as his wife, his children’s mother, his parents’ daughter-in-law, etc.—rather than an independent individual. The only hope and highest achievement for a woman is marriage.

Thus marriage still places restrictions on many Chinese women, even today. Because of this, marriage issues remain popular in mainstream TV drama. A typical trope in these TV dramas is the ‘Cinderella’ storyline, depicting how a silly, poor girl with low social status meets a powerful man and is rescued by his love. In this trope, women, as a group contrasted with men, are defined as persons who are powerless. Indeed, storylines around women seem generally limited to the trope of ‘desperate (in/for) love’. Fujimoto also observes this phenomenon in Japanese girl comics, and calls it the ‘love trap’: young women devoting their whole being to so-called love, and being totally controlled and enslaved by men (Shamoon, 2007). It can be inferred that this is a shared cultural phenomenon among East Asian traditions. The repetition of this and related issues in the everyday mass media also increases the pressure on women and their family members. It confirms that no matter what a woman is like, her primary consideration should be whether anyone might be willing to marry her. This arouses resistance in well-educated women.

When Maomao introduced herself to me, she said: ‘I am not really a woman with a strong Asian sense, I think my ideology is closer to Western women. I am more independent and confident.’ She was using the terms ‘Asian’ and ‘Western’ to distinguish between obedient women and confident, independent women. She automatically considered that these two characters were opposites, belonging to two separate groups. Panpan is a film student at a Hong Kong university. From her analysis of countless films, she concludes that men have different possibilities in different stories; however, love or personal issues are always the main topic in films for women. It is frustrating for many female audiences to always see female characters stuck on emotional issues. As Panpan complains: ‘Can they do something other than thinking about boyfriends all day long? Why not try to save the world?’

Feminist theories and movements have been developing for three centuries, with women struggling for equal rights to education, work, the vote, and in other fields in every part of life. However, in today’s China women still have the status of the ‘second sex’. Although women are now educated to be independent and equal to men, social reality still frustrates them in a variety of respects, such as discrimination in employment and promotion in the world of work, and household duties and childcare in the family sphere. These different social expectations are external, objective factors that increase pressure on women, which may in turn lead to internal, subjective problems of inferior self-identity. External and internal factors interact and create despair among women that they are ‘born to be women’ in a patriarchal society, even in the modern age. Thus women’s demands for liberation arise from inside the women themselves, spearheaded by the educated young generation.

Political reforms in China have offered great opportunities to facilitate the processes of consciousness-raising and personal liberation. On the one hand, the one-child policy makes it possible for girls to gain more attention. There is no other option for the ‘normal’ family but to invest all their love, energy, and finances in supporting the only child to carry on the family line. Education also shapes women’s views, and gives them the confidence to rethink the gender norms that might have been taken for granted previously. On the other hand, the introduction of Western culture not only brought feminism to the attention of Chinese women, but also gave them ‘sex, drugs, and rock ’n’ roll’. These advances empowered women as well as showing them new ways to enjoy their female identity. There is no need for a woman to feel guilty about having fun while she is young; she can still remain true to her material and spiritual needs. Furthermore, with technological developments and new media such as blogs, Twitter, and Weibo, the grassroots have a chance to speak out in public directly and with little or no cost: everyone’s views can spread and be valued.

In this context, female writing is an important means of women’s liberation. The field of literature was traditionally dominated by men, and the marginalization of female writing meant that women’s experience was ignored. This is reflected in Panpan’s critique of Hong Kong gangster films:

Panpan: In most Hong Kong gangster films, the stories are all about men. You can see that the men’s storylines can support the whole film structure without being empty. Take the *Young and dangerous* film series, for example. In the whole series women play minor roles or are even absent. However, we can barely find any female gangster films… I mean, yes, we do have *Portland Street blues*, but it is rare, and she is lesbian... So the *jiang hu* is always men’s *jiang hu*.

*Jiang hu* (江湖, literally ‘rivers and lakes’) refers to the social world of martial artists and thugs in ancient times, and is also applied to anarchic societies in modern times. For instance, the triads and other Chinese secret societies use the term *jiang hu* to describe their world of organized crime, with a meaning close to ‘underworld’. In this world, all disputes and differences within the community can only be resolved by members of that community, through the use of mediation, negotiation, or force. According to this definition, *jiang hu* can be seen as a stage on which various powers do battle, including political elements. In Panpan’s description of gangster stories, *jiang hu* belongs to men, and women have less involvement in it. This reflects the marginalization of women in social life. The film *Portland Street blues* does deal with the same subject, with a focus on female characters; however, the heroine is a butch lesbian. Therefore this film actually parallels the world dominated by men, and is another piece of evidence that female voices are suppressed.



Figure 30. Panpan’s cosplay as a swordsman who protects his kindom. (photo by Panpan, 2015)

On the other hand, many of my participants blame women’s inferior social image on their biology:

Fafa: Simply speaking, I just don’t like the identity of female; there are many things that are impossible to do using this gender identity, an organism with a vagina and uterus. For instance, I used to like to go out late at night and stay out all night. My father would say, ‘If you were a boy, I would leave you alone. But you are girl.’ So I am disgusted with the gender role of women that is always inferior to men. For another example, while on a date or in a relationship, men always try to be protective, or financially support the girl. I simply dislike that.

Longlong: For instance, if you are a boy and you change your partner quickly, people will say ‘well done’ or ‘you are good at relationships.’ On the contrary, if you are a girl, people will judge you differently and call you a slut. I think it is a worldwide phenomenon, people morally judge you based on the number of your playmates… my ideal life is… I can do whatever I want, and I don’t need to worry about the judgement of other people any more. Moreover, as a boy I can have more freedom in terms of sexuality and choosing my relationships instead of worrying that people will judge me on the moral level, ‘you are a slut.’

However, some of my participants can see that this inferior status, which make women unhappy, is not because they are biologically women, but arises from social constructions about them:

Zhuzhu: I think what a woman really wants to break is... actually she does not really hate her own identity as a woman, but the burden is placed on her in the social context. So there might be some misunderstandings about feminism among ordinary people that a feminist should present as a manly woman. It really needs a clear mind and to be highly educated to figure out what feminism is. For example, some women who assert that they are feminists, in their embodiment they imitate men. They will say Mulan can fight like a man, or Zetian Wu can be a female emperor of the whole country like a man, too. Therefore women can be as good as men. In fact, the most important thing is, she can be happy as a woman, just like a man can be happy as a man. Those women cannot be happy as women, because they have this bondage, but it does not mean they will be happy when they transfer to a man. But many women cannot realize this and thus wrongly pursue a manly self-presentation. For example, some girls dress like boys and want to be called tomboys. They present as straightforward and saucy and disdain other girls’ femininity. There are only the two extremes in their minds.

Women need to write in their own words, which are different from men’s and have been suppressed. Women’s writing can express women’s experiences and points of view, and their participation in and observations of social life. It can achieve things that men’s writing cannot, and can expand the possibilities of story development. In this way women can transform their role: from a minor role, or the role of the observed, to that of the main character, the storyteller and controller. This active participation also enables women to recognize the subject ‘I’, a subject who escapes the limitations of the ‘second sex’.

**Sameness and difference: *fu nü* are normal but special**

*Fu nü* are women, but they are special women. They are ordinary women who share special interests that ordinary people have difficulty in understanding. In Japan, *fujoshi* (BL fans) are often not open about their fantasies and desires in public (Saito, 2011). Their sensual pleasure in and social interaction around BL usually depend on the Internet. Japanese philosopher Azuma (2009) uses the term ‘hyperflatness’ to describe this flat world, which lacks narrative meaning but offers moments of sensual pleasure; Suzuki (2002) uses the term *neta* (‘material’) communication, or topic-oriented communication, to capture how *fujoshi* interactions operate as surface communications (see Galbraith, 2011). Chinese BL fans share this characteristic as well. *Fu*, as a social practice for a certain group of people, builds a relatively closed community. In the *fu* community, certain forms of language and interaction can grow and gradually mature.

Tech Homebody is an example of this. This popular web forum not only enables users to share resources such as novels, manga, or other media, but also provides technological support such as online tutorials in Photoshop, video-making, animation, or even classes in psychology, literature, history, philosophy, and foreign languages. These classes help users to improve the production and delivery of their own opinions through BL. In addition, the website creates a welcoming environment for users to gather and make friends.

From introducing themselves to organizing offline parties, the *fu nü* community makes BL fans ‘not weird’ by allowing them to find others who are in the same camp. With the support of others, BL as a positive practice for breaking gender norms has a great effect on *fu nü*’s self-identification and self-construction. Women realize that it is not wrong to be special and go against traditional rules and expectations. They also become braver to speak out about being special:

Urur: From my experience, I was always chasing those cool things. Thus I hated to be called ‘little girl’, ‘little princess’; I didn’t want to become integrated with other kids. I wanted to be special. When I read BL, I felt it was special and I liked it, I felt special myself because I liked BL.

Urur is a good example of young women who go against social expectations of women. They pursue ‘cool’ things, which can be understood as in opposition to traditional female characteristics. They do not want to be limited to gender stereotypes or to be women who meet social expectations; indeed, they even go against those expectations on purpose.

Pipi: When we had the sand play therapy course, I remember that I thought there should be some characters in it. Thus I took the Monkey King, Wukong Sun, but I gave up after hesitating because I thought it was improper. In my supervisor’s analysis, she said Wukong Sun represented individualistic heroism. I think I might have some. When I read novels or other works, I like the ones with heroic elements.

Pipi is explaining that young women like her are trying to escape social expectations. They require more independence, and do not want to rely on men. Pipi’s analysis of the individual heroism of the character Wukong Sun suggests that she wants to be a woman who can rely on herself, although the fact that she later gave up the behaviour shows a conflict between her desire and what she had previously learnt from social expectations. This shows a fissure in *fu nü* identity: they do not make a clear decision to fight against tradition; it remains at an ambiguous stage.

**The other me: pretending or exploring**

Sensen’s eyes were bright and green thanks to her coloured contact lenses. She looked very smart and fearless. I was interviewing her at the comic-con, where she was appearing as Harry Potter. This form of role-playing is called cosplay, another practice that originates from manga in Japan. Manga or novel readers dress up and behave like their favourite characters, wandering around to chat with others, allowing people to take pictures, or selling their manga/novel-related products at comic-con. Unlike many other female cosplayers, who liked to cosplay gorgeous female characters, Sensen told me, she always cosplayed male characters such as Harry Potter, Sherlock Holmes, or Qiling Zhang, the famous hero from the *The grave robbers’ chronicles*. When I asked her why she cosplayed these characters, she replied: ‘I feel that I am him… I have his mind, his courage… I am as strong as him when I cosplay him… I can feel him in my body.’ Sensen told me that in her daily life she always wants to do things, but she does not dare to because of the ‘good’ behaviour she was taught as a girl; but as soon as she puts on her cosplay costume, she becomes the character she is portraying. However, since the character is one she has chosen herself, it can be argued that rather than obtaining the personality from the character, she is choosing the right characters to present her own personality. She wears a mask which shows others that she is a woman who acts properly, but she hides her ‘improper’ nature behind good behaviour. When she cosplays, she wears another mask to uncover the masks she wears in daily life. During cosplay, she is exploring herself rather than pretending herself.

A large number of BL readers are also cosplay lovers. As a subgenre of BL culture, cosplay, like the production and consumption of BL, is a process of understanding and constructing the self through choice and expression. Many BL works are set in ancient times or in the future, in exotic foreign countries. These settings allow readers to escape from reality and imagine freely. Similarly, cosplay offers an experience of fictional life that is far away from daily life. Outwardly, BL and cosplay are deviations from real life, but in a sense they are the true reality.

***Fu nü*’s self-belonging and self-presentation**

BL fan culture has developed tremendously and become an important part of pop culture among the young in China. Alongside the culture’s online manifestations, the number and variety of BL novels, comics, games, dramas, broadcasts, and movies has been expanding. The expansion and blossoming of BL-derived content in everyday mass media is important evidence of its popularity. The Chinese search engine Baidu yields 27,600,000 results for the search term ‘BL’, 17,700,000 for ‘*danmei*/*tanbi*’ (alternative Chinese and Japanese terms for BL), and 10,000,000 for ‘*fu nü*’. Evidence of BL’s popularity can also be found on Baidu Tieba, China’s largest communication platform. For instance, its BL Bar forum has 980,000 registered users and 45,920,000 posts under this tag, Danmei/Tanbi Bar has 10,900,000 registered users and 19,580,000 posts, and Fu Nü Bar has 20,430,000 registered users and 89,800,000 posts.

As mentioned above, *fu nü* have mostly built a sense of community through the Internet. They express themselves through the *fu* identity in order to find their own kind. On the Internet they can reveal their identity as *fu nü* in information such as their username or signature line, and through the articles or interactions they share with others. Online forums serve as a virtual community, creating a supportive environment where insiders can reveal their identity. Forum users can search for information they are interested in, and participate in discussions by creating or replying to topics. These interactions can go further through other means of communication, and can be transferred from online to offline. In such interactions, members present themselves to each other with information about ‘who I am’, ‘what I like’, and ‘what I am concerned about’, forming a sense of self and community.

The widespread use of the Internet makes it much easier for ordinary people to find information and express what they are thinking. On Weibo, an intriguing 140-character story can easily be created and forwarded. This efficiency means that BL is widely disseminated. *Fu nü* can decorate their homepage and forward articles and images to show their interests and claim their identity. A prominent example is the username 我与基友的日常 (‘daily life of my gay friend and me’): with its avatar of two half-naked men hugging, this username is clearly identifiable as *fu*. This is a way of presenting the user’s identity, as well as a clear symbol to attract other *fu nü* who can find and follow her on Weibo.

Similarly, there are message boards for readers to communicate with BL writers on BL literature websites. It is convenient for BL readers to interact with others in this way. Their opinions also have an effect on the writers. As they receive inspirations and expectations from their readers, writers can be fulfilled and motivated to improve their writing. That is to say, the process of completing a BL work is not only about the writers’ creativity, but also emphasizes readers’ participation. Writers and readers alike can strengthen their identity in this process.

Literature websites, such as Jinjiang and other leisure/entertainment sites, not only offer BL works created by famous professional writers, but also encourage readers’ participation in writing. There are different ways to participate in creating BL works online. First, these websites provide online forums for readers to discuss aspects of particular works, including the plot, setting, characters’ personalities, the interactions between the heroes, etc. The relationship between the heroes is always the focus of readers’ discussions. For example, if the writer sets up a series of obstacles to their relationship and even forces them to break up at the end, these stories are dubbed ‘BE’ (bad ending). In some BE stories the heroes suffer mental or physical abuse, overlapping with the category *nüe wen* (sad romance).

BE stories can leave readers in tears; in this case the readers will call the writer *hou ma* (后妈, ‘stepmother’). *Hou ma*, like the stepmother in any fairy tale, is always mean to the heroes. Writers who always save the heroes’ relationship from its various pressures and give an HE (happy ending) are the heroes’ *qin ma* (亲妈, ‘real mother’), even if the story contains an abuse plot (which is possible but not necessary). Some readers want to protect the heroes from the trouble created by *hou ma*, and want the heroes to be able conquer every obstacle; these readers call themselves *qin ma fen* (亲妈粉, ‘real mother fans’). Conversely, readers who love to see heroes suffer are called *hou ma fen* (后妈粉, ‘stepmother fans’). Debates between *hou ma fen* and *qin ma fen* happen frequently online. In some cases the writers gather information through these online interactions, and their story development is affected by readers’ preferences—after all, the writers’ purpose is to make a profit. Since the nature of BL is to fulfil women’s fantasies, readers play an important part in the story-creating process.

In other cases, if fans are not satisfied with a developing storyline, they will take the original story and use it to develop a new story of their own, known as *tong ren wen* (同人文). For the most part *tong ren wen* is faithful to the original work in its background setting and characters. *Tong ren wen* can originate from an existing BL work, but more generally fans will create it from entertainment sources such as TV series, pop groups, films, and so on. In the period of *tong ren wen*’s early development, a great part was played by work based on Korean singing groups.

Harry Potter is an example. The magical series of Harry Potter stories created by J. K. Rowling became a worldwide cultural phenomenon, and both the original books and the film adaptations received massive popularity and attracted thousands of fans. In the original books, while Harry Potter represents justice, Malfoy is the personification of evil. As the plot develops, Malfoy also reveals his conscience. Female BL fans began to develop their own interpretations and show great sympathy for the character of Malfoy. A large number of slash works pairing Harry Potter with Malfoy emerged and became extremely popular within the *fu nü* community. *Destiny* is one of the classic video montages created by BL fans. The video recreated the story of Harry and Malfoy, from first acquaintance to coexistence, disagreement, and tragic ending. Using original movie footage, coupled with soundtracks from Chinese TV drama, the creators of this re-edited video deliberately created a tragic atmosphere, reinterpreting the relationship between Malfoy and Harry as a same-sex romantic relationship. As a result, *Destiny* became a major hit within the BL community.

Influenced and inspired by the original BL literature, fans have thus begun to develop a strong desire to be creative themselves. From partial participation to full-on creation of BL works, BL culture has a great impact on its fans. Many of my interviewees shared similar feelings, including great compassion for and strong emotional connections with the characters in BL literature. Respondents were no longer satisfied by merely reading homoerotic literature, and showed a strong desire to give the original characters second lives by creating new plots. In other words, BL fans surpass their identities as readers, and show a strong impulse for creation and control.

Horton and Wohl (1956) coined the concept of the para-social, which is now widely used to describe the relationship between media users and media characters. Media users develop emotional attachments to their favourite characters—including celebrities, fictional characters, and even voice characters—and these can become interpersonal relationships within the space of the user’s imagination. For instance, Horton and Wohl (1956) observe that many TV viewers will say goodbye to their favourite local news reporter when the show is over, just as family members greet each other in real-life scenarios. This similarity to real-life social interactions is what leads Horton and Wohl (1956) to dub this media phenomenon para-social interaction. Para-social interaction is not only found among TV viewers, and can often be observed among *danmei* fans. Popular terminology invented within fan groups—such as ‘real mother’ and ‘stepmother’ to describe writers—not only accurately encapsulates the main themes of slash works, but also shows a strongly possessive attitude towards the characters. In their own imaginary worlds, fans can easily manipulate fictional characters to create their own para-social interactions. The production of slash work often begins with a strong emotional attachment to specific original plots or characters. The creators first deconstruct the plots, character relationships, and even background settings, then reconstruct and recreate an entirely new plot according to their personal preferences or to fulfil their own fantasies. The recreated plots are thus given new interpretations. The newly created plot replaces the original work, and becomes the focal point of *danmei* fans.

Generally speaking, BL fans fall into two different groups: readers and creators. Within the *danmei* community, creators and readers are inextricably linked. The creators are the main force in the creation of slash works, and are described as ‘super fans’ or ‘creative fans’. The readers can be seen as ‘supportive fans’, and they are the pillars that support the daily practices of the *danmei* community. In order to become a creator, one must have deep roots in *danmei* culture; only if one accumulates great knowledge of *danmei* culture and fosters a creative passion can one qualify to become a *danmei* creator. In other words, the creators often come from the readers’ group. Thus creators and readers constitute an ecosystem that involves writing, circulation, and feedback exchange.

My own analysis of this material found that the double male leading characters in the original works adapted in *danmei* are usually in line with the *danmei* atmosphere, and hence have more chance of being recreated by the fans. In these original works, the relationships between male characters are often shown as following types. They may be partners or brothers in a closely bonded friendship, whose partnership becomes even closer than friendship; in this case the male characters always help each other and overcome different challenges. Alternatively, they may be rivals; in this case the two male characters are often portrayed as sharing equal status, power, or strength. They are not friends and often stand on opposing sides; however, they admire each other. This ‘love him but had to kill him’ storyline often attracts great sympathy among *danmei* fans, and has thus become very popular. Both these types of fictional relationship demonstrate strong feelings of equality and independence. The male characters in such stories often help each other, showing great courage and strength. Through their contrast with the reality of patriarchal society, where women are subordinated to men, these fictional works fit the BL fans’ fantasy, and they deeply touch the *fu nü* group, who are reconstructing and reinterpreting original works to create their own imagined utopia.

Thus most *danmei* literature tends to depict the male characters as highly intelligent, self-confident, self-reliant, and independent. Even the weaker characters can obtain a certain social acceptance and status by using their abilities. In the homoerotic relationships, *seme* represent the more aggressive party, while *uke* play the passive role. Even so, in *danmei* works there is emotional attachment between the two parties. For instance, in the fan fiction *Fireworks*, a short novel based on *The grave robbers’ chronicles*, the *uke* is portrayed as weak in appearance, but he has a strong heart: he always tries to solve his problems alone and to prove himself, and he expects recognition and respect from others, while the *seme* character respects his choices.

As mentioned above, *fu nü* online communities are not only places for interaction and participation, but also offer a supportive environment for training in anything from Photoshop to foreign languages. With the help of these training courses, *fu nü* can produce higher-quality works. These works circulate among *fu nü* groups, and sometimes can spread outside their circles and have a positive effect due to their high quality. In this way *fu nü* can further confirm their belongingness and benefit from it.

The virtual community, as a space for generating and expanding social interaction, has the function of communicating information, sharing emotions, and strengthening identity. The virtual community for *fu nü* is relatively closed, but one is free and safe inside it. In this space *fu nü* can interact and communicate about the shared topic of BL. They can express their identity and interest, without worrying about being criticized. The close linkages among members originate from their shared identity.

**Conclusion**

Self-identity is an inherent part of one’s psychology, consciousness, emotions, values, etc. Self-identity is reflected in one’s overall understanding of the self. It is a result of the differentiation of the self, which settles into a kind of ownership. This identification process is also a confirmation process. By comparing themselves with others, individuals can find their own points of uniqueness as well as their similarities with other group members. This ultimately achieves a confirmation of ‘who I am’. The constant questioning process can confirm one’s own characteristics—determining which categories I belong to, and which I do not belong to. In the process, one’s own self-understanding involves the understanding of one’s surroundings and other members. Thus self-identity is positioned through group identity. In this sense, Weeks (2012) points out that identity gives people a sense of belonging. Identity is also about one’s social relationships, the complexity of being involved with others.

According to my participants, their self-identity involves various aspects. Such as how to behavior in ma feminine way, how to concern more about safety when going out, what their expectation should be like - a good mother and a good wife in the future- are highly related to one topic: how their body is structured by others and how they understand their body under this construction. As Foucault's believe I use a lot in this thesis that, gender is not a natural attribute of the body, but the product of a particular power relationship, McNay (2013) discusses Foucault's body concept from the perspective of feminism, expressing the ambivalence of feminist scholars towards Foucault's theory with both love and hate. McNay (2013) sees that although Foucault takes a kind of anti-essentialist understanding of the body, he also considers the body as a specific existence. In this belief, the body is still unavoidable to fundamentally related to the materiality and biology determined discourse. Thus, it inspires other feminist scholars to re-understand the body from the perspective of biological gender and social gender. Physical concepts have long been the core of the feminist analysis of gender oppression. Since patriarchal culture by emphasizing biological differences between men and women, the gender inequality had been legally established in issues about marriage and childbirth. Women are passively fixed in the role of mother and wife because of their body. It emphases that the body is natural, women are biologically inferior to men. This naturalized body became a tool to legitimize sexual oppression.

Whether it is a confirmation of an inherent self or a search for belonging, identification involves supporting certain views or positions. Taking these basic viewpoints, fu nü’s self-identification and self-construction give a sense of escaping from the mainstream. In BL, women are absent from the storylines. The only gender role there is—men—is created by women, but women are not present in the stories. This particular relationship structure makes male characters in BL fundamentally different from men who are shaped by the dominating traditional patriarchal ideology.

However, my participants also show an attitude that young women accept their biological structure as a fundamental base of social gender structure. The key to being happy with their women identity is not to deny its biological structure, but to accept it positively. They did not separate their socially structured gender from their biological sex but regarded it as an organic unity which could be redefined by subjectivity. Under Foucault's influence, McNay (2013) argues, today's feminists are more flexible about the issue, seeing motherhood as both a pillar of the patriarchy and a source of female identity. It also represents progress in the feminist conception of the body - one that is neither based on an inherent biological nature nor regarded as merely the result of social construction. Instead, the body is understood as an intersection -- a cross between biology and social/political power and subjectivity. The bilateral nature of the body is also related to the construction of female identity, which is constructed in the intersection of gender and gender reflected by the body.

In modern society, there is a diverse range of masculinities and femininities, some of which may become more popular or dominant in a given period. According to Croll (1995), gender inequality is constructed by patriarchy. Whether the discourse in BL can change this construction is worth exploring.

# Conclusion

My study of BL fan culture and the BL fans known as *fu nü* was initially inspired by a personal experience: my ‘crush’ on a same-sex friend while we were interns at a Beijing LGBT centre. As I self-identify as a heterosexual woman, I found that I could sense an intuitive connection between the ‘heterosexual’ and the ‘homosexual’ in my feeling of ‘butterflies in the stomach’. This feeling of connection is depicted in BL fictions about same-sex love and eroticism, which are mostly created and consumed by young women. After a careful analysis of young women’s stories about reading BL, I not only share their cherishing feelings towards same-sex love, but I also strongly empathize with the voices of these young women through the appeal of BL.

The significance of the study of BL culture and *fu nü* is far more than just the study of a group of minority-culture enthusiasts. Following China’s reform and opening up, the country had to let in information from other countries and cultures. In the words of one of Xiaoping Deng’s favourite sayings from the early 1980s: ‘if you open the window for fresh air, you have to expect some flies to blow in.’[[17]](#footnote-16) Although it may go against conventional ideology and party-state policy to some extent, unprecedented winds of change may be blowing across the whole country thanks to the Internet. On the other hand, the fully developed and stable traditional culture that has existed for centuries still has a profound impact today. These two antagonistic interacting forces have led to a drastic social change that constitutes a historic shift in the wider background of China. The new generation of young women who have grown up during this era are being educated from both traditional and modern directions. *Fu nü*’s preference for the male same-sex erotic scenes of BL is opposed to mainstream culture in two ways: women’s consumption of naked male bodies inverts the male gaze in patriarchal society; and the depiction of same-sex eroticism as entertainment reverses heterosexual hegemony. Their preference is therefore worthy of profound exploration on the battlefield of gender. This thesis has demonstrated how *fu nü*’s personal experiences resist patriarchal norms and heterosexual hegemony, create the opportunity for individuals to explore different sexualities and relationships, and reflect a broader social change. Women as a group have been ignored and silenced, and how *fu nü* situate themselves in this changing social context will therefore influence how they confront various constraints and opportunities, how they define their own female identities and roles, how they make choices and decisions, and how they control their own desires, emotions and identities. These women’s experiences of the new era also mirror my own path as a woman who grew up as part of this generation – and who then went on to become a women’s studies’ researcher as an adult.

BL’s popularity in China today is closely related to the gender culture of traditional Chinese society. The cultural and historical impact of Confucianism has influenced Chinese society for centuries. The Confucian system not only emphasizes people’s understanding and acceptance of their social status through strict social hierarchy, but also connects the life of the individual to their whole family. Equality for women was seen as a by-product of political movements waged by men, rather than the result of bottom-up reform initiatives emanating from women themselves. To build a harmonious society, women’s virtue was re-emphasized, and the slogan ‘women return to the family’ was proposed. However, the trend of feminism awoke many women and became a powerful force during this period. Thus, we can say that the changes in women’s status have been, and continue to be, reflected in the degree of civilization in China, and this constitutes a backdrop for understanding my participants’ preference for BL. When women are expected to become obedient wives and caring mothers, and are regarded as their male family members’ dependants, their potential for and contribution to education, finance and politics are underestimated and restricted (see Chapter 2).

Homosexuality in China has been documented since ancient times. Homosexuality was never considered to be so problematic that it caused serious conflict within social, political or scientific realms. As Chou (2000) explains, the term ‘homosexual’ in ancient China related to one’s behaviour and personal interests, rather than to an identity. Such behaviour and personal interests were generally agreed to be ‘natural’ (Ruan, 1991), and this provided a tolerant environment in which homosexuality could exist. Indeed, rich historical references have revealed that homosexuality was even popular in feudal China (Samshasha, 1997), especially among the upper classes, as emperors kept male consorts, and homosexual practices were regarded as noble virtues (Hinsch, 1990; Guilk, 2003). Between the Wei and Jin dynasties, this behaviour spread from the royal family to the whole scholar class (Ruan, 1991; Samshasha, 1997). It was fashionable for aristocrats to keep beautiful young males for the enjoyment of visiting guests, especially during the Han dynasty (206 BCE – 220 CE).

The long tradition of homosexuality also encouraged the development of same-sex prostitution in ancient China (Kong, 2002). In order to demonstrate the dominant partners’ powerful, aggressive, dominant ‘yang’ energy, male prostitutes were young and feminine, and often took the passive role in sexual relationships (Hinsch, 1990). Thus, male prostitutes were discriminated against and placed at the bottom of the social hierarchy, on a par with women (Sommer, 1997). The lower classes also used homosexual intimacy as an alternative strategy to achieve emotional and financial support when they were frustrated or sought to resist traditional arranged marriage. This phenomenon was especially typical in the south-eastern coastal areas, which were highly commercialized and westernized, and which were the areas where capitalism emerged. For example, qi xiong-di (契兄弟), male homosexuality, was popular in Guangdong and Fujian, while Zishu Nü, female homosexuality, was popular in the Canton Delta area. This started to change when homosexuality became stigmatizedit began to be seen as abnormal in the early 20th Century with the import western ideas of perversion and inversion and was regarded as deviant right through the Mao era and early reform era, which associated with moral corruption. However, the younger generation see an accepting attitude towards homosexuality as modern (see Chapter 3). This cultural environment contributes to BL’s popularity in China, since ordinary people are more tolerant of homosexuality, and it is easy to access BL. BL readers see BL as a different product from gay fiction writing. It also demonstrates a heterosexual parallel on some level (see Chapter 4).

Taking an in-depth interview approach, I recruited 40 participants, including four focus groups of three participants each. Ultimately I used 30 participants’ responses as my data for this thesis. When I was seeking participants at the beginning of my fieldwork, I assumed that it would be very easy to find enough participants by advertising on the Internet or randomly approaching people at the comic-con I attended. However, these methods proved inefficient, and I had only one respondent. Thanks to this experience, I realized that conducting research on a sensitive topic – especially using a qualitative approach – could involve exposing the most private and vulnerable parts of one’s heart. My personal network greatly helped me to find participants following this realization. I eventually had 40 participants, including friends of mine with close interests in the issue of homosexuality, including a gay friend, my undergraduate gender studies lecturer, and my former schoolmates. These ‘gatekeepers’ helped me to gather enough participants with snowball sampling, and to move to a more profound level when I subsequently conducted the interviews. Following their advice, I organized four focus groups, with three participants in each group. However, one group proved disappointing, as the participants in that group did not provide detailed answers to my questions, but instead used statements such ‘so do I’ or ‘I have nothing to add to this issue.’ This demonstrated the tendency towards conformity in groups. I also found that when the focus group was composed of schoolmates who were not close to each other, it was hard to get very personal responses. I also found the data could be dull when I was interviewing participants to whom I had been introduced by my former lecturer. They were all students on his gender studies course, just as I had been. They saw me as the lecturer’s colleague or an older alumna. Thus they were not willing to open up deeply, and instead sought to ingratiate themselves with me by presenting ‘politically correct’ answers on gender issues. Thus, although I interviewed 40 participants, I only used 30 as data for my thesis. In other respects, the interview process was very smooth and satisfactory (see Chapter 5).

My data from 30 participants showed that women from the young generation are transforming, from the traditionally expected relatively passive role, to more proactive roles as regards sex, romantic relationships, love and self-identity. The depictions of BL characters reflect women’s changing attitudes about masculinity or male sexual attractiveness: from sweaty muscle men, to more neutral portrayals that contain both masculinity and femininity, according to traditional definitions. For women, it is the desires and pleasures of the individual that are important, rather than the general privileging of male heterosexuality. Women also gain a sense of sexual autonomy from reading BL (see Chapter 6).

When women were expected to remain tied to the family, their education, career and political potential were not valued. Today, however, the importance and necessity of marriage are greatly reduced. Besides, marriage is unstable, since it is built not upon love but upon pragmatic considerations. A double standard between men and women regarding loyalty in marriage also exists. Thus, heterosexual relationships and marriage are disappointing in reality. This means that for female readers BL offers an escape into true love, equal relationships and good lovers (see Chapter 7). The reinforcement of essentialist rhetoric is another theme that participants responded to. It is evident from the participants’ accounts that they experience a contradiction. On the one hand, they experience restrictions and oppression as women, and they insist that discrimination against women (compared with men) is irrational. On the other hand, they also agree that in many respects masculinity and femininity are formed by biological differences. Thus, they experience a paradox between an internal drive for independence and external compliance to deal with reality (see Chapter 7).

In my thesis, I have explored how young women’s different understandings of intimate relationships have a long-term impact on their choices in life. In these women’s narratives and daily lives, we can see their desire to become sexual: they want to find pleasure in life, hope to have more choices in intimate relationships, and hope to have a gender image beyond the constructions of essentialism; they are fleeing sexual scripts that are entirely defined by mainstream discourse, and this results in freer spaces for self-definition and implementation of a stronger self. They challenge gender norms in the practice of daily life, and they strive to break through their boundaries and achieve self-transformation. By understanding their pursuit and interpretation of BL, we can better understand the new possibilities that they see as young women, as well as their experiences of restraint and their strategies for surviving subjugation. How these experiences affect their life choices can also further reveal the implications of giving them that choice.

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1. Japanese novelist Natsume Soseki (1868–1912) of the Meiji period created the phrase ‘The moon is so blue tonight’ to express a subtle equivalent of ‘I love you’ in Japanese. This is because in Japanese the pronunciation of *tsuki* (moon) is phonetically similar to *suki*, which means ‘like/love’. Another metaphorical interpretation is ‘I can recognize the moon’s beauty and love, because I see them in you. Thank you for letting me comprehend what true beauty and love are.’ See Ramisa the Authoress (2016) and Quora (n.d.). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
3. *Li* (礼) is commonly used in defining a certain type of Chinese philosophy, particularly within Confucianism which serves feudalism ruling class. Wing-tsit Chan (1963) explains that li originally meant ‘a religious sacrifice but has come to mean ceremony, ritual, decorum, rules of propriety, good form, good custom, etc., and has even been equated with Natural law.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. See http://www.time.com/time/asia/features/youngchina/a.hottest.authors.html, accessed on 26/07/2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. Seehttp://club.163.com/viewElite.m?catalogId=4831&eliteId=4831\_100d22f00c100, accessed on 12/02/2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. ‘The passion of the cut sleeve’ is a phrase used to describe the relationship between Emperor Ai of the Han dynasty and his same-sex lover, Xian Dong. The story tells that one afternoon, after they fell asleep on the same bed, Emperor Ai cut off his sleeve rather than disturb the sleeping Xian Dong. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. ‘The bitten peach’ is a term used to describe the relationship between courtier Mizi Xia and Duke Ling of Wei. Mizi Xia bit into an especially delicious [peach](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peach) and then gave the remainder to the duke as a gift. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. At a traditional Chinese wedding, the bride and groom kneel before their mothers and fathers. The mother of the bride combs the bride’s plait into a chignon, at which point it is announced that the bride is officially a married woman and no longer an innocent young girl. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
9. Princess Sapphire was born a girl, but has both a male and a female soul, due to an angel’s mischief. To protect her kingdom and people, she fights as a knight to defeat a conspiracy to usurp the throne of Silver Land. Toku (2007) argues that Sapphire’s identity struggle reflects the difficult situation of Japanese women who must choose between (limited) careers and marriage. The ‘happy’ ending of the story sees Sapphire marrying a prince rather than ruling the kingdom as a boy. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
10. 24 Nen Gumi (‘the Year 24 Group’) refers to one of two female manga artist groups which are considered to have revolutionized *shojo* manga. Their works often examine radical and philosophical issues, including sexuality and gender, and many are now considered classics of *shojo* manga. Many of those in the first group, the Fabulous Year 24 Group (花の24年組, *hana no nijuyo-nen gumi*), also known as the 49ers, were born in 1949 (Wikipedia, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
11. Clamp (クランプ, *Kuranpu*) is an all-female Japanese [manga artist](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mangaka) group that formed in the mid-1980s (Wikipedia, 2018a). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
12. The two participants in a BL relationship are often referred to as seme ("top") and uke ("bottom"). These terms originated in martial arts: seme derives from the verb "to attack", while uke is taken from the verb "to receive" in anal sex.

    Source:https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yaoi#Seme\_and\_uke [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
13. *Otaku* (おたく/オタク) is a Japanese term for people with obsessive interests, often anime and manga fans (Wikipedia, 2018b).  [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
14. *Guanxi* can be said to go to the core of Chinese interpersonal relationships. It is broadly defined as personal connections and/or relationships (Kriz and Keating, 2010) and is perceived to be critically relevant within China today (Chen et al., 2011; Yang et al., 2005). According to Bell (2000), *guanxi* is born out of the culture of shared responsibilities and relationships with one’s kin. It has extended to non-kin today, into broader networks, similar to but going far beyond ‘reciprocity’ (Ridley, 1996) or ‘tit for tat’ (Axelrod, 1984) in the Western context. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
15. The noun ‘man’ is frequently used in informal spoken language among young people as an adjective. For example, to describe a manly, virile man, the sentence can be ‘这个男人很man’ (‘this man is very *man*’). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
16. Due to various factors, such as geographical conditions, politics, economics, ethnic customs, etc., the northern part of China differs greatly from the southern in terms of lifestyle, cultural temperament, and social customs. Such diversity also contributes to the different characteristics of male stereotypes. While men from southern China are often considered sentimental and delicate as well as calculating, the male temperament of northern China is supposedly quite the opposite: generous and frank, but uncouth. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
17. Chinese: 打开窗户，新鲜空气和苍蝇就会一起进来; pinyin: *dǎkāi chuānghù, xīnxiān kōngqì hé cāngying jiù huì yìqǐ jìnlái*. There are several variants of this saying in Chinese, including ‘如果你打开窗户换新鲜空气，就得想到苍蝇也会飞进来’ and ‘打开窗户，新鲜空气进来了，苍蝇也飞进来了’. The meanings are the same. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golden\_Shield\_Project#cite\_note-6 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)