

History and research review of contemporary female-oriented male-male erotica (*Boys' Love*) in Chinese-speaking regions

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Abstract

Female-oriented male-male erotica is a global genre of youth culture which portrays fantasy romantic and sexual relationship between men. Globally known as *Boys' Love* (BL), the genre originated in 1970s Japan and spread almost worldwide during the 1980-1990s through commercially-translated products and illegal uploads to the internet. We provide a history of the development of BL culture in contemporary Chinese-speaking regions in Southeast Asia encompassing Mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan. A literature search identified 263 relevant articles on BL in Chinese-speaking regions until the end of April 2020, the first published in 2006. In order of dominance the literature focuses on the following themes: fandom, sexual liberation, social influence, paradox of gender identity, and communication. Since the early research, academics have become more positive and nuanced in their investigations. Inspiringly, the large number of student theses in the literature suggests that young people who have grown-up with BL culture view it as an important social movement worthy of serious study.

Keywords: Boys' Love; *bōizu rabu*; *bīeru*; *danmei*; *yaoi*

History and research review of contemporary female-oriented male-male erotica (*Boys' Love*) in Chinese-speaking regions

Female-oriented male-male erotica is a global genre of youth culture which portrays fantasy romantic and sexual relationship between men (Bollmann 2010). Its designations are many: *shonen-ai* and *yaoi* originally in Japan; *slash* originally in Anglophone regions; *danmei* (耽美) in Mainland China; and *bōizu rabu* (ボーイズラブ) or *bīeru* (ビーエル) in Taiwan. The term '*Boys' Love*' (BL) has gained traction universally and will be used here except where a more specific labelled is more appropriate in context. BL is produced and consumed mainly by women (Madill 2020) and takes many formats including comics and manga, commercial and amateur fiction, anime, live action film, internet series, CD drama, fan art, and video games (Patrick and Galbraith 2011). We provide a history of the development of BL culture in contemporary Chinese-speaking regions in Southeast Asia encompassing Mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan (Harding 1993). Our aim in presenting a history of BL is to offer a context in which to situate our review of the research literature and we highlight regional differences throughout.

History of BL in contemporary Chinese-speaking regions

Originating in 1970s Japan, what has become known as BL spread globally, especially during the 1980-1990s, through commercially-translated products and illegal uploads to the internet. Today, professional and amateur creators exist all over the world and have developed multiple styles in multiple formats. In contemporary Chinese-speaking regions, there is a huge population of BL producers and consumers with an almost inestimable number of novels serialized online.

In the early 1970s, a group of young female Japanese artists began producing manga about platonic love between adolescent boys. These stories attracted the genre names *shonen-ai* (literally 'boy love') and *tanbi* (aesthetic literature). The creators are recognised for their

influence by being named the 'Year 24th Group', all having been born around 1949. Key works include Moto Hagio's *Heart of Thomas* (1974) and Keiko Takemiya's *Song of the Wind and Trees* (1976-1984). Both were serialized later in JUNE, the earliest BL magazine, which commenced publication in 1978. The Year 24th Group are credited with bringing manga for girls into dialogue with classical literature, historical drama, science fiction, exoticism, and philosophical ideas (Suzuki, 1998). However, *shonen-ai* was also considered by some to be pedantic and difficult to understand (Galbraith 2011).

Simultaneously, during the 1970s in the Anglophone west, a form of fan fiction developed called *slash* which portrayed sexual relationships between male characters in popular culture. The original and most famous couple is *Kirk* and *Spock* from the TV series *Star Trek*, the term 'slash' stemming from the format 'K/S' used to denote the couple (Boyd, 2001). Early western slash culture inspired Taiwanese writers and artists to create works of male-male romance designated 'European and American Circle' (歐美圈). Taiwan also has a relatively long and successful experience of importing and translating Japanese manga compared with other Chinese-speaking regions, has done so since the 1970s, and has established many local publishers and Japanese publisher outposts (Chen 2007). Scholars of Japanese anime, comics, and games in Asia also assumed Taiwanese BL comics as an absorber, replicator, and localiser of Japanese BL (Chao 2018).

In the 1980s, works featuring male-male romance as developed by the Year 24th Group had become widely accepted in Japan. Moreover, amateur derivative works called *dojinshi*, consisting of fanzines and other non-commercial publications, had become popular (Pelc 2017). It is commonly thought that the first *dojinshi* were based on *Captain Tsubasa*, a typical sports themed boys' manga and anime. *Dojinshi* focus on emotional connection and friendship between male characters, develops these into romantic and/or sexual relationships, and tend to have relatively simple plots. In fact, early *dojinshi* creators joked how they

produced stories with 'no peak, no point, no meaning': in Japanese, 'yama nashi, ochi nashi, imi nashi,' from which came the popular culture designation 'yaoi' (Ingulsrud and Allen 2009).). In general, *yaoi* is used to indicate material of a more sexual than romantic nature and the umbrella term BL, covering most forms of male-male erotica and romance, took hold in Japan from the late 1980s.

Taiwan is the most Japan-influenced area of the Chinese-speaking regions, and while Hong Kong demonstrates also a relatively open attitude, Mainland China tends to be much less accepting (P Li 2006). Consequently, at first, most Chinese-translated Japanese manga came from Taiwan, then increasingly from Hong Kong, but only limited and official versions of Japanese manga are available in Mainland China, not including *yaoi* due to its controversial subject matter. *Yaoi* was introduced into Taiwan during the 1980s and BL also has been quickly and extensively accepted by Taiwan readers. In particular, the female group of Japanese artists known as 'CLAMP' played an essential role in developing and spreading BL manga, starting with their first original work *RD Veda* (1989-1996). Compared with more sexually explicit *yaoi* materials, their more romantic and suggestive works have drawn less negative attention from authorities and are accepted by more readers. During the 1980s, an increasing number of commercial, amateur, and fan-made BL novels and manga were published in Japan. Although most were not formally translated into Chinese, pirated editions and fan translations (*scanlations*) were available. This had a major influence in encouraging authors in Chinese-speaking regions to publish their own BL online, both fan fiction and original works.

During the 1990s, Japanese manga and anime became truly globalised (Hernández-Pérez 2019). Although McLelland (2007) suggests that *yaoi*/BL was not formally introduced in the west until 2003, what might be called 'yaoi forms' had been available much earlier. This includes the above-mentioned western *slash* works which were blooming online despite

copyright infringement issues. Similarly, from the 1990s onwards, production and consumption of BL in Chinese-speaking regions were mainly internet-based and witnessed considerable growth by the end of the 20th century. In Mainland China, with very limited outlets for formal publications, Japanese *yaoi*/BL manga, *danmei* novels, and *dojinshi* were released regularly as online piratical serials from Taiwan or Hong Kong. Although some *danmei* novels were produced as physical books, these tended to be self-publications sold online rather than through an official publisher. However, the internet has facilitated the creators and audience in Chinese-speaking regions to spread BL culture through sharing and discussing the material online.

From the turn of the 21st century, BL culture has boomed worldwide. Initially, Chinese *danmei* tended to imitate the Japanese style in plot and language, such as the naming of main characters. However, in contemporary *danmei*, culturally-meaningful settings and themes are popular including the mythical realm, martial arts, and spirits stories, as well as time travel and rebirth. Source material has also expanded to include original manga, anime, modern fiction, TV programmes, movies, and real celebrities. *Danmei* tends to take the form of serialised internet novels, shorter fan fictions, and micro-fictions/flash fiction of around 100 words, rather than manga or anime as in Japan, and with very few in actual physical form. Despite official censorship and sanctions, the popularity of BL has not been ignored by the mainstream across Chinese-speaking regions and aspects have infiltrated popular culture in diluted form. Commercial publishers sometimes even commission professional writers to create gently teasing *dojinshi* for the launch of a new product.

In Taiwan, local BL integrate aspects of Taiwanese girls' comics and Japanese manga for teenagers and young adults. This is particularly significant in works issued by commercial publishers such as SPP and Tongli (Chao 2018). Apart from commercial and amateur BL works, a small number of media-mix BL productions have emerged since the 2010s whereby

novels are issued with peripherals such as voice drama. (Chao 2020; Lin 2018). Commercial Taiwanese original BL fiction is hugely influenced by heterosexual romance fiction, with some inspiration from Japanese BL light novels and Chinese *danmei*, while influence on amateur original *danmei* fiction – ‘*dourinji*’ - varies with subgenre, e.g. *slash*, Japanese BL, Taiwanese popular fiction, and gay culture (Chao 2018).

As BL has had increasing influence on mainstream popular culture, academics have noticed and sought to understand BL and its possible causes and consequences in Chinese-speaking regions. However, this exposure has also placed BL under increasing scrutiny for its controversial content. In many western countries this has focused on the possible overlap with child pornography (e.g., Madill, 2015). In Mainland China, there is continual online monitoring and censorship, flurries of site deletions, and sporadic prosecution of *danmei* publishers and creators. This may explain why *danmei* in Mainland China, unlike the western male-male works, tend towards suggestive romantic storylines reflecting heteronormative relationship ideals (Zhao and Madill 2018).

Research review of BL in Chinese-speaking regions

Zsila and Demetrovics (2017) provide a review of the BL literature organised under four headings: genre-specific characteristics, fan community, motivations behind the phenomenon, critiques from gay society, and the possible social implications of boys’ love media in an intercultural context. Our literature review is more specific in identifying and thematising the research on BL in Chinese-speaking regions. We describe our search strategy, provide an overview of the literature, and present the themes we identify as dominating the field.

Literature search strategy

The literature search was deliberately broad to scope BL-relevant research in all disciplines and includes publications until the end of April 2020. Inclusion criteria were that relevant

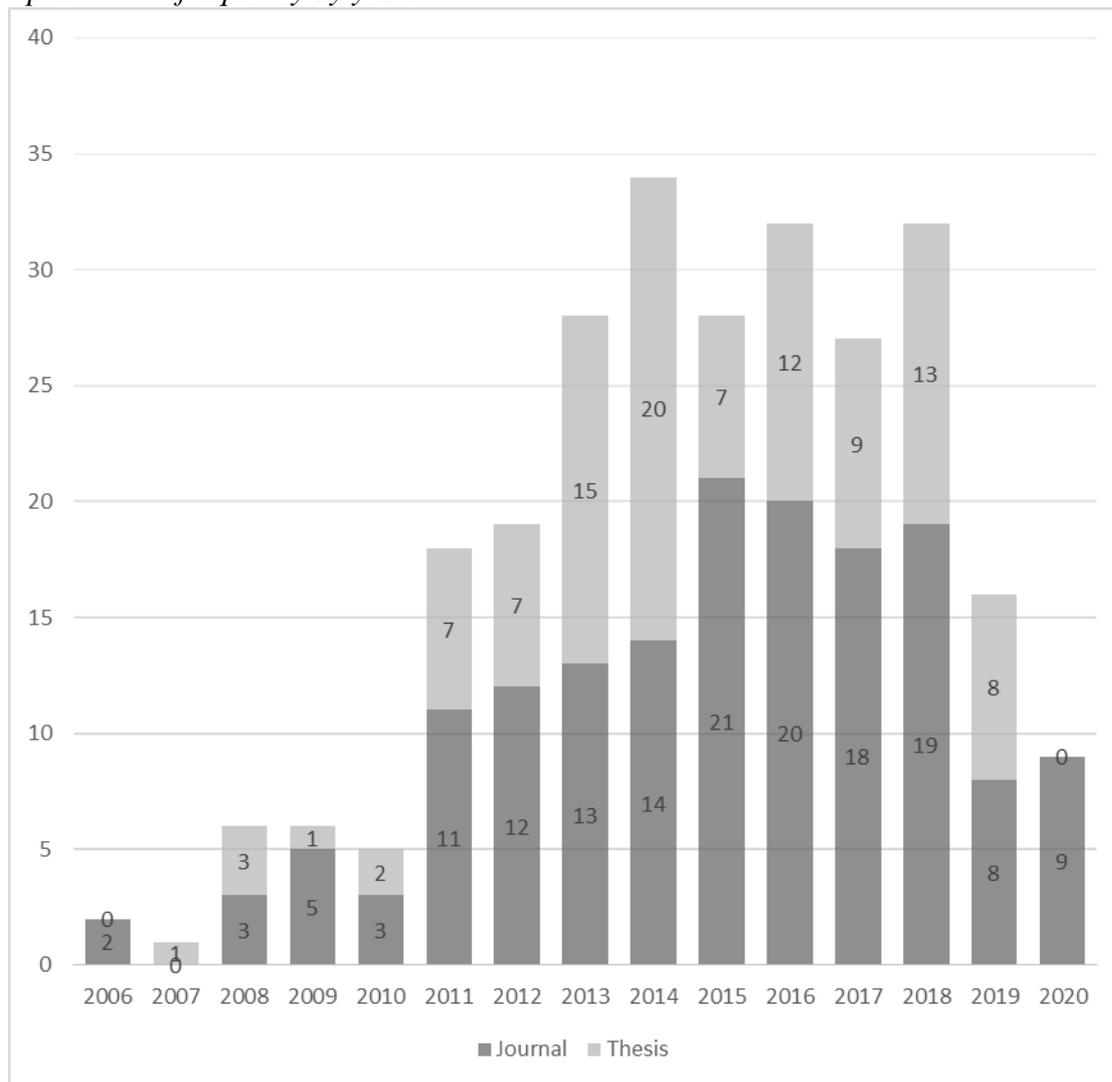
articles are: released full-text, Master or PhD dissertations, or published in academic journals; focused on BL in the geographical regions of Mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan; present empirical research or commentary; and available in Chinese or English. Literature of very poor quality were excluded on the basis of misunderstanding fundamental aspects of BL, being unclear about source material, and/or poor reasoning between evidence and conclusion.

We searched the three largest academic data bases in Mainland China: Chinese National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), Chongqing VIP information Co. Ltd (CQVIP), and Wanfang Inc. We also searched the three main academic data bases of Taiwan and Hong Kong: the National Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations, the Index to Taiwan Periodical Literature System, and Hong Kong Journals Online. The keywords searched were: *tanbi/danmei*, *Boys' Love*, BL, *yaoi*, *dojinshi*, and *fujoshi* (an original Japanese term for ardent female fans of BL). *Boys' Love*, BL, and *yaoi* were searched in English because this form has global currency. *Tanbi/danmei*, *fujoshi*, and *dojinshi* were searched for in Chinese because they are regional terms. Commensurate with regional tradition, Simplified Chinese was used in databases for Mainland Chinese and Traditional Chinese was used in databases for Taiwan and Hong Kong.

Overview of the identified research literature

BL culture has attracted academics from various fields such as education, economics, literature, sociology, psychology, gender studies, law, communication, and political education. The number of identified journal articles (K = 158) and research theses (K = 105) of acceptable quality is presented by year in Figure 1 (Total K = 263).

Figure 1. Journal articles and research theses on BL in Chinese-speaking regions to end-April 2020 – frequency by year.



In terms of timeline, from 2006 to 2010, only 20 articles were published. Most are of relatively low quality through having a strongly biased starting point and/or superficial understanding of BL materials. They tend to focus on the negative effects of BL culture, and aim to reform the readers' taste and to educate them about relationships. Although some of this early research mentions positive aspects of BL culture, and its feminist implications, its potential for sexual education may be over-emphasised. Some explores reasons for the popularity of BL, but conclusions often lack reference to regional context.

After 2010, the number of articles and dissertations grew quickly, with the total almost doubling by the end of 2011 and stabilising between 27 and 34 per year until 2018.

This later research focuses on more variable aspects of BL culture, addresses more specific questions, and shows a more accepting attitude, although researchers still demonstrate concern about negative impact. Topics include the psychology of readers such as gender identity, views on intimate relationships, desire for autonomy, but also practices of female writing, transmission theories of BL culture, and how BL novels are published. The most recent research has moved beyond the psychology of readers and has incorporated queer theory, gender politics, construction of masculinity, and narrative theory. With reference to the latter, plots, themes and types of story have been studied alongside the appeal of most popular features of the BL novel, such as the high value placed on love and the description of beautiful young men.

Between 2016 and 2020, although researchers seem more focused on feminism and BL as an expression of female desire, BL novels adapted into online series have achieved great success and research has consequently paid more attention to selling BL to the public (Liu 2018; Yi 2017). In particular, research is exploring how BL is gaining popularity in mainstream culture through fitting a heterosexual ideology (Luo 2017; Zhu and Zhang 2017). In 2019 only 16 articles were found, suggesting that research on BL in Chinese-speaking regions may be waning. However, our literature search was conducted in May 2020 and there is often some delay between publication or thesis submission and an item being searchable in a data base.

Themes dominating the research on BL in Chinese-speaking regions

Our analysis of the identified research literature on BL in Chinese-speaking regions indicates five main themes in the corpus (see Table 1). In order of dominance these are: fandom, sexual liberation, social influence, paradox of gender identity, and communication. Each theme consists of two sub-themes, each identified article assigned to the sub-themes best

describing its main emphasis, with an attempt to be as parsimonious as possible and most assigned to only one or two sub-themes.

Table 1. Weight of articles contributing to each theme and sub-theme in the review.

Theme	% weight of articles in theme	Sub-Theme	% weight of articles in sub-theme
Fandom	28%	Audience	15%
		Authors	13%
Sexual liberation	26%	Feminism	21%
		Pornography for women	5%
Social influence	24%	Selling BL	14%
		Moral concern	10%
Paradox of gender identity	14%	Misogyny	10%
		Idealisation of the male	4%
Communication	8%	The internet	7%
		Legal issues	1%

Theme 1: Fandom

BL culture in Chinese-speaking regions is associated with a huge amateur industry such that the same women are often both authors and fans. The large ‘comics market’ format, popularised in Japan, has been taken-up in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Mainland China and provides essential real-world spaces for fans to sell and buy amateur creations. However, BL culture is predominately promoted through online spaces and a considerable number of BL novels are serialized online. This has drawn the attention of researchers and articles have explored the reason amateurs keep producing BL and the motivation of fans to engage (Lu and Tang 2012; J Zhang 2015).

Sub-theme 1: Audience. Although BL have been criticized as superficial, formulaic, and distasteful in incorporating explicit sexual description, it has a large audience. Many researchers have explored the reasons women read this material. Many theories have been proposed for the popularity of BL, including their ability to be read as feminist, creative expression for women, and their portrayal of ideal romantic relationships.

Possibly incorporating all three theories, while adding a new dimension, J Zhang (2015) proposes the concept of ‘healing’ as the central feature of audience engagement with

BL (see also Chang 2015). J Zhang argues that readers experience three stages during their reading: identification, catharsis, and insight. So, first, readers seek characters or features in the story with which they have an emotional resonance. In this way, they understand and vicariously experience the journey of the characters. Second, this facilitates the reader to explore and relieve her own stresses safely. Finally, based on her understanding of the characters, readers can reconsider their own problems and find possible new solutions. Importantly, J Zhang posits that it is not necessary for the reader to insert herself into story in order to see similarities or to build identifications allowing her to reduce negative emotions and have a feeling taking more control of her life. Similarly, relatively early research on the BL audience in Taiwan, such as Chou (2010), suggests that women appreciate the freedom to engage with romances which do not feature the gender constraints they face in everyday life.

Sub-theme 2: Authors. Most BL authors release their novels online for free or at a very low-price, such as one Chinese penny per chapter, and this money usually goes to the website owner. Any income received by an author is part of a signed contract with the website with payment based on word count. Subsequently, the number of amateur works online massively exceed those published professionally, and more than four hundred amateur BL novels are published online each month with a word account of between about five thousand and one million. This figure is from *Jinjiang* finished fictions and the collection of the *Gongdewuliang* reading group - average January 2015 to June 2016 - which actively uploads, catalogues, and provides comments on completed BL.

Zhang (2010) investigated the motivation for authors to start, continue, and print their work for the comic markets in Mainland China and Taiwan. Most were unable to publish professionally, so printed their work privately to sell at the comic market. Printing can be complex and relatively high cost for amateurs, however economic factors did not appear to be a major consideration. Rather, authors were motivated by three main factors (Lu and Tang

2012). First is a strong emotional investment in a character or scenario. Second is feedback from readers. Feedback demonstrates and encourages engagement with the work and authors often take suggestions from fans about how to develop the narrative. Third is when the story is finished, or sells out, the author's self-confidence and self-esteem is increased. Therefore, as opposed to rational economic benefit, it appears to be emotional factors that have a greater influence on the motivation of amateur authors to create BL.

Theme 2: Sexual liberation

Although Hong Kong and Taiwan have tended to be more progressive than Mainland China, Chinese-speaking regions engaged with the idea of 'sexual liberation' later than the west and in the 21st century attitudes to sex and sexuality are in transition (Allyn 2000). The first female sexologist in China - Yinhe Li - (e.g., Y Li 2015) has made a huge contribution to sexual liberation, however tension still exists between liberal and traditional views. This is reflected in the research on BL. That is, this for-and-by-women, often erotic, material is viewed by some as a positive means of self-expression and exploration while, at the same time, the apparent equality between romantic partners in much BL has been criticised and content subjected to censorship.

Sub-theme 1: Feminism. A number of researchers identify feminism as an important reason for BL's popularity and influence. Women's writing is an important symbol for feminist practice and academics highlight the way in which BL fundamentally challenge the heterosexual relationship model through exploring love between men (e.g., Zheng and Wu, 2009). That is, BL is speculated to be a channel through which women can explore relationships that are both sexually intimate and socially equal when this may be difficult for them to achieve in real life. Further, the social obligations of heterosexual relationships, such as marriage and reproduction, is avoided and personal attraction, loyalty, and love emphasised (Zhang 2015).

Some researchers have attempted to make sense of BL through drawing on queer theory (e.g., Yang and Xu 2015). Indeed, BL can challenge the patriarchal-heterosexual model through incorporating ambiguous gender traits and sexual identities such as male pregnancy. Although the intimate relationships are between men, BL has received criticism that these still replicate, via performance, a masculine-feminine gender binary given that pairings often conform to a top-bottom, dominant-submissive, active-passive formula. Hence, several researchers argue that if BL is feminist, it is only superficially so (e.g., Y Li 2013; Zheng 2015).

Arguably, the BL subgenre with the strongest feminist potential is that known as 'ABO'. ABO stories are set in a world in which, although 'male' and 'female' appearance maintains, all people have both male and female genitals. Moreover, gender is determined by one's social position as an Alpha, Beta, or Omega. Alphas are masculine, dominant, and have high social status. Betas are the largest group, have reproductive ability, but low fertility. And Omegas are a subordinate feminine minority with an uncontrollable, highly fertile, monthly mating cycle to which Alphas respond. A large number of ABO stories emphasize the biological and social inferiority of Omegas, portraying them as scheming and selfish while Alphas are remarkable people who can control life and win a superlative relationship (Y Li, 2013). However, Zheng (2015) found that many ABO focus on how Omegas struggle with and negotiate the strict social hierarchy through shaping sexual conflicts between mating cycles or how, in hiding their identity, can achieve Alpha or Beta status. Moreover, the ideal relationship in many ABO stories is where the social hierarchy is overcome and a relationship established on the basis of mutual love rather than instinctual sexuality. Such stories lend themselves to feminist interpretation as a metaphor of affirmative action for the socially disempowered. ABO conventions also facilitate exploration of anxieties stemming

from a hierarchical socio-sexual culture and Zheng draws attention to the creative interpretive possibilities for the reader of these texts.

Sub-theme 2: Pornography for women. Pornography is an essential aspect of sexual liberation since it is a form of sexual expression independent of a marital relationship. However, pornography has a complex relationship with gender and sexual roles and norms and is strongly debated between different schools of feminism. In particular, anti-pornography feminists argue that the depiction of women in pornography is purely misogynist and vile, while sex-positive feminists argue the issues are more subtle, that pornography, in and of itself, is not necessarily problematic, and fight against what they see as a repressive, reactionary, and conservative faction claiming to represent all woman (Garlick 2011). In this context, BL is particularly interesting as a fantasy of male-male romance and sexuality largely by and for women, because it challenges the way in which debates on pornography have traditionally been framed (Yang 2017).

In Mainland China, all kinds and formats of pornography are prohibited and close censorship is maintained to check the sexual content in material including novels, movies, and sitcoms. Moreover, many BL researchers in Chinese-speaking regions appear reticent to explore sexually-related topics possibly because this is still considered a relatively taboo and vulgar topic, and positive articles are generally limited to indicating how BL could be a channel for to educate teenagers about sexual matters and to satisfy their curiosity (Zheng 2016). Due to traditional obligations on women to be chaste and conform to an image of being without sexual desire, BL may be somewhat tolerated due to a presumed lack of identification with the male protagonists. Increasing tolerance may also be supported by the ways in which technological and media developments facilitate women in Chinese-speaking regions to openly consume many forms of the beautiful male image including public figures, pop idols, and sportsmen.

Theme 3: Social influence

With BL becoming extremely popular in Chinese-speaking regions, it has exerted an increasing influence on mainstream culture and inclusion of a sexual frisson between men in media of all kinds appears to have huge economic potential in attracting an audience: known as ‘selling *yaoi*’. This economic motivation, and the fact that BL describes a female *fantasy* of male homosexuality, is open to serious critique as superficial, majority-serving, and fetishizing. However, BL has provoked greater representation of sexual minorities in the mainstream and, in consequence, increased public familiarity with diverse ways of loving and living. On the other hand, heightened visibility of homosexual themes has also aroused public anxiety, indignation, and moral concern. In the research literature, this is echoed in articles expressing concern that BL transgresses traditional moral expectations of women and anxiety about its impact on the sexual orientation of readers.

Sub-theme 1: Selling yaoi. Although it is difficult to make money directly from selling BL, it appears that inclusion of homosexual themes attracts an audience to a variety of mainstream media. Those active in BL culture may use innuendoes to create *dojinshi* with themes which can act to promote the original work, stars, or events. As a result, male celebrities more frequently banter about close same-sex friends and news media reports the enthusiasm of fans in Chinese-speaking region for gay love sub-texts in series such as *Sherlock* (Abad-Santos 2014). Hence, researchers have tried to understand the use of BL elements in the promotion of films, teleplay, reality television, and movies produced in Mainland China (Wu 2015).

Pan (2014) suggests that, to an extent, *dojinshi* expresses counterculture desire, offering a critical and challenging alternative discourse to mainstream consumerism. For example, the inter-penetration of *danmei* and popular culture encourages acknowledgement of erotically-ambiguous same-sex relationship in programmes for the general public. On the other hand, BL elements are heavily sanitised in order to cater to mainstream mores and

regulations such that explicit sexual contents are omitted and characters reinterpreted within traditional gender stereotypes. Yin (2015) reminds us that, in Mainland China, general programming are not allowed to portray homosexuality directly and almost no Chinese 'art-house' films incorporating gay themes that have achieved international renown have been released officially to the public. This includes *Farewell My Concubine* which won the Cannes Palme d'Or in 1993.

Sub-theme 2: Moral concern. In Mainland China, the State Administration of Radio Film and Television issued an update of general principles with regard to content in 2015 which maintains a stringent ban on explicit sexuality. Moreover, all types of pornography are illegal and considered immoral in the region. Hence, it is interesting that, within this context, some researchers have suggested that BL may have some educational potential (e.g., Lui and Tang 2012; K Zhao 2016). However, it is likely that many BL authors know very little about (homo)sexuality (Wang 2010) and, typical of the small research literature on the topic, R Zhao (2007) reports that nearly 60% of students of the 190 surveyed at Shandong Economic University had received no formal sex education. In fact, researchers express concern that BL conveys incorrect and morally deviant information about sexuality and some propose greater regulation, sex education, and exploration of how readers interpret the world (e.g., Gao 2013).

Researchers have also expressed moral concern that BL could impact readers' sexual orientation: specifically, that it could influence young women to eschew heterosexuality and their traditional gender role. In contrast, research suggests that BL narratives actually fit rather well a heteronormative ideology rather than promoting female rebellion (Zhao and Madill 2018). However, although BL is unlikely to influence most readers' sexual orientation, research confirms that fans as a whole have a more positive attitude than the general public towards homosexual peoples (Yang and Xu 2015; Zhu and Zhao 2015).

Theme 4: Paradox of gender identity

In regions influenced by traditional Chinese culture, masculinity is constructed around the concepts of ‘wen’ (文) and ‘wu’ (武): that is, father and son, cultural attainment and physical prowess (Kam 2014). Hence, masculinity is not reduced by a gentle demeanour or apparent physical frailty if *wu* qualities, such as scholarship, are abundant. At the same time, however, women have been defined by social roles, such as wife, mother, and daughter (Z Zhang 2001). BL seem to fit nicely traditional Chinese expectations for men, including both artistic and warrior skills, and academics have been interested in studying this contemporary presentation of male gendering. On the other hand, given that women dominate the demographic of BL producers and consumers, the fact that female characters are often absent or denigrated in the material, and male characters idealised, has also attracted researchers’ attention.

Sub-theme 1. Misogyny. The male couple in BL often inhabit conventional male-female roles depending on personality and preference, and this sometimes negotiated between the men. In this way, women’s traditional responsibilities and roles are replaced and she is made irrelevant. In fact, in the majority of BL, if female characters exist, their characters and their roles tend to be superficial, simplified, and villainized (Yan 2015). Researchers have labelled this phenomenon as ‘misogyny’ and sometime as a ‘female castration complex’, meaning that women reject and undermine other women and the conventions of female identity. A possibly unintended consequence is implicit support of patriarchal male privilege.

Yan (2015) found there to be three common types of female characters within BL. First is the villain who is discarded or rejected by the central male protagonists, aims to break their relationship, and who is portrayed as detestable. Second is the friend who has no developed personality and is a mere accessory of the main characters. Finally is the hero who, although presented as female, is little different from the male characters. Another researcher,

notes how the weak role of female characters in BL has been theorised as a manifestation of women's internalised misogyny (Zhang 2013). That is, the superficial female characters may allow female readers to avoid engaging with the complexities of gender role in reality that evoke anxiety. However, at the same time, female readers can insert themselves into the drama of the main characters given that their roles are decided by personality, physical appearances, or even preference. Moreover, sometimes the active-passive roles are inhabited flexibly and changeably by the characters, so offering new possibilities for romantic partnerships. Hence, arguably, the male couple in BL offer women an imaginary full of romantic possibilities unsullied by the bio-psycho-socio realities of being female under patriarchy (Yang 2017).

Internalised misogyny is also incorporated in BL in terms of the proscription and limitation of women's aspirations such that mainstream media promote the idea that a fulfilling life is to marry a good man, have a good child, and be a good wife. This ideology infiltrates BL through the incorporation of elements such as male-male marriage, male pregnancy, and the raising of children by the couple (Madill, Zhao, and Fan 2018).

Sub-theme 2: Idealization of the male. According to the concepts of *wen* and *wu* (Kam 2014), male characters can embody the best attributes of both masculinity and femininity at the same time. As a result, researchers suggest that such perfect figures can conduct the 'pure love' romantic relationships of women's fantasy, the essence of which is to endure suffering and to make sacrifices to be with one's true soulmate. Contemporaneously, male-male relationships in BL can also escape the mundane aspects of ordinary relationships, usually avoiding the obligations of marriage and the physical risks and domestic work of reproduction experienced by women in reality. BL also emphasizes the beautiful physical appearance of the central male protagonists and the majority of novels offer a dramatic story populated with gorgeous characters. Y Li (2015) suggests, for example, that a major motivation for women's

consumption of BL is to enjoy these beautiful images, evocative language, and intense stories.

Theme 5: Communication

Although BL is blooming in Chinese-speaking regions, there are many challenges related to its communication. The internet plays an essential role in that it has carried the development of BL culture. Fans have many ways of communicating through the internet, such as chat groups, social networking sites, and forums, and most physical produce, including books, toys, and accessories, are sold online. However, given that much online material is made available without identification, certification, or permission - and its often explicit sexual content - legal issues associated with copyright and censorship are highly pertinent.

Sub-theme 1: The internet. In Mainland China, BL culture took hold a little later than in Taiwan and Hong Kong. However, in all Chinese-speaking regions, the internet played an essential role. For example, the *Chinese National Internet Development Report* (NBSC 2019), indicates that internet penetration in Mainland China had reached 61.2%, up 1.6 points from the end of 2018, making 854 million netizens compared to only four million in 2000. The internet provides almost unlimited space for information exchange and creation, with huge amounts of material is accessible online for free. In addition, due to the relative anonymity of the internet, it provides a space that produces a sense of safety and freedom for users, meaning that fans are more willing to express themselves online. Anonymity is imperative if the audience is to enjoy material that may attract social condemnation and for authors to test out themes which might be considered shocking. Homosexual relationships and explicit sexuality are particularly sensitive topics in traditional Chinese culture, and for authorities in Mainland China, hence the communication of BL culture has benefitted enormously from the internet (Chang and Tian 2020).

Sub-theme 2: Legal issues. Pirated copies of numerous BL materials can be accessed online and most *dojinshi* are distributed without authorization from the copyright owner. Most pirate versions are uploaded by fans, and even are translated by them, and, although some Japanese *yaoi* have been published in Taiwan, fans still upload version online without permission. Disputes associated with copyright infringement have been the focus of researchers' attention (e.g., Xu 2015). Copyright holders decide the level of sharing for non-commercial fan works and, if acceptable, provide Creative Commons Licenses. However, even if Creative Commons Licenses provide a strong legal basis for derivative material, given the huge audience for, and levels and formats of, amateur fan creations, these licenses may need review of their fitness for purpose.

Finally, due to official prohibition of sexually explicit material and public acknowledgement of homosexuality in Mainland China (e.g., Wu 2015; Zhao 2016), *danmei* risk being identified as illegal. Moreover, due to country-wide regulations in Mainland China, periodic checking of online content is conducted and *danmei* and the sites that hold this material are vulnerable to deletion. In fact, in 2010 two people were charged and sentenced to six-eighteen months imprisonment for *danmei*-related offenses; in 2011 32 female authors and a website owner were arrested and charged with obscenity; and in 2014 there were further arrests, content deletions, and site closures in what has become known as the 'Internet Purge' (Wei 2014).

Conclusion

BL is of social significance given that women's engagement with pornography is often problematized (Attwood, Smith, and Barker 2019). Specifically, it provides a window into the development of a grassroots sexualised entertainment for women and how this is shaped within different cultural contexts. It is also highly interesting that, even though sexually-explicit material illegal in some Chinese-speaking regions, BL is flourishing and infiltrating

the mainstream. We trace a jump in interest in BL in Chinese-speaking regions by academics in 2011, which has been sustained until only recently and, the research has become more positive and nuanced. The main focus has been BL fandom, what BL implies about sexual liberation for women, and the social influence of the material for good or ill. A minority of research has been interested in what BL tells us about young women's exploration of gender identity and how the culture is facilitated and policed online. In comparison to the organising categories found useful in Zsila and Demetrovics' (2017) more general review of the BL literature, there are broad overlaps in terms of interest in the fan community, motivations behind the phenomenon, and the social influence and implications of BL. An interesting difference, is that, rather than critique of BL stemming from gay society, in Chinese-speaking regions the critique is from mainstream society and is reflected in much of the academic research. However, inspiringly, the large number of student theses in the literature suggests that young people who have grown-up with BL culture in Chinese-speaking regions view it as an important social movement worthy of serious study.

Declaration of interest statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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