

Book Review

**Boys' Love, Cosplay, and Androgynous Idols: Queer Fan Cultures in
Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan**

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If, like me, you were born before 1990 and are not immersed in online fan cultures, you may never have heard of the acronyms BL and GL that comprise the primary thrust of *Boys' Love, Cosplay, and Androgynous Idols: Queer Fan Cultures in Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan* (hereafter *Queer Fan Cultures*). Fortunately, this captivating anthology's editors Maud Lavin, Ling Yang, and Jing Jamie Zhao define 'BL (Boys' Love, a fan subculture narrating male homoeroticism)' and 'GL (Girls' Love, a fan subculture narrating female homoeroticism)' (p. xi) at the outset in the Introduction. Lavin, Yang, and Zhao expertly unpack and contextualise these and other terms that may be new to the less enlightened reader – 'ACG (anime, comics, and games)' (p. xii); 'slash/femslash (fan writing practices that explore male/female homoerotic romances)' (p. xiv); and Chinese slang '*tongzhi* (gay), *guaitai* (weirdo), *ku'er* (cool youth)' (p. xix) – which reappear in fruitful discussions in the following chapters. I recently assigned *Queer Fan Cultures* in a seminar, and my millennial students, who enthusiastically devoured the book, already knew all about BL, GL, and ACG, as well as related concepts like "cosplay" (costume play, as when people dress like manga and anime characters) and "shipping," which denotes when fans couple two seemingly heterosexual characters in a same-sex relationship. No matter their extant knowledge of BL, undergraduate and graduate students and seasoned academics all stand to gain a tremendous deal from this anthology, which probes the theoretical dimensions of BL, GL, cosplay, and androgynous idols while expertly weaving in enlightening and nuanced socio-political observations on the complex cross-cultural relations between mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan.

Truly interdisciplinary, the anthology deftly integrates various subcultures and platforms (e.g. celebrity fan groups, pop music, online forums) and methodological approaches (e.g. Internet ethnography, interviews, postmodern analyses) in a rhizomatic compilation akin to the online fan cultures and queer theoretical terrains the book illuminates. Furthermore, the editors successfully employ a transcultural framework by presenting case studies from mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, contributing to Sinophone studies, a burgeoning field pioneered by scholars such as Shu-mei Shih (p. xix) that seeks to examine cultural connections across and between vast and disparate Chinese-speaking populations. Often occupying feminist positions, Sinophone studies practitioners are well poised to radically transform traditional humanistic disciplines long dominated by Western content, and built on Orientalist notions of Western academic superiority and attempts at categorising/containing non-Western subjects. *Queer Fan Cultures* aligns Sinophone studies with queer theory and fan/reception studies,

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and in so doing, poses a triply effective method for decolonising academic disciplines by challenging Western hegemonies, heteronormativity, and top-down power structures of knowledge construction. In the editors' own words, they share with queer Asian studies, queer China studies, and queer Sinophone studies

a common focus on non-normative genders, sexualities, and desires; a complex understanding of the hybrid and heterogeneous nature of Chinese-speaking sociocultural practices and experiences; and a strong commitment to decenter Western gender and sexuality knowledge and theories (p. xiii).

Section 1. Mainland China occupies over half of the book and includes six chapters, whereas Section 2. Hong Kong and Section 3. Taiwan contain two chapters each. This distribution of content makes sense given the territories' respective sizes, populations, and global political clout. While practical, this tripart spatial division does not offer a particularly exciting path through the anthology. In line with the book's daring content, the editors might have more boldly and creatively arranged essays theoretically and/or thematically (e.g. by grouping chapters about BL generally and chapters focusing on fans of individual celebrities). The main connective threads, as the book's title reveals, are: boys' love, cosplay, and androgynous idols. Subthemes include contemporary theories of media, performativity, and parody/the carnivalesque; current and historically informed political and personal relations, especially between mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, but also between China, Japan, Korea, and Western nations; and varied perspectives on and legal statuses of LGBTQ communities in mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan.

The anthology's contributors keenly consider queer fan cultures as both being influenced by and influencing various political realities facing LGBTQ communities: in mainland China, where homosexuality was decriminalised in 1997 and removed from the official list of mental disorders in 2001, the government maintains a 'no encouraging, no discouraging, and no promoting attitude' (p. xvi). In Hong Kong, 'since the decriminalisation of male homosexuality in 1991, the local *tongzhi* [gay] movement has always preferred normalisation over confrontation' (p. 132); furthermore, 'Taiwan has often been assumed to be a liberal and democratic state in terms of gender and sexual equality... Yet it has also been found that the sex-negative traditions and other conservative and political forces in Taiwan have been persistent in...negating homosexuality' (p. xx).

Allow me to hover over Chapter 1, 'Chinese *Danmei* Fandom and Cultural Globalisation from Below' by Ling Yang and Yanrui Xu, which offers the most comprehensive exploration of BL (*Danmei* in Chinese), as a

model of grassroots globalisation that subverts heterosexual normativity, fosters alternative social and economic networks, and generates a convergence of cultural and media flows from both the East and the West (p. 3).

The chapter provides a highly informative overview of multiple BL platforms in mainland China, such as print magazines, commercial websites, and non-profit blogs, and examines how these platforms have developed from the early 1990s (when BL was first introduced to China via pirated Japanese manga) to the present. The authors show how fans evade mainland China's strict censorship laws by, for instance, utilising fake or borrowed permits to publish print magazines and employing coded language in online venues. The chapter's data is culled from online ethnography of BL websites, field research into BL distribution networks, interviews with BL fans, including publishers, creators and readers, and years of the authors' own BL fan experiences. This extensive data is analysed in relation to theories of 'low-end globalisation' (p. 7) and colonial histories, political and economic competition, and social interactions within East Asia. The authors positively assess BL fan cultures, with their 'nomadic' 'cross-fertilisation' across diverse formats and genres, as constituting a 'vibrant global cultural commons' (p. 8). However, Yang and Xu also intimate that liberation from/subversion of gender and sexuality norms does not necessarily extend to the political sphere. The final part of this chapter discusses how BL platforms can stoke nationalist sentiments, showing how mainland Chinese BL fans tend to disparage pro-democracy activism (e.g. Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement), concluding that 'pop cosmopolitanism' and nationalism can actually go hand in hand' (p. 14). Chapter 1 raises a myriad of important points about the socio-political, economic, and cultural dimensions of queer fan cultures that link to subsequent chapters.

In Chapter 3, 'The World of Grand Union': Engendering Trans/nationalism via Boys' Love in Chinese Online *Hetalia* Fandom', Yang further highlights diverse perspectives on geopolitics through an analysis of *Hetalia: Axis Powers* (2006-), a Japanese manga and anime series featuring characters representing nations, and the series' reinterpretation by mainland Chinese fans into various BL stories and spin-offs. Yang examines how fans have 'shipped' *Hetalia* characters, such as Ivan Braginski (Russia) and Yao (China), and how these pairings register particular political relations and historical circumstances (e.g. China's 1950s regard of the Soviet Union as 'big brother' to emulate) (p. 55). This chapter also discusses conflicting ideas on how BL fans feel China should be represented in relation to other nations, as either a '*seme* (*gong* 攻 in Chinese, literally, the attacker, similar to the *top* in self-defined gay relationships with labeled positions)' or '*uke* (*shou*, 受, literally, the receiver/bottom)' (9). In *seme*

vs. *uke* discussions and elsewhere in the book, as in Egret Lulu Zhou's Chapter 6, 'Dongfang Bubai, 東方不敗; Online Fandom, and the Gender Politics of a Legendary Queer Icon in Post-Mao China', which notes the backlash against feminism in post-Mao China vis-à-vis the re-gendering of the classic martial arts character Dongfang Bubai (originally a man who castrated himself and fell in love with another man) - readers sense that BL fans occupy subversive terrains that are always at risk of conforming to heteronormative standards through the assignation of binary gendered positions that adhere to patriarchal order, even within same-sex couplings. Yet the queer, non-normative space carved out by these fans ultimately remains intact through the vast number of participants and their thousands of diverging fantasies and opinions, all articulable through the Internet and the relative anonymity it affords.

Multiple chapters highlight the transgressive potentials of transnational, and especially pan-Asian dynamics within queer fan cultures. In Chapter 9, 'Exploring the Significance of 'Japaneseness': A Case Study of *Fujoshi*'s BL Fantasies in Taiwan', Weijung Chang considers the defining role Japanophilia (common in Taiwan, with its complicated colonialist past) plays in the island's culture of *fujoshi* (girls who read male homoerotic texts). Chapter 2, 'Cosplay, Cuteness, and *Weiniang*: The Queered *Ke'ai* of Male Cosplayers as 'Fake Girls', by Shih-chen Chao provides an in-depth cultural contextualisation of the 'cute' (*kawaii* in Japanese, *aegyo* in Korean, *ke'ai* in Chinese) performative strategies of AC Alice Fake Girl Group, an all-male group known for cosplaying female Japanese anime and manga characters and Korean pop singers. Chao convincingly concludes that the group's hyper cute performances (which adapt mainstream conventions of female gender performativity and online selfie culture) pose 'deviant challenges to real-world heteronormative discourse in today's China' (p. 39). This chapter engages most directly with images through Chao's close readings of the cosplayers' postures and facial expressions. As an art historian, I desired more imagery analysis of this kind elsewhere in the book. I would also love to see coloured screen shots punctuating the texts and enhancing the Internet-like space *Queer Fan Cultures* occupies.

Many contributors focus on fans' multifarious discussions of androgynous idols and what these discussions reveal about cross-cultural relations and personal perspectives on queer topics. Jing Jamie Zhao's Chapter 4, 'Queering the Post-*L Word* Shane in the 'Garden of Eden': Chinese Fans' Gossip about Katherine Moennig', provides ample insight into lesbian identities in mainland China and is packed with rich theoretical examinations of 'Occidentalizer homoeroticisation' and 'queer hybridity' as embodied in mainland Chinese fans' projections about Moennig, an actress who plays 'a handsome lesbian womanizer' (65) on the popular American television show, *The L-Word*. Eva Cheuk Yin Li's Chapter 7, 'Desiring Queer, Negotiating Normal: Denise Ho (HOCC 何韻詩) Fandom before and after the Coming-Out', offers a captivating discussion of HOCC, one of the only Hong Kong celebrities to publicly come out as lesbian, informed by fans' related comments. Li argues that fans' responses to HOCC – which vary greatly from supportive to non-supportive to prescribing what kind of lesbian she should be (e.g. B or TB/tomboy, approximating but not entirely reducible to 'butch lesbian' vs. G or TBG/tomboy's girl, approximating 'femme lesbian') (p. 142) – are embedded in the *tongzhi* (gay) movement in Hong Kong and the normative backlash that constantly threatens the movement. In Chapter 8, 'Hong Kong-Based Fans of Mainland Idol Li Yuchun (李宇春): Elective Belonging, Gender Ambiguity, and Rooted Cosmopolitanism', Maud Lavin reveals how fans and followers of mainland Chinese pop singer Li Yuchun, known for her *zhongxing* (中性) gender neutral style and sexual ambiguity, negotiate bigotry towards Mainlanders in Hong Kong and generate a sense of elective cosmopolitan belonging. In a positive and productive manner, Lavin describes Li's public persona as 'queer light' (p. 162) (which, in her reading, is actually not light at all), considering, with welcome sincerity, the potential of 'tomboy' styles to foster greater acceptance of fluid gender, sexuality, and place-based identities as well as more generous cross-cultural communications.

In the penultimate footnote of Chapter 5, 'From Online BL Fandom to the CCTV *Spring Festival Gala*: The Transforming Power of Online Carnival', a fascinating study of how the 'shipping' of pop singer Wang Leehom and pianist Li Yundi played out in online BL platforms and mainstream Chinese television, Shuyan Zhou observes that

there are some gay netizens who express a very unpleasant and negative attitude to some BL fans; they usually believe the consumption of male homosexuality by those BL fans distorts gay men's representation to the public and creates a misperception that a male homosexual must be beautiful, aesthetic, and even unreal (p. 110).

I would have liked to hear more dissenting opinions of this kind, to add to the already multitudinous array of voices and perspectives presented.

Overall, *Queer Fan Cultures* constructs a dialogical terrain in which conflicting opinions are presented evenly and without bias. The critical power of this dialogical terrain is highlighted in the anthology's culminating Chapter 10, 'Girls Who Love Boys' Love: BL as Goods to Think with in Taiwan', wherein Fran Martin astutely states:

I want to argue for the important social function of the BL scene itself as an arena – ‘a discursive battlefield,’ in Akiko Mizoguchi’s inspired phrase – where complex debates about gender and sexuality can be played out, in all their internal contradiction, through the construction and trading of the fans’ own reflexive theorisations (p. 195).

In this sense, the anthology functions like the BL scene, erecting a ‘discursive battlefield’ that promises to spawn further examinations of the political, social, and cultural stakes of BL, GL, ACG, cosplay, and androgynous idols. To be sure, this book illuminates the online lives, desires, fantasies, and realities of BL and other queer fans, especially the examined genres’ primary consumers and creators – young Chinese women. I did find myself wishing for a more thorough and sustained recognition of other kinds of queer fans (e.g. gay men, transgender people) and genres specifically geared toward them; this is an area the editors themselves marked for future research (p. xxvi), and I realise such studies might necessitate an entire second or even third volume. In the year following *Queer Fan Cultures*’ publication, to the shock and horror of many (especially young) people, voters in a 2018 Taiwan referendum overwhelmingly rejected the previous year’s Constitutional Court ruling that could have made Taiwan the first place in Asia to legalise same-sex marriage. The referendum results, along with increasing global threats to LGBTQ rights (including in the United States from where I write), remind us of the urgent need to seriously consider *tongzhi* (gay), *guaitai* (weirdo), and *ku’er* (cool youth) fantasies as real alternative futures.

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