



Maud Lavin, Yang Ling and Zhao Jing Jamie
(editors)

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

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reviewed by [Junyi Cai](#)

1. In the broad sense of media discourse, fan culture is everywhere in terms of the obsession with movies, comics, games, TV shows and of course, celebrities. When fan culture is bound up with the term 'queerness', it creates an exciting space full of imagination for alternative fantasy. Queer fan culture can be understood as a subculture in which fans' practices are conducted through a queer reading. For instance, Boy's love (BL), originated from Japan. It refers to fictions created by fans who describe romantic relationships between two males. BL is one of the most popular and widespread queer reading genres for fans.^[1] While research attention on such fields in current scholarship has been increasing with various aspects, few reach into the transnational fandom culture in a non-western context. The book *Boys' Love, Cosplay, and Androgynous Idols: Queer Fan Cultures in Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan* edited by Maud Lavin, Ling Yang and Jing Jamie Zhao offers a significant contribution to the gap in the non-western model of fan culture studies, especially transnational studies. The book surely lights up a new spot in the field.
2. The section on Mainland China contains six chapters and is the weight of the whole book. It begins with Ling Yang and Yanrui Xu's comprehensive overview of the development of BL fandom, or *danmei*, as well as the difficulties BL has faced in the past 20 years. The authors suggest that even though the BL genre first appeared in Japanese Anime, Comic and Games (ACG) in the 1970s, it has been localised in China with a Chinese name *danmei* and developed to a successful transnational meta-fan culture which merges both global and local pop culture, and celebrity cultures. The chapter investigates BL fandom culture through three aspects: online and offline networks of distribution, interactive circles within *danmei* fandom and the women-dominant online transnational public sphere. The study borrows Gordon Mathews' concept of 'low-end globalisation' to describe Chinese *danmei* fan culture as an alternative form of grassroots globalisation that 'subverts the heterosexual normative' (p. 3). As for the online transnational public sphere, the authors observe a sense of nationalism among fans of transnational pop culture. They point out that even though *danmei* fans may be united because of their common interest, there is a division caused by their personal political beliefs (p. 15). Shih-chen Chao presents a case study of a Chinese-specific all-male cosplay group named Alice Cos Group. Through an in-depth examination of the group's cross-gender presentation of cuteness (*ke'ai*), group members' internet personas and their cis^[2] male identity in real life, the author argues that Alice Cos Group's public performance of

opposite gender expressions challenges the heteronormative discourse in China regardless of whether it is the group's initial intention or not. Chao's case study of cosplay, in some extent, also invites readers to rethink the connotation between gender performance and one's sexual identity. Ling Yang explores the intersections between queerness, gender politics and trans/nationalism through a deep critical analysis of online Chinese BL fan discourses of a Japanese manga/anime series of world history based on national anthropomorphism called *Hetalia: Axis Powers*. Yang suggests that the trans/nationalist interpretation in *Hetalia* BL fandom shows that BL fandom is not merely about reshaping gender norms and sexuality but it can also be employed as a vehicle for political expression. Given the particularity and complexity of *Hetalia* that implies both historic narratives and political subjects, Yang's research links up fans' BL practice and their national identity to present a new perspective of queer fandom culture in China.

3. In addition to Alice Cos Group culture, Zhao Jing Jamie, Zhou Shuyan and Zhou Egret Lulu respectively focus on elaborating queer fandom imaginations of characters in TV series, galas and movie. Jing Jamie Zhao analyses Chinese fans' queer reading and fantasy of American celebrity Katherine Moennig's real-life lesbian gender identity and relationship. Moennig played the butch lesbian character in a famous TV series *The L World*. Zhao reveals the complicity among Chinese fans' fantasy of normative ideals of the western queer lesbianism as well as their desiring voices and self-reflexive interpretations in which the local heteropatriarchal memory encounters a global queer world. Notably, Zhao also illustrates that the prevalent heteronormativity in Chinese fans' expectation of Moennig's normative lesbian relationships—masculine butch and feminine femme—unveils their strong desire for gender differences that were once eliminated by Mao's gender ideology of gender erasure. Shuyan Zhou explores the interactions and contradictions among the cyber-culture of fans' BL fantasy, commercially driven mass media and official politico-cultural discourse. Zhou gives a detailed examination of the journey of matchmaking by two male celebrities—pop singer Wang Leehom and pianist Li Yundi—on the internet by the public and the media. Zhou suggests there is a transformative power of online carnival as a flow of rebellious pressure which pushes and challenges multiple cultural boundaries between online and offline media discourse, nonsexual and sexual BL fantasy, private and public narratives as well as fantasy and reality.
4. Egret Lulu Zhou illustrates different queer readings of Dongfang Bubai (DFBB), a fictional androgynous character in a popular martial novel written by one of the greatest martial arts novelists Jin Yong, along with the adaptation history of the character. Zhou presents three dissimilar incarnations of DFBB: male homosexuality in the original novel, transgender casting in the Hong Kong movie and the remodelling of a female identity in a Chinese-aired TV drama. Regarding the third new female DFBB interpretation, Zhou investigates how fans framed and reframed DFBB's character and his/her personality, gender identity and romantic relationship. Notably, the author goes beyond the common fictional writings by fans to pay particular attention to fan-made online episodes in fandom practices of DFBB.
5. It is worth mentioning that all chapters in the mainland China section bring up the issue of government censorship. Some give detailed examinations of its impact on *danmei* production and how BL fans and creators deal with such problems (e.g. Ling Yang and Yanrui Xu), some present how official censorship intervenes in fans' practices of BL fantasy in public media (e.g. Zhou Shuyan and Zhou Egret Lulu).
6. Both chapters in the Hong Kong section focus on Hong Kong-based fans' responses and practices regarding their idols but with different angles and perspectives. Eva Cheuk Yin Li contextualises the queer fan culture of Denise Wan-See Ho (HOCC), a famous female Hong Kong celebrity, in terms of an intersectional perspective of queer fan practices. Li demonstrates the shift in fans' queer readings from celebrating self-discipline to negotiating a proper lesbian embodiment after HOCC came out as

a lesbian in public. Such a shift, Li argues, situates the anxiety between being queer and seeking normality which are placed in the confrontation among heteronormativity and normalisation in queer politics, and the rising homonormative codes in queer fan culture. Maud Lavin explores the attitudes and practices of Hong Kong-based, Mainland-born fans of a Chinese mainland female idol with an androgynous appearance Li Yunchun, in negotiating the feelings of complex belongings. Lavin conducts her research by interviewing Li's fans and followers, and she further concludes that fans' responses reflect that the androgynous gendering, or *zhongxing* (neutral gender) style of Li presents a sense of cosmopolitan connotation which is relatable to the fans' self-identification of belonging and/or gender identity.

7. Each of the two chapters in the Taiwan section present the hybrid cultural practice of *fujoshi's* (girls who love male homoerotic fictions) BL fantasies and its engagement with Japaneseness. Weijung Chang situates *fujoshi* culture within the range of Japanophilia to explore the internal connection between Japaneseness and *fujoshi* culture in Taiwan. Chang's interview-based research reveals that Taiwan's complex local sociocultural and political context with Japan's colonial legacy plays a significant role in shaping *fujoshi's* cultural practice as well as their paradoxical sentiment towards Japaneseness. Fran Martin offers a subtle analysis of the BL scene in Taiwan from its engagement with Japaneseness to its popular taxonomy to Taiwanese fan culture that differs from that of Japanese readers. Drawing upon her interview-based study of BL fandom in 2005, Martin further addresses the particularity of the BL phenomenon in Taiwan in which fans have created two distinguishable worlds associated with BL engagement: one with an imagination of a geocultural world of Japan 'characterised by sex-gender ambiguity/fluidity/nonconformity', another one as a 'social subworld' in which fans and readers can share, communicate and link up with each other for their common BL interests (p. 211).
8. Overall, *Boy's Love, Cosplay, and Androgynous Idols* offers readers a tempting glance at the variety of participation activities within fannish spaces in contemporary Chinese-speaking societies through a queer and transcultural lens. The chapters are based on research that covers a wide range of first-hand data from the authors' own queer fan experiences, digital networks (including online forums and fans websites) and face-to-face interviews. Its content involves diverse exercises of queer practice from cosplay, fanfic of movie characters to queer fantasy of celebrities. It is dangerous to assume that a clear and precise understanding of fan culture can be achieved without a proper contextual analysis. By presenting 10 typical cases with specific focuses in three major locations, *Boy's Love, Cosplay, and Androgynous Idols* illustrates alternative forms of queer fan practice in different cultural and political particularities in a transcultural traffic. It reminds us that acknowledging the variety of cultural difference within a Sinophone context is particularly crucial rather than defaulting to and generalising about a Chinese-speaking community. This is why fan practice is varied in terms of preference, strategy and interactions within the fan circle under specific socio-political circumstances. Keeping all these in mind, the book invites readers to enjoy the sight of an alternative, yet important, world in which heteronormativity has been constantly subverted in various ways.

Notes

[1] For more about BL fiction, artworks and entertainment in English created by fans, see Antonia Levi, Mark McHarry and Dru Pagliassotti, *Boys' Love Manga: Essays on the Sexual Ambiguity and Cross-cultural Fandom of the Genre*,. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2010.

[2] Note: 'cis' male refers to a naturally-born male whose gender identity and expression is also male.

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