

The reasons for the popularity of "Boys love" culture in China

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ABSTRACT. *Boys' Love (BL), or Danmei, is a genre of male-male romance created by and for women and sexual minorities, which have many formats such as novels, manga, anime, songs and audio drama. Danmei originated in Japan. The literary work of BL was brought into China, which arouses the popularity of BL culture in 1970s. This paper explored the reasons for the BL culture's popularity in China from two perspectives. On the one hand, the export of Japanese culture and the development of the Chinese Internet are considered as the objective reasons, on the other hand, the lack of sexual culture has led to sexual repressions for thousands of years in China, which is one of the reasons for the widespread of BL works with pornographic descriptions in China.*

KEYWORDS: *social media, BL culture, Boys' Love, manga, gender culture*

1. Introduction

Boys' Love (BL), or Danmei, is a genre of male-male romance created by and for women and sexual minorities, which have many formats such as novels, manga, anime, songs and audio drama. Danmei originated in Japan. In the 1970s, it appeared in Japanese girl comics for the first time. With the spread of Japanese anime, comics and game culture, girls' comics gained great popularity around the world, especially in East Asia. (Zhao, Yang and Lavin, 2017).

At the beginning of the 1990s, the literary work of BL was brought into China, which arouses the popularity of BL culture. Later, many BL websites were established, which provide the fandom with the newest trend and information on BL culture (Min, 2017). According to previous research, it is obvious to find that BL culture has become a prevalent cultural phenomenon in China; However, Previous research lacked the research which combined fan groups with their external environments such as national laws and restrictions.

Therefore, this essay analyzed the reasons for popularity in BL literature work in China in two aspects: internal reasons and external reasons. In order to investigate this topic, this paper was divided into five sections to investigate this topic. The next

section is the literature review to find the relevant previous research, then followed by the description of the status of development and features of BL in China, then this paper would investigate the reasons of popularity in BL literary works from internal and external reasons. Finally, there is a conclusion about this topic.

2. Literature Review

Boys' Love (BL), as known as Danmei (Tanbi), is a genre of male-male romance created by and for women and sexual minorities, which have many formats such as novels, manga, anime, songs and audio drama. This type of literary work mainly focuses on describing the homoerotic relationships between male characters (Zsila et al., 2018). BL (Tanbi) originated in Japan; In the 1970s, it appeared in Japanese girl comics for the first time. With the spread of Japanese anime, comics and game culture, girls' comics gained great popularity around the world, especially in East Asia. (Zhao, Yang and Lavin, 2017). BL fans, as known as fujoshi, have emerged with the emergence of BL culture. These fans created a cultural phenomenon which was considered as fujoshi culture. The meaning of this phenomenon is that females keen on aesthetic male-male romantic love. In Japan, fujoshi culture is classified as an urban culture by Japanese scholars (Zanghellini, 2009a). Due to the widespread of Japanese BL culture in the world, many western scholars have investigated the popularity of BL culture.

The study of BL culture in western countries mainly focus on the development of transnational communication in Japan (Chou, 2010). In early times, O'Brien (2008) has analyzed the phenomenon that majority of American females consider the consumption of BL as a social bond. In addition, western scholars are more inclined to analyze BL culture and fujoshi groups from the perspectives of female culture and sociological studies compared with Japanese scholars. O'Brien (2008) states that with the development of Japanese cultural capital around the world, there is an increasing number of American people who are drawn to Japanese literary works. What is more, the study of "boys love" offers a cultural intersection of contemporary youth culture. Also, online communities provide a platform for youth to connect and these platforms were considered as a place where youth can consume cultural materials. O'Brien (2008) also pointed out that BL community, as a popular subculture, did not receive enough attention.

Japanese research on BL culture is mainly based on BL comics, while the fujoshi group is considered as the research object. Although Japanese comics research is not the mainstream of urban culture research, many Japanese universities have carried out related research topics to explore the development of fujoshi culture and its impact on society (Li, Parrish-Sprowl and Goering, 2009). In previous studies, some scholars have raised doubts about BL literary works. As Zanghellini (2009) pointed out, there are much content about underage pornography in Japanese BL works, which will be prohibited by law to a certain extent. In addition, BL works could be censored under the system of child pornography laws.

Xu and Yang (2013) researched the development of Japanese BL works in China, which indicated that BL works penetrated the cyberspace of China within 20 years and released the imagination of millions of fans. Due to the limitations of laws and technology, most Chinese BL productions appeared in the form of novels rather than comics, as fictions are easier to spread than images on the Internet. In addition, Chinese BL novels are considered as an "opposing discourse," which are used to challenge traditional literary genres and mainstream cultural standards (Min, 2017). Chou (2010) investigated the reasons for the popularity of BL works in China, which showed that women had fulfilled their desire to pursue "pure love" through BL works. In addition, in previous love stories, females are always in a passive position. Compared with the typical romantic stories between boys and girls, this gender inequality will disappear in BL works.

Zhao, Yang and Lavin(2017) researched the development of Chinese BL works in the information age. They pointed out that BL works were brought into China at the end of the 1990s, and the emergency of BL culture associated with the development of the internet in China. Also, the internet played an essential role in BL culture in building fans identities. The anonymity of the internet provides a safe space for fans to share their feelings and discuss with fellow fans (Zhao, Yang and Lavin, 2017). In sum, the previous research of BL culture mainly focus on the fandom of BL, however, due to the particular social environment of China, lacking the comprehensive investigations from internal and external perspectives. Therefore, this essay will investigate the reasons for the BL culture's prevalence in China, using the perspective of the fandom and the social environments.

3. The current status and characteristics of BL culture in China

BL comics and novels were brought into China from Japan in the early 1990s, bringing the popularity of BL culture. With the widespread of the Internet, online BL fans communities were established in mainland China (Xu and Yang, 2013b). By 2016, the searching results of websites related to BL reached 100million. In addition, the searching results showed that the registered users of BL Bar in Baidu Post Bar reached two million by the end of 2016 (Min, 2017).

The apparent characteristic of BL culture in China is minority communication. It only spreads among specific groups of young women, and the ages of them are roughly between 14-25 years old (Wang, 2008). The majority of female fans groups are mainly heterosexual, and most of them generally had high economic and cultural levels (Wang and Dian, 2008).

In recent years, the spread of the BL culture has shown a low-age trend. According to the surveys of Yang (2006), the audiences of the BL culture who are under the age of 22, accounting for 78.43%, and the proportion of those under the age of 18 is 24.5%. Yang (2006) also pointed out that these BL literary works have significant impacts on teenagers.

Furthermore, another characteristic is that many BL works are full of pornographic content, which become the mainstream of BL literary works (Feng,

2009). According to the survey, 47% interviewers said that BL culture attracts themselves due to the description of sexual behaviors. In addition, 53.3% said they prefer to notice the pornographic description when reading the BL novels.

4. The reasons for the BL culture's prevalence in China

From an objective point of view, on the one hand, the development of Chinese BL culture is the result of the output of Japanese culture. Due to the cultural similarities and geographical proximity, Chinese popular culture has been deeply influenced by Japanese culture (Xu and Yang, 2013). On the other hand, the development of the internet is an essential reason for the popularity of BL culture. Firstly, In the international communication of animation culture, Japan has always dominated a strong position. There is an increasing number of works which are exported to China and other countries every year, while the output of Japanese animations and tv series is about 10,000 minutes, accounting for more than 60% of the global animation production (Wu, 2003). Today, the output value of the animation industry has become the second largest branch of the Japanese national economy, following the tourism industry. At the beginning of the 21st century, the Japanese government proposed a new foreign policy of "anime diplomacy" which aims to influence China and other countries in East Asia(Wu,2008). In this way, BL culture entered into China with the powerful influence of animation. Finally, this policy promoted the rise and popularity of the BL' s culture in China.

Furthermore, today, with the development of technology in communication, online social media provided a platform for the culture of the BL, which has promoted the rapid development of the BL culture in China (Zhao, Yang and Lavin, 2017). Compared with previous times, communication media is not limited to newspapers, magazines, television. Information technology drives people into the Internet age, and the Internet has become a necessary part for people (Feng, 2009). China is the country which has the largest number of Internet users in the world, and young people are the most active group among these users. Young females have more choices to get access to BL literary works today such as mobile phones and tablets(Zhang, 2014). It is different from the real world, as the cyber world eliminates the various physical boundaries. Young females find friends who have the same interests in BL culture via the network, which will offer a sense of belonging, seeking spiritual sustenance, and established a "Utopia" in the virtual world (Zhao, Yang and Lavin, 2017). Also, due to the specific features of network media such as timeliness, interactivity, and openness, the BL fans not only can enjoy various BL works in the online world but could communicate with each other (Wang and Dian, 2008). Any subcultures cannot be officially spread like the mainstream cultures, which mean that the spread of subculture will face many obstructions and suppressions (Min, 2017). From the perspective of online media, the openness, interactivity and anonymity of the network just catered to the characteristics of cultural communication. Therefore, it can be seen that communication technology provides a platform for the development of BL culture, and it also dramatically promotes the widespread dissemination of BL culture.

From an internal perspective, the BL culture satisfies the needs of sexual fantasies, and the desire for romantic love (Zhang, 2016). In addition, the improvement of social openness and the lack of sexual culture are the main reasons for the popularity of BL culture in China. Firstly, in traditional Chinese culture, sex has always been associated with debauchery and immorality, which mean that any descriptions of sexual behaviors were traditionally described as obscenity and taboo (Louie, 2012). Although there are various descriptions of sexual behaviors in Western cultures, such as the American television series "Sex and the City, however, in contemporary China, the points of "Slut-shaming" still have impacts on social norms and behaviors (Chao, 2016). Chinese women intend to break this highly structured and hierarchical patriarchy. Therefore, the BL works are considered as an output for them to satisfy their sexual fantasies (Chou, 2010).

What is more, since the 1990s, social and economic developments have promoted the liberation of the minds in public and more people began concerning the status of women, gay groups and sexual liberation in-depth (Zhang, 2014). Also, economic developments have increased the demand for sexual liberation. The sociological theory has confirmed that economic and social developments also have impacts on human instinct and erotic desire. As Marcuse (2012) pointed out that in a rich and prosperous society, the conflicts between human instincts and civilization can be overcome, which mean that individual desires will be free and unrestrained. The facts showed that feminism, feminist movements, and sexual liberation had achieved unprecedented developments in China in the last 30 years, which has also cleared obstacles for the popularity of the BL culture in China (Li, Parrish-Sprowl and Goering, 2009). Secondly, the opening of the economy enabled Japanese animation culture to be imported into China. As Zhang (2016) argued that in a relatively closed planned economy in society, China has carried out a comprehensive blockade and boycott of the culture in Japan and western countries. With the gradual opening of the economy and social fields, Japanese animation culture has already entered Chinese daily lives through material consumption, which has created conditions for Japanese BL culture to enter China.

Finally, the lack of Chinese sexual culture has also created conditions for the popularity of BL culture in China. Although both Japan and China are influenced by Confucian culture, regarding sexual culture, Japan is a relatively open country. Japanese pornographic industry is very developed, which provides many relevant cultural products (Yu, 2015). Compared with Japan, China is a relatively conservative country which has few products related to sexual culture. In Japan, the cultural products produced for the BL fans provide them with spiritual food, which strengthens the influence of the BL culture at the same time. With the entry of these BL cultural works into China, which enables many Chinese females to satisfy the demand for self-identity and sexual culture. (Li, Parrish-Sprowl and Goering, 2009)

5. Conclusion

This paper explored the reasons for the BL culture's popularity in China from two perspectives of internal and external factors. From the external perspective, the

export of Japanese culture and the development of the Chinese Internet are considered as the objective conditions for the development of BL culture in China. From an internal perspective, the BL culture satisfies the needs of Chinese female fans for sexual fantasies and liberation of the minds. On the other hand, the openness of Chinese society and the improvement of its economy have created spaces for the developments of subculture such as BL culture in China. It is worth noting that the lack of sexual culture has led to sexual repressions for thousands of years in China, which is one of the reasons for the widespread of BL works with pornographic descriptions in China. It is undeniable that this paper studies the existence of BL culture. Due to the limitations of time, this paper has many drawbacks such as lacking the research in depth. However, this essay still tries to investigate the reasons for the popularity of BL culture from the comprehensive perspectives.

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