

## **Engagement with female-oriented male-male erotica in Mainland China and Hong Kong: Fandom intensity, social outlook, and region**

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### **Abstract:**

Our aim is to provide robust information on the demographic in Mainland China and Hong Kong who engage with female-oriented male-male erotica (a.k.a., *danmei* or Boys' Love [BL]). We ask three novel research questions: *Are there differences between (a) 'casual' and 'avid' danmei fans? (b) danmei fans by social outlook in the sexual sphere ('Traditional', 'Progressive')?, and (c) danmei fans from Mainland China and from Hong Kong?* Questions were selected from our 43-question online BL fandom survey in Chinese and the largest data set of its kind (N=1498). Statistical comparisons provide evidence: of consistency between self-reported fan behaviour and fandom intensity: that avid fans are more likely to report nonhegemonic sexual orientations and to be more 'Progressive' than casual fans; the 'Progressive' report greater concern with copyright and legal issues while engaging with a wider range of sexual materials than do the 'Traditional'; and fans from Hong Kong are more likely to report nonhegemonic sexual orientations and to be 'Progressive' than those from Mainland China. In conclusion, although *danmei* materials often perpetuate a heteronormative ideology, avid fans demonstrate a relatively progressive social outlook and engagement in socially-challenging *danmei*-related activities and we speculate that even casual engagement with *danmei* may encourage young people to think critically about the complexities of human sexuality.

**Keywords:** Boys' Love, *yaoi*, *danmei*, pornography, fandom, female-oriented erotica

Female-oriented male-male erotica consists of a cluster of popular culture genres including Boys' Love (BL), *yaoi*, slash fiction, and *danmei*. It presents in manga, light novels, anime, video games, fan art, and fan fiction with the defining theme of romantic and sexual

relationships between men often, but not always, built around a 'seme' (top), 'uke' (bottom) trope. BL originated in Japanese girls' manga in the 1970s (McLelland & Welker, 2015) while, at the same time but independently, slash fiction developed in Anglophone culture through *Star Trek* fan works (Kustritz, 2003). *Danmei* is a predominantly Chinese term, being the direct Chinese pronunciation of the Japanese characters for 'tanbi' (耽美) which, in this context, has come to mean 'aesthetic literature.'

Female-oriented male-male erotica has become a global phenomenon with materials made available commercially, but also through *scanlations* (fan translations), fan-subbed anime, and promoted through fan activities such as *cosplay* (costume play) and *doujinshi* (fan works). Our aim in this article is to provide robust information on the demographic in Mainland China and Hong Kong who engage with female-oriented male-male erotica. For ease, we will use the term '*danmei*' except when referring to the global fandom and in stating our survey questions where we will use 'BL' to be consistent with our previous publications comparing the results of our identical fandom surveys in English and Chinese (e.g., Madill & Zhao, forthcoming).

BL manga from Japan was introduced into Taiwan during the 1980s and spread across Chinese-speaking regions mainly via non-official channels. (For a historical review see Madill, Zhao, & Chao, forthcoming). Even today there is limited legitimate access to Japanese manga in Mainland China given the relatively hostile official attitude towards Japanese popular culture (P. Li, 2006). Moreover, in Mainland China, all materials deemed pornographic are banned, there is strict regulation of the content of novels, movies, and other forms of popular entertainment, and prohibition on public acknowledgement of homosexuality (Zhao, 2016). Hence, all forms of female-oriented male-male erotica are legally and socially problematic in Mainland China although this has not stopped the incredible rise of *danmei* in Chinese-speaking regions from the 1990s, linked to the popularisation of, and access to, the internet. Contemporary *danmei* tend to be novels and fan fiction self-published on the internet. There is a strong Chinese flavour and content often draws on traditional mythology, martial arts, and spirits stories, as well as time travel and rebirth. The most popular *danmei* website holding original novels and fan fiction may be *Jinjiang Literature*, which receives in excess of 2 million log-ins per day according to the newspaper *China Daily* in 2014 – and log-in is not even needed for basic online reading.

Research reporting demographic information on the *danmei* audience in Chinese-speaking regions is relatively sparse and of low quality. Madill and Zhao (forthcoming) identified eight survey studies to May 2019 (i.e., Chen & Yang, 2012; Cui, 2014; Dai, 2014; Hou & Xiao, 2013; Y Li, 2009; Yan, 2018; Yao & Guo, 2013; K Zhao, 2016). Sample sizes range from 31 (Y. Li, 2009) to 980 (K Zhao, 2016). However, interestingly, the larger surveys often target the general and student population meaning that findings do not focus on *danmei* fans (e.g., Yao & Guo, 2013, N=530; K Zhao, 2016, N=908). Where *danmei* fans have been surveyed, one included only women (Hou & Xiao, 2013, N=278) while the most recent is reasonably large and importantly reveals a proportion – 14% – of male fans (Yan, 2018, N=439). Moreover, only three of the eight surveys collected information on sexual

orientation, all of which report heterosexual identification of around 80% (Y. Li, 2009; Yan, 2018; Yao & Guo, 2018).

Madill and Zhao (forthcoming) identified also seven survey studies on the Western BL fandom (i.e., North America: Levi, 2009; Sweden: Lilja & Wasshede, 2016; USA/UK: Neville, 2018; USA: O'Brien, 2008; European Union English- and Italian-speakers: Pagliassotti, 2008; North America/European Union: Turner, 2016; Hungry: Zsila et al., 2018). Sample sizes range from 16 (O'Brien, 2008) to 724 (Zsila et al., 2018) and, in contrast to the Chinese surveys, all but one Western BL fandom survey (i.e., O'Brien, 2008) collected information on sexual orientation. This is of particular interest given that researchers in Mainland China have raised concerns over the possible influence of *danmei* on the sexual orientation of readers through their engagement with material that beautifies homosexuality (e.g., Liu & Tang, 2012; Zhao, 2016). On the other hand, Taiwanese researchers have been much more positive about the potential of *danmei* to help some women explore their sexual anxieties (e.g., Chang, 2015).

The analysis we report here is based on data from our online BL fandom survey in Chinese which is the largest data set as yet collected in this field (N=1498). Our research is also distinguished in its comprehensiveness and rigour. First, of our 43-question survey, nine questions collect demographic information including gender, sexual orientation, age, and nationality. Other sections ask about *danmei*-related preferences and activities, and engagement with other erotic materials. Second, we promoted the survey through a number of different routes (see Data Collection), and included questions on fandom intensity and amount of spare time spent on *danmei* to judge strength of interest. Finally, we utilise comparative statistical analysis and report effect sizes in order to identify and provide evidence for meaningful sub-population differences relevant to our research questions.

Previously, we compared the demographic engaged with female-oriented male-male erotica in the Greater China area with that in Anglophone regions (Madill & Zhao, forthcoming). Our findings confirmed existing research which suggests that the engaged Anglophone demographic includes more men, people with a wider range of sexual orientations, lower levels of heterosexual identification, and a wider and older age range. In the aforementioned article, we also provided novel evidence that a broad demographic of young people in China is familiar with *danmei* as a casual interest in contrast to Anglophone cultures where BL is more of an intense but niche pass-time. In the present article, we develop this work by exploring three novel research questions specific to understanding engagement with female-oriented male-male erotica in Mainland China and Hong Kong:

*Are there differences between 'casual' and 'avid' danmei fans?*

*Are there differences between danmei fans by social outlook in the sexual sphere?*

*Are there differences between danmei fans from Mainland China and from Hong Kong?*

## Method

Ethical approval was obtained from the School of Psychology Ethics Committee, University of Leeds UK.

### **Data Collection**

The survey is in Simplified Chinese and consists of 43-questions in five sections: demographic information, *danmei* materials and feelings about *danmei* culture, social relationships, and engagement with other erotic materials. Responses are, in the main, on a five-point Likert-scale and some questions include an open-text box for additional free-form responses. Data (N=1498) were collected between 18<sup>th</sup> March 2015 and 31<sup>st</sup> January 2018. The survey was released through online Chinese social networks, websites and fan forums, leaflets were distributed at universities in China via classes, an online seller of *danmei*-related materials included a leaflet with products, and we distributed a paper version of the survey at anime events in China in person for immediate completion (N=200) which we transferred to the online version for analysis.

### **Participants**

Nationalities given on the survey are: Chinese (N=1464), Hong Kongese (N=33), and Taiwanese (N=1). Mean age is 19.75 years with a range of 12-37 years. The majority identified as 'heterosexual' (N=996, 66.5%), followed by 'bisexual' (N=236, 15.7%), 'not sure' (N=208, 13.9%), 'homosexual' (N=40, 2.7%) and 'other' (N=18, 1.2%). Gender identification is 'female' (N=1315, 87.8%), 'male' (N=167, 11.1%) and 'other' (N=16, 1.1%). Given the small number of other-gendered participants, only participants identifying as either male or female are included in analyses of gender.

### **Data analysis**

The Chi-Square test of independence was used to determine if two categorical variables are associated with one another for each observational unit. Because the Likert scale response data are not normally distributed, non-parametric tests – the Mann-Whitney U and the Wilcoxon signed-rank tests – are used to test for differences in median between and within groups, and the Spearman test is used to measure the strength and direction of association between two ranked variables. A demanding significance level of  $p < .001$  was set and all analyses undertaken are reported regardless of significance level. When significant, effect size is provided – Cramer's V (Chi-square) and Pearson's r (Mann-Whitney) – where a trivial effect is less than .1, a small effect .1 to .29, a medium effect .3 to .49, and large effect .5 and above (Cohen, 1988).

Four new variables were created. First, responses to *What is your sexual orientation?* were recoded to two categories – 'Heterosexual' and 'Nonheterosexual' – the latter including responses *Bisexual, Homosexual/lesbian/gay, Not sure, and Other*. Second, each participant's response to *At what age did you start to engage with BL?* was subtracted from

their response to *What is your age in years?* to create new variable *Duration of Engagement*. Third, response frequency and cumulative percentage to the question *How intensely are you a BL fan?* suggested the validity of dividing participants meaningfully into two groups: ‘casual’ fans (‘not at all’, ‘a bit’, ‘quite’: cumulative percentage 49.1%) and ‘avid’ fans (‘a lot’, ‘extremely’: cumulative percentage 50.9%).

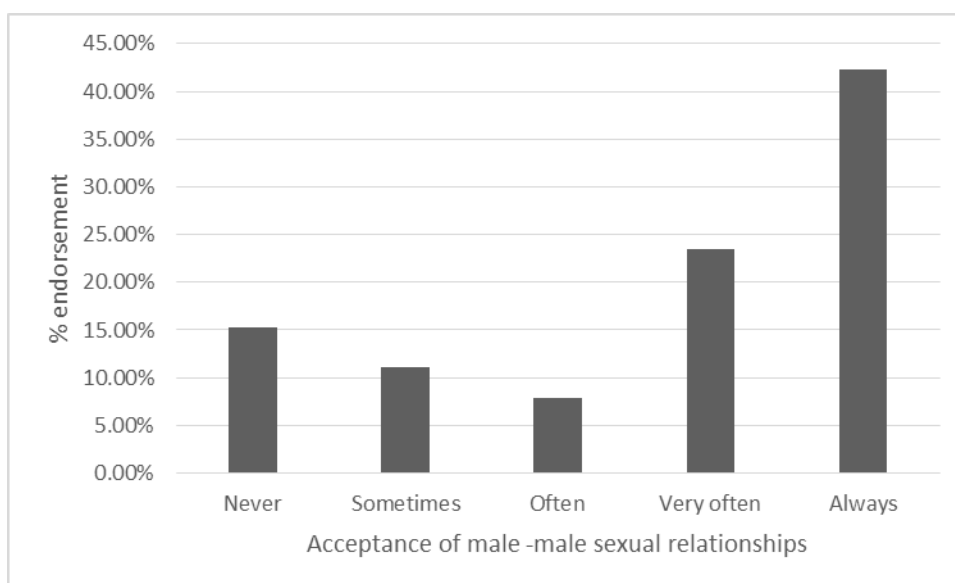
Fourth, a second-order, theoretical variable – *Social Outlook* – with regard to the sexual sphere was created from participants’ responses to two questions:

*How acceptable are male-male sexual relationships to you in real life?*

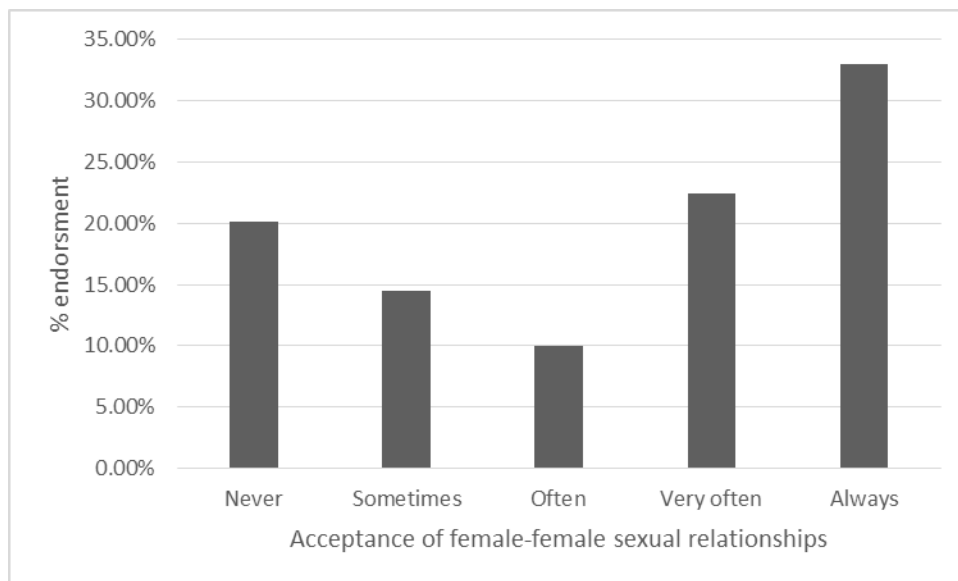
*How acceptable are female-female sexual relationships to you in real life?*

The response of each participant to these two questions was inspected and, on this basis, each assigned to one of three *Social Outlook* categories: ‘Traditional’, ‘Progressive’, or ‘Hybrid’. Participants coded ‘Traditional’ responded ‘Never’, ‘Sometimes’ or ‘Often’ to both questions about the acceptability of male-male and female-female sexual relationships in real life (N=454; 30%). Participants coded ‘Progressive’ responded ‘Very often’ or ‘Always’ to both questions (N=770; 52%). Participants coded ‘Hybrid’ responded ‘Never’, ‘Sometimes’ or ‘Often’ to one question but ‘Very often’ or ‘Always’ to the other (N=274; 18%). The division point was decided on the shape of the response pattern whereby, for both questions, there is descending endorsement ‘Never’ to ‘Often’ and then a leap in endorsement at ‘Very often’ and again at ‘Always’ (**Figures 1&2**). Because ‘Hybrid’ fans do not constitute a consistent, or possibly cohesive, social outlook group – and is a comparatively small sub-population - they are omitted from further analysis of this variable.

**Figure 1:** How acceptable are male-male sexual relationships to you in real life? - % endorsement



**Figure 2:** How acceptable are female-female sexual relationships to you in real life? - % endorsement



## Analysis

### **Research question 1: Are there differences between ‘casual’ and ‘avid’ danmei fans?**

**Table 1** presents a summary of the analysis of the survey questions explored with regard to *Fandom Intensity* as having the possibility of differentiating ‘casual’ and ‘avid’ fans in terms of gender and sexual orientation, and fandom activity.

**Table 1:** Are there differences between ‘casual’ and ‘avid’ danmei fans? – Summary Chi-square and Mann-Whitney statistical results

Survey question	Direction of difference	Effect size
Gender and sexual orientation		
<i>‘Gender by sexual orientation’</i>	Avid ↑nonheterosexual males and ↑nonheterosexual females	Medium
Fandom activity		
<i>How frequently do you engage with male-male slash fiction</i>	Avid more	Large
<i>What percentage of your spare time do you spend on BL?</i>	Avid more	Large
<i>I discuss my interest in BL with people online</i>	Avid more likely	Large
<i>I discuss my interest in BL with friends I know in person</i>	Avid more likely	Large
<i>Duration of Engagement</i>	Avid longer	Medium

<i>I use BL terminology (e.g., 'moe', 'seme', 'uke') in general conversation</i>	Avid more likely	Medium
<i>I like to classify people and things as different types of seme and uke</i>	Avid more likely	Medium
<i>Do you create any BL works yourself?</i>	Avid ↑yes	Medium
<i>Do you BL cosplay?</i>	Avid ↑yes	Small
<i>I discuss my interest in BL with members of my family</i>	Avid more likely	Small

A free-form response linked to the question *I use BL terminology (e.g., 'moe' [eliciting feelings of affection or protectiveness], 'seme', 'uke') in general conversation* stated: *I'd be grateful if you'd explain your answer to me.* A written response was provided by a total of 96 participants. Comments from participants endorsing 'Never' (N=13), indicated that they disliked using this kind of terminology or were not interested in doing so. Those endorsing 'Sometimes' (N=27) or 'Often' (N=23), indicated that they used BL terminology depending on the situation or the person to whom they are speaking and some also mentioned that the terminology might make some people feel uncomfortable. Those endorsing 'Very often' (N=13) or 'Extensively' (N=2), included remarks on being influenced by the use of such terminology in the media: e.g., 'This terminology is very popular online. I like to use them to describe the ideal and popular characters', its usefulness: e.g., 'I cannot find any better word to describe some person or something', and familiarity: e.g., 'Those words were deeply in my life. I've been 'abusing' them for a long time.'

A free-form response linked to the question *I like to classify people and things as different types of seme and uke*, stated: *I'd be grateful if you'd explain your answer to me.* A written response was provided by a total of 70 participants. Comments from participants endorsing 'Never' (N=25), indicated that they were not interested in doing so or felt it was not respecting of others. Those endorsing 'Sometimes' (N=25) and 'Often' (N=7) indicated that they used *seme* or *uke* to classify people or things very occasionally, would say 'This man looked like a uke', or it was a joke on very close friend, and one participant said that she would use it in studying maths and history. Those endorsing 'Very often' (N=7) or 'Extensively' (N=6), said they enjoyed playing with those words because it was really funny, or statement such as 'The difficult textbook is an S [sadistic] seme' or 'I classified all my male classmates as seme or uke.'

## Discussion 1: Are there differences between 'casual' and 'avid' *danmei* fans?

### **Gender and sexual orientation**

Compared to casual fans, avid fans include more self-identifying nonheterosexual males and nonheterosexual females. Ours is the first study to demonstrate this and may offer credence to the link Chinese researchers have suggested between engagement with *danmei* and rejection of hegemonic sexuality (e.g., Liu & Tang, 2012; Zhao, 2016). However, if there is an

influence, it is most likely from sexual orientation to material of interest. Avid fans are also more likely than are casual fans to engage with male-male slash fiction. Unlike *danmei* which often follows heteronormative ideology (Guo & Fang, 2020; Luo, 2017; Madill & Zhao, 2018; Zhu & Zhang, 2017), such as the importance of marriage, reproduction, and gender-stereotyped roles (Madill, Zhao & Fan, 2018), slash can be more challenging to mainstream gender and relational norms (Zhou, Paul, & Sherman, 2018). Hence, avid Chinese fans not only appear to be a 'queerer' demographic than are casual fans but may also seek queerer material.

### **Fandom activity**

The analysis comparing casual and avid Chinese *danmei* fans demonstrates excellent consistency between self-reported fandom intensity with fandom activities. The strongest associations are between fandom intensity and extent of spare time spent on *danmei*, discussing *danmei* online and with real-life friends, and engaging with male-male slash fiction, but also with duration of engagement. These associations may not be surprising but are interesting to note and provide evidence supporting the candour with which participants completed the survey and, in turn, the validity of results. In terms of additional specific activities, avid fans are more likely to: (a) use the *danmei* lexicon in everyday contexts, and (b) engage in creative *danmei*-related activities.

**Danmei lexicon:** Although to our knowledge there is no research focusing specifically on the use of *danmei* terminology in daily life, Han (2015) investigated the influence of Japanese anime and manga terms on Chinese networks including the words '*danmei*', '*douji*,' and '*fujoshi*' (i.e., BL fangirl). Linguistically, similarities in the written forms allow Japanese kanji often to be modified easily into Chinese characters, e.g., '*fujoshi*' from 腐女子 to 腐女. Han (2015) demonstrated that around half participants (N=129) were aware of and used such terms, whether or not they were a *danmei* fan. Our study adds to this by evidencing that only avid fans tend to use *danmei* terminology in everyday life and do so due to the usefulness of the concepts and the pleasure of word-play, although often self-consciously of the potential stigma attached.

**Creative danmei-related activities:** Avid fans are more likely to cosplay but there is little research on this phenomenon in Mainland China and Hong Kong. Noting cosplay as an emerging sub-culture in Hong Kong, Rahman, Liu and Cheung (2012) used a quasi-ethnological approach and concluded that cosplay provided a temporary escape from reality. Closer to the specifics of *danmei* culture, Jacobs (2013) conducted an ethnographic study of cross-dressing and same-sex relationship cosplay in Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. She concluded that such activity provides young people a space in which to explore the boundaries of self and sexualities that are heavily regulated in majority culture. Our study builds on this to provide quantitative evidence that, as well as cosplay, avid fans are also more likely to create their own *danmei*, and to discuss their interest with members of their family. Such activities index their interest in *danmei* culture, but may be connected



to economic issues. Ninety per cent of our survey participants are high school and university students (Madill & Zhao, forthcoming) and, hence, in the main, dependent on their family for economic support and accommodation. Engaging in cosplay requires money, preparation, and absences to attend events so, even if not explicitly paid for by the family, is likely to be noticed and to require some explanation. This is particularly so given the respect accorded elders in Chinese society and the social and economic influence parents have over their young adult offspring (Fincher, 2014).

Avid fans may also use their interest in *danmei* to create works for economic profit and to support their other fandom activities. In Chinese-speaking regions, the majority of *danmei* are published on online platforms and, rather than directly employ any of the large number of amateur authors, companies commonly sign contracts for serialized works from which the author can obtain income according to number of reads and comments. Authors can also be provided economic support through website vouchers by readers and, on some websites, money directly from fans. Because of the economic interest involved, *danmei* has been greatly commercialized and an increasing number of professional writers have appeared despite its vulnerability to deletion due to country-wide regulations on sexual content (Mou, Wu, & Atkin, 2016). One impact of increasing exposure, however, is a shift towards acceptably romantic and only gently suggestive storylines (Yang & Xu, 2017).

### **Research question 2: Are there differences between *danmei* fans by social outlook in the sexual sphere?**

A second-order, theoretical variable – *Social Outlook* – with regard to the sexual sphere was created from participants' responses to two questions (**Table 2**):

*How acceptable are male-male sexual relationships to you in real life?*

*How acceptable are female-female sexual relationships to you in real life?*

Participants tended to answer the two questions in a very similar way which, hence, suggests the validity of integrating responses to the two questions in order to categorise participants on a theoretical underlying characteristic of *Social Outlook* (in the sexual sphere). Interesting, as a whole, participants were more accepting of male-male sexual relationships than they were of female-female sexual relationships in real life. Survey questions were selected for exploration with regard to *Social Outlook* as having the possibility of differentiating 'Traditional' and 'Progressive' *danmei* fans in terms of identity, attitude, and engagement with other erotic materials (**Table 2**).

A free-form response question linked to the question *To what extent does it worry you that BL scanlations (fan translations) and fan-subbed BL anime are breaches of copyright?* stated: *I'd be grateful if you'd explain your answer to me.* A written response was provided by a total of 97 participants. Participants endorsing 'Never' (N=27) or 'Sometimes' (N=8), indicated that they 'did not care', 'did not think about it', and some provided

opinions such that ‘If copyright has been protected, nothing would be available, especially for manga.’ Participants endorsing ‘Often’ (N=21) or ‘Very often’ (N=16), tended to express their willingness to protect copyright and support authors but with reservations: e.g., ‘I am willing to support to protect copyright and happy to pay for those materials, but many of them are not even able to publish legally.’ Participants endorsing ‘Extensively’ (N=25), sometimes commented that, as authors, they worry about plagiarism because, since *danmei* fiction is not condoned within the legal system, it is very difficult to protect their own creative work. Others suggested that copyright breach is often used by the authorities as a reason to delete fan-subbed or fan-translated materials from the internet, while not providing access to the legitimate originals.

**Table 2:** Are there differences between *danmei* fans by social outlook in the sexual sphere? – Summary Spearman, Wilcoxon, Chi-square and Mann-Whitney statistical results

Survey question	Direction of difference	Effect size
Creation of variable ‘Social Outlook’		
<i>How acceptable are male-male sexual relationships to you in real life? and How acceptable are female-female sexual relationships to you in real life?</i>	Correlation	Large
<i>How acceptable are male-male sexual relationships to you in real life? versus How acceptable are female-female sexual relationships to you in real life?</i>	↑ Male-male	Small
	Male-male mode ‘Always’ 43% Female-female mode ‘Always’ 33%	
‘Traditional’ vs. ‘Progressive’ social outlook		
Identity	<i>How intensely are you a BL fan?</i>	‘Progressive’ more
	‘Gender x sexual orientation’	Nonheterosexual ↑ ‘Progressive’; female ↑ ‘Progressive’
Attitude	<i>To what extent does it worry you that BL scanlations (fan translations) and fan-subbed BL anime are breaches of copyright?</i>	‘Progressive’ more
	<i>To what extent do you worry about legal issues in relation to the sexual content of BL?</i>	‘Progressive’ more
Other erotic materials	<i>How frequently do you engage with male-male slash fiction?</i>	‘Progressive’ more
	<i>How frequently do you engage with non-slash male-male erotic materials (e.g., fictions, videos, photographs, manga, anime)?</i>	‘Progressive’ more

How frequently do you engage with female-female slash fiction?	'Progressive' more	Small
How frequently do you engage with heterosexual erotic materials (e.g., slash fiction, other fictions, videos, photographs, manga, anime)?	'Progressive' more	Small
How frequently do you engage with non-BL/non-slash female-female erotic materials probably designed for gay men (e.g., fictions, videos, photographs, manga, anime)?	'Progressive' more	Small
How frequently do you engage with non-BL/non-slash BDSM materials (e.g., fictions, videos, photographs, manga, anime)?	'Progressive' more	Small
'Missing data'	'Progressive' less	n/a

A free-form response question linked to the question *To what extent do you worry about legal issues in relation to the sexual content of BL?* stated: *I'd be grateful if you'd explain your answer to me.* A written response was provided by a total of 80 participants. Participants endorsing 'Never' (N=30) and 'Sometimes' (N=13), indicated that they 'did not care,' expressed some dissatisfaction in that, for example, 'It is odd that sexual contents are illegal theoretically but for the great authors or famous literature it seems to be OK' or acknowledged the current situation: e.g., 'BL is not really legal in China. I do not want make any comment for this question.' Participants endorsing 'Often' (N=11), 'Very often' (N=20), or 'Extensively' (N=6) provided a variety of comments. Some proposed that the apparent increasingly young audience and 'deviant' and 'immoral' BL contents might need to be regulated. On the other hand, others emphasized the normality of sexuality within romantic relationships and the greater acceptance of sexual content in heterosexual stories. In addition, participants also mentioned concern about the official regulation: e.g., 'The authorities have a dodgy and ambiguous attitude toward homosexuality and BL that it is not inhibited' or lamenting 'I cannot see the day that the adult materials (not for under 18) would be published in China.'

Due to the potential sensitivity of the questions in section 'Other erotic materials', and the fact that it included questions beyond *danmei*, participants could submit the survey without completing this section. Missing data on these questions, therefore, may provide information of interest with regard to the research question *Are there differences between BL fans by social outlook in the sexual sphere?* (Table 3) In fact, the total frequency of missing data for each survey question in this section increases in the same order as presentation in line with the researchers' perception of increasing sensitivity (i.e., from 'softer core' to 'harder core' materials). In terms of *Social Outlook*, 'Progressive' participants showed consistently lowest percentage of missing data for the questions in this section.

**Table 3:** Missing data for other erotic materials questions for two social outlook categories

Survey question	Response (Sample N=1498)	Missing data	% missing data by Social Outlook	
			'Traditional' (N=454)	'Progressive' (N=770)
Male-male slash fiction	1455 97.10%	43 2.90%	15 3.30%	20 2.60%
Female-female slash fiction	1447 96.60%	51 3.40%	20 4.41%	21 2.72%
Heterosexual erotic materials	1439 96.10%	59 3.90%	19 4.19%	26 3.38%
Non-BL/slash male-male erotic materials	1430 95.50%	68 4.50%	22 4.85%	32 4.16%
Non-slash female-female erotic materials	1427 95.30%	71 4.70%	26 5.73%	33 4.29%
BDSM	1418 94.70%	80 5.30%	29 6.39%	35 4.54%

**Discussion 2: Are there differences between *danmei* fans by social outlook in the sexual sphere?**

Chinese researchers tend to be unwilling to explore sexually related topics, and the more positive research on *danmei* is often limited to indicating how the material could be a channel for teenagers' sexual education and to satisfy their curiosity (Wang, 2015; You, 2015). Moreover, although both concern and optimism has been expressed in terms of *danmei* as a form of feminism, as mentioned earlier, there is also critique that the material is fitted into a heteronormative ideology, although this may be changing (Xi, 2020). We therefore discuss our results with respect to the limited available research literature on the apparent sexual politics of the *danmei* audience and on related topics such as acceptability of nonhegemonic sexualities and pornography consumption in China.

**Social outlook: Acceptability of homosexual relationships in real life**

The strong correlation between acceptance of male-male and of female-female sexual relationships by our participants demonstrates an overall consistent attitude towards same sex relationships and provides confidence in this result (i.e., a large effect, **Table 2**). Moreover, our results suggest, at 52%, a marginal preponderance in the *danmei* fandom of people with a progressive social outlook in the sexual sphere (see also Yang & Xu, 2015). This contrasts mainstream Chinese culture which is more generally socially conservative in that accepted morality stresses family values, filial piety, and that it is one's social responsibility to have children. For example, a highly interesting survey of 922 homosexual people in Mainland China (Li, Dai, & Gao, 2014) revealed that 50% felt pressurised by family

to have children and 30% intended to marry, or had already done so, to fit a heterosexual lifestyle.

To our knowledge, in Mainland China there has been no national investigation on attitudes towards same-sex relationships and the minimal research that has been conducted has tended to focus on specific regions and groups – mainly students. In terms of openness, Xu et al. (2004) estimate a male homosexual population in Hangzhou of 1-2%, of whom only 0.58% were open about their sexual orientation. Zhang (2006) investigated attitudes toward homosexual groups and found that acceptance tended to reduce as intimacy of social relationship increased: strangers (53.6%), idols (27.6%), classmates (27.2%), friends (26.3%), teachers (21.6%), senior officer (21.3%), and family members (19.9%). Only 18.8% accepted homosexuality in all of these groups, and 36.3% rejected homosexuality across the board. Hence, general university students in Mainland China show lower acceptance of same sex relationships than do the *danmei* fans in our sample. On the other hand, participants who completed our Chinese survey show relatively lower tolerance of same sex relationships than do Anglophone BL fans who completed the English-language version (Madill & Zhao, forthcoming).

Our participants also showed significantly higher acceptance of male-male than female-female sexual relationships in real life (**Table 2**). Of the very few Chinese studies investigating differential attitudes to same-sex relationships, Li and Zheng (2013) found that female university students tend to be more tolerant of both male and female homosexuality than were male university students, and that the more ‘feminine’ male students were more tolerant of homosexuality than were the more stereotypically masculine. Moreover, Wang and Zeng (2009) found greater acceptance of female-female as compared to male-male relationships in a university student population. However, noteworthy is the fact that there were more male than female participants in Wang and Zeng’s study. We have many more female participants and our results show that, overall, participants were more accepting of nonheterosexual behaviour in the opposite sex. This might be interpreted as showing how some heterosexual-identifying people, while intellectually tolerant of nonheterosexuality to some degree, may feel more anxious about same-sex sexuality that might implicate them personally. Moreover, *danmei* materials represent male-male relationships and, hence, it might not be surprising that the audience is more comfortable with, and accustomed to, this form of homosexuality.

### ***Identity: ‘Traditional’ vs. ‘Progressive’ social outlook***

Compared to casual fans, avid *danmei* fans are more likely to be ‘*Progressive*’ in the sexual sphere and, it may be argued, evidence their relative acceptance of nonheterosexuality through their intense engagement with *danmei*, often pushing the boundaries of attempts by authorities to limit their activities (R. Li, 2018). The nonheterosexual identifying participants are more ‘*Progressive*’ as a group than are the heterosexual participants, and the women as a group more ‘*Progressive*’ than are the men. The former result is commensurate with nonheterosexual people’s willingness to express a non-traditional

sexual identity within a socially conservative society. The latter result may be linked to the fact that men in general tend to be a more casual audience of *danmei* in China, while the avid male fans are more likely to be nonheterosexual. Moreover, because the material tends to reflect their gender/sexuality constellation, they may otherwise be more likely to espouse socially conservative values than female fans who, arguably, in their fandom are being more transgressive of the social expectations on them as women. However, the notion that *danmei* culture itself may be progressive needs to be tempered by the scepticism of some Chinese researchers who argue that the assumption of female inferiority remains embedded in the *uke* role (e.g., Zheng, 2015).

### ***Attitude: 'Traditional' vs. 'Progressive' social outlook***

The '*Progressive*' participants demonstrate more concern with regard to breaches of copyright and legal issues in relation to the sexual content of *danmei* than do the '*Traditional*' participants. This finding may be a result of the association between being '*Progressive*' and greater fandom intensity such that the more '*Progressive*' fans tend to be more involved in *danmei* culture and, hence, potentially impacted by, or exposed to, copyright and legal issues to a greater extent than the more, generally '*Traditional*', casual fans. This interpretation is supported by the explanatory comments provided by some participants. That is, in-line with its increasing economic influence, *danmei* works have been subject to plagiarism and breach of contract disputes and some fans were worried with regard to the lack of protection of authors given *danmei's* ambiguous legal status in China (Dou, 2017; Wen, 2017).

On the other hand, interestingly, while some of the more concerned participants were critical of the negative attitude of authorities towards non-hegemonic sexuality, they often also supported the tight regulation of online erotic material in order to protect young people from deviant behaviour. The sense that erotic materials are harmful is perpetuated in the Chinese public media and general morality. However, in the written comments provided by our participants, it seems that some *danmei* fans perceive themselves to be less vulnerable than average to the seemingly harmful influence of pornography than are others, and so may be interpreted as demonstrating a certain cognitive dissonance on the issue (Alicke et al., 1995).

### ***Other erotic materials: 'Traditional' vs. 'Progressive' social outlook***

The last section of the survey involved six, non-compulsory, questions on 'Other erotic materials.' Although frequency of stated engagement was generally low, '*Progressive*' participants reported engaging more frequently in all types of erotic material than did '*Traditional*.' The gap between '*Progressive*' and '*Traditional*' participants is largest for male-male erotica, smaller for heterosexual and BDSM erotica, and smallest for female-female erotica. Moreover, '*Progressive*' participants showed consistently lowest percentages of missing data. Placed at the end of the survey, some may have decided not to complete

these questions merely due to fatigue. However, results are in line with expectations regarding social outlook in the sexual sphere and openness to different kinds of sexually-explicit material.

In Mainland China there is a strong assumption that erotic materials have a harmful influence and there is an attempt to avoid sexually-related words in both official and unofficial circumstances. For example, in April 2018, LOFTER reposted regulations on the prohibition of pornographic material which includes both explicit and implicit representation of sexuality, even wife-swapping, one-night-stands, and sexual products such as condoms. With this very broad concept of pornography, and the highly conservative social environment of Mainland China, it is likely that many participants under-reported their consumption of pornography, particularly '*Traditional*' participants, who research suggests might be unwilling to report this activity (Wright, Tokunaga, & Kraus, 2016).

It is no surprise, perhaps, that the '*Progressive*' *danmei* participants responded as engaging more frequently with different kinds of male-male erotic materials than did the '*Traditional*' given the similarity of the material with *danmei* and the finding, reported and discussed above, that '*Progressive*' participants may also seek queerer, less heteronormative, material. '*Progressive*' participants tend to identify as the more avid *danmei* fans and, hence, potentially also more comfortable expressing their erotic interests. Engagement with male-male erotica probably designed for gay men may also be relatively high due to nonheterosexual-identifying men in the sample, even though nonheterosexual males endorsed quite a low frequency of engagement with such material, but more than did the heterosexual men. The relative lack of engagement with female-female erotica across the board is in-line with the reported lower acceptance of female-female sexual relationships in the survey. Moreover, BDSM was reported as having the lowest frequency engagement of all types of erotic materials listed in the survey commensurate with its status as a minority fetish.

There is a very small amount of empirical research on the consumption of pornography in Mainland China. One finding is that there is much less consumption of online pornography in rural as opposed to urban China (e.g., Wang & Zeng, 2009). Research on university students provides the most reasonable comparison with the current study and it is reported that around half of university students have engaged with pornography in Shanghai (N=1423) and Chengdu (N=2017), with around 6% consuming such materials 'quite often' in Shanghai (Shen, 2012; Wang & Zeng 2009). These findings are lower, but not totally out of line, with figures in 'sexually progressive' countries. For example, Livingstone and Bober (2004) report that 67% of UK children and adolescents aged 9-19 years (N=1511) had engaged with online pornography; Grubbs et al. (2015) report that only 15% of college students in the USA (N=532) had engaged with pornography online less than 3 times within past month; and Lim et al. (2017) report that 87% of Australians aged 15-29 years (N=941) have engaged with pornography. A very limited number of research studies do imply some increase in progressive attitudes to sexuality in Mainland China, but the majority of

pornography research in China is focused on obscenity issues and the potential for harm (e.g., S. Li, 2017).

### **Research question 3: Are there differences between *danmei* fans from Mainland China and from Hong Kong?**

The questions *In what country are you living at the moment?* and *What is your nationality?* were used to code participants as being from ‘Mainland China’, ‘Hong Kong’, or ‘Neither’. Participants were coded as being from *Mainland China* if they indicated that they are: (a) currently living in Mainland China (including Macau, N=4); and (b) are Chinese nationals (total N=1275). Participants were coded as being from *Hong Kong* if they indicated that they are: (a) currently living in Hong Kong; and/or (b) are Hong Kong nationals (N=33) (total N=198). To control for participants with possibly extended non-Chinese or non-Hong Kongese cultural influences, all other participants were coded as ‘Neither’ and subsequently excluded from this part of the analysis: Taiwanese or living in Taiwan (N=2) and Chinese nationals living abroad (N=23). Participants from Mainland China were compared with participants from Hong Kong on gender, sexual orientation, and *Social Outlook* in the sexual sphere using Chi-square (**Table 4**).

**Table 4:** Are there differences between *danmei* fans from Mainland China and from Hong Kong? - Summary Chi-square results

Survey question	Direction of difference	Effect size
‘Gender x sexual orientation’	Hong Kong ↑ Nonheterosexual female	Small
‘Social Outlook’	Hong Kong ↑ ‘Progressive’	Small

### **Discussion 3: Are there differences between *danmei* fans from Mainland China and from Hong Kong?**

We are aware of no research comparing directly the *danmei* audience of Mainland China and Hong Kong, although Lavin’s (2017) examination of Hong Kong-based fans of Mainland China idol Li Yuchun begins to make in-roads into this interesting field. The dearth of research is due possibly to the sensitivity of both the subject matter of *danmei* and of exploring potential differences in outlook between these regions locally. The Westernised cultural context of Hong Kong, helps makes sense of the relative progressiveness of the Hong Kong participants, including the identification of significantly more female participants from Hong Kong, as compared to Mainland China, reporting nonhegemonic sexualities. Hong Kong became a colony of the British Empire after the First Opium War in 1842 (Carroll, 2007) and the UK ruled Hong Kong for more than 150 years. Hence, Hong Kong modernised under Western regulations with its first Higher Education Institutes built in 1911 (Chu, 2017), Kai Tak Airport in 1924 (Wordie, 2007), and was the first of the Four ‘Asia Tiger Economies’ in the 1950s (Buckley, 1997). In 1997, Hong Kong was formally returned to China



as a special administrative region, with China guaranteeing to maintain Hong Kong's economic and political systems. Thus, Hong Kong kept its own legislative and judicial system based on common law from the territory's time as a British colony rather than Chinese national law (Gittings, 2009; Tam et al., 2012).

## **Conclusion**

In this article we have been able to address three novel research questions using the largest data set to date on the massive phenomenon of *danmei* fandom: a fandom difficult to study due to Mainland China being a relatively closed region, the culturally sensitive subject matter, and need for sub-cultural knowledge, language skills, and routes to access fans. Comparisons between Chinese casual and avid fans, 'Traditional' and 'Progressive' fans, and between fans from Mainland China and Hong Kong, demonstrate consistent differences in terms of identifications, activities, and concerns, and we provide information on new aspects of *danmei* culture and in more detail than ever before. Although *danmei* materials often perpetuate a heteronormative ideology, avid fans demonstrate a relatively progressive social outlook in the sexual sphere and engagement in socially-challenging *danmei*-related activities. We speculate that even casual engagement with *danmei* may encourage young people to think critically about the complexities of human sexuality and the diverse ways of living and loving.

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