Slash Fan Fiction in China: Negotiating Gender and Sexuality in Chinese Female Fan Communities and Their Fan Texts

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of

Bournemouth University for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Faculty of Media and Communication

Bournemouth University

May 2022

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Declaration

This thesis has been created by myself and has not been submitted in any previous application for any degree. The work in this thesis has been undertaken by myself except where otherwise stated.

Acknowledgements

This thesis has survived a long and tough journey. During the research I was pregnant and then I was writing this thesis with my infant daughter at my breast. Without the huge support, care, and help of many friends and family members, I cannot complete this work.

Special thanks to my tireless supervisors, Bronwen Thomas, Jenny Alexander, William Proctor (Billy). I would never have composed this work without their intellectual counsel, patient advice, and constant reassurances. I will be eternally grateful to them for their engagement, understanding, support, and friendship.

Many thanks also go to all the fans who have given their time in the interviews, shared their stories with me, and offered valuable depth to my understanding of their fannish practices. I appreciate their generosity with their enthusiasm and time.

Last but not least, I would also like to extend special thanks to my family. My parents have always accepted and supported my study and always help me financially and emotionally. I have received generous support from my mother, who came to the UK from China during the pandemic to help look after my infant daughter. 爸爸妈妈我爱你们！妈妈辛苦了！

And of course, thanks to my husband for always being there to patiently accompany me across the long journey. Finally, Molly, my dear daughter, although you have added challenges and difficulties for me to complete this thesis, I am still happy that you have accompanied me on this journey.

Abstract

Slash fan fiction, a fan-generated literature centring on male-male romantic and/or erotic relationships based on characters from media texts, is widely popular in China. Analysing the Chinese *Harry Potter* (*HP*) slash fandom on the Slash Fan Fiction Network (SFFN, pseudonym), this thesis examines how Chinese female slash fans negotiate gender and sexuality issues in the context of cultural globalisation, domestic censorship, and the Chinese commercial online literature market, as well as the impact of their slash practices on their everyday lives in mainland China. Based on a close reading of selected Chinese *HP* slash fan fiction and interactions between female writers and readers on the SFFN and interviewing twelve Chinese *HP* slash fan writers and readers, this research, undertaken between 2016 and 2021, explores how Chinese female fans creatively rework their favourite *HP* texts to express their shared sexual desires and fantasies, which negotiate and even subvert hegemonic heteronormative gender and sexuality discourses. Meanwhile, I will demonstrate that going beyond leisure and entertainment, writing and reading *HP* slash fan fiction has become a significant part of female fans' everyday lives, and also affects their understanding and support of LGBTQ+ groups and politics in their offline lives.

Definitions

1. Slash Fan Fiction Network (SFFN): It is not the real name but a pseudonym of the Chinese online literature website. The real name and URL of the website are not revealed in this thesis due to the protection of Chinese *Harry Potter* (*HP*) slash writers and readers.

2. Translation: To protect Chinese *HP* slash writers and readers by minimising searchability and maintaining confidentiality, all textual materials analysed in this thesis, including original Chinese *HP* slash stories content and names, readers' comments, and authors' replies, have been translated from Chinese into English. Any original Chinese language descriptions are not presented in this thesis.

3. Pseudonym systems: When referring to readers who have written comments on *HP* slash stories, the readers' original names are changed to generic terms, such as Reader 1, Reader 2, and Reader 3. When referring to writers and readers in the interviews, alphabet letters are used to name my interviewees, such as Writer A, Writer B, Reader J, and Reader M.

4. Anglo-American: In this thesis, the term Anglo-American is used to connote cultural framework relating to both the UK and the US. For example, Anglo-American slash fan fiction studies refer to the slash fan fiction studies conducted by British and American scholars. Anglo-American *HP* slash fan communities refer to *HP* slash fans based on the UK and the US.

5. Anglophone: English-speaking. In this thesis, Anglophone slash fan fiction refers to slash fan fiction written in English, but not necessarily by fan authors based on the UK and US.

6. BL/*danmei*: BL is short for Boys' Love, also known as *danmei*, "is a genre of male-male romance created by and for women" (Yang and Xu 2017, p.3). Chinese fans often prefer to use *danmei*, while Japanese and Taiwanese fans often prefer to use BL. In academic studies, scholars often use both terms interchangeably. However, Yang

and Xu (2017, p.16) use the term *danmei* when they "want to highlight the differences between Chinese BL fandom and its Japanese counterpart". In this thesis, I use the term BL/*danmei* as it is more inclusive.

7. ACGN: Short for animation, comic, game, and novel.

8. *Gong*/*shou*: The concept of *gong*/*shou* in Chinese BL/*danmei* and slash fan fiction is directly borrowed from Japanese BL culture, in which *gong*, literally meaning attacking, translated from the Japanese term *seme*, refers to the penetrator in sexual behaviour in Chinese BL/*danmei* and slash fan fiction, and the term *shou*, receiving, from the term *uk*e, refers to the penetrated (Tian 2015). Like the Japanese BL, the assignment of the roles of the *gong* and *shou* is "usually fixed and nonreversible", and the *shou* "is often depicted as an effeminate young boy, physically shorter and weaker" than the *gong* (Yang and Xu 2017, p.9).

9. Funv: Literally Chinese female slash fans are often self-identified as *funv*, a term translated from Japanese female BL fans' self-identification *fujoshi*, literally rotten girls (Galbraith 2011).

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1 Introduction

The last two decades have witnessed mainland China's queer popular culture, "represented by non-normatively gendered and sexualised narratives, performances, [and] cultural productions" (Zhao 2020a, p.464), blossoming in digital media spaces under the dual discourse of commercialisation and censorship, which has been closely tied to mainland China's neoliberal economic policies since the late 1980s. The term queer in mainland China, as Wang (2015, p.153) has noted, "not only indicat[es] the sexual acts and identities for the sexual and gender minorities", but also alternative "ideologies, activities, and lifestyles" associated with marginal communities "who challenge the social structure and formation controlled by the governing body and the dominating groups". In this vein, slash fan fiction – a creative fan writing practice largely produced by and for women featuring the romantic and/or erotic relationship between existing canonical characters of the same sex created by other authors (Russ 1985, Callis 2016) – is an example of this queer popular culture in contemporary mainland China.

The genre of slash fan fiction was first identified in the 1970s within Anglo-American *Star Trek* fandoms (Penley 1992). Initially, all fan stories published in fanzines were 'gen' and 'het' fan fiction. Gen, short for general, denotes fan fiction that does not portray romantic relationships between the characters; het, short for heterosexual, defines fan fiction describing heterosexual relationships between characters (Busse and Hellekson 2006). The situation changed in 1974, when Diane Marchant's *A Fragment Out of Time* was published in the third issue of *Star Trek* fanzine *Grup*, which described sexual encounters between two nameless characters – one was male, while the other's gender was ambiguous (Coppa 2006). In the next issue of *Grup*, Marchant declared that the two nameless protagonists in her story were *Star Trek*'s Kirk and Spock. Hereafter, this kind of fan fiction, which portrayed a romantic relationship between two same-sex characters, was named 'slash' by female fans, after the typographical mark '/' between protagonists' names such as Kirk/Spock.

Slash fan fiction usually describes a male-male romance, while the term femslash or femmeslash is used to label a female-female fan story (Tosenberger 2008). Therefore, slash fan fiction can be considered as either an umbrella genre of same-sex fan fiction

or more specifically the genre of male-male fan fiction. The latter is employed in this project to narrow the scope of this research into male-male Chinese *HP* slash fan fiction only.

1.1 The Origins of Chinese Slash Fan Fiction

The genealogy of slash fan fiction in China is different from that the Anglo-American tradition. The origin of Chinese slash fan fiction has been traced back to Japanese Boys' Love (BL) works in the 1970s (Zhang 2016). As early as the 1950s, Japanese female manga artists, who were impatient with traditional heterosexual romance manga, began to create a "transvestite girls' subgenre", in which female characters cross-dressed (Martin 2012, p.366). Growing out of this transvestite manga, in the 1970s, Japanese female manga artists began to draw BL manga, in which female characters appeared "even more thoroughly in disguise: decked out in male bodies as well as masculine attire" (Martin 2012, p.366). BL in Japan, whose primary creators and readers are female, hereafter refers to multiple female-oriented romances between two men, including manga, fiction, and related products (McLelland 2006; Zhang 2016).

In the early 1980s, Japanese female BL manga fans started to create their own *dojinshi*, the fan-produced and self-published amateur BL manga, fiction, and related products, which consisted of both original and parody BL fan works (Kinsella 1998). The parody BL *dojinshi* works often take "male characters from popular animation series" and depict "them in gay relationships" (Schodt 2014, p.37). Therefore, Japanese parody BL *dojinshi* fiction is considered to be a Japanese equivalent of Anglo-American slash fan fiction (Kinsella 1998). Unlike Anglo-American slash fan fiction, which mainly derives from *Star Trek* fan fiction, Japanese slash fan fiction (parody BL *dojinshi* fiction) derives from the BL culture.

Japanese BL culture began to spread to Taiwan in the 1970s, driven by the local publishers for financial interests; while Taiwanese fans started to create their own BL fiction and manga from the early 1990s (Martin 2012). In terms of the degree of sexual explicitness, Taiwanese fans have divided BL into two categories: pure love and H-ban, in which the latter refers to X-rated BL works containing sexually explicit scenes

and descriptions, and the former is often associated with "the Japanese homoerotic aesthetic of *tanbi* (*danmei* in Mandarin: an obsession with aesthetic beauty)" (Martin 2012, p.368). With the distribution of Japanese and Taiwanese BL works into mainland China in the early 1990s, fans in mainland China prefer to use the term *danmei* as the umbrella term for BL works, and *danmei tongren* for slash fan fiction, although the term *danmei* in Taiwan (tanbi in Japan) refers only to less X-rated BL works (Martin 2012; Zhang 2016).

Japanese and Taiwanese BL/*danmei* works were distributed to mainland China via the Internet and unofficially pirated book publishing (Feng 2013; Yang and Xu 2017). BL/*danmei* flowing into mainland China was closely linked to the fundamental economic shift in Chinese society at that time. Since the late 1980s, the regime of mainland China has promoted the "autonomy of cultural work in exchange for its depoliticisation and non-interference with the overarching course of economic reform", which has led to the emergence of a number of unofficially market-driven publishing houses (Hockx 2015, p.30). In the 1990s, these private publishing companies started to produce and distribute illegally printed materials, including Japanese and Taiwanese BL/*danmei* fiction and manga, such as Ozaki's *Zetsuai* (*Desperate Love* 1989) and Yoshihara's *Ai no Kusabi* (*Wedge in the Relationship* 1986-1987) (Feng 2013).

Meanwhile, the development of the Internet provided a new space for Chinese female fans to create, consume, and circulate BL/*danmei* products, as well as contributing to building up the fan community (Yang and Xu 2017). Enthusiastic female fans were keen to share BL/*danmei* works online, including the Taiwanese writers' commercial BL/*danmei* stories. Such free sharing activity was soon protested by Taiwanese writers whose financial and copyright interests had been violated (Yang and Xu 2016a). Hereafter, Chinese female fans started to create their own BL/*danmei* works around 1998; most were BL/*danmei* stories for legal and technical reasons: compared with BL/*danmei* manga (images), BL/*danmei* stories (words) found it easier to bypass Internet censorship (Xu and Yang 2013). There is no evidence to identify when local slash fan fiction in mainland China first appeared. However, based on fans' debates on Tianya Club, one of the most popular Internet forums in mainland China, local

slash fan fiction also seemed to be created around the same time as local BL/*danmei* fiction in the late 1990s, which was mainly based on the popular Japanese manga *Slam Dunk* (1990-1996) and *Saint Seiya* (1986-1989) (Tianya Club 2010, 2018).

It is not difficult to understand why the early Chinese slash fan fiction was mainly built on Japanese animation and manga. As early as the 1980s, Japanese animation could be officially broadcast in children's programmes on mainland China's television, which led to China's 1980 generation being very familiar with Japanese animation (Zheng 2017). Although the government shut down its legal broadcast on television in the mid-2000s, pirated Japanese ACGN (animation, comic, game, and novel) products could still be downloaded via the Internet, on which fansubs (subtitle creators) and fan translators were the major mediators (Zheng 2017). Therefore, most Chinese youths who were born in and after the 1980s were more or less exposed to and familiar with Japanese ACGN products. Naturally, most of the earliest Chinese slash fan fiction was drawn from Japanese manga and animation.

There has been a rich body of literature on slash and its parent genre of fan fiction in Anglo-American academia. However, most Chinese studies have drawn upon the BL fandom (Liu 2009; Xu and Yang 2013; Yi 2013; Jacobs 2015; Chao 2016; Yang and Xu 2016a, 2016b, 2017; Zhang 2016; Zhao et al. 2017), and only a few researchers have paid special attention to its sub-genre slash, such as Tian (2015) for *Three Kingdom* slash, Wei (2014) for *Iron Man* slash, Yang (2017) for *Hetalia* slash, and Zhou (2017) for Dongfang Bubai slash. Researchers such as Wang (2020, p.138) even fails to acknowledge that *danmei* consists of original *danmei* and *danmei tongren* (slash), who problematically claimed that "*danmei* is China's version of slash fiction". Detailed studies of specific forms of Chinese slash fan fiction, therefore, are urgently needed.

1.2 The Transnational and Local Context of Chinese Slash Fan Fiction

As a Chinese slash fan fiction reader and writer (from 2006 to the present), as well as a scholar of fan fiction and fan culture, through witnessing and experiencing the development of Chinese slash fan fiction, I would argue that Chinese BL/*danmei*

including slash fan fiction is explicitly transnational and transcultural, from its inception until the present day. Liu (2009, para. 1) even sees the transnationalisation as a defining feature of BL/*danmei* culture, saying that BL/*danmei* is "a transnational subculture", which allows young women to produce, consume and distribute male-male relationships in various formats, such as fiction, manga, and music videos. As mentioned above, initially Chinese BL/*danmei* and slash fan fiction were mainly influenced by Japanese ACGN and BL culture, in which early slash stories were often based on Japanese manga and animation such as *Saint Seiya* (1986-1989), *Slam Dunk* (1990-1996), *Hunter X Hunter* (1999-2001), *The Prince of Tennis* (2001-2005), and *Naruto* (2002-2007). With the booming development of Chinese fan translation (fansubbing) groups, an increasing number of Japanese manga and animation (both BL and non-BL), though illegal, continue to circulate on Chinese cyberspace, which has greatly enriched the development of Chinese slash fan fiction through providing fruitful source texts.

In addition, the aesthetics and conventions of early Chinese BL/*danmei* fiction, including slash fan fiction, were highly influenced by Japanese BL (Yang and Xu 2017). The concept of *gong*/*shou* in Chinese BL/*danmei* and slash fan fiction is directly borrowed from Japanese BL culture, in which *gong*, literally meaning attacking, translated from the Japanese term *seme*, refers to the penetrator in sexual behaviour in Chinese BL/*danmei* and slash fan fiction, and the term *shou*, receiving, from the term *uke*, refers to the penetrated (Tian 2015). Like the Japanese BL, the assignment of the roles of the *gong* and *shou* is "usually fixed and nonreversible", and the *shou* "is often depicted as an effeminate young boy, physically shorter and weaker" than the *gong* (Yang and Xu 2017, p.9).

With the development of Chinese indigenous BL/*danmei* and slash fan fiction, Chinese female fans were more inclined to experiment with different styles, and incorporated more Chinese cultural elements and figures into their creations (Yang and Xu 2015). Today, Chinese slash fan fiction based on traditional Chinese classic literature such as *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (Tian 2015) and popular Chinese martial arts novels such as *The Legendary Swordsman* (Zhou 2017) are blossoming within Chinese slash fandom.

Since the *Harry Potter* books (1997-2007) and film series (2001-2011) became widely popular in mainland China, *HP* slash fan fiction began to spread online in China as well as in a globalised context around the late 2000s. Recently, more Anglo-American films and television series such as BBC television series *Sherlock* (2010-present) and the Marvel Cinematic Universe films have been released legally on Chinese online video platforms such as iQiyi, Youku, and QQTV, and illegally on private websites, which provide rich materials for Chinese slash fans to draw upon. Meanwhile, Chinese fans have also frequented overseas sites such as LiveJournal, Tumblr, and Archive of Our Own (AO3) to write and read slash fan fiction of Anglo-American texts in both English and Chinese languages, which has further influenced the development of Chinese slash fan fiction, such as introducing new tropes and aesthetics (Wei 2014; Yang and Xu 2017). For example, Chinese fans have realised that there is no equivalent concept of *gong* and *shou* in Anglo-American slash fan fiction (Yang and Xu 2017). Therefore, slash fan fiction in China is no longer exclusively associated with Japanese culture, but has become thoroughly entwined with a variety of Chinese and Anglo-American popular culture. Nevertheless, most scholars have focused on the impact of Japanese BL culture on Chinese BL/*danmei* creations (Wang 2011; Yi 2013; Zhang 2016; Yang 2017), whereas only a few have paid attention to Chinese slash fan fiction and fan communities of Anglo-American popular culture (Wei 2014; Yang and Xu 2017).

1.3 The Social Context of Chinese Slash Fan Fiction: Gender and Sexuality Politics

The social context of Chinese slash fan fiction, particular with regards to gender and sexuality, is different from the Anglo-American context. For much of the history of China, women have lived in a patriarchal society highly influenced by Confucian values, which require them to "obey the father before the marriage, obey the husband after marriage, and obey the first son after the death of husband" (Gao 2003, p.116; Han 2018). Instead of being independent individuals, women were highly dependent on men as daughters, wives, and mothers – in other words, women were always invariably subordinate to men (Hong et al. 1993; Eng 2004). In addition to such unequal gender roles, men and women also faced discrepancies and unequal codes of

conduct in terms of sexuality in traditional Chinese society, in which men did not need to be chaste before marriage and could have concubines in addition to their wives, while women must be virgins before marriage and loyal to their husbands afterwards, even in widowhood (Watson and Ebrey 1991; Zuo et al. 2012). Dominant sexuality norms, which emphasised the procreation responsibility of women, further stipulated that women should be sexually passive – any exceptions were stigmatised as "fallen women" (Zuo et al. 2012, Zheng et al. 2014).

The dominant and traditional Confucian values were replaced by socialist ideologies after the communist revolution in mainland China. From the 1950s, the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) started to implement gender-equal policies, such as providing women with the same legal rights as men, including employment in social production and pay (Peng 2020). Under Mao's widespread pronouncement that "women can hold up half of the sky", women's social attributes – their work and responsibilities in the construction of socialist China – were emphasised. Chinese women were given such gender equality precisely because the CCP required their labour in post-revolution social construction. However, beyond the gender-equal policies, the gender difference was erased, especially during the Cultural Revolution period (1966 to 1976), as evidenced by the national slogan: "the times have changed, men and women are the same" (Zeng 2009). Women were required to cut long hair, to wear "a form of gender neutrality with a defemini[s]ed colourless uniformity", and to be strong and muscular to undertake heavy physical work that was normally done by men (Zeng 2009, Zheng et al. 2014, p.622). Therefore, such 'liberation' was criticised as a kind of political violence enacted on women, because it unnaturally and forcibly erased femininity (Zeng 2009). Meanwhile, in terms of sexual politics, strict regulations target women as well as men, whereby sexual behaviour is only permitted within marriage and aimed at reproduction (Zheng et al. 2014). Any exception is considered to be immoral and shameful, because enjoying sexual pleasure is "a manifestation of bourgeois individualism", which runs counter to the communistic ideology (Zheng et al. 2014, p.622).

Since the early 1980s, mainland China has begun to transition from state socialism to a market economy, which has yielded profound impacts on social changes, including gender and sexuality politics (Zuo et al. 2012). As the authorities no longer enforce

official “neutered-women role models” (Peng 2020, p.42), traditional terms of feminine beauty have been restored. Meanwhile, the CCP still promised to “continue promoting gender equality in Chinese society in the post-reform era” (Peng 2020, p.44). For example, according to the National Bureau of Statistics of China (NBSC) (2019), in contrast to the situation in the past, modern Chinese women have gained equal educational attainment: 52.5% of university graduates were female. Women’s political participation also increased: the number of female deputies at the 13th National People’s Congress accounted for 24.9% of the total, an increase of 1.5% from the previous session (NBSC 2019). In terms of the labour market, Chinese women’s employment rate also rose to 43.7% in 2018 (NBSC 2019), while female directors accounted for 39.9% of corporate boards in 2018, which was 7.2% higher than in 2010 (NBSC 2019). These statistics seem to indicate that gender inequality is being reshaped in modern China.

However, women are oppressed by both the revived traditional values and through political violence in modern China. To subvert the “masculine[s]ation and politici[s]ation of women” in the Cultural Revolution period, femininity has been redefined “in rather traditional terms of feminine beauty”, which is consonant with and even reinforces the traditional gender and sexuality ideologies (Zeng 2009, p.111). Despite relatively equal access to education and employment, mainstream ideology in China often emphasises the domestic roles of women, which says that they should focus on getting married and taking care of their families and children, which results in women losing their competitiveness in the workplace to their male colleagues (Feng 2017). When there is an excess of labour supply, female employees are usually laid off first (Zuo 2013). The Chinese Ministry of Education even used the term “leftover women” to describe women over 27 years old but not married, and stated that those women’s high educational background, income, and professional achievements made them unattractive to men (Fincher 2014). Such discriminatory discourses, which emphasise women’s reproductive and marital values and devalue their personal and career achievements, are caused by both traditional Chinese gender norms and the modern Chinese government’s ideology, which sees “heterosexual marriage as central to social stability and hence national well-being” (Ng and Li 2020, p.483).

The political violence on female bodies was represented by the one-child policy (1979-2015), in which forced abortions and sterilisation were implemented only on women's bodies. Paradoxically, female fans of BL/*danmei* and slash welcomed the one-child policy rather than resisted it. As Yang and Xu (2016b, pp.254-255) claimed, many "veteran *danmei* fans were born in the 1980s and belong to the generation of only children" who had "enjoyed the full support of their families". It made this generation of women more "ambitious, assertive, and independent" (Yang and Xu 2016b, p.254). With the easing of the one-child policy in 2015, those female *danmei* fans were deeply concerned that women of child-bearing age would face further gender discrimination in the job market because they were believed to need to spend more time and effort than men on taking care of the second child (Yang and Xu 2016b). Those worries also prove the existence of the sexist job market and the falsity of the declaration that gender inequality no longer exists.

Regarding the sexual arena, although the sexual openness among young generations in contemporary China has challenged the notion of sexual asceticism in Chinese sexuality studies (Yang and Bao 2012), repressive and conservative discourses towards sexuality are still dominant in mainstream media and educational institutions, in which sexual activities are still prohibited in publications and broadcasting and sexual education is insufficient in both families and schools (Zhang 2016). Chinese middle and high schools still view "youth engagement in sex as forbidden" and aim to police sexuality among youth (Chen 2017, p.955). Biology teachers often ask adolescent students to learn sexual knowledge such as the female reproductive system by themselves in class, and "many parents consider 'sex' as a taboo, which, they think, will bring harmful effects to children if mentioned", as well as believing that "children of certain age would understand sex naturally because these parents did not accept any sexual education when they were children" (Huang and Wang 2018, p.267; also see Steinhauer 2016). Moreover, female sexuality and desire "is still defined by male-dominated discourse", in which "sex is to be enjoyed by men, not women" (Chao 2016, p.71). Therefore, although sexual asceticism is kind of old fashioned, Chinese women are still far from being sexually liberated.

In addition to the minimal sexual education related to heterosexuality, LGBTQ+ education is non-existent or very negative (Parkin 2018). As Parkin (2008, p.1257)

noted, after examining 90 college textbooks in mainland China, “40% erroneously identified homosexuality as a type of illness, and over 50% claimed that homosexuality could be cured by conversion therapy”. Although homosexuality has been decriminalised in Mainland China since sodomy was removed from criminal law in 1997 (Criminal Law of the People's Republic of China 1992 Revision 1997), few novels, films, and television series containing LGBTQ+ characters have been published and broadcast in Mainland China. Even though two Chinese-made television series, *Go Princess Go* (2015-2016) and *Addiction* (2016), which respectively contain transgender and adolescent gay male characters, were broadcast on Chinese online video platforms LeTV and iQiyi, both were closed down by the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (hereafter SAPPRFT) (Clover 2016; Tan 2016). In addition, homosexuality has been regarded as abnormal by the Audit Principles of Network Audio-Visual Programs, which prohibits any broadcast containing LGBTQ+ characters and plots (Audit Principles of Network Audio-Visual Programs 2017, 8:6:2). Such hostility to homosexuality stems from its departure from the Chinese government’s mainstream ideology that heterosexual families are central to the entire well-being of the nation (Ng and Li 2020).

Given the social context in which sexually active women are still seen as immoral and homosexuality is still stigmatised in modern Chinese dominant discourses, it is not surprising that Chinese female slash fans are often self-identified as *funv*, a term translated from Japanese female BL fans’ self-identification *fujoshi*, literally rotten girls (Galbraith 2011). Such self-identification can be seen as both satirical and as a protest against the dominant heteronormative ideology. Meanwhile, although slash fan fiction might be far from representing actual gay male experiences, it might be one of the ways for Chinese female writers and readers to understand homosexuality. To date, due to the “depictions of unconventional sexual relationships and the higher proportion of graphic sex” in BL/*danmei* and slash fan fiction (Feng 2013, p.56), most studies by Chinese scholars have focused on how BL/*danmei* fans negotiate dominant culture, women’s culture, and queer culture, as well as examining whether Chinese BL/*danmei* fans’ enthusiasm of the fictional male-male bonding can translate to their support of real-life LGBTQ+ groups (Yang and Xu 2016b, Zhang 2016, Yang and Xu 2017, Ng and Li 2020); fewer works have paid attention to slash fan fiction and slash

fans (Wei 2014, Tian 2015). Therefore, more critical research on the slash fans' negotiation practices referring to gender and sexuality issues and the impacts their practices on their real life and lived experiences remains necessary, even urgent.

1.4 The Legal Context of Chinese Slash Fan Fiction

The legal issues involved in Chinese slash fan fiction are different from Anglo-American slash fan fiction. In the Anglo-American sphere, the copyright issues involved in fan arts including slash fan fiction are probably most significant, because the original media texts' producers become aware of the fact that their original properties are infringed by fan authors (Jamison 2013). As Martens (2019, p.1) noted, copyright owners "have a very clear idea of ownership, backed up by an established system of copyright law and the financial means to support lawsuits". Historically this has often involved legal 'cease and desist' notices being issued to fans by franchises for copyright infringement, such as by Lucasfilm in relation to early Star Wars fan fiction. For example, the Usenet bosses refused to "run a Star Wars fanfic group for fear of receiving cease and desist letters" (Brooker 2002, p.176). Today, fan fiction tends to be tolerated in Anglo-American contexts by most estates, provided it remains not-for-profit, as they have recognised that fan fiction can work as paratexts that promote the original products for free, and fans who made fan fiction are their loyal consumers (Becker 2014). When conflicts between big companies and fans arise, "each side has much to lose" (Martens 2019, p. 1).

However, Chinese slash fan fiction suffers more from state censorship than it does from corporate censorship. As Yang and Xu (2016b, p.252) note, Chinese BL/*danmei*, including slash fandom, is "at risk of prosecution" because it "contains abundant graphic depictions of homosexuality, which puts it squarely at odds with the conservative sexual morals" of mainland China. The censorship has led to the closure of many BL/*danmei* websites and even led to the arrests of online BL/*danmei* writers (Zheng 2019). For example, in 2011, the Zhengzhou Bureau of Public Security closed down "a locally based *danmei* website and arrested a group of female writers on the charge of disseminating pornographic materials" (Feng 2013, p.58).

In the same year, the State Council Information Office was established for censoring online pornographic and obscene texts (Feng 2013). Therefore, Slash Fan Fiction Networks[i](SFFN), one of the biggest online literature websites hosting BL/*danmei* and slash, started to use software to automatically delete 'sensitive words' from all online literature, as well as encouraging readers to act as whistle-blowers to avoid being fined or even closed down. In 2014, a new principle has been introduced by the SFFN editors to all authors that states they are not allowed to describe anything below the neck (Zheng 2019). Massive BL/*danmei* and slash fan fiction archives containing homoerotic contents have been locked and entry barred until their writers revise such content. As a result, writers have had to delete significant portions of their work, previously available on SFFN before the crack-down in 2014. One slash story which was previously available on the site, for example, remains entirely locked because of its excessive depictions of sex and BDSM (bondage, discipline/domination, sadism, and masochism). The SFFN even changed the genre name from *danmei* – an easily targeted term – to *chun'ai* (literally pure love) to further ensure the legal continuity of the website.

Despite increasingly severe censorship, BL/*danmei* and slash writers and readers have found ways to bypass this censorship, such as asking their readers to include an email address in the comments area and then sending deleted content to readers directly. This ensures that more explicit content remains 'private' rather than 'public' in terms of availability. However, as censorship becomes increasingly stringent, the above methods have been abandoned by BL/*danmei* writers, especially considering the increasing number of whistle-blowers from informants inside the community. According to Zheng (2019, [3.5], "[u]sing the power of governmental censorship to persecute people of a different fannish position has been a common practice since 2014", evidenced by the fact that most reports come from "antifans[ii] of a certain genre of writing, or even antifans of certain slash pairings". An example that caused a sensation both in domestic and overseas fan communities occurred in 2020. When fans of actor Xiao Zhan found a RPS (real person slash[iii]) story published on AO3 portraying their idol as a transgender woman building a romantic and erotic relationship with a male high school student, they reported AO3, a worldwide famous non-profit website founded by in the United States by fans for fans, to the Chinese authorities, which led to the site being blacklisted in mainland China (Cai 2020).

The arrest of two more BL/*danmei* writers also made others more cautious about creating and sharing homoerotic content. Tianyi (pen name), an independent author who is famous for writing original BL/*danmei* fiction with plenty of erotic descriptions, was sentenced to ten and a half years in prison for the crime of illegally producing and selling pornographic materials in 2017 in mainland China (Flood 2018; Bai 2021). Another BL/*danmei* writer, under the pen name Shenhai Xiansheng, is a contracting writer on the SFFN. In 2017, she was also arrested on the charge of illegally publishing and selling pornographic books through a private publishing house. Publishing BL/*danmei* books containing pornographic descriptions ultimately resulted in her being sentenced to four years in prison. Compared with BL/*danmei* and slash in their grassroots period (from the 1990s to the early 2010s), their content, subgenre, conventions, and community have been deeply affected by the increasingly severe and tighter state censorship of perceived pornography by the Chinese state. How slash fan fiction and its female fans' understanding of gender and sexuality has been impacted by these changes remains under-researched in existing academic studies.

1.5 The Commercialisation of Chinese Slash Fan Fiction

Last but not least, given the context in which Chinese online literature is highly commercialised, Chinese slash fan fiction is by no means unaffected by this commercial culture (Feng 2013). Early BL/*danmei* forums, established in the 1990s, were non-commercial websites, run by young female fans (mostly students) with "neither money nor experience, and often suffered from funding shortage and unstable servers" (Yang and Xu 2017, p.4). Although some BL/*danmei* and slash fans still stick to their non-commercial principle of sharing for free, with the rise of commercial literature websites that offer BL/*danmei* fiction, those non-commercial forums have fallen under the aegis of big corporations (Yang and Xu 2017). Among many commercial literature websites, the SFFN is mostly known for its BL/*danmei* and slash fan fiction genres. Following in the footsteps of most for-profit Chinese online literature websites, the SFFN provided a VIP project in 2008. If an author's slash story joins the VIP project, its first part (around 80,000 words) is free to read; after that readers must pay if they wish to continue reading. Thus, slash writers become commercial producers and slash readers are consumers. The relationship between

slash writers and readers is therefore more complex than in Anglo-American slash communities, where fan fiction is free, although it is true that some Anglo-American fan fiction writers eventually turn professional on a small (e.g. self-publishing via Amazon) or large scale, and may then alter or delete their fan-works to become more commercially viable (Tan 2012; Pepitone 2013; Jones 2014; Hellekson 2015).

Since the early 2010s, there has been significant research into Chinese commercial online literature, with the focus on the basic features of the most common business model for online literature sites (Hockx 2015), the shift in roles of authors, publishers, editors, and readers from a printed literary field to an online field (Chao 2013), and the dynamic and unrelenting writer-reader interaction in which writers are both worshipped and chastised while readers are empowered under the impact of communalisation (Tian and Adorjan 2016). However, the commercialisation of Chinese slash fan fiction has been overlooked by scholars, which this thesis seeks to redress. Some studies do not even acknowledge the commercialisation of slash fan fiction in China (Tian 2015; Zhao and Madill 2018). Some studies have only introduced commercialisation as the general context for Chinese slash fan fiction (Feng 2013) or have tried to define whether Chinese slash fandom is a gift or commercial culture (Wei 2014), but they have yet to explore its broader impact on Chinese slash fans. Yang and Xu's 2017 article "Chinese Danmei Fandom and Cultural Globali[s]ation from Below" is an exception, in which they address the commercialisation of BL/danmei fandom and "the affective labo[u]r of fan consumers" (p.7). However, their argument that "[w]hen big corporations try to cash in on the huge danmei market, they bear the same risk of playing in the legal grey zones as small players" should be carefully re-examined (details of which will be analysed in chapter 4). Considering that economic independence contributes significantly to women's pursuit of gender equality and self-empowerment, for Chinese female slash writers, writing slash fan fiction can not only allow them to negotiate gender and sexuality issues in cyberspace, but also may have an impact on their real lives. However, such an assumption has not been the focus of studies of Chinese slash fan fiction to date.

1.6 The Research Questions

Given its male-male romantic and/or erotic narratives and female dominant fan base, Anglo-American slash fan fiction studies almost frequently focus on issues of gender and sexuality (Hellekson and Busse 2014). Early studies see slash fan fiction as a kind of female sexual fantasy, which allows female fans to freely express their sexual desire and pleasure towards male bodies (Russ 1985, Segell 1997, Green et al. 1998, Scodari 2003, Lothian et al. 2007, Samutina 2013, Willis 2016, McLelland 2017), their desire for an equally ideal relationship (Lamb and Veith 1986, Penley 1992), and their potential to subvert heteronormativity and homophobia (Jenkins 1992, Penley 1992). With the transition of fandom to the Internet, slash fan fiction and fan communities have become increasingly diverse and complex, which makes the entire genre become "even more difficult to essentiali[s]e or explain" (Hellekson and Busse 2014, p.81). Therefore, instead of drawing a universal explanation of the entire genre, scholars prefer to analyse particular slash fandoms and individual slash stories, such as Tosenberger's (2008) focus on Harry Potter slash. Details of previous studies focusing on issues of gender and sexuality of slash fan fiction are discussed in Chapter 2.

Currently, fan fiction has been seen as a worldwide and cross-cultural transformative work within the digital world (Rosenblatt and Tushnet 2015). Examples of transcultural academic fan fiction studies include Kienzl (2014) for German-language *Supernatural* fan fiction, Cuntz-Leng and Meintzinger (2014) for German fan fiction history, and Kustritz (2015) for European fan activities including fan fiction. Black (2009) also indicates how adolescent English language learners construct their online identities by participating in fan fiction. Rosenbaltt and Tushnet (2015, p.390) further examines how writing fan fiction can empower "women of colour to move beyond traditional underrepresentation". Even though these transcultural fan fiction studies contribute to discussions of "how fans incorporate cross-border media into their own popular cultural contexts and what meanings they attribute to them" (Chin and Morimoto 2013, p.93), few studies have been conducted on fan fiction produced outside the Anglo-American arena, and even fewer have been produced on slash fan fiction in particular. Therefore, transcultural slash fan fiction within a non-Anglo-American cultural context still lacks detailed academic research.

Unlike the rich studies of slash fan fiction in Anglo-American academia, Chinese slash fan fiction studies are still in the early stages – most studies have focused on its parent genre BL/*danmei* and only a few studies have been carried out on individual slash fandoms, such as Tian (2015) for *Three Kingdom* slash and Wei (2014) for *Iron Man* slash. Taking into account the popularity of slash fan fiction in China, as well as the complex social and cultural context of Chinese slash fan fiction mentioned above, following the spirit of the most recent transnational fan fiction studies, this research project specifically draws upon Chinese *Harry Potter* slash fandom on the SFFN, asking the following key questions to fill the gaps in terms of both Anglo-American and Chinese studies of slash fan fiction:

RQ1. How do Chinese *HP* slash fan fiction writers and readers negotiate gender and sexuality through their writing, reading, and communication practices?

RQ2. How do their practices of reading and writing *HP* slash fan fiction and communication with other *HP* slash fans influence their everyday lives?

RQ3. How does Chinese dominant culture and Japanese and Anglo-American popular culture influence Chinese *HP* slash fans in their negotiation of gender and sexuality in *HP* slash fan fiction?

RQ4. How does the commercialisation and the online censorship of Chinese slash fan fiction affect Chinese slash fans in their attempts to negotiate gender and sexuality in *HP* slash fan fiction and their offline lives?

1.7 The Scope of This Research

As mentioned above, because male/male slash stories outnumber female/female ones in the *HP* fan fiction both inside and outside China, this research focuses specifically on male-male Chinese slash fan fiction. At the same time, even though a few male fans do participate in Chinese slash fan fiction (based on my own experience), female fans are still the majority of slash fan fiction writers and readers in China (Feng 2013). This research, took place between 2017 and 2021, will therefore focus on Chinese

female *HP* slash fan writers and readers only. As detailed in the Methodology chapter, I conducted in-depth interviews with Chinese HP slash fan writers and readers, as well as textual analysis of popular HP slash stories published on the SFFN between 2011 and 2021.

1.7.1 Chinese Harry Potter Slash Fiction

Rather than analysing slash fan fiction from a variety of fandoms, this research project only focuses on one of the most ubiquitous online slash fandoms in mainland China – that of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* septet. In Anglo-American academia, a number of studies have been conducted on slash fan fiction of particular source texts such as Callis (2016) on *Star Trek*, Valentine (2016) on the BBC's *Sherlock*, and Hampton (2014) on *Harry Potter*. Rather than offering a one-size-fits-all explanation of the complicated nature of slash fandom, these studies have provided detailed, in-depth analyses of slash in relation to a particular fandom. Observing this academic tradition, this research sacrifices breadth for depth by focusing on Chinese *HP* slash fan fiction only.

As stated earlier, the *Harry Potter* books and film series have gained widespread popularity and commercial successes globally, including in mainland China (Gupta and Xiao 2009; Samutina 2013). Mainland China's People's Literature Publishing House began publishing the Chinese language version of the *Harry Potter* books in 2000, including *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, and *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, which made the books popular in mainland China (Xinhuanet 2017). Since then, the Chinese translations of *Harry Potter* novels have been published almost simultaneously with the original English version. On 21 July 2007, the day that *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* was released in mainland China, major bookstores in Beijing witnessed long queues outside their doors, all waiting to buy the last volume in the *Harry Potter* septet as soon as possible (Mu 2007). In 2007, over 1.8 million copies of Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows were sold in mainland China (AP 2007). From 2000 to 2007, the *Harry Potter* book series sold more than 9 million copies in mainland China, totalling 200 million Chinese yuan (about 23 million pounds), making it the best-selling series of all time among books published by People's

Literature Publishing House (Mu 2007). By 2017, over 20 million Harry Potter books had been sold. Beyond the books, *Harry Potter* film franchises, including the eight films in the *Harry Potter* series (2002-2011), the 4K 3D restoration of *Harry Potter and The Sorcerer's Stone* (2020), and two films in the *Fantastic Beasts* series (2016-2018), have grossed over 2.3 billion Chinese yuan (about 270 million pounds) in Chinese box office (Sina 2011; Maoyan Film 2016, 2018, 2020). On 20th September 2021, Universal Beijing Resort opened in Beijing, China, which allowed Chinese fans to explore the wizarding world of *Harry Potter* in mainland China (The Wizarding World Team 2021). Excited Chinese fans wrote visitor blogs, recorded videos, and shared their joy and experience on social media and video sharing sites with fellow fans.

Today, most of the first Chinese Harry Potter generation – the post-1980s and post-1990s generations who were the first group of Chinese Harry Potter readers – has grown into their adulthood and parenthood, and they started to introduce and read the Harry Potter books to their children, radiating new vitality in new generations (Gupta and Xiao 2009; Wu 2021). In 2019, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* was included in the recommended reading list for Chinese junior middle school students made by the Ministry of Education, which symbolised the Harry Potter book series' classicisation in mainland China, as well as further heralding its ongoing cross-generational influence in mainland China (Wu 2021).

The Internet has escalated the popularity of the Harry Potter series and the establishment of Anglo-American Harry Potter fandom (Duggan 2021; Martens 2019). Initially, Anglo-American Harry Potter fan websites were "independently made by young fans", but "later replaced by professional and corporate-owned sites" (Martens 2019, p. 3). Similarly, Chinese fans have also developed an active and productive online fandom. The early Chinese Harry Potter online forums were also non-profit websites independently run by fans and their operating expenses were dependent on the website owners themselves and/or donation from other fans (Muyuren 2019). In addition to discussing plots, characters, and Harry Potter-related issues, impatient fans also spontaneously translated English versions of the Potter books into Chinese and published their translations on fan websites. For example, on 21st June 2003, the English version of *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* was released in the UK,

but the official publication of the Chinese translation version did not come out until six months later. From 12nd July 2003, Chinese fans began to publish their independently translated Chinese versions of *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* on Huoli Bar, one of the largest Harry Potter forums in mainland China. This incident made this fan website become the most influential Harry Potter forum at that time, but at the same time it brought about a legal crisis. On 11 September 2003, Rowling's Shanghai agent sent an email to the administrator of Huoli Bar, severely criticizing its unofficial translation incident, which led to the temporary closure of the website (BBC News 2005; Muyuren 2019). Like Chinese fans-owned and fan-run non-commercial BL/danmei websites, which "often suffered from funding shortage and unstable servers" and "gradually went into decline", most early non-commercial Harry Potter online fan websites also fell silent under the onslaught of the mighty commercial sites. Today, most Chinese HP fans are nomadic, with no fixed attachments to one single HP fan site. They can discuss HP-related issues, books, films, news reports, characters, plots, and celebrities on Baidu Harry Potter Bar[iv], produce and view HP fan videos on Bilibili[v], and write and read HP fan fiction (including slash) on the SFFN and other commercial and non-commercial websites.

As Yang and Xu (2017, p.8) indicated, there are three main circles in Chinese BL/danmei fandom, in which the "Japanese circle"[vi] is "the oldest and most multifarious", the "original danmei circle[vii] is the largest", and the "Euro-American circle"[viii] is "the fastest growing". In the Euro-American circle, Chinese HP slash fan fiction appeared earliest and most frequently, to "hold up the half of the sky of the Euro-American circle" (Liu 2019, chapter 4, section 4, para.9). Martens (2019, p.5) has carefully documented the longevity of the HP books and the activity of Anglo-American Harry Potter fans, from "fan fiction, to participating in festivals, to political activism", as well as arguing that such activity is a result of the "rich world-building that exists within the books" and the complicated characters and "relationship between owners and fans". Her argument also applies to Chinese HP slash fandom.

The highly fascinating imaginary world and complicated characters of the HP books have contributed to many different pairings since 2008 on the SFFN. As with the Anglo-American *HP* slash fandom, there is no dominant 'One True Pairing' (OTP) in

Chinese *HP* slash fandom (Tosenberger 2008). In Anglo-American *HP* slash fandom, the most popular slash pairing is "Harry/Draco, followed by Sirius/Remus and Snape/Harry" (Tosenberger 2008, p.192). Although Harry/Draco and Snape/Harry pairings are also popular in Chinese *HP* slash fandom, the pairings favoured by Chinese *HP* slash fans are more complicated. For example, the slash story *About the Time-travel of Harry Potter* (hereafter *Time-travel of HP*), which will be discussed in detail in Chapter 4, labels Snape/Harry as its main pairing. However, this story portrays the soul of a modern Chinese woman named Bai Xue travelling back into the *HP* universe. When she regains consciousness, she has become the unborn male baby in Lily Potter's womb – Harry Potter. Therefore, she is Harry, yet she is *not* the Harry found in Rowling's *HP* universe. Although the story claims its main pairing is Snape/Harry, it is different from the traditional Snape/Harry pairing. There are so many pairings featuring original time-travellers with *HP* characters in Chinese HP slash fan fiction. Some time-travellers become other *HP* characters, such as Harry, Ron, and Neville, and others appear as original characters. Such complexity provides richer material for an analysis of the way Chinese female *HP* fans negotiate gender and sexuality issues through different pairings across almost a full decade (2011-2021).

Today, Chinese *HP* slash fan fiction is still one of the most popular literary productions on the Chinese Internet and over 20,000 Chinese *HP* slash fan stories had been released on the SFFN at the time of this writing (2021). However, the number and visibility of *HP* fan stories including slash have sharply decreased on the SFFN since 2018. This is not because the *HP* universe has lost its attractiveness to fans, but mainly because *HP* fan fiction including slash could no longer be commercialised on the SFFN from 2018, which made many *HP* fan writers turn to producing original and/or fan stories based on commercial texts (this will be discussed further in Chapter 4).

Beyond the popularity of Chinese *HP* slash fandom, my experience as a *HP* slash fan also leads me to conduct this thesis focusing on Chinese *HP* slash fandom. Similar to Jenkins (2006), I self-identify myself as an aca-fan, who is a member of both the fan and academic community. As Jenkins (1992, p.6) noted, writing as an aca-fan can facilitate "certain understandings and forms of access impossible through other positionings". Compared with outsider researchers, being an aca-fan with

comprehensive and deep knowledge of fandom allows me to "avoid a position of the single text and would instead respond to the fandom's intertextuality" (Evans and Stasi 2014, p.15). In this project, my knowledge and experience as a *HP* slash fan has helped me provide an intertextual interpretation of both fan texts and fan experiences. Meanwhile, it also allows me to challenge the power hierarchy between outsider researchers and fans, in which the researchers are in a powerful position (Press and Livingstone 2006). Aca-fans are considered to play a crucial role in challenging such power imbalances, as well as forming a bridge between the fan community and academia (Cristofari and Guitton 2017). This was particularly important for my study, given the increasing censorship of BL (Boys Love) and slash fiction genres by the authorities in China. Under these circumstances, it is unlikely an outsider researcher would have gained sufficient trust from slash fan community members to have completed this research.

Writing as a *HP* slash fan about Chinese HP slash fandom indeed "poses certain potential risks for the academic critic", especially in "confusing one's own stance with that of the subject being studied" (Jenkins 1992, p.6). However, the assumption that outsider researchers can possess total or near objectivity is also challenged, as their perspectives are also affected by their own social, cultural, and political backgrounds (O'Byrne 2007). Moreover, the imagined ideal of the academic whereby researchers should always maintain an objective position has been criticized by feminist scholars. As Holman Jones et al. (2016, p.35) noted, "traditional research often adheres to hegemonically masculine traits, particularly objectivity, control, and predictability", while the traits such as "subjectivity, uncertainty, and emotions, are often gendered as feminine and, consequently, considered inadequate, insufficient, and irrational".

In other words, as "women are culturally required to be the bearers of emotion", excluding emotions/subjectivity from the process of knowledge production but advocating rationality/objectivity (the masculine standard) could undermine "the recognition of women as culturally legitimate sources of knowledge" (Hannell 2020, [4.7]). Therefore, aca-fans' destabilization of object and subject and its blend of personal and professional are fundamentally feminist, which "model the (feminist) value of affective scholarship and self-reflexive insight" (Stein 2011). As a work carried out by a female Chinese aca-fan with involvement in Chinese-context female

fan-culture, this project will also contribute to filling the gaps of the complex portrait of slash fan fiction and its female fan community from a feminist perspective.

It is also worth noting that in 2020, Rowling's "anti-trans commentary" posted on Twitter "has justifiably been received with horror by many *Harry Potter* fans" (Duggan 2021, paras.35-37). For example, Bird (2020, cited in Kelleher 2020), a member of the Harry Potter Alliance[ix], has expressed the disappointment at Rowling's alleged trans-phobic manifesto and highlighted that the *Harry Potter* fandom is "so much bigger" than the author. Similarly, the spokesperson for the Leaky Cauldron, one of the biggest *Harry Potter* fan websites, also asserts that the Harry Potter fan community "is more than the views of any one person, the books' author included", and they will still continue to "find ways to lift each other up" and fight against any inequality (Kelleher 2020). This incident has also sparked discussion among Chinese fans on fan sites and social media. As both an HP fan and academic researcher, when Rowling's alleged transphobia was revealed in 2020, I browsed and participated in fans and more broad public discussion of this incident on Chinese social media. Based on my personal experience, not rigorous academic research, I suggest most Chinese fans did not participate in the backlash against her views and alleged transphobia. Academic research on the reaction and response of Chinese fans to Rowling's incident is still lacking at the time of this writing (2021).

The support for Rowling's statements on transgender among most Chinese fans should be attributed, at least in part, to the almost universal transphobia in the Chinese context. According to Peng et al. (2019, p.4), 92.8% of Chinese transgender adolescents experienced "parental abuse or neglect owing to being transgender or gender nonbinary" and 76.6% of them reported bullying or abuse from classmates and teachers at school. Those parental abuses include "economic control", "being forced to change their gender expression", "verbal abuse or insults", "restricting personal freedom", physical assault, "being coerced or forced to undergo convertion therapy", and even "being forced to have sex with others", while the school abuse includes "being publicly mocked", "isolation or exclusion", "cyberbullying via social media", and verbal/physical abuse (Peng et al. 2019, p.5).

Given the severe discrimination and bullying at home and school towards Chinese transgender groups, relevant law and school policies aiming at prohibiting transphobia are still absent in the Chinese context (Lin et al. 2021). As Yan et al. (2019) noted, the employment rates for transgender and gender non-conforming individuals are also lower than cisgender people, and transgender individuals also suffer from discrimination in the workplace. In the Chinese Classification of Mental Disorders 3, homosexuality was removed from the mental disorders categories, while transgender is still categorised under mental disorders (Wang et al. 2019). At the same time, there are "few medical facilities providing transgender-related health care" in mainland China, and even fewer mental health supports for transgender groups (Lin et al. 2021, p.e954).

Although there are some organisations in mainland China which have started to campaign for transgender rights, most of the public in mainland China still shows negative attitudes towards, or neglect of, transgender groups (Wang et al. 2019). Therefore, it is not difficult to understand why most Chinese fans did not participate in the backlash against Rowling's views and alleged transphobia. As the interviews I conducted for this thesis took place before the Rowling's controversy happened (her blog post on the subject was published in June 2020), my interview questions do not cover this topic. Meanwhile, the Chinese *HP* slash stories and their related readers' comments I analysed in this research were all completed before this controversy. Therefore, my findings are not significantly affected by it. It would, however, be an interesting topic for future research.

From the start of this project in 2016, and even earlier, from the time I started reading *HP* slash fan fiction in 2008 on the SFFN, to the time of writing the thesis in 2021, many things have changed and are still in the process of changing in Chinese *HP* slash fandom on the SFFN, such as the de-commercialisation of *HP* slash fan fiction on the SFFN and fans' changing preferences in the *HP* canon and fanon. This also makes this study timely as it seeks to address some of the changing dynamics of Chinese *HP* slash fandom on the SFFN.

1.7.2 The Slash Fan Fiction Network

As shown in RQ4, this project investigates how the commercialisation of Chinese *HP* slash fan fiction affects Chinese slash fans in their attempts to negotiate gender and sexuality in *HP* slash fan fiction and their offline lives. Therefore, the SFFN, the most successfully commercial literature website offering *HP* slash fan fiction, has been selected for this project. All slash stories come from the SFFN and all of the interview participants are SFFN writers and readers.

According to the SFFN's 2019 official report, the SFFN proclaimed itself to be one of the most influential women's literature websites in mainland China, with 91 percent of its over 30 million registered members being women and 84 percent of them being 18-35 years old (SFFN 2019). This almost exclusively female user base of the SFFN has contributed to it becoming a cyberliterature platform devoted to female-oriented online novels, which appear in serialised form on a chapter-by-chapter basis. Chinese women's literature websites have been regarded as invaluable media for investigating how Chinese women explore the Internet (Feng 2013). The SFFN, of which female writers and readers are the main constituents, can also provide insights into contemporary Chinese women's tastes, interests, and considerations.

Currently, heterosexual romance, Boys' Love (BL), fan fiction, and original fiction are the four major genres displayed on the homepage of the SFFN. They also act as hyperlinks to refer users to the SFFN's four main sites that correspond to the four major genres to help users quickly find the different genre fictions that they are interested in. Moreover, each of the four main sites contains a number of different subsites to further divide those genres to better guide users with different reading preferences. Notably, users can find the slash fan fiction subsite from both the BL and fan fiction major sites, which can be seen as a reflection of the complexity of the genealogy of Chinese slash fan fiction. On one hand, slash fan fiction is a subgenre of fan fiction by definition. On the other hand, slash is widely accepted as a subgenre of BL fiction by most Chinese readers as it originated from BL culture. No attempt is made to eliminate the ambiguity and intersection of the slash fan fiction subgenre, instead the SFFN refers users outwards to the same subsite whether they click on the term 'slash fan fiction' from fan fiction or BL major sites, which allows the SFFN to best meet users' different classification habits.

In addition to its female gendered user base, the VIP project of the SFFN is also highlighted in the official report shown above. The VIP project is a pay-to-read or pay-before-reading business system, which had been launched by the SFFN since 2008 to charge readers for access to its popular serialised novels. On the SFFN, any registered users can start to serialise a novel in very small instalments on a daily basis. Once a story achieves enough audience attention, such as views, bookmarks, and comments, its author will be invited to become a VIP author and sign a contract with the SFFN. After becoming a contracted writer, the author's works will be eligible to join the SFFN's VIP project. When a story joins the VIP project, its first few chapters (approximately 80,000 words) can be read for free. After that, readers must pay three 'points' (the SFFN currency) per thousand words – with a point equalling one Chinese cent (0.01 Chinese yuan) in real money – to continue reading the following VIP chapters (Figure 1).

Figure 1 The free chapters and VIP chapters of a slash story on the SFFN

Writers and the SFFN share the income, with writers taking two-thirds of the total. Thus, a VIP writer can earn two Chinese cents per thousand words multiplied by the number of their subscribers. Charging three Chinese cents (0.03 Chinese yuan) per thousand words is generally employed by almost all Chinese online literature websites, and is considered to be a relatively modest cost (Hockx 2015). Indeed, considering that the national average monthly salary in China is about 5,833 Chinese yuan in 2019 (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2019b), and the average monthly salary in big cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou was as high as 9,942 yuan, 9,802 yuan, and 7,996 yuan respectively in 2017 (China Daily 2017), the subscription fee standard of the SFFN is very inexpensive for readers, especially those from the big cities mentioned in its official report. In the interviews I conducted, readers M and S also confirmed this inference. Reader S even reported that she generally spent three

hours per day reading slash stories on the SFFN, including their VIP chapters, which only cost her one hundred yuan a month.

Meanwhile, the SFFN also offers users a virtual gifts system, which allows readers to use their SFFN online currency to buy and send virtual gifts to stories and authors they particularly like to show their love and support (Figure 2).

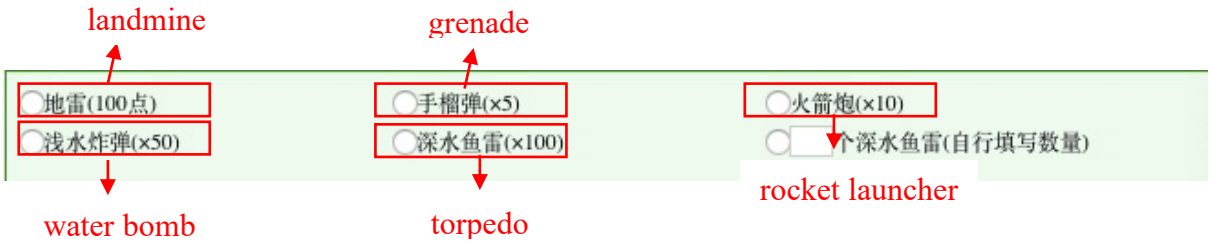

Figure 2 The SFFN's gift system

The SFFN offers five kinds of virtual gift – the landmine, grenade, rocket launcher, water bomb, and torpedo – which respectively cost 100, 500, 1,000, 5,000, and 10,000 SFFN points. The virtual gifts that writers have received can also be transferred into real money, which is equally shared by writers and the SFFN (Figure 2).

Moreover, the SFFN also provided a print-on-request service until 2014, which allowed writers to have their works published as printed books and readers to collect hard copies of their favourite online fiction. When an online story had been completed, the author could initiate the print-on-request service. According to the number of readers who had paid the full cost, the SFFN would print the same number of paper books and mail them to readers. The profits from the print-on-request service would also be divided by the author and the SFFN, with the author taking 80 percent. However, it is technically illegal to sell such self-published books and circulate them on the market as they do not have the International Standard Book Number (ISBN) allocated by the relevant authority (Hockx 2015). In mainland China, only the General Administration of Press and Publication (GAPP), which is incorporated in the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television, can issue the ISBNs (Chen 2015). Publishers must "submit a list of titles they plan to issue during a certain period of time", after passing the censors from GAPP, they are then given the ISBNs (Chen 2015, p.16).

Without applying for the ISBNs and passing the censorship, the SFFN's print-on-demand service is illegal. Winged Wolf (pen name), a female writer using the SFFN's print-on-demand service to print her heterosexual romance stories, was arrested in 2014 and sentenced to three years and a half in prison in 2015 (The Paper 2015). After the incident, the SFFN stopped this print-on-request service in 2014. Today, the SFFN collaborates with both domestic and overseas publishing houses to provide authors with the opportunity to publish paper books legally. Since the publication of BL works is still restricted in mainland China, almost all can only be published and circulated in overseas markets through overseas publishers such as Amarin Printing and Publishing Plc (Thailand), SMM Plus Company (Thailand), and Zgproup Joint Stock Company (Vietnam). Similar to its print-on-request service, authors take 80 percent of the royalties from the publishing houses.

Finally, the SFFN further maximises its business opportunities and profits through cooperation with the TV, film, and game industries to adapt its popular literature works into multiple media products such as TV dramas, movies, animations, and online games (SFFN 2019b). Although in a newspaper interview the vice president and co-founder of the SFFN disclosed that the profit from every single adaptation was approximately one to ten million Chinese yuan, which would be shared with authors, he did not reveal the details of the division between the SFFN and authors (She 2018).

Nowadays, the SFFN has been a hybrid of literature site and market-led and profit-driven cultural industry, although it was a free literature sharing website in its early days (Yang and Xu 2016b). Located in and maturing within the SFFN and the broader Chinese commercial cyberliterature context, *HP* slash fan fiction is by no means isolated from the commercialisation of online literature, although commercialising fan fiction based on copyrighted third-party materials violates the copyright laws of both China and the rest of the world. Among various commercialisation models of the SFFN, three have been applied to *HP* slash fan fiction. Firstly, *HP* slash fan fiction was able to join the VIP project on the SFFN between 2008 and 2018. In 2018, the SFFN suddenly informed writers that although they could continue to write *HP* fan fiction including *HP* slash, but that no *HP* fan fiction including slash could join the VIP project. At the time of this writing (2020-21), none of the *HP* slash stories

currently in progress on the SFFN are part of the VIP project; works in progress that had already joined the VIP project previously have been removed; but completed works are still in the VIP project. Although the SFFN did not announce an official statement, writers and readers believed that copyright issues around *HP* fan fiction was the reason for the action, as discussed in my interviews. Given such a complex and changing commercial environment of the SFFN, this project selects HP slash fan fiction on the SFFN to better contextualise writers and readers' practices within commercialisation.

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[i] Slash Fan Fiction Network is not the real name but a pseudonym of the website. The real name and URL of the website are not revealed in this thesis for the protection of Chinese writers and readers. More specific details relating to this are outlined in the methodology section.

[ii] The term "anti-fan" came from Jonathan Gray's (2003) article "New Audiences, New Textualities: Anti-Fans and Non-Fans", in which Gray coined anti-fans as viewers hating or disliking certain texts or genres.

[iii] Real person slash is a sub-genre of slash fan fiction, which features "male-male romantic and/or erotic relationships between two real people such as celebrities, actors, and athletes" (Zhang 2021, p. 346)

[iv] Baidu Post Bar is "the biggest Chinese communication platform provided by the search engine company Baidu, allowing Chinese fans to "set up open access 'bars' or forums at no cost", such as Baidu BL Bar for Chinese BL fans, Baidu Harry Potter Bar for Chinese HP fans, and Baidu *Game of Thrones* Bar for Chinese *Game of Thrones* fans (Yang and Xu 2017, p.5).

[v] Bilibili is the most popular barrage subtitle website in mainland China, which provides sections for fans to upload and watch fan videos (Zheng 2017). Barrage subtitle "is a unique feature which allows online video viewers to input 'live' comments in a way that is directly overlaid onto the video" (Yang 2020, p. 255).

[vi] The Japanese circle is made up of Chinese fans' "translation of Japanese BL works and the fan re-creation of Japanese ACG series" (Yang and Xu 2017, p.8).

[vii] The original danmei circle consists of Chinese fans' "production, consumption, and adaptation of original Chinese-language danmei novels" (Yang and Xu 2017, p.8).

[viii] The Euro-American circle, also known as the Anglo-American circle, refers to "the production and translation of slash fanfic of Euro-American media products" (Yang and Xu 2017, p.8).

[ix] The Harry Potter Alliance is a network of fans devoted to the Harry Potter series. This network mobilizes Harry Potter fans to work on a variety of issues and concerns, "from human rights in African to rights to equal marriage, from labo[u]r rights to media concentration and net neutrality" (Jenkins 2012, [1.9]).

2. Literature Review

In this chapter, I review the existing theories on slash fan fiction in both Anglo-American and Chinese academia, as well as the broader studies on Harry Potter books and the HP slash fandom. Beginning with a general overview of Anglo-American slash fan fiction studies, the first section mainly focuses on four debates: about female fans expressing their sexual fantasies and desire through slash fan fiction; about female fans envisioning ideal equal relationships and experimenting with multiple gender identities through slash fan fiction; about the relationship between slash fan fiction and heteronormative, homophobic, and queer culture; and about the gift-commercial culture of female fan communities. Through this review, this part examines the critical theoretical landscape of Anglo-American slash fan fiction regarding gender, sexuality, fan labour, and fan communities, which are vital for my research.

The second part reviews both broader Chinese BL/*danmei* studies and Chinese slash fan fiction studies in general. As introduced in Chapter 1, the complexities of the genealogy of Chinese slash fan fiction have resulted in the lack of rich research specifically about this subject. Chinese scholars still tend to treat BL/*danmei* and slash fan fiction as a whole and overlook the specific characteristics of slash fan fiction and slash fans (characteristics can vary across different slash fandoms). For example, Feng (2013), who devotes a single chapter to analysing the narrative features of BL fiction in her English-language book *Romancing the Internet*, treats original BL fiction and slash fan fiction as a whole without addressing the similarities and differences between them, even though the BL fiction *Transported in Time to Become Yin Zhiping* analysed in her book is a slash story based on famous Chinese martial arts story *The Legend of the Condor Heroes*.

However, this does not mean there is a clear boundary between BL/*danmei* fans and slash fans. As Yang and Xu (2017, p.8) note, although "some BL fans might have fixed attachments to certain formats, genres, or fan objects, most are nomadic, constantly moving from one circle to another, bringing fan knowledge of previous circles to new ones". Considering the nomadic nature of BL/*danmei* and slash fans and their shared core elements of the fantasy imagination of the male-male relationship, in the second section I review both Chinese BL/*danmei* and slash fan fiction studies;

although those BL/*danmei* studies do not pay particular attention to slash, they can still provide valuable insights for my research into Chinese slash fan fiction. In reviewing Chinese BL/*danmei* and slash fan fiction studies, the four debates reviewed in the first section are also addressed.

In the final section of the literature review, I also turn to review Anglo-American studies of *Harry Potter* books and the *HP* slash fandom, particularly highlighting the complicated and even controversial ideologies embodied in the *Harry Potter* books, in which gender and sexual normativity and queerness co-exist, as well as how fans express and experiment with their alternative gender and sexual fantasies in creating *HP* slash fan fiction. Finally, I will discuss the research on the *Harry Potter* phenomenon in mainland China, as well as the few studies on Chinese *HP* slash fan fiction.

2.1 Anglo-American Slash Fan Fiction Studies

2.1.1 Sexual Fantasies and Desire

Slash fan fiction began attracting Western scholarly attention in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Russ 1985; Lamb and Veith 1986a; Bacon-Smith 1992; Jenkins 1992; Penley 1992). These early studies mostly used *Star Trek*'s Kirk/Spock slash fan fiction from pre-Internet fanzines as sample texts, attempting to discover the driving forces behind female slash fan writers and readers. Russ (1985) conceptualises slash fan fiction as a kind of feminist pornography, in which female fans can represent their female sexual fantasies, highlighting not only the physical eroticism but also the emotional intimacy, including tenderness, commitment, and nurturance. What female fans want is:

> sexual intensity, sexual enjoyment, the freedom to choose a love that is entirely free of the culture's whole discourse of gender and sex roles, and a situation in which it is safe to let go and allow oneself to become emotionally and sexually vulnerable. (Russ 1985, p.89)

For Russ (1985, pp.86-89), such female sexual fantasy is empowering, as female fans have "sexuali[s]ed our female situation and training, and made out of the restrictions

of the patriarchy our own sexual cues" by creating "images of male bodies as objects of desire". As Richardson (2015) notes, women were perceived as sexually passive in patriarchal gender discourses, thus in the 1980s sexually active women were regarded as either fallen in the moral sense or perverted in a psychological sense. Penley (1992, p. 484) considers slash as female appropriation of popular culture, in which female fans can "resist, negotiate, and adapt to their own desires this overwhelming media environment that we all inhabit". Thus, slash fan fiction is celebrated as empowering women to actively express their forbidden sexual fantasies, to enjoy erotica and sexual urges, and to emphasise that female sexuality is not passive and secondary to male sexuality, but is "first-class humanity" (Russ 1985, p.90).

Although not all slash stories are pornographic, sexually-oriented scenes take centre stage in a large number of slash stories (Samutina 2013). Specific genres of slash such as PWP (Plot, What Plot?), kink-fic and slave-fic are created by fans to refer to stories that are dedicated primarily to erotically-charged content (Alexander 2004, Samutina 2013). Conventionally, writers always warn readers about the sexual scenarios in their story headlines and clearly identify the rating of stories to avoid readers accidentally accessing porn content they might not like. However, as pornography has long had negative connotations, scholars such as Saxey (2002), Jenkins (1992) and Bacon-Smith (1992) have tended to focus more on "the emotional nexus of sexualised fan-fiction rather than on its visceral erotogenics – its pornographic imagination" (Alexander 2004, p.6). Nevertheless, writing and reading pornographic slash fan fiction, declaring a preference for explicitly sexual scenes, and praising well-written porn plots is common within the fan community, and female slash fans always testify to the positive values of pornographic slash stories (Samutina 2013). Such normalisation of female sexual desires is highlighted by female fans themselves:

> For me what's interesting about the eroticism of fandom isn't the erotic content in general but its communal nature and the way sexual activities and proclivities on the fringes of ordinary acceptability are considered quite normal.
>
> (Cat, cited in Lothian et al. 2007, p.106)

As described here, compared with mainstream pornographic content, the more fascinating aspect of slash fan fiction is its legitimation of active female sexual fantasies, although such legitimation might only be gained within the fan community. Meanwhile, female fans' piqued interest in porn slash stories reflects how mainstream cultural productions do not satisfy women's need for sensual and sexually-oriented media texts (Samutina 2013) Therefore, slash fan fiction not only offers female fans a chance to develop their actively sexual desires, which mainstream cultural productions do not fulfil, but can also be seen as a means to openly express their ideas of sexual liberty (Samutina 2013).

It may be significant to note that what many female slash fans fantasise about is not "the desire of the two men for each other" (Willis 2016, p. 295), but "heterosexual sex acted out via ostensibly male bodies" (Salmon and Symons 2004, p.98). Although turning men into sexual objects for women in slash fan fiction can be seen as "progressive" (Penley 1992, p. 315), it has also been criticised as colonising "male bodies for the sake of female pleasure" (Busse and Lothian 2018, p.120).

Further, the erasing of female characters in slash fan fiction has generated academic debates about misogyny (Segell 1997, Green et al. 1998, Scodari 2003). For example, Segell (1997) argues that the motivation of female slash fans is comparable to that of males who are infatuated with male-targeted pornography featuring lesbian sexual encounters, which reflects their desire to remove competitive same-sex characters and better enjoy sexual pleasure towards both attractive characters of the opposite sex. From this standpoint, Scodari (2003, p. 115) highlights the possibility of misogyny being embodied in slash fan fiction and among female fans, as "a fictional woman is perceived as the rival of a female fan". Willis (2016, p. 297) also argues that *Supernatural* slash, which only focuses on the romantic relationship between brother-on-brother, "overlooks or erases the constant repetition of horrific violence against women which is a major part of the show". For Willis (2016), such erasure of women's concerns is a form of misogyny.

However, other critics argue that claims about misogyny are too pessimistic and misread the motivations of female fans. As early as 1992, Jenkins (p.211) cited slash

author M. Fae Glasgow's words to explain one of the possible reasons why female fans preferred male-male relationships rather than female-female ones:

> Most women in fandom have longstanding female friendships… If we want to see strong female-female relationships, all we have to do is look in our own lives. To us that's mundane. To us that's as everyday as sliced white bread. Slash is something way out there – a total fantasy. Not many of us know men who incorporate this ideal bonding into their relationships and that's what we want to see.

As Glasgow explained, contrary to the hypothetical misogyny, female slash fans experience close and intimate female friendships in both their daily lives and online slash fan communities. Rather than being a symptom of misogyny, their preference for male-male content can be seen as fulfilling an experience they lack in real life. Willis (2016, p.295) further explains why "sex imagined by women must be between men", saying that it is difficult for women to imagine or represent "female sexuality (homo or hetero) within patriarchy". As female bodies, especially the sexualised zones, are always associated with sexual objects in pornography, female fans prefer to explore "possibilities for female sexuality and subjectivity on relatively unmarked bodies of men" rather than re-signifying their female bodies (Willis 2016, p.296).

2.1.2 Gender Equalities and Identifications

Slash is also seen as offering a greater range of cross-gender identifications to female fans, which allows them to identify with male characters themselves and also still treat male characters as sexual objects (Penley 1992). Early academic studies have interpreted the *Star Trek* series in detail to illustrate why female fans can and tend to identify with male characters, especially Spock (Russ 1985, Lamb and Veith 1986). Different from Kirk, Spock is a half-human alien, a species which is often symbolised as female in literature, TV drama and films (Russ 1985). Meanwhile, Spock has a cyclically reproductive biology, which is also symbolically similar to a woman's menstrual cycle (Lamb and Veith 1986b). In terms of social status, although Spock is a preeminent Vulcan prince, as an officer in the Federation, he is still ruled by humans, which leads him to be isolated from both Vulcans and humans (Russ 1985). Similar

to Spock, as non-traditional women, female slash fans are also alienated from both men and traditional women based on the dominant notions of gender (Russ 1985). For example, early female fans are usually "better educated than most, heavy readers, and scientifically literate" (Coppa 2006, p. 45). They also often have degrees and jobs in science and technology such as physics, astronomy, and computer science. However, being female engineers, botanists, or computer programmers in the 1960s moved too far from the traditional gendered expectations for women at that time. Therefore, these women "knew what it was like to be treated as an alien with an inappropriate and disconcerting emotional range" (Coppa 2006, p.45). Such a sense of alienation is one of the reasons why Spock tends to trigger significant identification among female slash writers and readers.

Although Spock seems to embody those feminine traits mentioned above, as Russ (1985) argues, both main male characters (Kirk and Spock) are androgynous rather than encoding exclusively feminine or masculine traits in K/S slash fan fiction. For example, Spock is physically stronger than Kirk, rational, unemotional, and good at scientific logic. Such characteristics are ordinarily associated with masculinity based on traditional gender norms. Likewise, while Kirk is "an undisputed leader", "initiator of action", and "sexually ready at all times" – characteristics that can be considered as masculine – he also embodies traits which are seen as feminine, such as being physically weaker than Spock, as more emotional and impulsive (Lamb and Veith 1986, pp.242-243). Lamb and Veith (1986) also argue that in K/S slash stories, both Spock and Kirk are masculine in the sense of actively taking action in the crew's adventures; at the same time, they are also very feminine when they provide care, sensitivity, and nurturance for each other, especially in the hurt-comfort[x] theme slash stories. By imbuing male protagonists with feminine traits such as tenderness, compassion, patience, weakness, vulnerability, and altruism, female slash fans construct an androgynous male sexuality, which is seen as subverting the traditional configurations of hegemonic gender paradigms (Lamb and Veith 1986). Therefore, slash is considered to be "a reaction against the construction of male sexuality on television and in pornography" and "something akin to the liberating transgression of gender hierarchy" (Jenkins 1992, p.189).

Such androgyny of both male characters fascinates female fans not only because of its rejection of the binary definition of male-female gender norms but also due to its potential for equality in a romantic relationship (Lamb and Veith 1986). In K/S slash stories, the core of the romantic relationship between Kirk and Spock is real respect and real love, without limits and dependents (Russ 1985). They can have love and adventure at the same time and neither of them has to abandon his work, adventure, and freedom (Lamb and Veith 1986). When they are in life-threatening situations in many K/S stories, the way they solve problems is collective not individual – they always need to support each other. Therefore, their relationship is not only a union of strengths, but they can also reveal their weaknesses and vulnerabilities with each other (Lamb and Veith 1986). Such equality and reciprocity in an intimate relationship are exactly what female fans desire but are almost unlikely to achieve in their real lives. These early scholars of slash fan fiction have highlighted the subversive potential of slash practices for challenging the gender inequalities inherent in mainstream culture and the patriarchal relations of power associated with such inequalities.

However, the equal relationship assumption of early slash fan fiction studies has been challenged with the expansion and increasing diversification of slash fandom. For example, the prevalent themes of slash fan fiction based on television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) are significantly different from traditional equal love narratives of Kirk/Spock slash fan fiction, which feature excessive descriptions of sexual violence such as rape, torture, BDSM (bondage, discipline/domination, sadism and masochism), and non-consensual sex (Busse 2002, Saxey 2002, Alexander 2004, Keft-Kennedy 2008). Although such violent sexual scenarios in slash fan fiction are placed at a safe distance as sexual fantasies and do not link to real life, they still represent an imbalanced power relationship between male partners, as well as the risk of reinforcing "cultural stereotypes and assumptions about hegemonic masculinity as necessarily aggressive" (Keft-Kennedy 2008, p.73).

Beyond debates about whether slash fan fiction contributes to challenging gender inequality through its reconfiguration of traditional masculine and feminine traits into male characters, Katyal (2006) notes that slash fan fiction can challenge the gender inequality between male and female authors in both online and offline worlds. As Katyal (2006, p.489) explains, in the process of writing slash fan fiction, female

authors “not only escape the inequalities of the real space marketplace of speech, but they create a new world – one in which the gender of the author plays a minimal role in the construction of the marketplace of expression”. From its very beginning, slash fandom challenged the status quo of gender inequality in science fiction fandom (Russ 1985). Pre-*Star Trek* science fiction fandom consisted of nearly 90 percent male fans, while *Star Trek* brought a great deal of women into science fiction fandom, whose primary interests were reading and writing *Star Trek* slash fan fiction (Russ 1985). Although exact figures are not provided, Russ (1985) claims that the sex ratio of *Star Trek* fans is much closer to equity.

As Larbalestier (2002) argues, many female fans had taken part in science fiction fandom since the beginning but were largely underrepresented in the profile of science fiction fans. When female fans became more vocal and participatory, such as creatively producing fan fiction in *Star Trek* fanzines, their activities caused a dispute within the *Star Trek* fandom (Coppa 2006). A large number of traditional (male) fans tended to dismiss such women as science fiction fans, which was “an unfair slur against the (mainly) female fans who were helping to build *Star Trek* fandom and who were still active science fiction literature fans as well” (Coppa 2006, p.45). Facing the hostility of traditional science fiction fans and this gender-centred hierarchy within male-dominant fandom, female fans took a series of actions to continue making their voices heard. When women felt unwelcome at traditional science fiction conventions, they started to hold their own; when their slash narratives were excluded from traditional fanzines, they published their own (Coppa 2006; Hampton 2010). In the process, female slash fans became more vocal and participatory. Their vigorous activities contributed to constructing their own culture, which was removed from the dominant male fan culture. Therefore, female fans’ slash practices not only changed the gender unequal ratio in the media fandom but also revealed the activities of female fans contending against dominant hierarchical power (Russ 1985, Coppa 2006).

Although Hellekson and Busse (2014) suggest that slash fan fiction has become mainstream today rather than being a subculture as it was in its early days, sexism against female fans still exist. For example, the stereotypically negative geek model of male fans has already become outdated, and increasingly positive male geeks are celebrated in mainstream shows such as *The Big Bang Theory* (CBS 2007-2019).

However, such media representations of female fans remain rare (Busse 2015). Slash fan fiction is still characterised as "a source of cheap laughs, the bastion of lonely women and geeks who need to get a life" (Wild 2018, p.4). The difference in tone is clearly based in gender, which reflects how women's interests, concerns, tastes, and values are still dismissed in patriarchal society (Hampton 2010). Female slash fans are very aware of this gender-based distinction. For instance, the slash fan Fireplum (cited in Wild 2018, p.9) said on Tumblr that:

> Making fun of fangirls for being too emotional while giving sports fans a free pass is misogyny. Using the same glass-wearing, inhaler-wielding, plain-looking stereotypes of nineties sitcoms on fangirls while geeks are hailed as the new hipsters is misogyny. And passing off erotic fanfiction or fanart as immature and grotesque in a society that still struggles to accept female self-stimulation as normal and natural, as opposed to male masturbatory practices, is misogyny.

Fireplum clearly points out the double standard between male and female fans in that the fannish practice of male fans is described in a positive way while that of female fans has a negative tone. Female slash fans like Fireplum are actively fighting against such unequal gender concepts, which still exist – not just in their slash stories but also in their communications with their peers and their public voices online. The nature of this process is considered to be empowering, in which female fans produce their fantastic stories, establish their own culture, and stick up for themselves against hegemonic ideology that still marginalises women's interests, tastes, and status (Hampton 2010, Wild 2018). At the same time, it also demonstrates that the concerns of gender inequality issues still need to be valued when debating slash fan fiction, although slash culture has changed from how it was in the past.

Moreover, the discussion of female fans' identificatory practices is also constantly expanding and being reviewed. As slash fandom expands, the portraits of female slash fans have become increasingly complex and diverse (Hellekson and Busse 2014). Russ (1985) insists that female slash writers and readers do not literally wish to become men, yet Willis (2016, p.292) argues that reading and writing slash fan fiction

is “a practice of bodily transformation, although the transformation does not affect the physical or corporeal contours of the body”. Based on her own experience, Willis (2016, p.292) explains that:

> [S]lash reading, writing, and fantasizing can enable a female-bodied person to experience her body as (if it were) male… [S]lash similarly allows us to change our embodiments (the bodies we feel ourselves to have) without changing our physical or corporeal bodies, although some slash fans may (and do) go on to do this.

Willis’s (2016) argument further expands Penley’s (1992) cross-gender identification theory, which focuses on female slash fans whose gender identifications deviate from traditional gender norms in society. As Willis (2016) notes, for those female fans like her, slash fan fiction practices can allow them to feel more comfortable in their own physical female bodies, as they can experience their preferred gender identifications through writing and reading slash fan fiction within their communities. Therefore, slash fan fiction functions not only “as a technology of gender and a site for the development of gendered terms and practices”, but also “as bodily configurations and transformations” (Willis 2016, p.292).

In addition, an anonymous slash fan (cited in Green et al. 1998, p.69) highlights the possibilities that cross-gender identifications can bring to liberate patriarchal gender roles:

> Identification with the other gender means liberation from one’s own gender-related taboos. However, we have no personal, direct, experience of the cultural constraints the other gender has to submit to, so these constraints, although known to us, are not felt as being as binding as our own. This I would call the ‘Tourist approach’. One feels freer to behave differently in a place that is not directly relevant to everyday life, and where the landmarks, although not very different, have shifted enough to create new perceptions: you are free of the rules of your country of origin, but not bound by the rules

> of the holiday country because you don't know them, or if you do, they don't mean the same things to you as to the natives.

As the slash fan argues above, identifying with male characters in slash stories does not mean she prefers to become a man; rather, such identification can allow her to feel freer from hegemonic gender roles as a woman. As Willis (2016) notes, although some political discourse suggests that individuals have a right to determine their own gender identity, the binary gender system is still dominant in society, which individuals can negotiate but not ultimately escape. Therefore, Willis (2016) considers slash fan fiction as a way for female slash fans to negotiate this binary gender system and choose the gender identity that is more fluid and varied for them to feel more comfortable.

2.1.3 Heteronormativity and Homophobia

As the defining attribute of slash fan fiction is that it ships[xi] two male characters who are often (but not always) heterosexual in the source texts into a same-sex romantic and/or erotic relationship, its potential to resist heteronormativity and homophobia has been subject to significant debate in slash fan fiction studies (Callis 2016). The term heteronormativity means considering heterosexuality to be the default and natural position, as well as privileging heterosexuality and marginalizing non-heterosexual practices in society (Dwyer 2015, Herz and Johansson 2015). The term homophobia originally meant "the dread of being in close quarters with homosexuals" (Weinberg 1972, p.4), but has come to refer to an array of negative emotions towards non-heterosexuality, including "prejudice against homosexuals" (Plummer 2014, p.128). From its beginnings, slash fan fiction has been considered "a tactical response" to the heteronormativity of mainstream culture and "an essential first step from homophobia" because slash authors alter heterosexual narratives in material texts to male-male ones (Jenkins 1992, pp.189-190). In the words of Hayes and Ball (2009, p. 223), slash fandom "thumbs its nose at the insidious heterosexism underpinning most forms of literary expression and seeks to subvert its dominance by introducing and celebrating sexualities that fly in the face of traditional heterosexist discourses". Also, from its beginning, "there have been homophobic and heteronormative reactions" to slash fan fiction, evidenced by many *Star Trek* fans using "prejudiced or disbelieving terms" to criticise K/S stories' reconstruction of Kirk's and Spock's relationship as sexual

(Callis 2016, [1.5]). Those critics are the audiences that Doty (1993) refers to as being trained to only interpret media texts in a heteronormative and homophobic way, who always dismiss the potential of queer subtexts. Slash fans, on the other hand, contribute to weakening the heteronormative and homophobic training process, by fully exploring and extending the queer subtext in their favourite popular media texts (Jones 2002).

However, whether slash fan fiction and fans are essentially resistant to heteronormativity and homophobia is open to debate. In *A History of Slash Sexualities: Debating Queer Sex, Gay Politics and Media Fan Cultures*, Busse and Lothian (2018) describe three waves in the relationship between slash and queer culture. According to Busse and Lothian (2018, p.118), the first wave of slash "consciously used male protagonists and male bodies to envision ideal relationships and fantasise about sexual experimentation, often within deeply committed romantic relationships". As Russ (1985) notes, early slash fan fiction expressed women's desire for the idealised heterosexual relationship, in which both partners are equal and respected. Descriptions of sex between two males in those stories are more akin to heterosexual intercourse: "the characters leap into anal intercourse with a blithe lack of lubrication that makes it clear that the authors are thinking of vaginal penetration" (Russ 1985, p.83). Therefore, for some fans, "slash stories are written about gay men, yet are not 'about' gay men" (Green et al. 1998, p. 26). In this regard, popular fan writer Speranza's explanation is clear (2004, cited in Busse and Lothian 2018, p.120):

> We're NOT writing about 'gay men' in any realistic/mimetic way, just as I don't believe we're writing about real cops or sex in a realistic or mimetic way… [T]he "best" stories are not the ones which gay men would find most recogni[s]able, but the ones that give the female slash audience the most recognition and pleasure.

What is emphasised by Speranza above is female slash fans' desires, needs, and pleasure. This has led some critics to express concern about the privileging of heterosexuality and the 'othering' of gay men. For example, Neville (2018, p. 387) calls slash "gaypropriation", describing slash as "exploiting m/m sexual culture in

order for women to achieve sexual satisfaction". Agreeing with Neville (2018), Busse and Lothian (2018, p.120) also argue that although the first wave of slash might be considered a kind of "essentialist feminist erotics", the slash stories of the first wave "consciously take over – one might even say colonise – male bodies for the sake of female pleasures". Coleman (2019, p.87) stresses the vulnerability of queer males, saying that as the subject of slash stories, those queer males have "limited capacity to shape narratives of queer life and representations of their experiences within slash communities".

The popular 'we are not gay, we just love each other' trope in slash fan fiction also reflects some female fans' wishes to keep male characters heterosexual (Penley 1992). Green et al (1998) also suggest that slash writers should clearly describe the denial of being gay plots as a symptom of male characters' struggle in the coming out process, not something female fans expected to agree with. However, in opposition to Green et al (1998), by analysing a number of K/S slash stories, Callis (2016, [5.4]) claims that Kirk's homophobia (denying his homosexual love towards Spock) is exactly the struggling symptom of his coming out process: "Kirk must learn to overcome his homophobic thoughts and feelings in order to have a meaningful relationship with Mr. Spock".

First wave slash has also faced criticism for representing heteronormative ideologies in its seemingly queer narratives. Monogamy and marriage are seen as "a heteronormative fashion", which are always emphasised in slash stories when portraying the relationships between male protagonists (Neville 2018, p.388). Jones (2002) also critiques the domesticating fashion of slash stories, arguing that rather than carrying forward the progressive homosocial and non-domestic ideologies inherent within source texts, slash stories domesticating the adventurous protagonists revive traditional gender norms. In line with Jones (2002), Hunting (2012) suggests that slash fans' favouring of narratives where the male couple builds a monogamous family with children in slash fan fiction based on *Queer as Folk* (2000-2005) is seen as weakening the transgressive non-monogamy queer politics in the show by representing such heteronormative ideologies (Hunting 2012). As Busse and Lothian (2018, p.120) note, "[e]specially in first-wave slash, all too often, once the relationship gets established,

the stories replicate heteronormative scenarios", thus re-establishing "the very norms slash fiction tried to complicate".

The second wave has been seen as a "politically self-aware movement towards realism that confronted these fantasy men not only with the realities of male bodies and sexualities but also with the cultural realities of gay lives" (Busse and Lothian 2018, p.118). In other words, slash fans are increasingly and consciously incorporating real-life gay politics into their writing. As Penley (1992, p.310) indicates, slash "is a highly self-reflexive and self-critical fandom; their intellectual and political interests and anxieties are apparent in far more than merely symptomatic ways", evidenced by the fact that "fans are also asking themselves if the AIDS crisis is having or should have an effect on what they are writing, whether, for example, Kirk and Spock should be shown practicing safer sex". AIDS and safe sex issues are usually addressed in second wave slash, especially in late 1990s/early 2000s slash stories, influenced by social and public discussion of those issues (Busse and Lothian 2018). Safe sex scenes portrayed in slash have become a convention and slash fans agree that "if unsafe sex is wrong, then fiction should not portray it" (Busse and Lothian 2018, p.122).

Beyond sex descriptions, second wave slash also shows fans' awareness of social and political issues and changes in relation to LGBTQ+ communities. According to Busse and Lothian 2018, p.123), slash fans actively respond to policies and legal change in real life:

> With every new country or US state that gained marriage equality, stories appeared that responded to the new laws: Sherlock Holmes and John Watson responding to UK legislation in 2013; Charles Xavier whisking away Erik Lehnsherr to a private ceremony in New York in 2011; Starsky and Hutch finally legalising their commitment to one another in 2015.

As discussed above, monogamy and marriage have been criticised for reinforcing heteronormativity. However, taking into account that same-sex marriage was not legal until 2013 in England and Wales, 2014 in Scotland, and 2020 in Northern Ireland (GOV.UK 2013; BBC News 2014; Coulter 2020), the description of same-sex

marriage in slash fan fiction can also be seen as slash fans' response to the long history of legal inequity in society. Therefore, although the marriage and child-rearing plots in slash fan fiction run counter to the radical queer ideas of rejecting marriage but valuing diversity and pleasure, the critique that slash fan fiction reinforces heteronormativity should still be carefully re-examined, especially considering the social and political context in which slash stories were created. As Busse and Lothian (2018, p.123) point out:

> The move from first to second wave slash narratives was accompanied by extensive discussions within fandom about the nature and purpose of slash, its function as feminist fantasy space, its homophobic colonisation of gay men, the necessity of realism and its relationship to the historical changes of queer rights and representations. So even as first-wave slashers continued to write, more and newer fans increasingly saw slash fiction as part of a critique of heterosexuality in media and as a form of queer representation created by a subversive subcultural community rather than a romantic and erotic hobby of heterosexual women.

Influenced by third wave feminism, third wave slash concerns go beyond queer culture, showing a growing commitment to intersectionality of racial justice, gender, and sexuality (Busse and Lothian 2018). In terms of queer desire, third wave slash, which is "deeply embedded within a self-defined queer space, neither fantastically creating nor idealising yet othering gay men, but rather writing multiple genders and sexualities as both reflections and fantasies of the complexly diverse community of readers and writers" (Busse and Lothian 2018, p.118).

Slash also assists some female fans in overcoming homophobia and discovering queer sexuality (Lothian et al. 2007, Samutina 2013, Rosenblatt and Tushnet 2015). For example, Lothian et al. (2007) report that although some female fans live in queer-friendly areas where they have many ways of accessing related information and expressing their queer desire, those who live in areas hostile to LGBTQ+ people can only do so through the Internet. For these female fans, reading and writing slash fan fiction, sharing their fannish and personal interests with other fans, and building the

sense of an intimate online community are all essential to their online non-heteronormative practices (Lothian et al. 2007). Samutina (2013) notes how some female fans report that after reading attractive slash fan stories, they begin to change their perceptions of homosexuality, although they acknowledge the distinctions between the male-male relationships in slash fan fiction and gay men in real life. Samutina (2013) therefore argues that slash fan fiction can be seen as a space for female fans to practice various sexual relations excluding homophobia and sexual intolerance. Female fans not only criticise homophobia in their slash fan texts, but also discuss their protest actions against real life homophobic phenomena within their online communities. Slash fan fiction's potential to help female fans accept non-heterosexual identities has also been observed. Lauren S (cited in Rosenblatt and Tushnet 2015, pp.389-390) states that slash fan fiction is vital to her acceptance of her queer sexuality, as it provides "a world where non-heterosexuality is accepted and celebrated". As Tosenberger (2008) suggests, in a society where heteronormativity is the dominant ideology and non-heteronormativity is marginalised, any positive and friendly depiction of queerness should be acknowledged. Criticizing slash fan fiction and fans being symbolically heteronormative and homophobic is thus too extreme.

In reviewing the three waves of Anglo-American slash suggested by Busse and Lothian (2018), it is worth noting that there are no clear and hard boundaries between them. In other words, although third wave slash seems to be mainstream in today's slash fan community, stories with narratives that belong to first and second wave slash are still being produced online within all slash fandoms every day (Busse and Lothian 2018). It is excessive to claim that all slash fans are transgressive to heteronormativity, but its potential and fans' increasing conscious embrace of queer culture cannot be ignored.

2.1.4 Female Fan Community and the Gift-commercial Culture

Slash fan fiction does not exist in a vacuum. Beyond slash fan fiction texts, a study of the interaction and communication of female slash writers and readers within the fan community is also vital to better understand this genre, especially its gendered dimension.

In the pre-Internet age, slash fan fiction was circulated through self-published fanzines and female fans shared their passions for slash fan fiction at annual conventions or in the homes of their peers (Tosenberger 2008, Hampton 2010). Although female slash fans are eager to communicate with their peers and build friendships with fellow fans, they are wary of admitting new members, which contributes to keeping the female fan community a members-only party, excluding outsiders (Bacon-Smith 1992). Female fans' unwillingness to be exposed to a wider public is rooted in social prejudice against their slash practices – some even said they could lose jobs or professional credibility "if it became known that they participated in writing or other creative aspect of K/S" (Bacon-Smith 1992, p.244). Meanwhile, many slash fans worry that "they will be made to look foolish or aberrant for activities that make sense in the context of the community" (Bacon-Smith 1992, p.244). Such social prejudice against women's tastes and pleasure still exists today: when female fans are attacked for their slash practices, men are "given a free pass to behave however they liked" (Wild 2018, p.10).

Slash fan fiction began to migrate from fanzines to cyberspace in the 1990s, which resulted in the expansion of slash fandom's scope and easier access to slash fan fiction and fan communities for new fans (Hellekson and Busse 2006). On websites such as LiveJournal, Tumblr, and Wattpad, female fans can not only write and read slash fan fiction, but they can also engage in discussion with other fans free from geographical restrictions. The anonymity of the Internet has also made female fans less concerned about exposing themselves. Since the 1990s, academic studies have paid increased attention to slash fan fiction's migration to the Internet. Cumberland (2000, p.1) celebrates how fans can "defy many of the social taboos that have inhibited self-exploration and self-expression in the past" in cyberspace. Lothian et al. (2007, p.106) also claim that slash fans have been "ostracised and ridiculed for their seemingly aggressive interpretations" in real life – now they can enjoy and share slash and interact with each other free from judgment within the supportive online fannish community. In line with this, Samutina (2013) argues that online slash fan fiction becomes a cultural space, in which female fans can express their ideas towards all aspects of life, including gender and sexuality, in both their slash fan fiction texts and their conversations with peers within fan communities. Agreeing with this, McLelland (2017) also states that slash fan fiction is an online sexualised fantasy space, which allows female fans to explore and develop their sexual expression and identities.

However, Brennan (2014, p.368) tempers such unbridled celebration of online community spaces by examining slash manip (slash photo montage) authors' negative experiences with anonymous commenters in *Supernatural*'s anonymous LiveJournal fan community, writing that online communities are "an extension of, rather than alternative to" terrestrial space, which "have as much potential for prejudice and narrow-mindedness as real-world communities, perhaps an even greater potential given cultures of anonymity". According to Brennan (2014, p.376), although online communities can allow slash fans to challenge social taboos, its anonymity can also "ridicule, homogenise and even regulate the fannish potential to resist dominant ideologies and cultural mores". Brennan's (2014) argument is closely aligned with the criticism of first wave fan fiction studies, which consider "the audience as a homogenous group, rather than a loose affiliation of conflicting and competing positions and voices" (Thomas 2011a, p.4).

Academics also pay attention to the intertextuality of fannish discourse and consider a fan community to be a shared space where authorship is collaborative, not singular (Busse and Hellekson 2006). Before publishing serialised or completed fan fiction online, some fan fiction writers invite so-called beta readers to assist them by correcting spelling and grammar errors, checking style and canonicity, and "offering advice on plotting and characteri[s]ation" (Thomas 2011, p.209). When a fan story starts to be serialised online, readers can comment on it, encourage the author, and recommend it to other fans. Although some fan fiction writers tend to disregard the readers' comments they receive (Pugh 2005), others are inclined to revise their work in light of readers' reviews (Busse and Hellekson 2006) and even believe that their stories belong to the readers who have encouraged and given them feedback during their writing as much as they belong to themselves (Jones 2014).

Moreover, "the entirety of fan fiction in a given fannish universe" is seen as a work-in-progress as well, because fan stories and comments can offer "an ever-growing, ever-expanding version of the characters", which contributes to creating "a larger whole of understanding a given universe" (Busse and Hellekson 2006, p.7). Therefore, fan fiction is viewed as a collaborative work and work-in-progress from beginning to end. In this process, readers are given agency as contributors to slash stories through

the paratextual materials they create (Leavenworth 2015). Given this sense of collaboration, although slash writers still retain great dominance over their slash stories, readers have an increasingly active role in their impact on writers. Therefore, it is not only slash writers but also readers who deal with social norms of gender and sexuality through slash fan works.

In addition, fan stories created by fan authors, comments and suggestions left by readers, and other aggregates of information circulated and communicated within fan communities, have been seen as 'effort gifts', which are offered free but require time and skill to make, rather than 'object gifts' such as physical objects and money (Hellekson 2009). Although fans "may purchase from the blog source virtual online gifts, such as chocolate or flowers, or monetary gifts, such as paid time or extra user pictures", they tend to regard these commercial exchanges of object gifts as a token of enjoyment rather than a payment (Hellekson 2009, p.115). Accordingly, Hellekson (2009, p.116) states that online fandom is inherently a gift culture, not a commercial one, and discusses how such gift culture can empower women:

> [W]omen are themselves gifts – indeed, gifts crucial to the maintenance of a (patriarchal) culture… In female fandom's gift culture, gifts correlate to aspects of the self, such as time or talent. This sort of exchange turns one role of woman and gift on its head: the woman is still the gift, but now she can give herself. This permits women agency that they lack under traditional patriarchal models. They construct a new, gendered space that relies on the circulation of gifts for its cohesion with no currency and little meaning outside the economy, and that deliberately repudiates a monetary model (because it is gendered male).

Highlighted here is gift culture's contribution to generating and strengthening the bonds of intimacy within female fandom. However, emphasizing female fans' writing, commenting and reciprocating practices as effort gifts tends to overlook how the nature of these effort gifts is fans' labour of love, a kind of female labour which is often marginalised and dismissed under patriarchy (Hampton 2010, Busse 2015). The issue of fan labour has attracted an important feminist concern; although "many

fannish labo[u]rs of love are performed by men, there tends to be a split, where often traditionally male-dominated fan activities move to create secure monetary remuneration and traditionally female-dominated ones do not" (Busse 2015, p.114). Such sexism has led to an academic debate about whether fan fiction, which is mostly created by women, should be monetised, especially given that copyright holders, especially big corporations, have already learned "how to take free fan content to use as advertisements to get fans to buy more stuff" (Busse 2015, p.113). Such pitfalls reveal that female fans have been exploited for a long time. In the words of Coppa (cited in Banet-Weiser et al. 2014), in the past she found herself "arguing for the legitimacy of our works", and she now find herself "arguing against their exploitation".

Before academics started debating whether female fans should be permitted to "shift the traditional gift culture aside in favour of a commercial model" (Hellekson 2015, p.126), some female fan writers had already attempted to profit from their creative writing, such as through Amazon Kindle Worlds, to sell fan fiction based on licensed series and through online publishing houses to publish 'pulled-to-publish' fan fiction (referring to fan fiction that is published commercially as original fiction after changing fandom-specific details) (Tan 2012, Pepitone 2013). The great commercial success of *Fifty Shades of Grey* (James 2011), a well-known pulled-to-publish *Twilight* fan fiction, has led increasing numbers of fan writers to try to commercialise their works, although *Fifty Shades* has received harsh criticism from both *Twilight* fans and academia, not only for its lack of literary merit, but also for its betrayal of fandom, with the author accused of stealing collaborative scenes of fan fiction production for her own personal revenue (Jones 2014, De Kosnik 2015).

However, treating such monetisation of female fan labour as a way of combating the exploitation of female fan labour is worthy of further consideration. Hellekson (2015, p.127) warns that switching "the fannish mode from gift to commerce is simply a way to legitimi[s]e fan activity by subsuming it under the dominant paradigm that fandom is so frequently held up as working against", which suggests that the commercialisation of fan fiction can undermine the subversive potential of this genre. However, not all female fans are in favour of commercializing fan works. If the mainstream embraces female fans who desire to commercialise their fan stories, it risks further excluding the remaining outsiders, the female fans who insist that fan

fiction should remain free. As Hellekson (2015, p.127) reminds us, "[a]ttempts to moneti[s]e fan activity rely on commercial ventures that will work for some fans but not others – often at the expense of unfettered fan creativity, as commercial ventures limit fannish expression in terms of explicitness and what is considered appropriate". More importantly, allowing female fans to commercialise their fan works cannot end the exploitation of their female love labour, as when female fans get paid for their labour it also turns "into actual and virtual profit for the men behind the scenes" (Busse 2015, p.115). Today, the complex topic of female fans' love labour and exploitation remains one of the focal points of Anglo-American academic discussion. This project also provides an in-depth discussion of slash fan fiction, fan community and female fan labour in Chapter 4, especially taking into account the Chinese social and economic context.

2.2 Chinese BL/*danmei* and Slash Fan Fiction Studies

2.2.1 Sexual Fantasies and Desire

Zhang (2016, p.253) conceptualises the motivation of female BL/*danmei* fans as "voyeurism", suggesting that BL/*danmei* fiction can "fulfil their voyeuristic curiosity about male partnerships", especially their inquisitiveness about sex. According to Zhang (2016), sexual conservatism still dominates modern Chinese society, which associates sex with lasciviousness and immorality and prohibits any descriptions of sexual acts, resulting in women feeling anxiety and shame about sex. Therefore, the homoerotic narratives of BL/*danmei* fiction serve as an alternative way for female fans to learn about sex and fulfil their desire for sex in a non-threatening way, without anxieties related to pregnancy and shame for enjoying sexual pleasure (Zhang 2016). Feng (2013, p.79) also highlights the non-threatening masculinity provided by BL/*danmei* fantasy, saying that the sexual orientation of the male protagonist in such fiction "guarantees that he would never direct sexual aggression toward women", thus offering a "non-threatening version of masculinity for females to savo[u]r". In line with this, Chao (2016) also claims that sex is still considered to be enjoyed by men and not women in today's Chinese society, thus *danmei* becomes a virtual space where women can realise desire and gain pleasure. According to Chao (2016, p.71), BL/*danmei* fiction can allow women to "freely project various sexual fantasies without feeling the patriarchal constraint of being a good, chaste girl" and to "safely exercise

various sexual fantasies which they will not necessarily experience or want to experience in real life".

It is worth noting that the sexual fantasies that women do not want to experience refer to brutal and violent sexual practices in Chao's (2016) paper. Through the close reading of several BL/*danmei* works portraying rape, torture, BDSM, and incest, Chao (2016) suggests that such narratives challenge not only social taboos, but also the traditional romance in which love or emotional feelings initiate a relationship between protagonists. Chao (2016, p.67) calls these BL/*danmei* narratives "grotesque eroticism", arguing that excessive sex and sexual fantasies are at the core of it. Although acknowledging the sexual violence in BL/*danmei* works and the position of dominants and submissives are firmly established throughout the narratives, Chao (2016) only regards it as representing the transgressive sexual fantasies of women and ignores the complicated power dynamics within it.

Gaining sexual pleasure from BL/*danmei* fiction is seen as empowering for female fans, as they "become the agents of spectatorship, redirecting the gaze toward male protagonists" (Zhang 2016, p.254). In their sexual fantasies, women become the subjects and men become the desirable sexual objects (Chao 2016). Slash fan fiction, according to Tian (2015, p.250), provides fan authors with double empowerment: one "derive[s] from the act of transforming [heterosexual mainstream narratives to homoerotic ones]" and another from fans' "communal enjoyment of sexual fantasies about men". Therefore, Tian (2015, p.255) evaluates slash fandom as "a positive cultural force and a force for women's liberation". However, Zhang (2016, p.255) also reminds us that when female fans feel empowered by objectifying men, they tend to show "a certain degree of overerotici[s]ation or even dehumani[s]ation of same-sex partnerships".

Compared with male characters, female characters are often absent or even problematic in Chinese Bl/danmei fiction, such as playing the role of "the mother of a gay protagonist who fiercely opposes her son's gayness" (Zhang 2016, p.255). Through interviews, Zhang (2016) indicates that Chinese female fans do not feel offended or uncomfortable about such negative images of women in BL/*danmei* fiction. On the contrary, female fans react with understanding to such representation.

In the words of one of Zhang's respondents (2016, p.255), "[a] female figure in BL is villain first and then woman second. Because she is designed as a villain for plot development purposes, she is being distorted by the authors". However, Yang and Xu (2016b, p.254) observe that BL/*danmei* writers have begun to "take greater care not to debase any female characters in their works", because of the "surge of feminist consciousness in the community". As they have shown in their previous research, many strong and positive women figures have been portrayed as supporters of male protagonists in BL stories (Yang and Xu 2015).

2.2.2 Gender Equalities and Identifications

Chinese scholars have also elaborated on the association of BL/*danmei* fiction with gender identity and identification. For example, influenced by the concept of the female gaze, Chao (2016, p.71) argues that female *danmei* fans can find themselves in "a homoerotic context to exercise a queer, cross-gender gaze". Because there is no "obvious category of female to identify with, these female spectators practise a fluidity of gender identification and identity in a male/male homoerotic context" (Chao 2016, p.71). They can identify with either or both male characters; they can also identify with neither – simply "exercising an omnipotent gaze over the male/male eroticism" (Chao 2016, p.71).

In addition to enjoying the fluidity and freedom of gender identification, BL/*danmei* fiction attracts female writers and readers because it enables them to enjoy a kind of powerful bonding that takes place between male characters, which is different from the traditional patriarchal relationship portrayed in heterosexual romance stories in which women are necessarily subordinated to men (Feng 2013). When writing and reading BL/*danmei* fiction, female fans can not only fantasise about attractive male characters, but also "imagine themselves as empowered, or at least as enjoying a greater degree of freedom than their current situation allows" (Feng 2013, p.72). Chao (2016) calls this a kind of ephemeral moment, which encourages them to release themselves from the patriarchal gender norms of everyday life. The traditional gender stereotype that "women are more interested in emotional fulfilment than physical satisfaction" is also regarded as being subverted in slash, especially considering female fans who are obsessed with explicit pornographic descriptions in slash

narratives (Tian 2015, p.255). Similar to Tian (2015), Chao (2016) also points out that many fans have a preference for *rouwen* (literally, 'meat narrative'), a term similar to PWP (Plot? What Plot? Or Porn Without Plot) referring to BL/*danmei* works containing nothing but raw sex. The euphemism 'eat meat' is used to indicate female fans' desire for reading a BL/*danmei* story "full of graphic, juicy sexual details", reflecting female fans' challenge to gender and sexual norms which they are expected to perform accordingly in everyday life (Chao 2016, p.68).

Although they both affirm female fans' enthusiasm for explicit sex descriptions in BL/*danmei* and slash, these arguments are still slightly different. Compared with Chao's (2016) suggestion that female fans prefer physically sexual pleasure rather than psychological satisfaction, Tian (2015) argues that both are equally important and that sexuality is saturated with emotion. In Tian's (2015, p.255) words, "spirit and flesh are inseparable, each reinforcing the other". Zhang (2016, p.257) also focuses on the emotional fulfilment of BL/*danmei*, arguing that the sense of "equality, independence, mutual understanding, and support" embodied in the same-sex relationship in BL/*danmei* fiction resonates with their desire for "a new gender order". As Yang and Xu (2016b) remind us, female BL/*danmei* fans can feel a huge gap between their childhood and adulthood, especially many veteran fans who were mostly born in and after the 1980s in urban areas. Despite the political violence that mainland China's one-child-policy has inflicted on women, including forced abortions and sterilisation, those veteran 1980s generation female fans, who belong to the generation of only children in their families, have gained full support from their parents, including physical resources and psychological care (Yang and Xu 2016b). In a traditional Chinese family with multiple children, such care and resources are always given to sons, not daughters, because of the preference for male heirs in traditional Chinese culture (Yang and Xu 2016b). Growing up as the only child in their families, those urban female fans become "ambitious, assertive, and independent" (Yang and Xu 2016b, p.254). However, it is such traits that make them more intolerant of sexism in their adult lives. Therefore, when writing and reading BL/*danmei* fiction, female fans can "escape into a vague reminiscence of their prepubescent years of freedom, before they became disillusioned by the social reality of gender discrimination and sexual violence against women and fettered by female sexuality and responsibility" (Feng 2013, p.78).

However, Feng (2013, p.81) reminds us that female fans who tend to gain empowerment through identifying with male characters in BL/*danmei* fiction "may have a problematic relationship with their own body". This seems to imply that female fans "have internali[s]ed traditional Chinese sexual and gender norms" because they "only feel comfortable talking about male sexuality" (Feng 2013, p.81).

Chinese scholars also point out the male characters portrayed in BL/*danmei* fiction are androgynous, as Feng suggests (2013, p.79):

> *[D]anmei* fiction creates an imagined "beautiful young man" who combines the best of masculinity (externally) with the best of femininity (internally)… That is to say, the hero can enact the ideal femininity stipulated by patriarchal gender codes, in that he is beautiful, gentle, and nurturing, but without the jealousy and other negative qualities that women sometimes associate with their female peers. On the other hand, since he is gendered male, he enjoys more opportunities and faces fewer constraints than women, and thereby achieves the traditional masculine ideal of thriving in his career and gaining power in the public realm.

Different from Russ (1985) and Lamb and Veith (1986), who highlight that the androgyny of male characters in slash fan fiction can subvert the fixed femininity/masculinity gender paradigm and allow female fans to shape and enjoy a relationship of respect and equality, Feng's (2013) argument emphasises how the androgyny can erode the "negative qualities" in femininity and amplifies the virtues in masculinity, rather than how the combination of femininity and masculinity can create intimacy and equality.

Zhang (2016, p.259) uses the term "pretty boy" to describe the male characters in BL/*danmei* fiction and indicates that female fans' preference for "pretty boy" style masculinity may "have changed the way that young women today perceive desirable masculinity". With the increased popularity of BL/*danmei* culture, this "transformation of masculinity will probably continue" (Zhang 2016, p.259). Tian

(2015, p.254) also claims that what female fans have eroticised in slash fan fiction is a particular kind of masculinity – "softness, malleability, and vulnerability" – which does not fit traditional ideas of hegemonic masculinity. Through close reading of several *Three Kingdoms* slash fan stories, Tian (2015) observes that female fans tend to appropriate traditional vocabularies and tropes of female beauty to portray male bodies, which both challenge the conventional construction of masculinity and the idea that those descriptions and characteristics are inherently female.

However, the argument that BL/*danmei* can provide female fans with "a revolutionary mental tool that helps women imagine alternative gender relations, explore new self-identities and consider strategies for re-inventing the big wide world outside the prison-house of patriarchal gender roles" has come in for criticism (Yang and Xu 2015, p.135; Zhou et al. 2018). Through content analysis and coding 87 BL/*danmei* stories, Zhou et al.(2018, p.113) suggest that "many BL stories contain plots which clearly indicate that one member of a couple is considered to be a man, whereas his partner is to be considered as a woman". According to Zhou et al. (2018, p.115), although both protagonists indeed contain some feminine traits, they are not described in a "truly gender-equal way". In their study, the more-feminine protagonists often act as subordinates and are financially dependent on and protected by more-masculine protagonists, which reinforces the dominant men/submissive women unequal gender norm (Zhou et al. 2018).

The dynamic of *gong*/*shou* has always been central when discussing gender (re)construction issues in the BL/*danmei* genre. As mentioned in the introduction chapter, the concept of *gong*/*shou* in Chinese BL/*danmei* and slash fan fiction is directly borrowed from Japanese BL culture, in which *gong*, literally meaning attacking, translated from the Japanese term *seme*, in Chinese BL/*danmei* and slash fan fiction refers to the penetrator in sexual behaviour, and the term *shou*, receiving, from the term *uke*, refers to the penetrated (Tian 2015). Like the Japanese BL, the assignment of the roles of the *gong* and *shou* is "usually fixed and nonreversible", and the *shou* "is often depicted as an effeminate young boy, physically shorter and weaker" than the *gong* (Yang and Xu 2017, p.9). By analysing several examples of Sinophone *Harry Potter* slash fan fiction, Madill and colleagues (2018, p.8) also found that the *shou* roles are always "portrayed in the traditionally feminine role", taking "the

passive sexual role", and "referred to as wife"; while the *gong* roles are the opposite, "sexually dominant" and in the "husband column". In their observations, the *gong* and *shou* roles can be seen as the traditional husband and wife respectively, in which "the separate roles are assigned clearly and consistently" (Madill et al. 2018, p.8). Madill and colleagues (2018) therefore suggest that traditional gender roles and values are echoed in slash fan fiction.

Different from Madill et al (2018), Yang and Xu (2015, p.135) insist that the *gong* and *shou* roles are "fundamentally equal", although "there is a distinction between the aggressive seme [*gong*] and the passive uke [*shou*] in the relationship". Yang and Xu's (2015) argument comes from their close reading of a slash story in which the initially submissive *shou* character trains and transforms himself into a powerful man, who finally rivals the *gong* character in social status and power. They also claim that the *gong* and *shou* roles "are by no means fixed" and "well-written BL stories would always make sure to give the seme [*gong*] and the uke [*shou*] a chance to switch their positions" (Yang and Xu 2015, p.136). Similar to Yang and Xu (2015), Wei (2014) also suggests that the dominant *gong*/submissive *shou* pattern is changing rather than fixed, especially in slash fandom based on Anglo-American media texts. In Chinese *Iron Man* slash stories, female fans are keen to portray a relationship between two masculine superheroes rather than that between a dominant man and a submissive cute young boy (Wei 2014).

2.2.3 Heteronormativity and Homophobia

Similar to Anglo-American academics, Chinese scholars have also examined BL/*danmei* and slash fan fiction's potential to challenge both heteronormativity and homophobia in China. To fully understand and evaluate the practices and cultural and social values of Chinese slash fans, and BL/danmei fans in general, a review of mainland China's queer politics and queer culture are necessary.

In terms of law, since the founding of the People's Republic of China (1949), laws and policies against homosexuality have been ambiguous (Hildebrandt 2019). Homosexuality was not itself considered sinful, but some gay men were arrested under the anti-hooligans law, until this was abolished in 1997 (Hildebrandt 2019). Today in

mainland China, sexual orientation is no longer persecuted since the "the decriminali[s]ation and depathologi[s]ation of homosexuality in 1997 and 2001" (Zhao 2020a, p.466). However, it also "receives no official approval", in which "the authorities' stance is often cited as being one of 'no approval, no disapproval, no promotion'" (Shaw and Zhang 2018, p.273). In terms of cultural policies, "explicit portrayals of homosexual topics have generally been either censored or carefully regulated in official, legal, educational, and media discourses" (Zhao 2020a, p.467). In 2016, the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television further released policies restricting LGBTQ+ related representation in media products, clearly stating that materials that "express or display abnormal sexual relations or sexual behaviour, such as incest, homosexuality, perversion, sexual assault, sexual abuse, and sexual violence" should be banned (Shaw and Zhang 2018, p.273). Therefore, Hildebrandt (2019, p.594) claims that "[m]ore common an attitude is ignorance, in the truest sense, where citizens either do not know what homosexuality actually is, or do not believe it exists in China".

Given the social context whereby homosexuality remains stigmatised and marginalised in Chinese society, BL is one of the few ways for young female fans to learn about homosexuality, although it is fictional and far from the real life of gay men (Zhang 2016). For some female fans, reading BL is their first encounter with "romantic love could happen between two men rather than only between a man and a woman" (Zhang 2016, p.253). The idea that romantic love can only exist between a man and a woman is aligned with typical heteronormative ideology. By reading BL fiction, those female fans, who had previously embraced the heteronormative ideas, have learned to use a non-heteronormative perspective to rediscover the world. Female fans then have the chance to "subvert the heteronormative power of the matrix" (Chao 2016, p.71).

Feng (2013) also sees BL/*danmei* as a self-discovery and enlightening process for those female fans to reconstruct their sexual identity. According to Feng (2013, p.57), although most female BL/*danmei* fans are heterosexual "who have little to no experience with real-life homosexuality" (Feng 2013, p.57), some fans have discovered their own homosexuality after objecting to BL/*danmei*. Agreeing with Feng (2013), Yang and Xu (2016b, p.253) also found that some female fans confessed

that BL/*danmei* contributed to discovering their potential homosexuality, a sexual identity that was "formerly unknown and unspeakable" for them (Yang and Xu 2016b, p.253). Therefore, BL/*danmei* is considered as a significant step to their identity reconstruction as well as offering them a non-heteronormative way of establishing relationships (Feng 2013).

However, by analysing slash fandom based on Dongfang Bubai (a supporting role in the famous Chinese martial arts television *The Smiling, Proud Wanderer,* first broadcasted in Hunan TV in 2013), Zhou (2017) tempers the unbridled celebration of BL/*danmei*'s subversion of heteronormativity and homophobia. According to Zhou (2017, p.123), "gay readings, heterosexual readings, and lesbian readings" coexist within Dongfang Bubai slash fandom. As Zhou (2017, p.123) has observed, although the existence of queer readings is more creative and radical than the original television series, the coexistence of competing sentiments of homophobia in slash stories still illustrates the "entanglements of queer and heteronormative sentiments".

Chinese scholars also focus on the extent to which BL/*danmei* and slash fans' enthusiasm for same-sex relationships in the fictional world can translate into their support for LGBTQ+ groups in real life. Feng (2013, p.70) argues that BL/*danmei* fiction can contribute to generating "openness and sympathy toward homosexuality in contemporary China" and changing social preconceptions that "homosexuality is pathological and immoral". In line with Feng (2013), Zhang (2016) indicates that through reading BL works, female readers can know more about gay people's thoughts, dreams, and daily lives, which can contribute to reducing prejudice. In addition to writing and reading BL/*danmei* texts, female fans also extend their attention to enthusiastically discussing LGBTQ+ related topics online, such as queer celebrities (Yang and Xu 2016b). Zhang (2016) also reveals that some female fans follow some gay men's social media accounts, comment on their posts, and make a show of supporting them. Although these activities can show fans' support for gay men in real life, Zhang (2016, pp.253-254) describes such activities as "cyberstalking gay people", which "may represent a new form of heterosexual privilege that appropriates and exploits marginali[s]ed identities and experiences for personal curiosity".

Meanwhile, Zhang (2016) argues that female fans' support for same-sex partnerships are limited – while identified as supportive of gay people in general, when their relatives turn out to be gay, their attitude becomes very conservative. Moreover, Yang and Xu (2016b, p.254) point out that female fans tend to show negative attitudes toward gay men in real life, although some fan girls "are willing to befriend gay men and support gay rights". The reason for their negative attitudes is that they find a gap between reality and fantasy:

> Those cynics like to emphasi[s]e the difference between the ideali[s]ed one-on-one relationship in *danmei* and the promiscuous, HIV risky gay lifestyle in reality, as well as the ingrained sexism among Chinese gay men, which has partly contributed to the widespread phenomenon of gay wife… there are 16 million gay men in China who will marry a woman under social pressure to carry on the family name. Most women enter into the gay-straight marriage unknowingly and are likely to experience various kinds of emotional and physical abuse.
>
> (Yang and Xu 2016b, p.254)

The existence of the gay wife phenomenon makes female fans change their attitudes to real life gay men from positive to negative. And the incident whereby a notable female *danmei* writer broke up with her boyfriend, who was gay but presented himself as bisexual, deepened the homophobia of many female BL/*danmei* fans (Yang and Xu 2016b). Therefore, although female fans, as Zhang (2016) suggests, might enjoy a kind of heterosexual privilege by exploiting same-sex partnerships, in real life gay men "could still enjoy many more privileges than women" and "it is always women who suffer most in the heterosexual patriarchal society" (Yang and Xu 2016b, p.254).

Further, from the negative attitude towards "the promiscuous, HIV risky gay lifestyle in reality" of female fans (Yang and Xu 2016b, p.254), we find that Feng's (2013, p.70) suggestions that BL/*danmei* fiction can generate "openness and sympathy toward homosexuality" and eliminate prejudice that "homosexuality is pathological and immoral" are questionable. As Zhang (2016, p.256) notes, some female fans only

appreciate the gay people depicted in BL/*danmei* fiction who represent monogamous loyalty to their lovers; with regard to 'other' gay people who do not meet these moral standards, female fans tend to maintain "a stereotypical perception that they attribute to the reinforcement of mainstream stereotype in the media or on the Internet". From Zhang's (2016) observation, we can see that these female fans still unconsciously impose a heteronormative (or homonormative) ideology on gay people, which legitimises some but marginalises all 'others'. As Zhang (2016) concludes, Chinese female BL/*danmei* fans' support for gay people is limited.

Despite such limitations, mainstream homophobic culture in mainland China still concerns BL/*danmei*'s possible effect of "converting readers into homosexuals" and "endangering heterosexual hegemony" (Liu 2009, pp.3-5). Although not all female fans are feminists, some of them indeed "maintain a sense of elitism as they traffic in feminist and queer critique" (Williams 2015, [7]). Therefore, female fans have been seen as employing a kind of "unruly agency" whose erotic pleasures are oriented away from heterosexual relationships (Ng and Li 2020, p.483). Some female fans even claim that "[b]eing with other good fan girl friends, I am not longing for romantic love", which further exacerbates the mainstream's concerns about their sexual orientation (Yi 2013, [10]). Although such a saying cannot be considered proof of their tendency to become lesbians, it at least shows that "these women are happy to be single at this stage of their lives" (Yi 2013, [10]). Considering the state ideology that heterosexual marriage is seen as "central to social stability and hence national well-being", BL/*danmei* fans and their gendered discourses are suspected as not supporting the traditional family unit and not "sufficiently in service of societal and national-level goals" (Ng and Li 2020, p.483). The anti-BL/*danmei* campaigns are based on this fear, although they are carried out in the name of anti-pornography (Liu 2009).

Although the majority of Chinese BL/danmei and slash fans are heterosexual women, they can still be considered as queer according to more expansive understandings of the term (Feng 2013; Zhang 2016; Zhao 2020a). As Wang (2015, p.153) argued:

> Queer is an umbrella term not only indicating the sexual acts and identities for the sexual and gender minorities… but also indicating the abnormality, deviance, and alternativeness of ideologies, activities, and lifestyles for some marginal

> communities who challenge the social structure and formation controlled by the governing body and the dominating groups. The queer, therefore, encompasses the sexual and non-sexual minorities who are viewed as the trouble-makers and noise-makers in China's otherwise harmonious society.

From this perspective, considering Chinese female BL/*danmei* and slash fans' "non-normatively gendered or sexuali[s]ed narratives, performances, [and] cultural productions", we can understand why Zhao (2020a, p.464) considered Chinese BL/danmei culture as queer culture.

2.2.4 Female Community and Commercialisation

Besides writing and reading BL/*danmei* fiction, female fans are also keen to exchange ideas and comments about those texts, as well as generating social interactions beyond BL/*danmei* fiction, creating many of their own unique terms and jargon (Zhang 2016). In doing so, female fans avoid much unnecessary attention from the outside world (Zhang 2016). As Yi (2013, [6]) notes, female fans can only "openly celebrate homosexuality" with other fans, but must "hide their love for these relationships from outsiders, just as homosexuals must hide in China". The closed nature thus produces a sense of community that allows them to "transcend geographical, ideological, gender, and class boundaries" to achieve emotional nurturance from their peers (Feng 2013, p.82). Thus, like-minded female fans establish their own space – full of support and sympathy – to "express their non-mainstream emotional, sexual, literary, and artistic tastes and needs", as well as to "experiment with ways of writing about the male body, male beauty, and sexuality" (Tian 2015, p.255).

Beyond the nurturing and intimacy dimension, Liu (2009) highlights the social and political dimension of the BL/*danmei* fan community, indicating that BL fans are not simply enthusiasts, but a social group with its own particular cultural tastes. According to Liu (2009), BL/*danmei* fan girls have employed multiple tactics, such as publishing protest postings online, displaying protesting slogans at offline comic conventions, and using overseas cyberspace, to defend their cultural tastes against mainstream media and state censorship. For Liu (2009), the Internet contributes to building a more consolidated and strengthened fan community, which empowers female fans to engage

in power struggles with the social establishment, as well as battle increasingly harsh anti-BL campaigns.

Although the anti-BL campaign has strengthened since 2007 in mainland China, BL/*danmei* culture still survives and continues to attract the attention of commercial capital (Liu 2009, Feng 2013). BL/*danmei* and slash fan fiction have become extremely popular genres on commercial women's literature websites, which has turned the formerly free to read and share subcultural products into commercial goods (Feng 2013, Wei 2014, Yang and Xu 2016b). The commercialisation of BL/*danmei* fiction initially ignited heated debate within the fan community, in which supporters argued that writers deserved the monetary reward for their labour and opponents worried that "the lure of financial gains would lower the quality of *danmei* writings, weaken the radical messages of the genre and drive away its core readers" (Yang and Xu 2016b, p.252). In line with those opponents' opinions, Zhang (2016) also points out that the commercialisation of BL/*danmei* fiction may dispel the resistant potential of this genre, evidenced by the fact that the popularity of effeminate male protagonists in BL/*danmei* fiction is not due to the writers' own aesthetic preferences, but instead caters to the tastes of younger female readers, which can bring more commercial value to their works.

Despite being highly commodified, Wei (2014, [2.8]) still argues that Chinese slash fan fiction is "less a commercial conduct than a gifting one", in which a reader's subscription fee "is more a gesture of support from this niche market". Instead of obsessing over the binary view of commercial or gift culture, Wei (2014) calls to attention the authoritative censors who have constantly appeared to regulate and repress BL/*danmei* and slash fan fiction. Before the commercialisation of BL/*danmei* fiction and slash fan fiction, Chinese scholars have discussed the power struggle between the female fan community and the social authorities (Liu 2009); today the highly commodified genres have drawn commercial capital into the power struggle (Yang and Xu 2017). Commercial corporations, which have been seen as exploiters of fan labour in Anglo-American academia, are considered as the allies of fans by some Chinese scholars. For example, Yang and Xu (2017, p.7) argues that:

> In this thick mesh of nonprofit fan communities, semicommercial fan producers, corporate-owned but fan-managed commercial websites and magazines, and semilegal family wholesalers and retailers, Chua Beng Huat's sweeping claim that the affective labo[u]r of fan consumers will always wind up being exploited by the cultural industries no longer holds water, as all the participants in this network are the targets of endless antiporn, anti-illegal-publication, and antipiracy campaigns of the nation-state. When big corporations try to cash in on the huge *danmei* market, they bear the same risk of playing in the legal grey zone as small players.

Whether Yang and Xu's (2017, p.7) argument that the big corporations "bear the same risk" as individual female fans is too optimistic and remains open to debate. However, when examining the relationship between fans and media producers, female fans do have unprecedented influence over media producers, due to their spending power. For example, after realising they have benefited from fan activities, the producers of the popular TV drama *Guardian* have constantly updated the behind-the-scenes materials that are full of what some might consider "queerbaiting"[xii] on social media to encourage fans to continue shipping the main characters and their actors (Ng and Li 2020). In discussing the producers' "queerbaiting" activities, Ng and Li (2020, p.488) also apply a positive perspective, arguing that "rather than a situation of producers exploiting or misleading fans with respect to promises of queer representation", female BL/*danmei* and slash fans of the drama and its producers have together "helped sustain the series in contexts of significant state censorship". Similar to Yang and Xu (2017), Ng and Li (2020) also see media producers as the allies of BL/*danmei* and slash fans, who share a common enemy, namely, the authorities' censorship.

Tian (2015) also points out female slash fans' influence on mainstream media producers, evidenced by the TV screenplay writer of the 2010 version of the *Three Kingdoms* admitting that he considered fans' preferences and tastes when he wrote his script. He also confirms his awareness of fans' online activities, especially their fan productions which portray two male supporting roles as a pair of "rivals as well as lovers" (Tian 2015, p.260). The drama's director also considered the tastes of the female fans, who controversially chose a young and handsome teen idol actor to

construct a prettier-than-ever Zhuge Liang, one of the most popular character in *Three Kingdoms* slash, who was always depicted as a middle-aged man in previous television adaption. Although admitting that the director's choice of the teen idol and the numerous scenes of emotionally charged interactions between male characters in the drama can be seen as emanating from female fans' impact on mainstream media production, Tian (2015) still points out that discrimination against women in mainstream narrative has not changed. As a well-known classic novel in China, the *Three Kingdoms* "has almost no well-developed female characters; the few female characters who appear are subject to heavy gender stereotyping" (Tian 2015, p.230). Although aware of this gender inequity, the screenplay writer of the 2010 TV drama adaption "did little to rectify the situation, claiming that he could not afford to push the limits of the audience's tolerance too much" (Tian 2015, p.230). Tian's (2015) argument shows the contradiction in mainstream television production: on the one hand, they add ambiguous homosocial or even homosexual subtexts to the mainstream narratives to please female fans; on the other hand, they refuse to change any misogyny in their plots.

Nevertheless, BL/*danmei*'s profitability and female fans' spending power still attracts media producers and capital. Not only are some heterosexual TV dramas consciously creating ambiguity between male characters, like the 2010 adaption of *Three Kingdoms*, but some popular BL/*danmei* stories have been adapted into online and satellite TV dramas (Zhao 2020a). Although TV dramas and films with explicit LGBTQ+ content have long been prohibited from public broadcast in contemporary mainland China, commercial media industries are still constantly testing and challenging the authorities' bottom line (Zhao et al. 2017). Since 2015, Chinese video-streaming sites such as LeTV, iQIYI, Tencent Video, and YouKu have started to broadcast web-based TV dramas containing LGBTQ+ content, especially after web-based TV dramas *Go Princess Go* (LeTV 2015) and *Addicted* (iQIYI 2016) – which respectively portrayed transgender and homosexual themes – achieved great commercial success (Zhao 2020b). Unsurprisingly, these shows were pulled offline by the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT) because of their indecent sexuality-related content in 2016. Meanwhile, the SAPPRFT issued a set of new stipulations in 2016 stating that media products could not "express or display abnormal sexual relations or sexual behaviour, such as

incest, homosexuality, perversion, sexual assault, sexual abuse, and sexual violence" (Shaw and Zhang 2018, p.273).

However, the fashionably original BL works still hold a strong and lasting attraction for those media industries despite hostile reactions from the SAPPRFT. BL web-based TV dramas such as *Love Is More Than A Word* (YouKu 2016), *Till Death Tear Us Apart* (Tencent Video 2017), *Guardian* (YouKu 2019), *The Untamed* (Tencent Video 2019), and *Winter Begonia* (iQiyi, 2020), which were all adapted from the most popular original BL/*danmei* works, continued to be broadcast on Chinese video-streaming platforms and attracted countless audiences and fans (Zhao 2020a). Although these dramas have rewritten the homosexual relationship between protagonists in their original BL fictions to conceal them, and even refer to the relationships as the "socialist brotherhood" to pass the censorship of the SAPPRFT, audiences and fans are still well aware of the queer attributes of these dramas and tolerant of the producers' adaptations (Ng and Li 2020, p.479). In these cases, the huge commercial benefits brought by the adaptation of BL works into TV dramas have opened up the boundaries of fandom and resulted in the mainstreaming of this subculture. Meanwhile, as Zhao notes, the "emerging genre of *danmei*-adapted drama has increased the sociocultural visibility and awareness of LGBTQ culture in today's China" (2020a, p.466).

2.3 *Harry Potter* and Its Anglo-American and Chinese Slash Fandom

If, as reader response theory suggests, the author is "dead", then a text never has a fixed meaning but allows readers to interpret it in their own way (Barthes 1977). For the world of *Harry Potter*, the "gaps between the books and the gaps created by the almost exclusive focali[s]ation through Harry" along with the rich world-building and characters encourage readers to interpret and rewrite the text (Duggan 2021, para.5). Readers' interpretive acts towards the Harry Potter series are diverse, complicated, and even contradictory, especially due to the coexistence of the "somewhat conservative traditions shaping the series" and the "books' overall message of inclusion, coalition, and resistance to oppression" (Duggan 2021, para. 6).

The storyline of the *Harry Potter* books, is summarised thus by Cuntz-Leng (2014) :

> [T]he books tell the monomythic story of an orphaned boy who discovers that he is capable of doing magic. On his 11th birthday, he is invited to the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, where he meets mentors, friends, lovers, and enemies. But rather than the expected task of surviving school life and adolescence, Harry is primarily supposed to defeat his archnemesis: the evil wizard Voldemort, who murdered his parents and gradually regains power.

The overall theme of the *Harry Potter* books is that Harry and his friends and alliances resist oppressive regimes, power relationships, and ideologies represented by the violent Voldemort and his followers who represent pure-blood aristocratic values, biased courts and politicians, and discrimination against magical non-humans (Pugh 2011; Duggan 2021). In the books, the protagonist Harry is portrayed as "an outsider to the magical community" because he is raised by muggles; as "an abused and neglected orphan"; and "as a friend to the poor, the weak, the enslaved, the nonhuman, the tainted, and the abused". This description of Harry and his friends and the explicit themes of the books have been interpreted by many fans and scholars as parallel to minority groups' resistance to oppression (Duggan 2021, para.6).

Therefore, it is not surprising that Bronski (2003) considers that the *Harry Potter* books provide readers with the potential to explore queerness in the books' heteronormative storyline. Hampton (2010, p.92) also argues that some readers consider the *Harry Potter* story to be "a metaphorical 'coming out' narrative". In the Dursleys' family, Harry is forced to live in a broom cupboard, which is considered a metaphor for LGBTQ people being in the closet. Moreover, Harry is considered as 'other' and 'abnormal' because of his wizard identity, mirroring the discrimination LGBTQ people often face in the society. As Hampton (2019, p.92) notes, "Harry is alienated from his family, a 'queer' little boy in a world that celebrates the mundane", as well as being punished by his relatives for any 'abnormal' behaviour. Therefore, although the books do not explicitly represent queer sexuality, Hampton (2010, pp.91-92) indicates that they "do celebrate the notion of 'queer'":

> The Harry Potter universe's opposing of the muggle/wizarding worlds is consistently framed in terms of normal/abnormal – with the normalcy of the muggle world seen as narrow, limiting and prejudicial. The wizarding world, by contrast, is constructed as open, celebratory of Harry's secret desires and powers and ultimately 'other' to that of the "muggles" (non-magical humans), who blindly follow authority and insist on rules and conformity.

In this manner, although the *Harry Potter* series "are not in any sense 'gay'", they are indeed queer "by undermining structures of normativity" (Pugh and Wallace 2006, p.261). Vezzali et al. (2015) further note that the *Harry Potter* books potentially have a positive social impact, which can educate readers, especially children, to use love to eliminate prejudice, inequality, amelioration of intergroup relations, and negative attitudes towards stigmatised groups. The Harry Potter Alliance, a network of *Harry Potter* fans devoted to fighting inequality of gender, sexuality, marriage, labour and so on, indeed upholds this purpose (Jenkins 2012). C.M, one of Martens' (2019, p.30) interviewees, claims that she "discovered both feminism and LGBTQIA+ community members in fandom and in the Harry Potter Alliance". Similarly, Tosenberger (2014), Duggan (2017), and Fowler (2019) also argue that fans who are marginalised in hegemonic society feel that the *Harry Potter* fandom and fan communities are warm, welcome, and encouraging.

Further, Wannamaker (2008) argues that the gender representation in the *Harry Potter* books also contains queer potentials. Wizards portrayed in the books represent some traditional feminine traits, such as wearing feminine colours and dress-like robes. Wizards also hug strangers on the street to celebrate Voldemort's failure, which is an emotional method of expression and usually considered a feminine behaviour in traditional gender roles (Wannamaker 2008). Duggan (2021, para.18) also suggests that the gender depicted in the Harry Potter books is fluid, evidenced by the books' descriptions of Polyjuice Potion, which can allow the drinker to transform into somebody else. By using the Polyjuice Potions:

> [T]wo male characters, Crabbe and Goyle, transform into young female students multiple times… Hermione and Fleur, both female, are part of a cohort who magically morph into decoy Harrys. It is therefore unsurprising that boundary

> crossings have made their way into fans' transformative interpretations of the novels.

Moreover, the "cross-gendered setting of Hogwarts" in the books also constructs the wizarding world as "a fantastically post-feminist world", where gender egalitarianism has been reached and sexism no longer exists (Pugh and Wallace 2006, p.260). In Hogwarts, girls and boys appear as equals, whose magical and academic abilities do not show explicit differences based on their genders. Furthermore, Rowling portrays several powerful and impressive female characters, such as Hermione Granger and Professor Minerva McGonagall – the former is "one of the most important characters" with unparalleled magical abilities (Pugh and Wallace 2006, p.268) and the latter is "Deputy Headmistress of Hogwarts", a respected mentor to students (Martens 2019, p.30).

However, as Pugh and Wallace (2006, p.260) argue, the "post-feminist façade merely camouflages the novels' rather traditional gender roles". For example, although Hermione is talented and knowledgeable, she "only contributes to Harry's adventures and not to her own" (Mikulan 2009, p.2). The only exception is constructed in traditional female gendered roles:

> The only times Hermione uses her magical abilities for her own purposes are associated with cosmetics – to straighten her "bushy" hair and realign her crooked teeth; this places her well within the range of the gender status quo.
>
> (Hampton 2010, p.94)

As Schoefer (cited in Gupta 2003, p.127) stated, "no girl is brilliantly heroic the way Harry is, no woman is experienced and wise like Professor Dumbledore". Although Professor McGonagall is a powerful witch respected by students and her colleagues, and ultimately becomes the Headmistress of Hogwarts, she achieves this position only after Dumbledore's death, to whom she always defers. Furthermore, the Ministry of Magic, the government in the *Harry Potter* books, also overwhelmingly consists of men, not women (Hampton 2010). Therefore, although female characters in the *Harry Potter* books "featured more prominently than we might expect", they are still marginalised (Pugh and Wallace 2006, p.263).

Further, although addressing the queer subtext of *Harry Potter* books, Pugh and Wallace (2006, p.262) still highlight that there is "a tension between normativity and queerness" and call for "particular attention to any normali[s]ing tendencies" that "ultimately trump the novels' investment in queerness". In line with Pugh and Wallace (2006), Hampton (2010, p.95) also suggests that although the *Harry Potter* books potentially encourage queer reading, the series still "effectively erases alternative sexualities by rendering them non-existent". What has been highlighted in the books is the "heteronormative heroism", and that "non-normative sexual identities are completely absent" in the *Harry Potter* series (Pugh and Wallace 2006, p.275). Even Rowling's retrospective outing of Dumbledore does not change such criticism, as Pugh and Wallace (2008, cited in Martens 2019, p.31) claim:

> If Dumbledore's homosexuality was not important enough to include within the narrative trajectories of seven novels, mentioning it after the series ends comes a bit too little, too late.

Comparing Rowling's "too late" outing of Dumbledore, the dominant ideology in the Harry Potter books is heteronormative. For example, the Dursley family, the muggle family who raises Harry in the books, represents patriarchally heteronormative traditions – Mr Dursley works to support the family and Mrs Dursley stays at home as a housewife. The Weasleys, the family who welcomes Harry into the magic world, also follows the same hetero-gendered roles in the heteronormative manner (Hampton 2010). Although "Remus and Sirius's giving Harry a joint Christmas present" could be considered as an implication of non-heteronormative kinship, "the men are never explicitly described as a couple in the way heteronormative couples are" (Duggan 2021, para. 10). Therefore, as Duggan (2021, para. 12) suggests, it "remains up to readers to decide whether the main ideology communicated is positive, negative, or neutral", and to choose which ideology they prefer in terms of "their own subject positions, [and] lived experiences". For example, Willis (2006, p.159) reflects her reading experience of the *Harry Potter* books:

> Harry describes his first kiss with Cho simply as "wet" (Rowling 2003, 405) … Hermione's suggestion that Harry might see Cho again "opened up a whole new

> vista of frightening possibilities… the though made his stomach clench painfully" (406). As a portrait of teenage (hetero)sexuality, this is at odds with my knowledge of the world.

Harry's heterosexual romance as portrayed in the books makes Willis (2006, p.160) feel odd. By contrast, she feels that "Harry's very intense, physicali[s]ed reactions to, interactions with, and fantasies about" the male character of Professor Snape "are never named in the text as sexual, however":

> The vocabulary and imagery of these interactions potentially open them onto a set of sexual associations: Snape's "fathomless black eyes bor[e] into Harry's", for example (*Azkaban* 448); or he "eyed Harry, tracing his mouth with one long, thin finger as he did so" (*Phoenix* 469). In all his interactions with Harry, Snape's villainy is conveyed in a way that recalls the romantici[s]ed conventions of the Gothic novel.

The way Willis (2006) interprets the *Harry Potter* books can be considered a queer reading, which follows Doty's (1993) argument that queer reading is not reading against the text but discovering the latent queerness of texts. There has been a long tradition of fans going online to "experiment with alternative modes of sexual discourse" and explore "many varieties of non-heteronormative discourses in fandom" by creating *HP* slash fan fiction (Tosenberger 2008, p.186). For Willis (2006, p.168), writing *HP* slash fan fiction is "a way of taking pleasure" and a way of ensuring that "all readings (or at least all readings that can themselves become legible for other fans) were equally possible". By analysing the Weasley slash stories, Cuntz-Leng (2014, [7.3]) argues that twincest slash is fans' attempt to exploit the "inner logic of the Harry Potter text", examining how fans logically extrapolate the non-sexual sameness and connectivity of the twins into sexual intentions. Meanwhile, through the lens of performance theory, Hampton (2015, [5.3]) suggests that *HP* fans' slash practices act as identity performance, stating that each "fan-writer has their own version of the characters" and their fannish creations are "specific to their lived experience and ideological subject positions".

As introduced in Chapter one, the *Harry Potter* books and film franchise are commercially successful and have gained popularity and commercial success in mainland China (Gupta and Xiao 2009). The research on "Pottermania" in mainland China is mainly from studies of translation and children's literature (Erni 2008, 2013; Kung 2018; Liang 2018; Fang and Liu 2019; Wu 2019). Translation studies mostly pay more attention to the translation technologies of Chinese translators of the *Harry Potter* books and film subtitles, exploring how they can promote the Chinese localisation of the British cultural products (Erni 2008; Kung 2018; Liang 2018). Children's literature studies often focus on the narrative strategies, literary value, and ideological connotation of the *Harry Potter* books, as well as arguing what Chinese children's literature creations can learn from the series (Erni 2008; Wu 2019).

In a few studies, motivations and meaning-making processes of Chinese *Harry Potter* readers have been examined (Gupta and Xiao 2009; Erni 2013). According to Gupta and Xiao (2009, p.215), Chinese readers are tired of traditional Chinese children's literature, which is staid, preachy, and often focuses on refining "a rigid, top-down social and moral order" based on Confucianism or socialist belief. Conversely, the Harry Potter series shows love, heroism, and personal achievement, which satisfy the desire of Chinese young readers who are excited to become active agents and interrogate the prerogative of their parents (Gupta and Xiao 2009).

Erni (2013) focuses on Chinese youth's reception and meaning-making process of the Harry Potter, arguing that Chinese young readers have double identifications with the Harry Potter universe. Firstly, Chinese young readers identify with "Muggles on one side and with Harry and the wizarding world on the other", in which the former "would direct them to spotting their own inadequacies" and the latter reflects their desires for "personal growth, improvement, and freedom" (Erni 2013, 29). Moreover, "this double identification can be simultaneously read as a feature of intercultural encounters", in which Chinese young readers tend to parallel "the Muggle world with the Chinese world" and "Harry's magical world to the West" (Erni 2013, 30). For Chinese young readers, "the progression and growth into youth" in the Harry Potter universe "is a symbol of liberation", a kind of Western ideologies produced by fantasy (Erni 2013, 30).

Few studies have focused on Chinese *HP* slash fan fiction. One exception is the work of Madill et al. (2018) *Male-male marriage in Sinophone and Anglophone Harry Potter danmei and slash*. In this research, Madill et al. (2018, p.427) conducted a comparative study to discuss differences and similarities of the portrayals of family approval, wedding and style of marriage, role in marriage, family type, and gender of children between Anglophone and Sinophone *HP* slash works, suggesting that:

> In contrast to the Anglophone fiction, the Sinophone tended to: stress the importance of family approval for the marriage; incorporate a wedding ceremony; employ clearly gendered roles between partners; utilise extended, as opposed to nuclear, families; and showed the couple to produce children, particularly boys.

In addition to addressing how Chinese *HP* slash fan stories "mirror the relative social conservatism" in mainland China, Madill et al. (2018, p.431) also suggest that as "a literature portraying male-male sexuality", Chinese *HP* slash fan fiction can still be considered as "exploring, and pushing at, the boundaries of the traditional family" in mainland China.

2.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have reviewed academic studies of both Anglo-American and Chinese slash fan fiction, particularly those which focus on how slash fan fiction interacts with cultural, social, and ideological norms of gender and sexuality. As reviewed above, concerns of pleasure, desire, identity, equality, community, and commercialisation are central to slash and BL/*danmei* studies in both Anglo-American and Chinese academic contexts. Despite different social and cultural contexts, scholars from both Anglo-America and China have recognised the complexity and contradictions of slash fandom. Anglo-American scholarship acknowledges that slash "is getting ever more diverse", which result in studies "shifting from one-size-fits-all explanations to ever more specific analyses of particular fandoms and subgenres, or to detailed analyses of individual stories" (Hellekson and Busse 2014, p.81). Similarly, Chinese scholar Tian (2015, p.249) claims that slash is "such a complicated, multifaceted phenomenon, and one cannot generalise about it and analyse it as a monolithic collective undertaking in a one-size-fits-all manner". Beyond the binary

debates about whether slash fan fiction is resistant or complicit, both Anglo-American and Chinese academic studies have admitted the subject's diversity and complexity, as well as its potential to both subvert and reinforce traditional discourses of gender and sexuality. In this sense, negotiation is a more fitting description.

Compared with these multi-angled studies from Anglo-American academics, Chinese slash fan fiction still lacks sufficient research. The main reason for this shortage is that most Chinese studies still tend to regard Chinese slash fan fiction and its parent genre of BL fiction as part of the same picture. Recently, Chinese researchers such as Wei (2014), Tian (2015), and Madill et al. (2018) have offered valuable insights into Chinese slash fan fiction in terms of gender and sexual issues. In this vein, my project considers the particular slash fandom of Chinese *Harry Potter* slash fan fiction in the SFFN, aiming to broaden and diversify empirical research on how Chinese female fans negotiate issues of gender and sexuality through their practices, as well as the impact of their slash fan practices on their daily lives.

In the final section of the literature review, I also review the Anglo-American studies of *Harry Potter* books and the *HP* slash fandom. As a stimulus for fans to create rich and vivid slash fan fiction, the *Harry Potter* books have multiple layers of meanings and many gaps that particularly invite and inspire fans to produce response to the canon texts (Pugh and Wallace 2006; Duggan 2021). Although the *Harry Potter* books are criticised for reinforcing heteronormativity and gender inequality, their latent queerness also encourages fans to apply queer and trans readings of the canon text, as well as actively producing slash fan fiction to explore their anti-normative desires (Willis 2006; Cuntz-Leng 2014; Hampton 2014). In mainland China, translation studies and children's literature studies have provided most of the research on the *Harry Potter* phenomenon in mainland China (Erni 2008; Kung 2018; Liang 2018; Fang and Liu 2019), and a few studies pay attention to the reception of the *Harry Potter* series among Chinese fans and their meaning-making process (Gupta and Xiao 2009; Erni 2013). Despite the popularity of Chinese HP slash fan fiction on the internet, only few studies have explored this cultural production and Chinese fan communities (Madill et al. 2018).

[x] Hurt/comfort, or h/c, refers to a genre of fan stories which revolves around "a character being injured and another character comforting hims" (Busse and Hellekson 2006, pp.10-11).

[xi] Ship is a fannish vernacular and refers to fans' activities that pair two characters into a relationship.

[xii] Queerbaiting: queerbaiting is employed by some fans and scholars to "call out media producers and performers who they believe have deliberately inserted homoerotic subtext in order to court a queer following, and yet never actualize this subtext" (Brennan 2018, p. 105).

3 Methodology

3.1 Aca-fan Position

The concept of 'aca-fan' is highlighted by Jenkins (2006) in the introduction on his website:

> Textual Poachers and much of my subsequent work has been written from the perspective of an Aca/Fan – that is, a hybrid creature which is part fan and part academic… The goal of my work has been to bridge the gap between these two worlds. I take it as a personal challenge to find a way to break cultural theory out of academic bookstore ghetto and open up a larger space to talk about the media that matters to us from a consumer's point of view.

As Jenkins (2006) notes, aca-fan refers to the scholar who is a member of both the fan and academic community. According to Evans and Stasi (2014), the rise of aca-fans has provided an alternative approach to traditional ethnography methods, namely self-reflexive autoethnography, which allows researchers who are both fans and scholars to be reflexive about their own position when doing research. The position of researchers has been the object of many academic debates. A "top-down process" always exists when the researcher belongs to the majority targeting a subculture group, which risks a power imbalance between the researcher and the researched (O'Byrne 2007, p.1382). In fan studies, as Press and Livingstone (2006) argue, the outsider researchers are in a powerful position and the hierarchy between researchers and fans is set in place. Therefore, aca-fans are seen to play a crucial role in challenging power binaries and better bridging the fan community and academic worlds (Cristofari and Guitton 2017).

In addition, compared with outsider researchers, aca-fans – especially those who are initially fans who move into academia – do not need to learn about the fandom from scratch but can re-examine their knowledge and experiences through an academic lens (Cristofari and Guitton 2017). Such comprehensiveness and depth of aca-fans' knowledge of fandom also "have the potential to avoid a position of the single text

and would instead respond to the fandom's intertextuality" (Evans and Stasi 2014, p.15). Practically, academic research carried out by aca-fans is already evident in fan studies (Hills 2002; Hellekson and Busse 2006; Couldry 2007; Monaco 2010). Following this academic tradition, as a slash writer and reader for over 12 years and an academic researcher of slash fan fiction and fan communities, I self-identify as an aca-fan and have conducted this research project from an aca-fan position. In practice, although aca-fans can regard themselves as study objects and observe their own experiences in an autoethnographic tradition, most aca-fans prefer to be participant observers, who recognise their fan identity but tend to observe the fan community rather than themselves (Hills 2001). In this project, I too aim to explore the *HP* fan community and the fan texts created by female slash writers and readers, rather than myself and my own experience. However, as Evans and Stasi (2014) note, my knowledge and experience as a slash fan can contribute to providing an intertextual interpretation of both fan texts and fan experiences.

Critiques of autoethnographers including aca-fans have also emerged, with the focus on the excessive subjectivity of researchers (O'Byrne 2007; Evans and Stasi 2014). However, the imagined ideal of the academic whereby researchers should always maintain an objective position has been criticised as illusory because some studies "require investigators to have a certain degree of proximity to the object of their study rather than observing a strict critical distance" (Cristofari and Guitton 2017, p.716). Fan research requires scholars to "reconcile their position as members of the community they study with their work" (Cristofari and Guitton 2017, p.718). Moreover, the assumption that outsider researchers can possess total or near objectivity is also questioned because outsider researchers' perspectives are also affected by their own social, cultural and political backgrounds (O'Byrne 2007). As Butler (2002) notes, answers from different researchers are various and none is correct or a misrepresentation; they are just different answers that are produced from different researchers within different contexts. No one can paint the full details of the entire cultural phenomenon; what researchers can do is to provide a partial understanding of the cultural phenomenon from their own perspective. Therefore, both outsider researchers' and aca-fans' works serve to produce an understanding of fans' practices and culture with respect to the nuances and complexity of this cultural phenomenon. As a work carried out by an aca-fan, and in particular a female Chinese aca-fan with

involvement in Chinese-context female fan-culture, this research project will also contribute to filling in the gaps of the complex portrait of slash fan fiction and its female fan community in a feminist perspective. As Sterin (2011a, cited in Hannell 2020, [4.11]) argues, the position of the aca-fan is inherently feminist:

> This not necessarily due to its focus on gender, sexuality, and other intersecting identity categories but rather to its methodological merging of the professional and the personal, the rational and the emotional, in ways that remain largely taboo within academia.

3.2 Qualitative Approach

Compared with quantitative approaches, qualitative methods are often applied in the majority of existing fan fiction studies, which provide valuable insights into understanding the meanings of fan fiction stories and slash writers' and readers' experiences and interactions (Yin et al. 2017). Some studies have offered illustrative analysis of small-scale fan stories (Somogyi 2003, Busse and Lothian 2009, Thomas 2011b, Hampton 2014, Wei 2014, Tian 2015, Linn 2017). For example, Busse and Lothian (2009) analyse three gender-change fan stories based on *Stargate: Atlantis* to discover female fans' gender identities, sexual desires, feminist concerns, and transgender slash narratives, and Hampton (2014) provides a close analysis of a single slash story based on *Harry Potter* to examine fans' performances that negotiate social norms of gender and sexuality. Ethnographic investigations, including participant observations and interviews, also consist of small-scale samples (Green et al. 1998, Wang 2017).

Although critiques of qualitative approaches include small sample sizes, fan studies scholars' preference for a qualitative approach is justified. As O'Byrne (2007) argues, the study of cultural phenomena requires not an accumulation of large amount of data, but an in-depth analysis of the nuances and complexity of different individuals. As a diverse, multifaceted, and even contradictory cultural phenomenon, it is impossible to sum up a one-size-fits-all conclusion for fans and fan texts that they produce (Tian 2015). Qualitative methods, which are seen to be vital to in-depth understandings of the experiences and perspectives of different individuals, are therefore favoured by

many researchers. Following this tradition, different qualitative approaches are brought together to develop mixed method design to explore the research questions of this project, which are introduced in detail in the following sections.

3.3 Textual Analysis

Textual analysis is a way for researchers to interpret readers' and audiences' sense-making practices in particular cultures at particular times from materials such as books, films, and magazines (McKee 2003). Texts are defined as the "empirical evidence we have of how other people make sense of the world" (McKee 2003, p.15). Textual analysis is widely used in slash fan fiction studies, in which specific textual examples including not only slash fiction contents but also paratexts such as author's notes, disclaimers and readers' comments have been examined in depth by researchers (Jenkins 1992; Tosenberger 2008; Hampton 2014; Wei 2014; Tian 2015). For example, through several Chinese Iron Man-based slash fan fictions, such as *Being Gay with Iron Man*, *Guide to Dating in the 21st Century*, and *Iron Man: Raising a Cat*, as textual examples, Wei (2014) argues that the narratives of Chinese Iron Man slash fan fiction do not usually escape a traditional Hollywood male hero versus helpless female victim pattern by rewriting a relationship between a male hero versus a male victim. In addition to examining the story content of *Harry Potter and the Bound Prince*, Hampton (2014) also focuses on the fan author's personal profile and journal posts on LiveJournal, readers' comments on the story, and the author's replies to these comments, and the story's metadata such as notes and warnings to explore both the author's and the readers' various performances of the queered identity.

In line with those studies, this research project also employs textual analysis to close read the texts that Chinese female slash fans produce on multiple levels: Chinese *HP* slash fan fiction content; the slash stories' metadata such as the summary, warnings, pairings, and the author's words; and the community reception, including the readers' comments and monetary rewards (story subscription fees and visual gift giving) as well as the writers' reply to the readers' activities. In doing so, I explore how Chinese female slash writers and readers are negotiating gender and sexuality (RQ1), as well as discovering how the distinctive form of cultural expression for slash writers and readers and the commercialisation of Chinese slash fan fiction influences their

negotiations (RQ3 and RQ4). Although the textual analysis method is criticised as risking the production of subjective misreading of the meaning of texts that are complex and indeterminate, such danger can be minimised by carefully considering the context and general ideological trends of the communities in which the texts are located (Larsen 2002; McKee 2003). Benefiting from my aca-fan position through which I am familiar with the history, changing fashion trends, and intertextuality of Chinese *HP* slash fan fiction and the fan community, the risk of the misinterpretations, which are often produced by outsider researchers, is further reduced.

All the textual samples for analysis come from the online literature website the Slash Fan Fiction Network (short for SFFN, pseudonym, see 3.6 Ethical Considerations for details). The slash stories were not randomly selected from thousands of Chinese *HP* slash fan fiction from the SFFN's database. Rather, based on my own reading experiences and the SFFN's ranking system, the text selection criteria take into account the time of creation, the popularity of the text, the degree to which it reflects the fashion of the *HP* fandom, and its degree of classicism within the fandom. Therefore, all slash stories analysed in this project are fairly popular within the *HP* slash fandom on the SFFN, with more than 1,000 bookmarks and comments, which not only reflects their popularity within the fandom but also provides rich data for research. In addition, the creation and serial time of those stories range from 2007 to 2020, which allows me to better observe the changes in Chinese female fans' tastes, preferences, and negotiations to gender and sexuality over time, as well as exploring the causes of such changes.

3.4 Netnography

First emerging in the 1990s, with the rise of the Internet, netnography is defined as "a new qualitative research methodology that adapts ethnographic research techniques to the study of cultures and communities emerging through electronic networks" (Kozinets 2002, p.62). Compared with traditional ethnographic studies, netnography research collects all forms of data through online interactions from various field sites such as online message boards, chat-rooms, and social media sites (Kulavuz-Onal 2015). In practice, netnographers can acquire information from purely observing textual communications that take place on the webpages without the participation of

researchers themselves or by participating in those online communications. Meanwhile, technologies such as email and CMC tools (e.g. Skype) can also be used by netnographers to make use of elicited data from online interview (Kozinets 2010). In other words, the typical attribute of netnography is that it focuses on "communications within online communities and social media spaces rather than face-to-face groups" (Costello et al. 2017, p.3).

Extensively employed in business and marketing research, netnography has also been widely applied in the field of other sectors such as anthropology, sociology, and communication (Kozinets 2010; Costello et al. 2017). In fan studies, netnography is used to explore online female fandom's organisation and experience (Bury 2005), to investigate fan identity through analysing fans' conversations on online message boards (Perkins 2010), and to examine the ways fans can strengthen fandom and the dynamic within fan groups (Phillips 2011). With the migration of fan fiction and fan communities to the Internet, fans have inhabited and developed online interfaces such as FanFiction.net, LiveJournal, AO3, and Tumblr to create, read, comment on, and share slash fan fiction. Therefore, netnography has also been used to explore Internet-based slash fan fiction for some time, although some scholars who have used this method may not be aware of it. For example, in Lopez's (2012) research into fan activism, she observed and took part in online debates about racial issues in the casting of the film *The Last Airbender* on a website called Racebending.com and a community on LiveJournal. Lopez's (2012) work is seen as taking a netnography approach by Evans and Stasi (2014) in their discussion of fan studies' methodology. However, in Lopez's (2012) description of the methods applied in her study, the term netnography is not used. Instead, she states that she conducted the work through "textual analysis of the group's online communities" (Lopez 2012, p.432).

Lopez's (2012) statement reflects why netnography does not yet seem to be popular in the field of fan fiction – the close reading of fan fiction content and paratexts such as readers' comments, author's notes, and content warnings are usually considered through textual analysis rather than netnography. Tirocchi (2018) is one of few scholars who clearly states that their analysis of Wattpad authors' profiles and fiction works including fan fiction involves netnography. Following Evans and Stasi (2014) and Tirocchi (2018), the close reading of *HP* slash fan fiction content and their related

readers' comments, writers' replies, and the author's words in this research project is seen as not only textual analysis but also netnography. The ethical issues related to netnography will also be discussed in section 3.6, especially considering that traditional textual analysis approach does not need to question whether researchers should ask for permission from the text authors.

3.5 In-depth Interviews

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted to answer RQ2 and RQ4, as well as further addressing RQ1 and RQ3. I interviewed a total of 12 Chinese slash fans, 6 of whom are writers and 6 are readers. Snowball sampling was employed in this research to contact potential interview participants. As Noy (2008) notes, when a researcher accesses participants through contact information provided by other participants, the researcher's sampling procedure can be considered to be snowball sampling – this is an effective way to access marginalised groups who suffer from stigmas (Noy 2008, Lindlof and Taylor 2011). Because Chinese slash fans are likely to be sensitive about responding to advertisements on public websites, snowball sampling was a particularly useful procedure for contacting slash fans. As an aca-fan, I have been a slash fan and writer for almost ten years, making it possible for me to recruit participants who might be difficult for outsider researchers to access. In this project, three participants (one writer and two readers) were *HP* slash fans already known to me in real life. The rest of the interviewees in this project were recommended by them.

Moreover, as Rabionet (2011, p.564) suggests, the way researchers introduce themselves to their interviewees is very important to "create an adequate environment, and to elicit reflection and truthful comments from the interviewee". Once again, since some of my interviewees already known to me in real and online slash fandom, and the rest are companions they recommended to me, it was not difficult to introduce my aca-fan identity and my research to people who might otherwise be very sensitive to outsider researchers. As I am based in the UK, to contact participants who live in mainland China, 11 of the interviews were carried out through online instant chat message facilities that were most convenient for the participants: three by Weibo instant messaging and seven by WeChat (one of the seven was conducted through

audio-based chat and the rest were carried out through text-based chat) and only one interview was conducted face-to-face because the researcher and the participant were in the same city in China at the time of the interview.

It should be mentioned that when I first designed the interviews, I preferred to communicate with my interviewees through email rather than video-enabled tools such as Skype, because the participants in this research are Chinese slash writers and readers, who are more familiar with and have excellent skills in terms of keyboard typing and reading and writing texts through a computer. Therefore, compared with Skype, I assumed my participants would have higher comfort levels in communicating with me through typing words by email, especially given the sensitive and intimate nature of my research subject. During the practice, my interviewees indeed said that they preferred text- or audio-based chat rather than video-based interviews. However, instead of email, they petitioned to use Weibo and WeChat, two of the most popular instant chat message tools in mainland China, to participate in the interviews. Based on the preferences and requirements of my interviewees, I finally changed the interview method from email to instant chat messaging.

Finally, the interviews were semi-structured because such interviews can allow researchers to cover specific topics, and at the same time leave spaces for participants to tell their own stories (Rabionet 2011). Before the interviews, an outline of interview questions was prepared, which primarily focused on the interviewees' reading or writing preferences, their views on and behaviours related to the SFFN, their communication with their peers, and the impact of *HP* slash fan fiction on their real life (see Appendix 4). These questions were designed to elicit conversation, as well as to gather information that did not come up naturally during the interview. They were also a guide for me to avoid moving too far from my research questions when interviewing the participants. In practice, based on the interviewees' responses to these pre-established questions, different follow-up questions were asked to achieve additional depth and to clarify my understanding of their given answers. Each interview lasted an average of two hours.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues in relation to netnography including online instant chat message interviews have been addressed in this research. Firstly, although the SFFN provides registration and login services, *HP* slash fan fiction content and their related paratexts are accessible without logging in, except for VIP content which require readers' payment. As a commercial online literature website, such policy exists for business rather than privacy purposes. Therefore, I still tend to consider the privacy setting for the SFFN to be public rather than private. In addition, all the *HP* slash stories, the author's words, the readers' comments, and the author's replies cited and analysed in this research project were taken from public threads, which are accessible without signing in to the SFFN.

Although all textual materials employed for close reading comes from public threads, this research still follows a highly ethical standard of existing guidelines for online research, with particular reference to the Research Ethics Code of Practice of Bournemouth University and the ethical implications of netnography (see Appendix 1 and Appendix 2). As Hampton (2014) notes, although slash fan fiction content is published on public fannish websites, their target audiences are peers with similar interests and hobbies, those who can understand the meaning of the texts fans produce in the fannish context. Therefore, fans assume privacy exists within fannish community, despite the public nature of the website. To respect this privacy and protect slash fans, Hampton (2014) takes actions that replace the commenters' online names with pseudonyms and does not include direct links to slash fan stories and comments. Compared to Hampton (2014), Evans and Stasi (2014, pp.16-17) further highlight that fan fiction scholars should presuppose "some kind of informed consent from the community and from gatekeepers", although traditional "literary criticism would not question whether the text's author should be contacted to ask permission".

However, the ethical principle that the researcher should obtain every single online community member's permission has been considered "far too rigorous" by Langer and Beckman (2005, p.195). In their own research, Langer and Beckman (2005) gather information from two popular women's websites to discuss females' online discourses about cosmetic surgery without informing online contributors and obtaining their

permission. There were several reasons why they adopted these research ethical principles. Firstly, the two websites used were open access and they regarded them as public communication media forms. In addition, an experimental difficulty also appeared during their research. The two websites did not require formal membership; thus, they could not approach the online contributors.

In the process of obtaining the permissions of the slash authors, I encountered a similar dilemma to Langer and Beckman (2005). Since only the editors and website managers of the SFFN have the authority to send internal messages through the website's message system and they refused to provide such access for me, I could not contact those authors directly through the SFFN. In an effort to obtain the permissions of the authors, I turned to Weibo, a Twitter-like social media website in mainland China used by many SFFN authors to communicate with their readers. Since some fan authors posted their Weibo accounts in their personal profiles on the SFFN, I found their Weibo homepages through the information they published and asked for their permission through Weibo's private messaging system. In this way, I obtained explicit permission from five authors. Meanwhile, two other authors did not reply to my messages. In those cases, as they did not explicitly refuse my requests, I assumed that permission had been granted. Because I was unable to contact readers, I did not require readers' permission to use their comments.

However, I employed multiple strategies in this research project to minimise searchability, maintain confidentiality, and to protect both authors' and readers' privacy and identities. Firstly, the website used to select textual materials was renamed as the pseudonymous Slash Fan Fiction Network (SFFN). In addition, all textual samples such as the slash stories content, readers' comments, and authors' replies were translated from Chinese language into English, and original Chinese descriptions are not presented in this thesis. As such content and comments have not appeared online in English previously, and as a result, they are not searchable online. Additionally, direct links to slash stories and comments are not included in this research. When referring to commenters, their original reader names are changed to generic terms, such as Reader 1, Reader 2, and Reader 3. For the interviews, every respondent was offered and read the Participant Information Form (Appendix 1) and signed the Participant Agreement Form (Appendix 2). Their private information such as their real

names, ID numbers, and telephone numbers were not sought, and their WeChat and Weibo account names are not cited in this research. To distinguish the interviewees from the commenters on the textual samples, another pseudonym system has been used. The authors among the interviewees are named as Writer A, Writer B, and Reader G etc.

Finally, I avoided using politically, morally, and legally sensitive words in the interview questions to protect my interviewees. For example, one of my interview questions translated into English asks how the SFFN's censorship principles influence my participants' *HP* slash fan fiction writing/reading on the website. However, as the word "censorship" is politically sensitive in mainland China, I did not use the Chinese translation of "censorship" in my interview questions. In Chinese slash fandom, the Chinese word "hexie" (literally "river crab" in Chinese) is a fan slang referring to censorship. Therefore, I used the fan slang "river crab" in my interview wording, knowing that my fan-participants were familiar with this coded terminology. Similarly, another interview question focuses on my participants' attitudes towards erotic description in Chinese *HP* slash fan fiction. As the Chinese translation of the word "erotic" is also morally and legally sensitive in the Chinese context, I employed the Chinese slash fan slang "rou" (literally "meat" in Chinese) to indicate the erotic content in Chinese slash stories. Again, I knew my participants were familiar with this coded terminology, as it is used, for the same purpose (of avoiding the attention of the authorities) in Chinese slash fan cultures online. Through the usage of Chinese slash fan slang, I avoided using the Chinese words that are more sensitive in the Chinese context, aiming to avoid attracting attention and further protect my fan participants.

3.7 Conclusion

Ultimately, my research project is a mixed methods qualitative study that uses textual analysis, netnography, and in-depth interviews to analyse qualitative data within an aca-fan ethnographic context. The close reading of *HP* slash fan fiction content, the author's words, and the conversation between readers and authors was undertaken to address RQ1 and RQ3. In-depth semi-structured interviews with eight Chinese *HP* slash writers and eight readers were conducted to answer RQ2 and RQ4, as well as gathering additional data in relation to RQ1 and RQ3. In the practical process, this

project followed the highly ethical standards from existing guidelines for online research, bearing in mind the additional context of Chinese state censorship of fan fiction and fan cultures, such as the blocking of the fan fiction website AO3 in 2020, and the project was approved by Bournemouth University's research ethics committee.

4 Findings and Discussions

Before starting the formal discussion, for clarity, I would like to reiterate the different pseudonym systems employed for readers who have written comments for *HP* slash stories on the SFFN and the interview participants, as explained in the previous chapter.

When referring to commenters, their original reader names are changed to generic terms, such as reader 1, reader 2, and reader 3. For the interviews, the authors among the interviewees are named writer A, writer B, writer C, and writer D, and the readers among them are named reader E, reader F, reader G, and reader H.

4.1 The Context and Commercialisation of Chinese *HP* Slash Fan Fiction on the SFFN and the Risks Involved

Having briefly discussed the background and the commercial model of the SFFN in Chapter 1, this section further contextualises Chinese *HP* slash fan fiction on the SFFN. By doing so, this section not only aims at providing an intertexual understanding of HP slash fan fiction on the SFFN and HP fans' interactions, but also demonstrate how commercialisation and the online censorship of Chinese slash fan fiction both affect Chinese female fans in their attempts to negotiate gender and sexuality in *HP* slash fan fiction and their offline lives.

Detailed contextualisation of Chinese *HP* slash fan fiction on the SFFN, the platform which allows Chinese fans to produce and consume slash stories, and communicate with each other, is necessary before providing more in-depth analysis of selected *HP* slash stories. Fan fiction, slash included, cannot be evaluated without considering the fan culture, community, and context that produce it (Busse 2006). As Thomas (2011, p.208) reminds us, fan fiction cannot be full understood "without reference to these wider processes of production and consumption" on the platform, in which the fan stories are created. Therefore, in this section I focus first on how female fans access *HP* slash fan fiction on the SFFN, not only further contextualising *HP* slash fan fiction on the SFFN, but also reading the SFFN as emblematic of how female readers, who are, I argue, to a degree empowered by commercialisation, can participate in changing

the SFFN's functions and layout in relation to gender and sexuality discourses. However, it is precisely because this empowerment comes from commercialisation, when women's favourite cultural products such as *HP* slash fan fiction lose their commercial value, that their power is taken back, and their tastes are once again marginalised.

Turning then to discuss how the commercialisation of *HP* slash fan fiction emotionally and financially empowers female fans, I further argue that it is the struggle between commercial companies and the authoritative censorship power that has made room for female fans to express their non-heteronormative gender and sexuality discourses. That said, although the pressure from authoritative censorship makes female fans see big companies as allies, compared with big companies, female fans bear much higher risks and serious consequence from their non-heteronormative practices.

In the last part of this section, I continue to discuss the impact of the censorship on Chinese slash fan fiction and female fans, particularly arguing how anti-pornographic censorship campaigns suppress Chinese women's expression of sexual and erotic fantasies and desire.

4.1.1 Access to *HP* Slash Fan Fiction on the SFFN: The Gendered Platform

This chapter starts by mapping how fans look for and access *HP* slash fan fiction on the SFFN. In addition to further contextualising *HP* slash fan fiction on the SFFN, I also illustrate how discourses of gender and sexuality are enmeshed within the function and layout of the SFFN. Cyberspace has never been a utopia where one can disengage from problematic constructions and discourses of gender and sexuality, although early feminist work on cyberspace suggested it might be (Haraway 2006; Plant 1997). In this section I will argue that users, such as fan writers and readers, can impact the SFFN's functions together with editors and censorship regulators. In this process, discourses of gender and sexuality are also negotiated by fans.

As a commercial literature website with the aim of attracting more readers, the SFFN is more hospitable than membership-only sites in mainland China that exclusively feature *HP* slash fan fiction, such as LoveHarry (pseudonym) and Cellar (pseudonym),

which often set restrictions for interested fans to access their content. For example, on LoveHarry only registered users can access its *HP* slash fan fiction section. To complete registration, fans must familiarise themselves with the *General Rules* of the site and pass five test questions about these rules. Fans are allowed to access work-in-progress *HP* slash stories when they have been registered for more than 24 hours or have earned five forum points, and they can access the complete *HP* slash works when they have been registered for more than three days or have obtained 20 forum points, which can be earned by posting topic posts and replying to others' posts.

Different from membership-only *HP* slash fan fiction sites, as a market-led and profit-driven commercial website, the SFFN provides easy access to all genres, including *HP* slash fan fiction. Registration and log-in is not required when *HP* fan readers browse the slash fan fiction subsite, read non-VIP chapters of *HP* slash fan fiction, glance over other readers' comments, and use the SFFN's data search system for *HP* slash stories they are interested in, unless they wish to subscribe to VIP chapters or write comments. Notably, considering that *HP* slash fan fiction has been removed from the VIP project since 2018, fans' access to *HP* slash fan fiction on the SFFN seems more open. However, in interview, Reader H complained that it was increasingly difficult for her to find *HP* slash fan fiction through the SFFN's search system:

> I always used the SFFN's search system to find *HP* slash stories. I remembered there was a dedicated tag called '*HP*'. But now the SFFN has deleted *HP* from all tags, so I cannot search for *HP* slash stories from simply choosing the tag.

When talking about why the SFFN deleted the *HP* tag, Reader H answered:

> I am not sure about it. Well, you know, *HP* [fan fiction] can no longer join the VIP project, I guess this is the reason they deleted the *HP* tag.

The tags Reader H mentioned in the interview are part of the data search system (Figure 3) of the SFFN. It is located at the top of every page of the SFFN, which can be used by readers of different fandoms to find their favourite stories. As shown in Figure 3, the search system consists of two parallel parts. The first part is made up of a keyword input field, an option selection menu, and an action button. Users can enter keywords in the input field and select the types of keywords they have entered, such as the title, author, protagonist, and supporting actor, from the option selection menu. By clicking the search button, stories that satisfy the keyword information entered by users will appear on the refreshed page. For example, if a reader types the term '*HP*' into the input field, selects 'title' from the option selection menu, and clicks the search button, stories with the term '*HP*' in the title will appear on the refreshed page. Similarly, if readers only prefer stories with Harry as the protagonist, they can type the term 'Harry' and select 'protagonist' from the option selection menu.

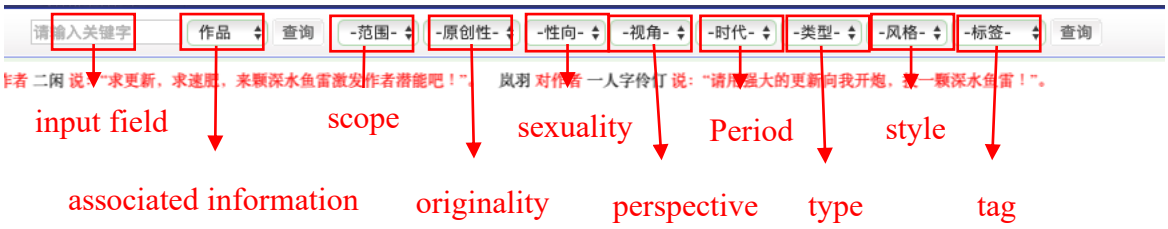

Figure 3: The search system of the SFFN

The system also allows readers to further narrow their search by using its second part, which contains eight parallel option filters. Readers can choose the scope of their search from the first column (full site, half price VIP fictions, or VIP fictions), genre from the second (fan fiction or original fiction), sexuality from the third (heterosexual, pure love [the metaphor of BL/*danmei* to avoid censorship], *baihe* [literally lily, a term referring to a lesbian relationship in Chinese fandom], superior women, or no pairings), narrative perspective from the fourth (male, female, *gong*, *shou,* reversible, or unknown perspective), period from the fifth (modern, ancient, future, or alternative history), type from the sixth (including romance, fantasy, and horror), style from the seventh (serious drama, tragedy, light comedy, comedy, or dark), and tag from the final one (including crossover, male pregnancy, and time-travel). If readers only prefer

fluffy *HP* slash stories that portray Harry as one of the protagonists and include male pregnancy plots, in addition to typing the term 'Harry' and selecting 'protagonist' from the former part of the search system, they can also choose 'relaxed story' and 'male pregnancy' from the seventh and final columns of the latter part.

Such making of choices from a menu or catalogue is seen by Manovich (2001, cited by Thomas 2011) as a symptom of advanced and post-industrial logic, and can help to foster the idea that website users can be regarded as a kind of co-author. With Anglo-American fan fiction sites, Thomas (2011, p.207) argues that such designs can give users "some degree of control over how they make use of and engage with the site and its contents", although the freedom of this kind of choice is still being questioned. Chinese literature websites including the SFFN also often change their web feature to better meet their users' changing needs. The SFFN's users have become accustomed to this search system and its frequently changing tags. However, as a researcher, when I re-examined this system, I found myself confronted by two issues that gave me pause: the sexuality column and the tags.

There are five options in the sexuality column: heterosexual romance, pure love, *baihe*, superior women, and no pairings. Among the five options, only the first, 'heterosexual romance, is in line with the social assumption of what heterosexual women should be interested in. The second option, referring to male-male relationships, and the third one, to female-female relationships, move away from heteronormative discourses. The fourth option, superior women, is a particular genre of Chinese women's romance, which "is bent on depicting a new configuration of love, marriage and family by imaging a matriarchal society where the Confucian maxim 'men are superior to women' is turned upside down" (Yang and Xu 2015, p.142). Instead of reconstructing a world of gender equality, the superior women genre reconstructs a universe with extremely unequal gender and sexual orders, in which women have become a privileged class and men have become a subordinate class. In this genre, women are "usually taller and stronger than men", become queens, officials, and aristocrats, are sexually active in sex, and can have numerous male concubines (Yang and Xu 2015, p.143). Conversely, men are sexually passive, "have to obey their wife-master", and "carry, bear, and rear children" (Yang and Xu 2015, p.143). Although the superior women genre stays rooted in heterosexuality, it subverts the hierarchical gender norms

in today's patriarchal society. The last option, no pairings, refers to stories in which the protagonist only pursues personal adventures or careers and does not establish a romantic relationship with anyone. This genre also violates the gender expectation that women always prefer romantic love stories.

The SFFN also provides over 80 tags referring to many different aspects, which include as of the most popular sub-genres and themes its female readers prefer many as possible. These tags cover a wide range: some, such as "mother-in-law and daughter in-law" (referring to stories focusing on the family conflict between two generations of women), "palace fighting" (stories describing battles between the emperor's wife and concubines in ancient China), and "after marriage" (stories featuring the protagonists' family life after marriage), reflect tastes that are in line with traditional women. Some tags, such as "trade war" (referring to stories describing the protagonists' competition in business) and "political" (stories featuring the political struggle of the protagonists), are considered to be the assumed interests of men; however, they clearly demonstrate that women are interested not only in love and family, but also in the workplace, business, and politics.

The establishment of these tags and options is not based on the assumptions of the SFFN administrators about the interests of female users, but on the real tastes and preferences of female readers. With the changes and expansion of female readers' tastes, the number of tags has grown from the 30 I remember in 2014 to more than 80 today. Through their impact on these changes of the SFFN, female users also contribute to establishing the gender and sexuality discourses embodied in these categories and tags. Heterosexuality is not the default setting, but one of the options together with different sexual orientations. The trickery, politics, and workplace stories are therefore shown to be something that not just men are interested in. These options and tags, as a function of discourse, further cements these constructions that are different from traditional gender and sexuality norms by lending them authority. As mentioned earlier, the SFFN has claimed to be the largest and most influential women's literature website in mainland China. The categories and tags presented on the SFFN are thus closely related to the category of "women". Through using the SFFN every day, female users increasingly internalise these discourses of gender and sexuality that they contributed to building together.

There is no doubt that female users' agency comes from their purchasing power. Commercialisation can give them power but it can also dissolve it. In the case of *HP* slash fan fiction, although it still has a large fan base, when *HP* fan fiction (slash included) cannot bring the SFFN as much income as before because of the legal risks of international copyrights violation, *HP* fan writers' and readers' demand and needs are neglected and marginalised. In the interview, Reader J also complained that:

> It is really much harder to find *HP* slash stories on the SFFN now than before. In the past, when you opened the homepage of the slash fan fiction subsite [of the SFFN], you could find a lot of new *HP* slash stories on different recommendation lists. At that time, you will never run out of food [fans called *HP* slash stories their spiritual food]. But now, they [*HP* slash stories] are all gone. They have nearly disappeared from the homepage.

The recommendation lists mentioned by Reader J occupy almost the entire homepage of the slash fan fiction subsite. These lists have been divided into two groups by SFFN writers and readers: one group is the natural list, the other is the manual list. The former is essentially a set of rankings, including: the monthly ranking, which displays the top 20 slash stories with the highest scores published that month; the diligent writing ranking, which includes the top 15 slash stories with the highest update frequency; the gold list, which consists of the top ten slash stories with the most VIP subscriptions; and the monthly virtual gifts list, which shows the top 15 slash stories that have received the most virtual gifts that month. Since the selection criteria for this group of lists, such as story scores, frequency of updates, and number of VIP subscriptions and virtual gifts, have not been manually collated by the SFFN editors, such lists are called 'natural' by SFFN writers and readers.

The second group contains a set of recommendation lists – such as the excellent writing recommendation list; the boutique exhibition list; the highly recommended list; and the editors' recommendation list – which is more of a kind of advertising space entirely controlled by the SFFN editors, thus it is called the 'manual' list by users. Although the SFFN does not disclose the selection criteria for its manual lists, the

experience shared by Writer E in interview helps to provide an insight into the mechanism of the lists:

> The reason why you cannot see *HP* slash fan fiction on the homepage of the SFFN is very simple: the editors will not offer places for *HP* fan fiction anymore. As long as you have signed a contract with the SFFN, you can apply for a place on the manual lists for all the stories you are serializing. The editor will decide whether your story will be on the lists after application. Based on my own experiences, every new story could have the opportunity to achieve a space in the manual lists at the beginning. However, after getting a few chances of being displayed in manual lists, if the story did not get enough views and bookmarks, the editor would probably no longer arrange a position for the story – the position would be given to more promising works. Of course, if you told your editor you do not want to let your story join in the VIP project, your editor would not arrange any lists for your works. Since *HP* fan fiction could not join the VIP project, my editor has told me clearly that *HP* fan fiction would not be offered a place on any manual lists.

As writer E reported in the interview, not every application can be approved by the editors. The core factor that impacts editors in making choices is whether a story can bring benefit to the site in terms of readership and income. When a story has gained enough exposure through the manual lists but has not been favoured by enough readers, its profitability is greatly reduced, which leads editors to no longer 'waste' valuable advertising space on it. Because a large number of stories are serialised on the SFFN, editors will choose to provide more exposure to works that have proven profitable to help them attract more readers.

When I first started my research on this project in 2015, *HP* slash stories were quite visible on the SFFN. However, since *HP* slash fan fiction can no longer join the VIP project (since 2018), it has lost most of its business value on the SFFN. Currently (2021), there is no *HP* slash fan fiction on the SFFN's manual lists, and few such stories can appear on the natural lists. There are still many *HP* slash stories that are

drowned in the sheer volume of fiction on the SFFN that are thus difficult to discover by their target readers. In interview, Writer E complained that:

> I am extremely disappointed about it! My new *HP* slash story was serialised with 100,000 words, but my editor refused to arrange any manual lists for it. Up to now my story was only bookmarked by about 1,500 readers, which is too little compared to my last story. I have to promote it on Weibo [a Twitter-like Chinese social media site].

Some *HP* slash writers have already given up writing *HP* fan stories and turned to producing original BL/*danmei* stories or slash stories based on other profitable fandoms. For example, the author of the *HP* and Marvel Cinematic Universe crossover slash fan fiction *To Be A Loser* wrote this paragraph on the story's abstract:

> I have just learned from my editor that even *HP* cross-over slash stories could not join the VIP project. Therefore, this *HP* crossover story will be free for everyone, and I will do my best to keep the update frequency of this one. Many thanks for every dear reader for your support as always! I will start to serialise a new original story next week, and the abstract of the new story will be displayed here later.

Under this declaration, a hyperlink to her new original story was shown to directly link her readers to the new one. Although the author did not force her readers to support her new story, her displaying of the hyperlink tended to imply that they should. How many readers of her *HP* slash story supported her new original story is unknown, but her new original story did achieve commercial success. At the time of writing, her new story had been bookmarked by 22,642 readers, received 3,155 comments and 224 million scores, joined the VIP project, and ranked ninth on the SFFN's quarterly ranking list. In addition, although the author said she would keep updating her *HP* slash story, at the time of writing, she had not updated the *HP* slash for over two years. However, her *HP* readers are still keen for her to continue writing. In the comments area, some readers were still writing comments begging for new updates in April 2020.

It is not uncommon for writers to stop creating and updating *HP* slash fan fiction, as Reader M said in the interview:

> Fewer and fewer authors are writing *HP* slash stories now, especially some professional writers. They rely on writing to make money, and they need income to continue writing. *HP* fan stories cannot bring them income now, they have to turn to write other subjects. Of course, some *HP* fan writers write for free, they do not want money but reputation. But the SFFN does not give their story spaces on recommendation lists, their works are difficult to be discovered by readers.

The reputation Reader M mentioned in the interview refers to being a "big-name fan" within *HP* fandom. On the SFFN, to become a "big name fan" writer means they must write very popular *HP* fan stories. However, as writers and readers I have interviewed mentioned before, it is difficult for readers to discover *HP* slash stories when they are not shown on any homepage lists. Nowadays, it is not only *HP* fan fiction but also others with copyright issues that are restricted. Based on my own experience, the SFFN editors have informed authors that if a character appeared in Marvel and DC comics earlier than 1968, the slash stories based on this character can join the VIP project. For example, slash stories based on Thanos, Star-Lord and Deadpool cannot join the VIP project as they first appeared in comics after 1968, but those based on Iron Man, Batman, Spider-Man, and Captain America can join the VIP project. At the same time, the SFFN editors also asked authors not to bring any superhero-related film series plots into their slash creations to further avoid possible legal risks.

What cannot be commercialised will be marginalised and silenced. The current status of *HP* slash fan fiction on the SFFN reminded me of Hampton's (2010) argument that profit-making fannish practices have been associated with masculinity and being legitimised and celebrated, while those that cannot be commercialised are discussed in terms of femininity and being subject to elision. Applying this point of view to the SFFN, although it has been regarded as invaluable media for investigating Chinese women's tastes, interests, and considerations because of its mostly female writership and readership, the power of commercialisation has rebuilt the hierarchy of gender

among women. Stories that can join the VIP project to make money for the SFFN, even if their authors are women, actually represent the commercial interests that are regarded as masculine. Such masculine behaviour is affirmed, promoted and celebrated. On the contrary, genres like *HP* slash fan fiction that cannot continue to make profit for the SFFN have been marginalised, just as mainstream culture consistently marginalises women's interests and labour.

As discussed in this section, commercialisation gives and eliminates power to women at the same time. Empowered by their spending power, female users have impacted the SFFN's functions and layouts that are associated with gender and sexuality discourses, encouraging them to transgress the traditional heteronormative gender and sexual norms, such as subverting heterosexuality as the default setting and redefining women's popular literature tastes. However, in this Chinese context, once their favourite cultural products, such as *HP* slash fan fiction, lose their commercial value, the power female fans have been given is taken back. Such experience of *HP* slash fandom and female fans on the SFFN reminds me of Busse's (2015, p.111) concerns about the mainstreaming of geek culture, whereby "if the mainstream embraces one form of geek, it risks excluding further or even negating the existence of whoever does not fit that model". In the case of *HP* slash fan fiction on the SFFN, when BL/*danmei* and other profitable fan fiction has been embraced and encouraged on the SFFN, *HP* fan fiction including slash is today regarded as an 'other', which is further excluded, silenced, and marginalised. Therefore, in the commercial environment, although female fans have contributed to redefining the gender and sexuality discourses embodied in the SFFN's functions, the boundaries of exclusion are not eliminated.

In the next section, I turn to discuss how female writers and readers are empowered by commercialisation, as well as revealing the risks involved in their practices.

4.1.1 Commercialisation, Empowerment, and Risk

Both Anglo-American and Chinese scholarship have addressed the importance of the fan community, where female fans can freely express their queer fantasies and desires and build emotional bonds with each other with full support in a sympathetic environment avoiding unnecessary attention from the outside (Samutina 2013; Feng

2014; Tian 2015; Zhang 2016; McLelland 2017). However, my participants revealed that the too-closed communicational space can also increase anxiety despite avoiding unnecessary outsiders' attention. In an interview, writer D, who is currently reading and writing *HP* slash fan fiction on the SFFN, reported her anxiety when she read *HP* slash on the Cellar (Pseudonym), a membership-only forum exclusively featuring Snape/Harry slash fandom:

> Before finding the SFFN, I used to read *HP* slash on the Cellar. At first everything was fine, but as the *HP* slash became more and more popular, lots of newcomers came to the forum. The Cellar's administrator started to change the registration methods. Registration had become an invitation system, that is, if you wanted to register an account to log into the Cellar, you should have an invitation code. You could either get the code from an old member, who needed to spend 50 forum points to buy one code [users can earn forum points through writing posts and comments], or you needed to send an email to the forum administrator, in which you must write your views on *HP* slash fan fiction, especially on the Snape/Harry pairing, and your personal preference on *HP* slash. The administrator would decide whether to give you an invitation code based on your email content.

Therefore, the Cellar became a secret and closed space for selected and approved fans, which made writer D start to feel that reading *HP* slash fan fiction was a shameful thing:

> It became a secret space and they said it was necessary to keep it secret because others [the public] might comment on our behaviour. I knew some people might feel excited when they had some secrets, but I was not. I felt I might be doing something wrong. If it was right, why did we hide it? I could not stop thinking about it, so I gave up logging into the Cellar and my *HP* slash fan fiction reading habit.

When talking about where such anxiety and shameful feelings originated, writer D answered:

> At that time, I was only 16 years old and was in the second year of high school. When I first encountered slash, I felt very curious and excited because I had never seen this before. But then sometimes I was a little afraid that… erm… maybe I was not normal? I mean, I was a girl, but I liked male-male romance and pornographic description.

Writer D's explanation echoes Zhang's (2016) suggestion that BL/*danmei* can fulfil female fans' curiosity and inquisitiveness about male partnerships and sex. Acknowledging Chinese traditional values associating sex with lasciviousness and immorality, which results in females being anxious and shameful about sex, Zhang (2016) sees BL/*danmei* as an alternative way for female fans to learn about sex and fulfil their sexual desire without anxiety and shame. However, writer D's case shows that the inner struggle of female fans is missing in Zhang's (2016) argument. When obtaining sexual pleasure and satisfying curiosity from reading slash, female fans, especially young female fans, might experience inner struggles and uncertainty, as well as vacillating between satisfying their own desires and complying with traditional hetero-gendered norms. At this time, the excessively closed online community might aggravate a woman's anxiety. Writer D's anxiety disappeared after she discovered the SFFN, as she observed:

> I left the whole fandom for about one year, but I still really, really, really love *HP*! One day when I re-read the *HP* books, I was still extremely sad for Snape's death. So, I knew, I need to read some Snape slash to make me happy again. I tried to log into the Cellar but I failed because I forgot my username and password. Then I turned to search 'Snape slash' on Baidu [a Google-like searching engine in China]. I found there were numerous Snape slash stories on the SFFN. They were right there and allowed everyone to read. I also found some writers were professional and they can even earn money from writing *HP* slash stories. It made me feel very relaxed.

In writer D's words, the inherent motivation for her to try to overcome the anxiety of pursuing pleasure away from traditional gender norms is her love for the *HP* universe. In addition, what facilitates this process is the easy access to *HP* slash fan fiction on the SFFN and its commercialisation. The openness and easy access help to resolve the anxiety caused by marginalisation, while the sense of professionalisation brought by the commercialisation furthers such dispelling.

After reading a great number of *HP* slash fan fiction stories, writer D started to write her first *HP* slash story featuring Snape/Voldemort on the SFFN, which attracted a large number of readers. Writer D was soon discovered by a SFFN editor and invited to become a VIP writer. She reported that:

> I remembered that it was the summer vacation after the university entrance examination. It was the first time I earned money through my writing, and it was also the first time in my life making money. I felt very excited and proud. When I told my parents, they were all happy and proud of me. Well, absolutely I did not tell them what I had written was slash at that time.

Although writer D still believed that slash should be hidden from her family, the economic income from writing *HP* slash built her self-confidence, as well as the courage to defend her sexual fantasy and cultural tastes in the face of hegemonic heteronormative gender roles. During her interview, writer D was full of confidence in her slash practices:

> I am not a little girl anymore. I am already a mature woman. Now many friends [in daily life] and my family already know I am writing slash and *danmei*. This is not something to be ashamed of. On the contrary, those who think I should be ashamed of my hobby are biased people who should be ashamed of their own prejudice!

Writer D's consciousness-raising process can also be seen as a process of empowerment. As Freire (1970) suggested, critical consciousness is necessary to achieve empowerment. In writer D's case, she experienced confusion and powerlessness, and rebuilt self-confidence through her income writing slash on the SFFN. Finally, she clearly and critically realised the social bias in relation to slash and gender norms.

From writer D's answer, we can also see that what she values is not how much financial income can be brought through writing *HP* slash fan fiction, but through the sense of professionalism that comes with earning income from writing *HP* slash fan fiction. However, for some writers, getting monetary income from writing is also important in itself. In interviews with reader G, writer M, and reader J, they all pointed out the predicament of female writers in their daily lives and the meaning of getting payment from their writing. In reader G's words:

> When you have to bear all kinds of pressures in life and have to earn money – Chinese people are under too much pressure – you cannot have enough time and effort to create [*HP* slash fan fiction]. When they [female writers] are 30 years old, they have to get married, take care of children, and also do housework, which is enough to destroy 80% of writers.

Similar to reader G, writer M also said:

> Most of the writers are young girls, because once they start working and get married, they do not have so much time and energy to create stories. If their stories cannot join the VIP project, their enthusiasm for writing will definitely decrease.

Reader J expressed a similar view, saying that:

> Since being unable to join the VIP project, there have been fewer and fewer *HP* slash stories. But I do not want to blame the writers for this. Although I am not an author, I also know that writing a story takes time and effort. Everyone is very tired, especially the writers who are doing full-time jobs. They want to make money, I think it is a legitimate demand, otherwise why do then spend so much extra energy on writing?

Writer M, reader G, and reader J all clearly indicated the dilemma facing women in their daily lives, whereby women often undertake both heavy career work and family work. Under this double burden, the de-commercialisation of *HP* slash fan fiction makes writing another burden for female writers: writing *HP* slash fan fiction is also effort-consuming, but its authors are unable to receive corresponding financial rewards. As reader M said, "Chinese people are under too much pressure", and life pressures also cause pain and suffering for women. For example, the author of *To Be a Loser* shared her suffering experience in the author's words section:

> On the May Day holiday, I came back to hometown to see my young son. I did not say goodbye to him when I left yesterday morning because I was afraid of his crying. When I arrived in Shanghai, I was told he was crying all day because of missing me. I am really worried that he would be badly affected by this experience, so I am considering whether I should take him to live with me in Shanghai. If I do so, I have to become a full-time mother. However, there is tremendous financial pressure living in Shanghai, such as buying a flat and paying for kindergarten fees. I have to work to earn more money. It is why I took my child back to hometown to let my parents help me take care of him before.

From these author's words, we can see she feels that the "tremendous financial pressure living in Shanghai" makes her endure the pain of separation from her child. The author of *To Be a Loser*'s experience is a microcosm of the common dilemmas faced by Chinese women. Although Chinese women occupy 43.7% of the labour force, which seems to indicate that women have almost achieved gender equality in modern

China (Catalyst 2019), the gender discrimination they encounter at work is still serious, especially with regards to fertility. It is common that well-paid job offers for women often attach an additional promise that they will not give birth within the next five years (Feng 2017). Meanwhile, the enforced long working hours, such as '996' (start at 9am, leave at 9pm and work six days a week), are associated with not only Chinese men but also women, which has caused both women and men to suffer from high-intensity work pressures (Wang and Hancock 2019). It has also led to the emergence of more than 60 million left-behind children who are growing up with their grandparents or other relatives while their parents live and work elsewhere (Sudworth 2016). The inflexibility of the work types that Chinese society provides for both women and men is another major reason for the left-behind children phenomenon. The concept of "job sharing, part-time, flexi-time, and term-time working are unfamiliar to most employers, even less entertained by them", which has led to the majority of couples working full-time and having less or no time to take care of children (Xiao and Cooke 2012). In this social environment, flexible writing time and the relatively profitable economic reward of commodified slash fan fiction undoubtedly provides an alternative outlet for Chinese female slash writers in distress, allowing them to achieve emotional satisfaction through building a balance between work and family, as well as maintaining economic independence by earning income through their passionate slash fan fiction writing. Therefore, considering the Chinese social context, the commercialisation of slash fan fiction can indeed contribute to both emotionally and economically empowering female slash writers.

It is precisely because the life pressures faced by women are universal in mainland China that the readers mentioned above are all so tolerant of the many authors who have given up writing *HP* slash fan fiction since its de-commercialisation. As I discussed in the previous section, today many *HP* slash writers have turned to using their writing skills to create profitable fiction such as original BL/*danmei* fiction, and slash fiction based on other profitable fandoms on the SFFN, such as slash stories based on Anglo-American and Chinese classics and historical figures. Therefore, although *HP* slash fan fiction cannot bring the authors commercial income, their writing skills developed through writing *HP* slash stories can still help them to gain commercial success from writing other genres.

In addition to emotionally and economically empowering women at an individual level, my interviewees also pointed out that it is precisely because BL/*danmei* and slash fan fiction are profitable that big corporations will stand together with fans to negotiate with authoritative power. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the social hostility faced by Chinese female fans is not only marked by ideological prejudice and stigma but also legal risks, especially for fan authors who prefer to portray erotic plots in their stories. Chinese BL/danmei, including slash, is "at risk of prosecution" because it "contains abundant graphic depictions of homosexuality, which puts it squarely at odds with the conservative sexual morals" of mainland China (Yang and Xu 2016b, p.252). The increasingly stringent censorship has led to the closure of many BL/*danmei* websites and even arrests of online BL/*danmei* writers (Zeng 2019). When writing this thesis, the SFFN encountered an exceptionally severe inspection. On 23rd May 2019, the director of the SFFN claimed on her social media account that she was taken away by the police, which caused serious panic among the SFFN readers and writers. Before an official explanation was given, one of my interviewees, writer M, contacted me to discuss her views on this matter. According to writer M:

> I think this reflects the tightness of China's cultural policy. The government wants to use cultural products to educate and guide the people politically. You can see that China's current fertility rate is only 1.1, which is already ranked among the bottom in the world. Maybe the government has attributed our unwillingness to have children to the spread of homosexual culture. I think that is why the heterosexual adult video websites have always been there, but *danmei* including slash has been repeatedly censored.

At the time of this interview, although the official announcement had not yet been released, writer M had already determined that the SFFN had been severely censored this time because it was one of the largest literature websites publishing BL/*danmei* and slash fan fiction in mainland China. Meanwhile, writer M also pointed out an ironic phenomenon that although the censorship activities against BL/*danmei* including slash are always conducted in the name of anti-pornography, heterosexual pornographic websites (although they are also illegal in mainland China) continue to flourish, and BL/*danmei* including slash has been hit hard. Therefore, writer M

believed that the root cause of the severe censorship of BL/*danmei* including slash lies in its non-heteronormative ideologies, not the so-called pornographic content. Writer M's view is not groundless: at the time of writing, the mainstream media's stigmatisation of BL/*danmei* and slash fans continues. The *Guangming Daily*, one of the official newspapers of the Chinese Communist Party, published an article on April 2021 that said:

> In rotten girls' world [rotten girls referring to BL/*danmei* and slash fans], men become objects to be gazed at and defined… *Danmei* stories are always away from the reality, however, some young audiences regard those stories as the reality, produced biased perception such as marriage and reproduction are not necessary in true love… *Danmei* culture hides a lot of pornographic and violent content, including unhealthy and paranoid gender concepts.
>
> (Meng 2021)

This paragraph clearly shows how the mainstream's aversion to BL/*danmei* and slash comes from the way "men become objects to be gazed at and defined" in BL/*danmei* and slash, and the notion that non-marriage and infertility that may be triggered by this subculture, which violates the traditional gender norms for women in China. It echoes writer M's speculation that BL/*danmei* and slash's non-heteronormative discourses and values are the fundamental reasons why the subculture has been consistently suppressed by the mainstream. In the mainstream view, these female fans, who have transgressed traditional heteronormative gender norms, have gained "unruly sexual agency", and are passionate about pursuing personal pleasure, not supporting "the traditional family unit" and "societal and national-level goals" (Ng and Li 2020, p.483).

When the SFFN published its official statement responding to this incident, writers' and readers' conjecture – including writer M's – that the BL/*danmei* and slash fan fiction on the SFFN was the reason why it was to be investigated was confirmed. The official announcement of the SFFN is shown below:

> We are responsible for showing the stories of the problems that have bypassed the SFFN's review and will sincerely accept the punishment. In accordance with the requirements of the competent authorities of the industry, we will close down the SFFN for fifteen days to carry out the comprehensive self-inspection and seriously rectify and reform all problematic stories and chapters, immediately delete two genres from the ancient BL and slash fan fiction subsites. With the help of relevant authorities, we will improve our internal censor system and conduct more rigorous content review to ensure legal operation of the SFFN.
>
> (BJ News 2019)

As the SFFN claimed in their statement, it added a manual review procedure. Today (2021), when a new chapter is released, it must pass manual review by the SFFN editors before it can be openly published on the SFFN. Notably, although there were BL/*danmei* and slash works of the SFFN that were identified as pornographic novels in its official report, it did not reveal that any authors of those "problematic stories" had been punished. In this regard, my interviewees expressed different attitudes. Writer B tended to agree with the censorship of BL/*danmei* and slash fan fiction, as well as being relatively optimistic about the future of this subculture. In writer B's words:

> I do not think the government is completely suppressing *danmei*. Firstly, I think fans must be aware of the fact that *danmei* itself is a subculture, which obviously will be restrained by mainstream culture. Some fans regard *danmei* as mainstream culture; I think they are unaware of their own limitation. It is their attempt to mainstream *danmei* culture that caused the government's suppression of *danmei* culture. But this is not a complete suppression. If the government really wants to completely suppress *danmei*, it would already be totally banned, just like *Devotion* and the Red Candel Games[xiii]

While denying that the government is completely suppressing *danmei* culture, writer B believed that *danmei*, including slash, should be properly supervised and regulated. According to writer B:

> Reasonable rules will promote the development and progress of literature, which also includes *danmei* and slash. It does not mean I advocate political forces to supervise and intervene in literary creation. I welcome professional literary criticism. If my stories are criticised by professional scholars, I will never insult them. However, Chinese literati have been fighting politics for thousands of years, no matter how strong the political power is. There is a saying that literati are unfortunate, but literature is lucky. It means, the dynasty will be annihilated, the regime will change, the literati will be suffering, but literature will never die. I am really hopeful at this point.

As writer B reported above, she believes that *danmei* including slash will continue to develop. She also regards the anti-pornographic campaign against BL/*danmei* as a reasonable rule that will "promote the development and progress" of *danmei* and slash, although she also dislikes the involvement of political forces in its production. Writer B said she was continuing to create slash and she maintained frequent communication with her editor to ensure that there was no plot in her serialised slash story that touched the 'bottom line' of policies. In another interview, writer D also reported she would not give up writing slash on the SFFN because the rectification policies of the SFFN made her feel that it was still safe to continue writing, as long as she was following the latest rules of the SFFN. In writer D's words:

> In the past, I wrote the meat [a metaphorical description of erotic scenes within Chinese fandom] as obscure and euphemistically as possible to avoid censorship. But after this incident, I decided not to write meat anymore. Although the SFFN's newest policy is strict, I think it is a kind of protection for authors. As long as you are following its rules, there will be no risk of meter checking [a metaphorical description within Chinese fandom referring to the police coming to arrest people in their home].

Different from writer B and writer D, writer M felt pessimistic about the increasingly strict policy referring to BL/*danmei* and slash. Writer M reported that:

> At present, the government has not completely suppressed *danmei* because they [the government] cannot show their control over the cultural industries so obviously. The current social environment has made it impossible for the authorities to eliminate *danmei*, slash, and any cultural productions in relation to the LGBTQ+ group, but they can craftily let them slowly disappear.

From writer M's narrative, we see that as an individual she felt powerlessness and panic in the face of the state's power. Taking into account this feeling, we can understand why *HP* slash fan writers and readers I interviewed all welcomed the commercialisation of slash fan fiction. Reader J's view can better help us understand why fans see commercial companies as alliances:

> As long as *danmei* and slash can make money [for the SFFN], the SFFN will not abandon the genres. I do not believe in the SFFN, I believe in the power of money. *Danmei* and slash and their fans already constitute a big market that cannot be ignored. Just like the popular saying online that a rotten girl [a term BL/*danmei* and slash fans used to describe themselves] equals a million soldiers, the one who gets the satisfaction of rotten girls can win a lot of commercial benefits. In this big market, the SFFN is almost monopolised. I do not believe the SFFN will give up such a large market. And I think you know, Tencent's China Literature Limited is the major shareholder of the SFFN. With Tencent, the SFFN will not get into big trouble easily.

The Tencent mentioned by reader J above is a giant company in mainland China, which ranked 14th in Forbes' 2019 Global Digital Economy 100 list (Shang et al. 2021). As reader J suggested, to consistently make a profit from the "big market", a big company like Tencent will continue to support the SFFN to negotiate with the state power and move within the grey area of the law. Compared with individual fans, such

a large company undoubtedly has more strength, power and confidence to negotiate with state power. From their negotiation, fans can obtain space to continue their BL/*danmei* and slash practices.

The commercialisation of fan spaces is a global phenomenon. In the Anglo-American context, scholars criticise "the co-optation and coloni[s]ation of fan creations, interactions, and space" brought about by commercialisation, and consider how to prevent the exploitation of fan labour (Busse 2015, p.112). In the Chinese context, media industries are seen as allies, working together to contend with censorships and regulations, which are "unclear and complicated in how they are understood and applied" (Ng and Li 2020, p.481). As Ng and Li (2020, p.481) observe, censorship of BL/*danmei* is inconsistent, evidenced by the fact that the regulation has classified homosexuality as "unhealthy sexual content that should be deleted" from broadcasting, but LGBTQ+ characters "have continued to appear in television and films produced and screened in mainland China". In their interview, writer E believed that such inconsistencies are the result of negotiations between commercial companies and the government for their commercial interests. In writer E's words:

> The National Radio and Television Administration [NRTA] has banned the broadcasting of *danmei* drama, but you have also seen that every year there are still *danmei*-adapted dramas broadcast online, such as *The Guardians* and *The Untamed*. They were both adapted from the original *danmei* fiction on the SFFN and gained phenomenal popularity. Although the homosexual romance has been changed to 'socialist brotherhood' [a term originated by fans to characterise the ambiguous relationship between male protagonists in *danmei*-adapted dramas], the officers of the NRTA are not fools. How can they not know that those are actually *danmei*? After all, it is the power of capital.

The powerlessness of individual fans means they must rely on capital strength to gain space for themselves. The change in their attitude towards the commercialisation of BL/*danmei* and slash is also born from this. When the SFFN decided to start running the VIP project in 2008, many writers and readers were opposed to such

commercialisation because they "worried that the lure of financial gains would lower the quality of *danmei* writing, weaken the radical messages of the genre, and drive away its core readers" (Yang and Xu 2016b, p.252). Nowadays, although some fans still insist on writing for free on websites such as the domestic website Loft and the overseas websites such as Archive of Our Own (which had been blocked in mainland China since February 2020), many fans have voluntarily integrated themselves into the business model of big companies such as the SFFN. As reader J reported in their interview:

> I always pay to read VIP chapters on the SFFN, although I know where to download the free copies. I voluntarily become a chive [in Chinese fandom, cutting chives means that the capital takes advantage of fans' love for idols or something else to squeeze their spending power]. Only with a steady stream of chives like me can *danmei* always exist.

In reader J's narrative, she is very clear about the relationship between big companies and fans. For large companies, fans are chives who need to contribute economically. However, in the face of the unmatched state power, fans must rely on the power of big companies, although they must voluntarily become chives like reader J. Therefore, we can clearly see that although fans and big companies are allies when contesting authoritative power, the power relationship between fans and big companies is not equal, and fans remain more powerless than big companies.

Taking such power dynamics into account, Yang and Xu's (2017) suggestions that big corporations "bear the same risk of playing in the legal grey zone as small players" should be carefully re-examined. As shown in the SFFN's official announcement, the most recent punishments for the SFFN included closing down the website for fifteen 15 days and deleting two sub-genres – which are found to contain pornographic stories by censors – from BL and slash fan fiction subsites. For the SFFN, such punishments are not significant. Compared with the SFFN, individual female fans have been punished much more severely. For example, in 2018, a BL writer under the pseudonym Tianyi was sentenced to 10.5 years in prison for the crime of illegally producing and selling pornographic materials in mainland China (Flood 2018). In

addition to Tianyi, the SFFN's contracting writer Shenhai was also arrested on the charge of illegally publishing and selling pornographic books in 2017 (The Caixin News 2019). According to reports, Shenhai used to consult her SFFN editor about publishing her BL works. The editor informed her that she had to delete and modify some content in the story, as well as ensuring that the paperback of this story would sell more than 6,000 copies. Eventually, Shenhai gave up publishing her book through the SFFN and turned to a private publishing house, which led to her being arrested for illegally publishing pornographic publications. Fans continued to focus on Shenhai's incident because she was under arrest for two years, but the court did not pronounce her four year sentence until 15th May 2019 (Yang 2019). The severe sentence these female writers suffered caused deep sympathy and resentment among Chinese BL fans, and some criticisms have been reposted numerous times on social media by fans, such as a comment pointing out that the male administrator of a boarding school who had sexually assaulted nine underage girls was only sentenced to four years in prison, suggesting that sexual assault is less severe than sexual fantasies (BBC China 2018).

The difference between the punishments suffered by the SFFN and individual female fans shows that although big companies and individual fans are both moving in the grey area of the law, individual female fans always suffer the most. Although Busse's (2015, p.112) warning that "the merging of fan and industry interests often ends up shifting costs and risks onto the fans" is based on the Anglo-American context, it also applies in Chinese BL/*danmei* fandom today. When viewing big companies and female fans as allies, we cannot ignore the risks that fans take as part of this alliance.

To sum up, in this section, I have pointed out in the Chinese social context how the commercialisation of slash fan fiction can support female fans, especially young girls, alleviate anxiety and struggle when they use slash to satisfy and express their sexual desires and fantasies. In this process, the sense of professionalism brought by the commercialisation of slash can emotionally empower women and the income provided can also financially empower female slash authors. Although in this case *HP* slash fan fiction has been de-commercialised, the writing skills of *HP* female slash authors can still bring them new income once they turn to other genres. Further, it is precisely because BL/*danmei* and slash can bring commercial benefits to big companies that they contest regulations with the Chinese government for their own interests. It is the

struggle between big companies and the authoritative power that has made room for female BL/*danmei* and slash fans to express their non-heteronormative gender and sexuality discourses and enjoy their transgressive sexual desires and fantasies. Therefore, Chinese female fans and scholars such as Yang and Xu (2017) regard big companies as allies, although fans are still exploited. In addition, in the face of authoritative power, the ability of individual female fans to take risks is much weaker than that of large companies. Although driven by commercial interests, large companies are constantly challenging the state power and they still enjoy many more privileges than individual female fans. In the end, it is always female fans who suffer most from their non-heteronormative practices.

In the next section, I will continue to discuss the impact of the censorship on Chinese slash fan fiction, especially focusing on how the anti-pornographic censorship campaigns suppress Chinese female fans' expressions of sexual and erotic fantasy and desire.

4.1.2 Censorship and Female Sexual Fantasy

As noted in the literature review, although not all slash is necessarily erotic, a large number of slash stories contain explicit erotic depictions of sexual encounters between male partners in both Anglo-American and Chinese slash fandoms (Keft-Kennedy 2008; Feng 2013; Tian 2015). Hockx (2015, p.115) claims that Chinese "BL and slash belong to the general area of erotic fiction" because of their "prominent sexual content". In the case of Chinese *HP* slash fan fiction, in the early days when the erotic content had not been strictly censored, plenty of *HP* slash stories were explicitly erotic.

With the increasingly strict regulation of pornography and severe punishment for violators, recent *HP* slash stories on the SFFN do not contain any explicit depictions of sexual encounters – the most intimate contact is kissing. For example, in the Voldemort/Harry slash story [*HP*] *Differences*, when the plot progresses to sexual description, the author writes:

> Voldemort also fixed his eyes on Harry. After a while, he suddenly smiled and said: "come here". He stretched out his right hand to Harry.

> Harry stood up, but he did not grab Voldemort's right hand. He kept their eyes connected and used one hand to untie his loose nightgown. The light black fabric quickly slipped under Harry's feet, but neither Harry nor Voldemort paid attention to it –
>
> River crab deletes thousands of words here, Voldemort and Harry rolled the sheets [In Chinese fandom, 'river crab' refers to censorship; 'rolling the sheets' means having sex].
>
> When Harry woke up again, his bones were sore, his body was covered with hickeys. When he got up, he felt that his waist was about to break.

In the above writing, the author of [*HP*] *Differences* described the ambiguous atmosphere and action between Harry and Voldemort before their sexual encounter, as well as the feelings of Harry after their sexual intimacy. But the author did not describe Harry and Voldemort's physical sexual activity. What was used to fill this gap is an explanatory sentence, which both explained the reason for skipping this sex description and told readers that Harry and Voldemort did indeed have sex. Even in this explanatory sentence, the author's language was cautious. Instead of using the words "censorship" and "having sex" directly, the author made use of the jargon familiar to fans as alternatives, in which "river crab" refers to censorship and "rolling the sheets" means having sex. By doing so, the author avoided the risk of being censored as much as possible. Today, the censorship is extremely strict and the rules of the SFFN are more severe than before. As writer E reported in the interview:

> My editor clearly told me that any description of sex is not allowed. Specifically, it was not allowed to describe the body parts below the neck but kissing and holding hands can be described.

The evasive treatment of sex scenes by the author of [*HP*] *Differences* is now universal. Based on my own reading experience, BL/*danmei* and slash writers always use sentences such as "turn off the lights and get on the river crab" and "river crab drifts

by, you guys all know about it" to refer to the erotic descriptions that would ordinarily exist.

As discussed in the previous section, my interviewees were not dissatisfied with the SFFN's strict regulations towards erotic descriptions, agreeing that this is a kind of protection for both the SFFN and the authors themselves. However, for the anti-pornographic censorship campaigns against slash fan fiction and BL/*danmei* in general, my interviewees expressed different views. Regarding how nowadays *HP* slash fan fiction does not allow any sexual description, writer B said:

> I don't like meat [referring to graphic descriptions of sexual encounters in Chinese BL/*danmei* and slash fandom]. Not only the meat in *HP* slash, but also in any *danmei* fiction. After giving birth to my son, I felt I was frigid.

For writer B, because she originally did not like the graphic descriptions of sexual scenes in *HP* slash fan fiction, the SFFN's restrictive regulations were not bothersome to her. However, as mentioned in the previous section, writer B also emphasised that her dislike of pornographic descriptions in slash and being unaffected by the anti-pornographic censorship campaigns did not mean that she agreed with the supervision and intervention of political forces in slash and BL/*danmei* creation.

Different from writer B, reader G expressed her dissatisfaction about sexual descriptions not being allowed in *HP* slash fan fiction:

> Of course [I like reading erotic scenes in *HP* slash], I am a sexually healthy woman in my 30s… *HP* slash stories are love stories. Will two people who are in love not have sex? For lovers, they will spend at least 30% of their time doing this [having sex]. In *HP* slash stories, when the relationship between two male protagonists reaches a certain level, they will naturally have sex. If the sexual plots are absent, the story will lack very important things. I even like slash stories which are full of erotic descriptions. However, such kind of stories cannot appear on the SFFN. After all, I do not understand why there

> is no rating system in China. If the government can establish a rating system in China, adults can legally and naturally read what they can read.

In reader G's expression above, she believed that it was reasonable and natural for adults to have sexual desires and to find ways to fulfil them. Rather than establishing a rating system, the censorship in mainland China now simply bans all pornographic descriptions for the public of all ages. Reader G felt that this was a decision that went against common sense.

On the surface, the anti-pornographic censorship campaigns target all media types, including heterosexual pornographic novels, images, and videos. However, my interviewees reported that BL/*danmei* and slash were subject to stricter and more thorough censorship than heterosexual pornographic content. In writer M's words, "the heterosexual adult video websites and the literature websites providing heterosexual pornographic novels are still operating, only pornographic BL/*danmei* and slash are banned". Similar to writer M, reader J also reported that:

> My boyfriend still watches porn from the website he is used to, but I cannot see any *HP* slash with meat [erotic description] on the SFFN anymore. Of course, I can go to AO3 to find some meat, but what I want to say is that it is a double standard in China [towards heterosexual porn and BL/*danmei* and slash].

As writer M and reader J have recognised above, there are double standards in the anti-pornographic censorship campaign of the Chinese government. Heterosexual adult videos, which are used to satisfy the sexual desire of heterosexual men, are still easy to access; while the erotic descriptions in slash and BL/*danmei* in general, which are used to fulfil the queer sexual desires of female fans, are strictly prohibited.

Chinese BL/*danmei* and slash fan fiction used to contain passionate erotic descriptions, which led to them being considered a space where Chinese women could freely express their non-heteronormative sexual desires and a way for Chinese young girls

to learn about sex that they are ashamed to express in real life (Feng 2013, Tian 2015, Zhang 2016). However, with the increasingly strict anti-pornographic censorship campaigns, this space and outlet for women has been closed, while heterosexual men are still given a carte blanche to explore their sexual desires and fantasies, although what men watch is also illegal in terms of the Chinese government's regulations. When I was conducting interviews with writers and readers, they could access fan fiction websites abroad, like AO3, to find slash stories with erotic content that aligned with their desires. However, at the time of this writing (2021), access to AO3 has also been banned by the Chinese government (since February 2020). Fans in mainland China must buy and use a VPN (virtual private network) to access AO3 to read slash stories. Not every fan can buy and use a VPN, which means that the space for a large proportion of female fans, especially young girls, to express their queer sexual desires has been further restricted. Women's non-traditional cultural interests and tastes continue to be suppressed by this patriarchal society.

4.1.3 Conclusion

In section 4.1, I mainly addressed RQ4: how does the commercialisation and the online censorship of Chinese slash fan fiction affect Chinese female slash fans in their attempts to negotiate gender and sexuality in *HP* slash fan fiction and their offline lives? There are many conflicting opinions about the commercialisation of *HP* slash fan fiction and BL/*danmei* in general in China. On one hand, for Chinese female fans, commercialisation is empowering, allowing female fans to utilise platforms such as the SFFN to change their functions and layouts to better satisfy their preferences and tastes. As discussed above, gender and sexuality discourses are embodied in the functions and options of the SFFN. Therefore, by impacting those SFFN functions and options, female fans contribute to reconstructing the gender and sexuality discourses that are not completely consistent with traditional heteronormative discourses. Also, the sense of professionalism brought about through becoming profitable writers emotionally empowers female slash writers, and the income from their writing also financially empowers them. Although the commercialisation carries with it a danger of exploitation for female fans – compared with commercial companies that use BL/*danmei* and slash and their fans to make profit, individual female fans earn little profit – it nevertheless contributes to maintaining the space for female fans to enjoy

their non-heteronormative fantasies, desires, and pleasure in mainland China. Taking into account the specific social context of mainland China, this queer female space stems from the constant struggle between big companies pursuing commercial interests and authoritative censorship that tries to suppress transgressive subcultures.

On the other hand, the limitations of gaining empowerment from commercialisation are also clear. In the case of the dilemma encountered by Chinese *HP* slash writers, when Chinese *HP* slash fan fiction can no longer be commercialised on the SFFN, we can see that when women's favourite cultural products no longer prove profitable, and women's voices, preferences, interests, and tastes are once again silenced and marginalised. Moreover, for female fans, while being exploited by big companies, they also take higher risks than commercial companies. In the face of authoritative power, the ability of individual female fans to take risks is much weaker than that of large companies. In the end, it is always female fans who suffer most from their non-heteronormative practices.

Historically, Chinese BL/*danmei* and slash fandom used to be a queer space where female fans could freely express and enjoy their non-heteronormative sexual fantasies and erotic desires. Today, with the increasingly strict anti-pornographic censorship campaigns in mainland China, Chinese female fans' expression of erotic fantasies and desires that transgress traditional heteronormative gender and sexuality norms have been suppressed to a large extent. In these so-called anti-pornographic censorship campaigns, the privileges of heterosexual men stand out, whereby heterosexual men can still easily access their favourite pornographic media content, but women's queer cultural interests and tastes are largely suppressed in this patriarchal society.

In the next section, I turn to address RQ2, exploring how Chinese female fans' practices of writing and reading *HP* slash fan fiction and their communication with other *HP* fans influences their offline lives.

4.2 The Negotiation of Gender and Sexuality in *HP* Slash Fan Fiction

Remaining within the commercial context of the SFFN and the broader social and cultural context in mainland China, the goal of this section is to demonstrate how Chinese female slash writers and readers negotiate gender and sexuality through their writing, reading, and communications (RQ1). The influence of traditional Chinese culture, Japanese animation culture, and Anglo-American popular culture on female fans' negotiation also forms the focus of this section (RQ3).

Focusing mainly on the selected Chinese *HP* slash stories on the SFFN and readers' comments on them, supplied by my interview data, I first discuss how Chinese female fans employ the tropes of gender change and time-travel to challenge the dualistic views of male-female and heterosexual-homosexual to reconstruct fluid gender roles and concepts, as well as their related gender inequalities and hierarchies. I then turn to analyse the *gong*/*shou* models in Chinese *HP* slash fan fiction, arguing that the hetero-gendered roles and norms are negotiated by Chinese female fans through their creation of more androgynous male characters and relatively equal relationships between *gong* and *shou* characters. After that, I focus on the male bodies and male beauty preferred by Chinese female fans, discussing how women actively express their various kinds of sexual pleasure and fantasies through their enthusiastic creation and consuming of eroticised male bodies. Finally, I attend to the mpreg (male pregnancy) trope in Chinese *HP* slash fan fiction, with a focus on how Chinese female fans employ mpreg in *HP* slash to negotiate masculinity, heteronormativity, and LGBTQ+ rights in mainland China. In these four sub-sections, the way in which Chinese female writers' and readers' negotiations of gender and sexuality issues are affected by multi-cultural influences will be highlighted.

4.2.1 Gender Change and Time-travel in Harry Potter Slash Fan Fiction

The communal context of fan fiction – in which fan fiction writers and readers are very familiar with the source text and fan stories they have produced – must be taken into consideration to understand fan stories (Busse and Lothian 2009). According to Busse and Lothian (2009, p.2), "tropes often function as community-wide conceits", which cannot be interpreted outside of the fan community that produced them. In the Chinese context, tropes used in *HP* slash stories are not only created by *HP* fan writers and readers but also deeply affected by the platform on which those stories exist.

Rooted in and developed on the SFFN, the popular narrative features and tropes of *HP* slash fan fiction on the SFFN are consistent with those of other genre fictions on the site, which are often different from the taste of membership-only *HP* platforms. For instance, in the general policies of LH.net (pseudonym), a Chinese dedicated *HP* slash fan fiction platform, the forum moderator claims, "It is forbidden to publish *HP* slash stories featuring original characters and time-travellers. Although such kind of *HP* slash stories are popular on the SFFN, it only makes us feel sick". As mentioned in this policy, *HP* slash stories featuring original characters and time-travellers have proven to be extremely fashionable on the SFFN.

The trope of time-travel, which has been employed across different genres of popular online fictions on the SFFN, has the protagonist travelling back to either a known or unknown historical period, forward in time to a distant future, or to a fictional universe based on existing media texts. Among different types of time-travel fiction, the gender change time-travel subgenre used to be popular within *HP* slash fandom in its early days. Unlike Anglo-American 'genderfuck' slash fan fiction that use fantasy tropes to temporarily alter male characters' bodies to female bodies (Busse and Lothian 2009, p.1), Chinese gender change slash fan fiction always employs the trope of time-travel to enable a modern Chinese woman's soul to travel to an alternative universe and become reincarnated in the physical body of a man, who had usually died at the time the woman time-travelled (Feng 2013). Therefore, Chinese body change fiction has been seen as "a mixed genre that combines elements of time travel, BL and traditional heterosexual romance" (Yang and Xu 2015, p.139).

The *HP* slash story *About the Time-travel of Harry Potter* (hereafter *Time-travel of HP*) is a typical example of gender change slash stories. *Time-travel of HP* first appeared on the SFFN in 2007 and was completed in 2009 with a total of 898,664 words – it has been bookmarked by 8,992 readers, received 20,334 comments, and achieved a high story score of 352,651,424. This longform *HP* slash fan fiction portrays the soul of a modern Chinese woman named Bai Xue (literally 'Snow White' in Chinese) travelling back into the *HP* universe. When she regains consciousness, she has become the unborn male baby in Lily Potter's womb – Harry Potter. Like the source text, Snow-Harry experiences the pain of losing their parents, is raised by their muggle guardians (the Dursleys) and enters the magical world at the age of 11.

However, Snow-Harry has an extremely strong and special magic ability (summoning and controlling plants) and physical power (skilled in Chinese Kung Fu and assassination) and retains the memories of the canonical narrative of the *HP* book series and films. These abilities and knowledge help Snow-Harry to alter the fate of many characters and defeat Voldemort. In the process of fighting Voldemort, Snow-Harry also falls in love with Severus Snape.

In this slash story, the protagonist is a woman before her time-travel. After travelling into the *HP* universe, as she inhabits the body of Harry Potter, a male body, she physically becomes a man. Although the protagonist experiences the transformation from a woman to a man, the *Time-travel of HP* does not depict the psychological struggle of being born into a new sexuality. Rather, the protagonist accepts her new gender quickly and frankly. Female authors' desire to write gender change fiction has been considered to be about the disapproval of their female bodies and disadvantageous gender identity (Feng 2013). In *Time-travel of HP*, in describing the reason for the protagonist time-travelling to the *HP* universe, the author describes how the physical and spiritual powers of the protagonist have broken the balance of her world, so she must travel to the *HP* fictional universe to avoid the destruction of the real world.

Such descriptions can be read in two ways. On the one hand, it can be read that the author does not regard the female gender as cumbersome and powerless. Rather, the author portrays a very strong female protagonist who has already obtained power and privilege over most males. However, such extreme shaping of female power can also be considered as the author's resistance to women's powerless position in the real male-dominant world. The description that the woman's power is too strong and could destroy the world also echoes prejudices about professional women in Chinese society. In the Chinese workplace, rather than being seen as an asset, being female puts women in an uncompetitive position with their male colleagues, because mainstream ideology believes that women should focus on getting married and taking care of children (Feng 2017). Within this environment, women with high education and work initiative have been devalued, as seen in an article on the Chinese Women's Federation website that says: "As women age, they are worth less and less, so by the time they get their MA or PhD, they are already old, like yellowed pearls" (Lovell 2014). Therefore, in the

feminist model, the author's portrayal of the powerful female protagonist Snow-Harry can be understood as resistance to the unequal status of Chinese women in the real world. However, the author's interest in depicting the powerful female shedding her female body and inhabiting a male body still tends to result in a compromise with the mainstream where it is natural for men to embrace powerful forces to succeed.

The author's dissatisfaction with gender inequality that says women are subordinate to men is further developed in the story, such as in the protagonist's following narration:

> Teachers have always told me how excellently my Dad had done in the classroom and Quidditch team. His name had been on the College Memorial Cup since his second grade. However, they rarely told me about my Mum.
>
> They only appreciated the appearance of my Mum. They told me she was a beautiful and charming witch. She was lovely and gracious, elegant and graceful. I couldn't say I was not happy, but I still felt sad because everyone only appreciated her appearance.
>
> After marrying Dad, she became Mrs. Potter. Everyone remembered she was the gentle and virtuous mistress of Potter's family and then the mother of Harry Potter. But I knew in addition to her well-known beauty, she must be intelligent, kind and talented. There must be other people besides Dad who really understood, appreciated and remembered her.
>
> (*Time-travel of HP,* chapter 111)

Through this narration, the author clearly criticises the different and hierarchal standards that social discourse uses to define men and women. The gender expectations of a man, such as Snow-Harry's father James Potter, are to be capable, talented, and competitive, which then enables him to become a qualified social leader; while those of a woman, such as Lily Potter, are to be physically beautiful, virtuous, and home-based, which leads her to become a good wife, that is, supportive, subordinate to and dependent on a man. Such descriptions of *Time-travel of HP* tend to echo Richardson (2015, p.10) who has observed that the main concern of gender is

"not simply to describe the ways in which gender is socially and culturally defined", but to understand unequal "social, economic and cultural status and power" between women and men. In this narration, the author clearly addresses a negotiation of a woman's traditional values through the mouth of the son, whereby in addition to being valued as a wife and mother, a woman's individual capabilities and talents should also be 'understood, appreciated, and remembered'.

Additionally, in this extract, the author constructs the relationship between Snow-Harry's father and mother as an ideal partnership: Snow-Harry's parents are equally intelligent, kind and talented; yet more importantly, the father is the one who "really understood, appreciated and remembered" the mother. In the author's description, James and Lily are equally outstanding and have a great deal of respect for each other in their marriage, which contributes to establishing an equal relationship. Considering that the Potters have passed away in the story, the author's portrayal of the idealistic equal relationship between James and Lily can be read as a satire of the social reality in mainland China: a truly equal relationship between a man and a woman does not exist between living people in the Chinese context.

The author further negotiates the traditional gender binary and stereotypical gender roles through humorous dialogue between the Weasley twins:

> "Yeah", Fred nodded his head… "Harry is good at cooking and housekeeping. He is also docile and considerate. All these characteristics are completely the virtues that an ideal wife must possess".
>
> "Harry's ability and talents far surpass wizards of the same age as him. He is loyal, rational, fair-minded, gentle, decisive and resolute". George went on to say, "These are so-called knight demeanours".
>
> "Harry! You are exactly a perfect lover for both men and women". The twins said in unison.
>
> (*Time-travel of HP*, chapter 126)

The dialogue of Fred and George clearly demonstrates the stereotypically feminine and masculine attributes that are respectively connected to women and men, which at the same time produce the unequal social status of women and men. As shown in Fred's dialogue, traditional feminine characteristics, such as proficiency in cooking and housekeeping, ultimately reinforce common-sense ideologies whereby becoming a good wife is the most significant social value for a woman. Contrary to the gender expectations of a woman (being a good wife), a man's gender expectations are to be capable, talented, rational, fair-minded, and decisive. All these man-associated values enable him to become a qualified social leader. Considering the inequalities of social, economic and cultural status between a good wife and a qualified social leader, Fred and George's dialogue represents how socially and culturally produced gender differences lead to gender inequality between women and men. However, such stereotypically and often exclusively feminine and masculine attributes both appear in Snow-Harry. As a female in a male body, the gender change trope means that Snow-Harry embodies both feminine and masculine characteristics. At the same time, the gender change trope also provides a sharp contrast: when Snow-Harry is in her female body, her strong physical and spiritual strength (traditional masculine traits) will destroy the world; when Snow-Harry reembodies a male body, the feminine characteristics in her male body do not make her devalued by other people, rather, they are valued as a 'perfect lover'. In a feminist mode, such a comparison explores how Snow-Harry is regarded differently depending on their differently gendered body.

Although the gender change trope can contribute to exploring gender roles, norms, and inequality, gender change *HP* slash fan stories remain controversial within Chinese *HP* slash fandom. Whether this kind of fan fiction can be regarded as slash fan fiction is the most controversial issue among *HP* fan readers. For example, reader 1 commented that she cannot think of any stories containing female-to-male gender change plots as slash stories and reader 2 even criticised them as pseudo-slash. Compared with readers 1 and 2, who simply expressed their dissatisfaction with the gender change trope, reader 3 tends to analyse the reasons why such stories are difficult to classify. According to reader 3, as Snow-Harry is essentially a female in a male body, if she/he has a relationship with a man, she/he is heterosexual psychologically but gay physically; if she/he has a relationship with a woman, she/he is lesbian psychologically but heterosexual physically. Reader 3 prefers to consider

this story as a slash one. As reader 3 stated, as a male-bodied heterosexual-identified woman falling in love with Severus, a man, Snow-Harry is hard to identify as heterosexual or homosexual. In this discourse, the stability of gender and sexuality identification has been subverted and a sense of fluid sexual identity is required. As Yang and Xu (2016b, p.147) suggest, gender change stories "interrogate the presumptively natural and fixed categories of sex, gender and sexuality, putting deep-rooted binaries of male/female, masculine/feminine, and heterosexual/homosexual all on trial".

Despite being criticised as being pseudo-slash by some readers, *Time-travel of HP* has still found favour with a significant number of readers, reflected in its high story scores and large number of bookmarks. Its popularity can be closely related to the overall trends of the SFFN during its serial period. Reader 4 wrote a comment on the story in 2017, saying that:

> it was really hot in those years [2007-2009] and I remembered its story score ranked first among all *HP* slash stories in those years. I really loved reading it at that time. However, I do not like to read any female-to-male gender change stories at present. I think the taste of readers has changed. In those years the gender change stories spread throughout the SFFN, but I cannot find this kind of stories on any ranking list nowadays.

Reader 5 agreed with Reader 4 – she remembered that *Time-travel of HP* was one of her favourite *HP* slash stories, but when she started to read it again, she found that she could no longer accept the gender change plot. Different from Readers 4 and 5, who changed their opinion of *Time-travel of HP*, Reader 6 has stayed loyal to the story and comments that she is very grateful to the author for portraying Snow-Harry as a mature and rational woman, which allows her to better imagine herself as Snow-Harry loving her favourite Severus Snape. Reader 6's comments are reminiscent of Penley's (1992) observation that slash fan fiction offers a great range of cross-gender identifications to female fans to be either or both male protagonists and also still have either or both as sexual objects. In the case of reader 6, the gender change trope allows her to better identify with Snow-Harry and find pleasure from such identification. Therefore,

despite being criticised as pseudo-slash by some readers, scholars such as Yang and Xu (2015, p.139) also suggest that the "inner logic of appropriating male body to articulate female desire" of female-to-male body change stories "is very much in accord with BL".

Following the general trend on the SFFN that *HP* slash reader's attitudes towards gender change *HP* slash stories have changed from fondness to criticism, *HP* slash writers have gradually given up employing this trope in their writing. Compared to the decline of the gender change trope, the trope of time-travel is still fashionable within *HP* slash fandom. *[HP] Chaotic Era* (hereafter *Chaotic Era*) – which began serialisation in 2009 and was completed in 2010 on the SFFN – is a special slash story among many *HP* time-travel slash stories as its author added approximately 200 time-travellers to the *HP* canon universe and invited her readers to play those time-traveller roles when she started to serialise the story. Traditionally, a time-travel story usually only portrays one time-traveller as the protagonist. However, in *Chaotic Era*, in addition to the large number of time-travellers, none of those time-travellers is the protagonist and the author also establishes clear rules for them. In chapter two of *Chaotic Era*, the author first emphasises that all time-travellers in this story should be original characters who never appear in J. K. Rowling's *HP* universe, which means that readers cannot become *HP* canon characters. In addition, the author explicitly requires readers not to set strange appearances (purple hair or silver eyes), names (Slytherin or Merlin), or abilities (those not existing in the *HP* canon) for their roles. Finally, the author solemnly declares that in *Chaotic Era* the time-travellers would not have romantic relationships with canon characters. The regulations set by the author represent a concentrated response to the enthusiastic applications of readers in their comments.

In more than 170 applications, the time-travellers that readers created were themselves grounded in fantasy, which further reflected their interpretation and negotiation of gender. Surprisingly, while female slash readers criticised female-to-male gender change *HP* slash fan fiction as pseudo-slash, some of the female readers of *Chaotic Era* still shaped their time-traveller roles as males. For example, in the commentary on the story, reader 7 said that she would like to become a male Ravenclaw student named Gulagnes Kaus, with grey hair, grey eyes, and a hunchback, who is unhealthy

and coughs all year round. Reader 7 portrays her role as a man who runs counter to traditional masculinity: the man she describes is not handsome (he has a hunchback) and not physically strong (he coughs all the time). Like reader 7, reader 8 also created her role as a slovenly male student whose appearance is ordinary, and whose hobby is unfocused wandering. Reader 9 also set her role as a clumsy male student who always loses his way in Hogwarts. In their role shaping, traditional masculine traits such as ambition and leadership temperament are absent. Instead, their preferred masculine features are not aggressive, but rather clumsy and delicate.

However, when female readers portray their roles as women, their preferences become diverse. For example, reader 10 portrayed her role as:

> [I have] dark red hair and light blue but very sharp eyes, which can make the person being looked at feel like being scanned by X-ray. I am tall and thin, delicate and pretty, and also have the intellectual and composed temperament – before the time travelling, I am an excellent scholar. I am interested in magic, loving reading and doing experiment, and trying to use Muggle methods to illustrate magic.

As this is the *HP* universe, reader 10 set her appearance as having dark red hair and light blue eyes – an Anglo-American look different from the Chinese norm. However, the "tall and thin" body shape and "delicate and pretty" female appearance, as well as her intellectual and career success as an "excellent scholar" with "intellectual and composed temperament" are quite in line with ideal pictures of women in modern China, which encourage women to become both "gentle, hard-working, caring, modest, decorous" and "independent, knowledgeable and competent" (Liu 2014, p.21). Reader 10 constructs a complex female image, which includes the appearance and temperamental characteristics of both Anglo-American and Chinese women. Such a female image both conforms to traditional Chinese femininity and contains the independent spirit of contemporary Chinese women.

Such a complex female image is also reflected in the comments of many other readers. For example, reader 11 described herself as a "tall and thin Ravenclaw third grade girl

with black hair and iron blue eyes". At the same time, she was a "mad researcher", who "dismembered and reinstalled Peeves for research". Reader 12 portrayed herself as "a Ravenclaw girl with black big wavy curly hair". Before time-travelling, she was "a professional accountant"; after graduating from Hogwarts, she would like to be "financial director of the Weasley's Wizard Wheezes". Readers 13 and 14 respectively portrayed their roles as "a medical school student" and "the president of a multinational corporation". For all these readers, in addition to their feminine appearance, women's professional abilities and independence are well valued. Their yearning for success, leadership, professional competence, and independence can also be seen as female readers' fictional desires reflecting their aspirations for their real lives.

It is also worth noting that although the author of the *Chaotic Era* clearly required her readers to "not set up characters with strange hair and eyes colours such as purple, pink, silver and so on", they ignored her warning and included such strange colours in their characters' appearances. For example, reader 15 portrayed herself as "having long white curly hair and light blonde eyes", reader 7 said she would like to be a male with "grey eyes and hair", while reader 16 preferred "dark green long straight hair and dark blue eyes", and reader 17 described herself with "purple eyes". In these readers' settings, their unusual hair and eye colours are not achieved through hair dye or cosmetic contact lenses but through the inherent and natural characteristics of their characters. Readers' preferences for these kinds of unrealistic appearances were considered by some of my interviewees to be the result of the influence of Japanese manga and animation culture. For instance, in their interview, reader J reported that:

> When *HP* slash fan fiction started to appear on the SFFN, the SFFN was dominated by slash fan fiction based on Japanese manga and animations. So, I remembered that early *HP* slash stories had a lot of Japanese anime elements. For example, there were many *HP* and Japanese animation crossover stories. And also, when *HP* slash authors created their original characters, they tended to set these characters with strange-coloured eyes and hair – just like the eyes and hair of those cartoon characters we saw in animations.

The *Chaos Era* was serialised in 2009, when *HP* fan fiction was beginning to become popular on the SFFN. As reader J reported, the influence of Japanese manga and animation can be seen in the construction of self-image of the female readers of *Chaos Era*. In other words, when these female fans were reconstructing female gendered discourses, they had been impacted by Japanese animation culture. However, the author's requirement to avoid "characters with strange hair and eyes colours", also indicates that the trends were starting to change. Some *HP* fan authors, like the author of *Chaos Era*, no longer tried to add Japanese animation cultural elements to *HP* fan stories. As a fandom based on Harry Potter – a British fantasy novel series – it is not surprising that Chinese female fan authors and readers tried to avoid the influence of Japanese animation culture on *HP* slash fan fiction and *HP* fandom in general. Among the comments of *Chaos Era* readers, reader 18 had constructed her roles' image in an Anglo-American style:

> My name is Jenny Humphrey, the Little J in American drama *Gossip Girl*. I am an American witch from Salem Witches Institute. I have long white-gold hair, blue eyes, and bright red lips. I love to sport smoky eyes, wear a short black leather jacket and super high-heeled fish-mouth black ankle boots. I always change the skirt of my school uniform to a shorter length to reveal my slender long legs.

Reader 18 constructed a sexy woman's image, which was derived from the heroine's image in the popular American TV drama *Gossip Girl*. Although such female images in Anglo-American TV and films have been criticised by feminists as presenting women as sex objects through skimpy clothing that reveal a lot of skin (Aubrey and Frisby 2011), it could be considered as resistant in the Chinese context, as it runs counter to the "gentle, modest, and decorous" femininity advocated by both traditional and modern Chinese culture (Liu 2014, p.21).

In addition to constructing female roles with characteristics influenced by traditional Chinese, Japanese animation and popular Anglo-American culture, female readers of *Chaotic Era* also addressed their rotten girl identity and behaviour. For example, reader 19 wrote that:

> [I am] a typical rotten girl with black eyes and hair. I am a voyeur, loving to peek into the emotional life of the little white-blond nobleman [Draco Malfoy] who is the partner of Professor Snape. My smile is rather wretched. My mantra is: ah! Beautiful young men love each other, how harmonious this world is.

Reader 19 only provides a few details about her character's physical descriptions. Rather, reader 19 emphasises her "rotten girl" identity, who is voyeuristic, "wretched", and obsessed with love between males. The rotten girl identity appears repeatedly in the readers' comments. For example, reader 20 described her role as "a rotten girl who always fantasised scenes of men falling in love in her mind", with the ultimate dream of "throwing down Professor Snape". Reader 21 also portrayed her character as "a stalker and voyeur", who was obsessed with shipping Harry and Snape. Through these readers' descriptions, we can clearly see these "rotten girls" are far from traditional Chinese femininity. Most importantly, these rotten girls are not sexual objects but desiring subjects – in all the readers' comments above, they are remarkably frank and candid about their strong and even voyeuristic desire for male characters they love, such as Draco and Snape. These female readers who are actively expressing their desires are desiring subjects rather than objects of desire, which is far from the traditional submissive female gender norms.

To summarise, in this section I have discussed how Chinese female fans negotiate gender issues through writing and reading Chinese *HP* slash fan fiction on the SFFN. Through analysing the story *Time-travel of HP* and readers' comments on it, I argue that by using the dual tropes of gender change and time-travel, the writer and her readers have questioned the deep-rooted male-female and heterosexual-homosexual binaries. The gender changed protagonist cannot be categorised as merely male or female but truly becomes androgynous. With this reconstruction of a fluid gender concept, the gender changed protagonist's sexual orientation also becomes fluid and amorphous. In addition, in this story, the female author also criticised the unequal social discourses used to define men and women and the related hierarchal social status between men and women, and constructed an ideal, equal and respectful

marriage relationship that is difficult to achieve in China's social reality. However, alongside criticizing gender inequalities and hierarchies, the trope of body change inevitably fuels suspicions that only after turning into a male can the protagonist achieve success and power that cannot be achieved as a female.

Compared with *Time-travel of HP*, the author of *Chaotic Era* gives away more participatory power to readers by inviting them to sign up to play the role of the time-travellers in the *HP* slash story. Therefore, the readers of *Chaotic Era* are actively involved in co-authoring the story, as well as being involved in gender construction when describing their roles. The masculinity they construct is far from typically ambitious masculinity, but rather more inclined to non-aggression, to clumsiness, and introversion. In their construction of female characters, a kind of postfeminist sensibility emerges, as identified by Gill (2007). The female readers' detailed descriptions of their appearances and bodies reflect their "obsession with the female body" that considers "femininity as a bodily property" (Gill 2007, p.149). Meanwhile, female readers' active expression of their voyeuristic desire presents what Gill (2007, p.151) called a shift from being "straightforwardly objectified" to "active, [and] desiring sexual subjects". Coupled with an emphasis on independence and professional ability, the female time-traveller characters portrayed by the female readers of *Chaotic Era* exemplify the "new woman" image in post-feminist discourses, in which female emancipation (such as professional success and independence, and becoming a desiring subject) and conservative gender values (such as attractive female appearance in line with traditional values) co-exist (Lotz 2006, p.89). It is also worth noting that the process of female readers' gender construction is inevitably influenced by Chinese traditions, Japanese animation, and Anglo-American popular culture.

In the next section, I continue to analyse the *gong*/*shou* model in Chinese *HP* slash fan fiction on the SFFN, arguing that the unequal hetero-gendered roles are negotiated by Chinese female *HP* slash writers and readers.

4.2.2 The *Gong*/*Shou* Models and Gender Roles in *HP* Slash Fan Fiction

As J. K. Rowling portrays a large variety of characters in her *HP* books, similar to Anglo-American *HP* slash fandom, there is a large variety of slash pairings in Chinese

HP slash fandom, yet none of them are dominant. Tosenberger (2008) cites fan Dira Sudis's taxonomy to divide the pairing types of Anglo-American *HP* slash fan fiction into three categories: *buddyslash*, such as Harry/Ron, who are best friends in the canon; *enemyslash*, such as Harry/Draco, who are enemies in the canon; and *powerslash*, such as Harry/Snape, who have differing levels of social agency in the canon. This classification is based on the relationship of the slash lovers in the canonical universe, which has been widely used by fan writers and readers in Anglo-American slash fandom. However, in Chinese slash fandom, fan writers and readers have a different classification criterion for pairings, which focuses on the sexual roles between two male lovers and is largely impacted by Japanese BL culture. As discussed earlier, Chinese slash fans generally use the term *gong* (literally meaning attacking, translated from the Japanese term *seme*) to refer to the penetrator in sexual behaviour in BL and slash fan fiction, and the term *shou* (literally meaning receiving, translated from the Japanese term *uke*) to refer to the penetrated.

According to Zhou et al. (2018, p.108), *gong* characters are often depicted as senior, mature, and dominant, "much like stereotypical men in traditional Asian literature", whereas *shou* characters take the opposite approach, always being younger, sensitive, and submissive, "much like stereotypical women in traditional Asian literature". Madill et al. (2018) also state that *shou* and *gong* characters often respectively mirror traditional female and male roles in sexual behaviour so that *shou* characters are always passive and *gong* characters are dominant. Such clearly distinctive sexual roles of *gong* and *shou* characters are consistent throughout the story (Madill et al. 2018). Therefore, scholars suggest that the relationship between male characters in BL fiction is still described in a heteronormative way and following hetero-gendered roles (Zhou et al. 2018).

Although such statements apply to some Chinese BL and slash fan stories, this tends to ignore the diversity, complexity, and even contradictions of slash fans' preferences for pairing types. The conclusions of Zhou et al. (2018) and Madill et al. (2018) can only be used to examine the pairing model of dominant *gong*/submissive *shou*, in which the *gong* character is aggressive and dominant whereas the *shou* character is docile and submissive. Different from this model, other narratives are also visible within BL and slash fandom, such as: submissive *gong*/dominant *shou* slash (although

the *gong* character is the penetrator in sexual behaviour, his personality is unambitious, gentle, and obedient, while the *shou* character's personality is the opposite); dominant *gong*/dominant *shou slash* (both *gong* and *shou* characters are rational, capable, and dominant); and mutual *gong-shou* slash (the *gong* and *shou* positions in sexual behaviour are not fixed but versatile). At the same time, the sequence of the characters' names is also important as the name that appears first refers to the *gong* and the second to the *shou*. For example, if a story is labelled "Harry/Draco, both dominant", it means this is a dominant *gong*/dominant *shou* slash and Harry takes the *gong* position while Draco takes the *shou*.

In the interview, writer D reported that the dominant *gong*/submissive *shou* pairings were rare among Chinese *HP* slash fan fiction on the SFFN. In the words of writer D:

> There are indeed many *danmei* stories featuring dominant *gong*/submissive *shou* pairings, but they are rare among *HP* slash fan fiction, at least I have not read such kind of *HP* slash. Even if in Voldemort/Harry and Snape/Harry stories, Harry is not submissive *shou*, because in these kinds of stories, Harry is either a time-traveller or a rebirth, who is evenly matched with Voldemort or Snape. As for *HP* slash in which the original time-travellers become the protagonists, those original characters are all very powerful – almost equal to Mary Sue. How could they be submissive *shou*?

As writer D observes, the slash pairings in Chinese *HP* slash fan fiction are rich, diverse, and complex. When pairing with Harry, Snape and Voldemort are most likely to become the dominant *gong* characters in Zhou et al.'s (2008) classification. Taking Snape/Harry as an example, in terms of age and generation, Snape is 20 years older than Harry, the same age as Harry's father and mother. When the 11-year-old Harry entered Hogwarts to learn magic, Snape was already a mature and powerful adult wizard. In terms of social status, Snape was Potions professor and Head of Slytherin House at Hogwarts; after Dumbledore's death, he became the Headmaster of the school. As a teacher, Snape was powerful and authoritative. In Rowling's (1997, p.102) words, Snape's eyes were "cold and empty and made you think of dark tunnels", and he "had the gift of keeping a class silent without effort". Harry was Snape's student,

and when he was 11 years old, he "looked even smaller and skinnier than he really was" and had "a thin face, knobbly knees, black hair and bright-green eyes" (Rowling 1997, p.20). Throughout Harry's student life at Hogwarts, Snape was abusive and tried to find every opportunity to humiliate Harry. Therefore, their different levels of personal and social agency make Snape/Harry a typical dominant *gong*/submissive *shou* pattern in terms of Zhou et al. (2018) classification.

However, in Chinese Snape/Harry slash stories, Harry cannot be simply considered as a submissive *shou*, although he is younger, impulsive, and inferior to Snape in social status. Because Snape is a powerful adult teacher, and Harry is an under-age and powerless boy, the shipping of Snape/Harry arouses anxiety about paedophilia from the public outside the *HP* fandom. However, as Rowling's Harry Potter books are for young people and about young people, underage relationships are common in both Anglo-American and Chinese *HP* slash fan fiction. As reader J reported in their interview:

> I do not think this is a paedophile. In most [Chinese] *HP* slash stories, Harry began to fall in love with Snape or Draco after the fourth grade – at that time, Harry was about 15 years old. Imagine that when we were 15 years old, we also began to dream of love, right? Some tried to have a relationship with their peers, and some also had a longing for mature men. I do not think this is an abnormal thing. Most fan girls are also young, or at least we all have been young. We should understand this kind of feeling very well. And also, in the customary rules that every fan girl abides by, underage sexual and erotic descriptions are not allowed.

As reader J mentions, banning "the depiction of sexual contacts or acts with minors" meets a communal consensus within fan communities and major literature websites in China (Yang and Xu 2016b, p.253). For Chinese fan girls, writing and reading romantic stories happening at Hogwarts is more about nostalgia for their own high school campus life, rather than paedophilia. The employment of the trope of time-travel also reduces the moral burden on underage relationships. In the case of *Time-travel of HP*, the Snape/Harry slash story discussed in the previous section, the author

shakes the notion that Harry was a minor. As discussed earlier, this story portrays the soul of a modern Chinese women named Snow travelling back into the *HP* universe and becoming the unborn male baby in Lily Potter's womb (Harry Potter). Although physically, Harry has an underage male body, Snow-Harry's soul is that of an adult woman. Such a combination makes it difficult to define whether the physically underage Snow-Harry is actually a minor or an adult. Since Snow-Harry is considered an adult in terms of mental age, the author and her readers naturally regard the love between Snape and Snow-Harry as that between two adults. As Snow-Harry is physically underage, the author follows the common rules that do not portray Snow-Harry and Snape having a sexual encounter before Snow-Harry's physical adulthood.

In addition to reducing the moral burden on female fans, by using the trope of time-travel, the power relationship between Snape and Snow-Harry is also different from that between Rowling's Snape and Harry. Firstly, although Snow-Harry is physically younger than Snape, Snow-Harry mentally considers his/herself an adult rather than a child, which blurs the age gap between Snape and Harry in the canon. Also, as a time-traveller, Snow-Harry is not powerless. In the story, the author describes how, when Snow-Harry was an infant, Snow-Harry's magic power was as powerful as an adult wizard. At the same time, Snow-Harry had the special ability to communicate with all plants and control them as well. Therefore, in terms of magic power, Snape and Snow-Harry tend to be equally powerful, or it can be considered that Snow-Harry's magical ability is more powerful than Snape's.

As a gender-changed character, Snow-Harry represents androgyny, embodying masculine traits such as being "decisive and full of wisdom" (chapter 15) and having "ability and talents far surpassing wizards of the same age as him" (chapter 126), and feminine traits such as being easily emotional and openly showing fragility. For example, when Snow-Harry is depressed and grieving because he is not trusted by Dumbledore, Snow-Harry plunges into Snape's arms and "cried until he lost his mind" (chapter 122). It is the same in chapter 238: when Snow-Harry learned that Sirius was still under arrest by the Ministry of Magic, Snow-Harry "lost control and cried out loud in Snape's arms". In these emotional interactions with Snape, Snow-Harry acts more like a fragile female and Snape presents the image of a male protector. However, readers did not consider Snow-Harry as being overly feminine and submissive. In

reader 22's comment on the slash story, she highly praised Snow-Harry's androgynous personality:

> I loved the author's Snow-Harry, who was extraordinary smart, calm, and courageous. I even loved Snow-Harry's impulsiveness and the caring for friends. Snow-Harry was gentle, strong, and discerning. Although sometimes Snow-Harry was impulsive, he just wanted to protect everything in front of him. I like this kind of Harry.

According to reader 22's comments, the most attractive feature of Snow-Harry in this slash is Snow-Harry's androgyny and complexity. On one hand, Snow-Harry is "smart", "courageous" and "strong", plus "calm, discerning" and "impulsive". On the other hand, Snow-Harry is also "gentle" and "caring for friends". Most importantly, reader 22 considered Snow-Harry as a protector who "wanted to protect everything in front of him", not a submissive person who needed to be protected.

In the interviews, my participants also expressed their dislike for the dominant *gong*/submissive *shou* pattern. Reader H claimed that she "liked trying different types of *gong*/*shou* pairings, but only could not accept the particularly effeminate *shou* characters". Taking *HP* slash fan fiction as an example, reader H further explained:

> I dislike submissive *shou* characters, no matter whether they are original characters or *HP* characters. For example, in an *HP* slash story, if Harry in it is particularly weak and always dependent on Draco – this is the type I cannot accept.

Writer B also reported that she was "particularly obsessed with the pairing of Grindelwald/Dumbledore" – a dominant *gong*/dominant *shou* model. In the interview, writer B also mentioned that the existence of submissive *shou* characters in Chinese BL/*danmei* fiction, especially the "flat-chest *shou* characters", was influenced by Japanese BL manga culture. In Chinese BL/*danmei* fandom, "flat chest *shou*" refers to an overly effeminate male *shou* character, which means that he is like a woman with

flat breasts. In another interview, writer D also suggested that the dominant *gong*/submissive *shou* pattern in early Chinese BL/*danmei* fiction was influenced by Japanese BL/*danmei* culture. In writer D's words:

> If you jumped out of the *HP* fandom and looked at Chinese BL fandom in general, it was true that in our early days, there were many BL stories featuring dominant *gong*/submissive *shou* pairings. I thought it was influenced by Japanese BL manga, in which *shou* were basically very effeminate, cute, innocent, beautiful, dependent, and weak. If you let me describe such kind of *shou* now, I would say they are 'flat chest *shou*'.
>
> But in *HP* slash fandom, such kinds of submissive *shou* rarely exists. Slash is based on its source text, right? In Rowling's *HP* universe, I cannot see any characters who are dependent, submissive and weak. Sometimes they may be vulnerable, but they are by no means weak and dependent. Of course, when you write *HP* slash stories, you can change the personality of *HP* characters, but this change must be logical, otherwise it is OOC [out of character]. For example, Voldemort is anti-social, violent, abusive, and cruel in Rowling's descriptions. But it is the abuse Voldemort suffered during his childhood that makes him become such kind of person. In slash story, if you write that Voldemort experienced a different, warm, and loving childhood, he can change to be a kind person. For me, this kind of character personality transformation is logical, I would not consider this as OOC. But if you portray Harry as a weak, dependent, and submissive *shou* – I cannot accept it, it is quite OOC!

My participants' viewpoints echo Yang and Xu's (2017, p.9) observation that the "aesthetics and conventions of Japanese BL help lay the foundation of Chinese *danmei*", in which "the uke [*shou*] is often depicted as an effeminate young boy, physically shorter and weaker than the seme [*gong*]", and "the assignment of the roles [*gong*/*shou*] is usually fixed and nonreversible". With the development of Chinese BL/*danmei* culture and the influx of Anglo-American slash and popular culture, the influence of such Japanese BL culture is slowly diminishing. The popularity of

Chinese *HP* slash fan fiction on the SFFN is evidence that Anglo-American cultural values have begun to flourish. As writer D reported above, the fundamental reason why there are few Japanese BL manga style submissive *shou* in Chinese *HP* slash fan fiction is that no characters in Rowling's *HP* stories have the potential to become a submissive *shou*. Female fans' rewriting of the source texts also needs to follow certain principles and logic. Yang and Xu (2017, p.10) also address this change, claiming that fans start to question "why the role of seme [*gong*] and uke [*shou*] cannot be reversed in BL" while "there is no equivalent concept of seme [*gong*] and uke [*shou*] in [Anglo-American] slash. Such an observation is also true in Chinese *HP* slash fandom on the SFFN. In the Chinese *HP* slash story *Chaotic Era* discussed earlier, the author made the *gong*/*shou* roles in her story reversible. The author stated:

> The pairing of this story is Snape and Harry, not Draco/Harry or Harry/Draco. Meanwhile, the *gong* and *shou* position of Snape and Harry is reversible. I always believe no one is born as a *shou*. The *gong* and *shou* position between true lovers should be versatile, not fixed. Therefore, unsatisfied readers can use stir-tried eggs with tomato to smash me.
>
> (*Chaotic Era*, chapter 37)

The author not only informed her readers that the main pairing in her story was Snape and Harry, but also clearly emphasised that their *gong*/*shou* position is reversible. The *Chaotic Era* began serialisation in 2009 – the early years of *HP* slash fan fiction becoming popular on the SFFN. In that time, Japanese BL manga culture had a strong influence on Chinese BL/*danmei* culture. Therefore, although the mutual *gong*/*shou* model is widely accepted in Chinese BL/*danmei* and slash fandom today, the author's decision was quite unique at that time, and caused divisions among her readers. Some readers could not accept such a mutual *gong*/*shou* model. For example, reader 23 commented that "I need to adjust my mood, I cannot imagine that Professor Snape can be the *shou*. That scene [Snape plays the *shou* roles in a sexual relationship with Harry] is totally a nightmare". Reader 24 also wrote that "I can accept Harry becomes the *gong*, but I cannot accept Professor Snape is the *shou* when pairing with Harry". Readers 23 and 24 both dislike the mutual *gong*/*shou* model of Snape and Harry because they cannot accept Snape, the senior, cold, and ascetic man, playing a passive

role in his sexual relationship with Harry, the younger and relatively naïve partner. Compared with dissatisfied readers like 23 and 24, some readers clearly displayed their support for the author's preference of the mutual *gong*/*shou* pairing model. Reader 25 commented that she equally loved the Snape/Harry and Harry/Snape pairings, and reader 26 wrote that she also supported the mutual *gong*/*shou* model. Reader 26 particularly agreed with the author and said that "no one is born as a *shou* – I seriously agree with you!"

It is worth noting that the power dynamic between Snape and Harry in *Chaotic Era* is different from that between Snape and Snow-Harry in *Time-travel of HP*. In *Chaotic Era*, neither Snape nor Harry is a time-traveller or a reborn person. In Chaotic Era, Harry is a young boy both physically and psychologically. However, in this slash story, the author portrays over 100 time-travellers, who all more or less guided or influenced Harry. Therefore, compared with Harry in Rowling's *HP* books, Harry in this slash story is calmer and more mature. Thus, although in this story Harry is younger and relatively more naïve than Snape, he is not weak and submissive, which provides the basis for the author to portray Harry and Snape in a mutual *gong*/*shou* relationship.

Today, the mutual *gong*/*shou* model is not rare in Chinese *HP* slash fandom and Chinese BL/*danmei* fandom in general. Slash writers, such as the author of *Chaotic Era,* consistently develop more possibilities in pairings and *gong*/*shou* models. In the process, readers represent a paradoxical mindset. On the one hand, they have a continuous preference for a dominant pairing that suits their tastes and gives them pleasure, which is consistent with their pleasure of reading slash fan fiction – fan fiction is often seen as a kind of repetition rather than original. Given the commercialisation of the SFFN, readers' triple identity – as passive readers, potential writers, and consumers – tends to transform the continuous desire of the *HP* slash stories featuring the same pairing into a market demand. However, readers are also capricious and take delight in looking for freshness from repetition, which creates another market demand that stimulates authors to innovate.

With *HP* fan writers' constant innovation and attempts to expand the possibilities of the different types of pairings, *HP* fan readers tend to be more diverse in their preference for the *gong*/ *shou* models, which further undermines the association

between the *gong*/*shou* models. *Black Technologies in the Magic World* (hereafter *Black Technologies*) is a work that exemplifies this trend. *Black Technologies* first appeared on the SFFN in July 2018 and was categorised as a work-in-process. At the time of this writing, after the author updated chapter 63 in October 2020, she stopped releasing new chapters. This story imagined baby Voldemort being adopted by a scientist couple from an orphanage and growing up in a warm, loving, and open-minded Muggle family. Although Voldemort still showed his magic from an early age, his adoptive parents did not regard him as different, but actively guided him to control, train, and discover his magical power. The different growth environment shaped Voldemort's different personalities and behaviours. Compared with canon, in *Black Technologies* Voldemort remains ambitious, capable, eager to succeed, and yearns to become leader of the magical world. However, he is not violent and could comprehend love and friendship. Therefore, although he is still ambitious and eager to succeed, he is a man of scruples. Given the changes in Voldemort's personality, *Black Technologies* develops around two main plot lines: one related to Voldemort's career, describing how he uses the Muggle world's scientific knowledge to transform the magical world at Hogwarts; the other is emotional and portrays the affairs between Voldemort and different attractive male characters at Hogwarts.

The various possibilities of romantic relationships between Voldemort and different male characters with diverse personalities became one of the most attractive and discussed aspects among readers of *Black Technologies*. Before the author clearly confirmed the pairing of the story, she portrayed several attractive male characters with different personal characteristics, any of whom had the possibility of being pairing with Voldemort. Charles Potter, the cousin of Harry Potter's grandfather, was described as a passionate and cheerful Gryffindor boy. As Charles was Voldemort's first wizard friend, who was rich in knighthood and full of worship and trust in Voldemort, he was considered by readers to be a decent 'loyal dog' for pairing with Voldemort (in Chinese BL and slash fandom, if a man's loyalty, trust, and attachment to his partner is like a dog to its owner, he is called a loyal dog). Although the 'loyal dog' characteristic was often related to a *gong* character, in this story, the readers were more inclined to regard Charles as a *shou* when paired with Voldemort.

Different from Charles is Abraxas Malfoy, grandfather of Draco Malfoy, whose beautifully feminine appearance has been highlighted by the author. When Abraxas first met Voldemort on the Hogwarts Express, the author describes him as having silkily beautiful long blond hair, charming grey-blue eyes, very long eyelashes, and lovely dimples on his snowy face. Such a feminine appearance made Voldemort mistake him for a girl when they met, which made the relationship between Abraxas and Voldemort full of contradictions and tensions from the beginning. In addition to his feminine appearance, Abraxas' character also contains more feminine features. For example, when a cauldron explodes in their potion class Abraxas' reaction is to hide in the arms of Voldemort and holds on to his clothes for protection. When Abraxas realises what he has done, he blushes. From then on, the tension between Abraxas and Voldemort changes from hostile to intimate, which further aroused readers' imaginations about the possibility of pairing them together. As reader 27 commented, she was extremely fond of a long-haired beautiful man like Abraxas and believed he was a perfect match with Voldemort. Like reader 27, reader 28 also claimed that she always supported Voldemort/Abraxas, which was her most preferred pairing in *HP* slash fandom. Although Abraxas' obvious feminine characteristics led reader 29 to comment that "Abraxas has played the heroine's role in the story", there were still some readers who insisted Abraxas was a *gong* with Voldemort. For example, reader 30 commented that she still believed Abraxas could be a *gong*, although Voldemort was more like a dominant *gong* in the story. Reader 31 also excitedly insisted that she supported beautiful Abraxas/dominant Voldemort. For readers such as reader 30 and 31, Abraxas' feminine traits were not necessarily related to his *gong* or *shou* identities, which challenges academic theories of Chinese BL and slash fan fiction that suggest male characters with more feminine traits are always a *shou* in a relationship (Zhou et al. 2018).

Compared with Charles and Abraxas, Alphard Black, uncle of Sirius Black, was a calm, elegant, and knowledgeable Ravenclaw boy who shared a room with Voldemort at Hogwarts. The author's description of the intimate interaction between Alphard and Voldemort in the dormitory undoubtedly inspired her readers' enthusiasm for pairing them together. For example, the author wrote:

> Alphard lazily falls on the bed, reading the latest issue of the potion magazine.
>
> Voldemort slightly raises his eyebrows and bends over to hold a hand next to Alphard, so that he can look straight into Alphard's grey eyes and touches Alphard's cheek lightly with the feather of the feather pen held in his other hand.
>
> (*Black Technologies,* chapter 13)

This author's description was full of intimate imagery, such as the shared private space, the position in bed, and Voldemort's sexual advances, which stimulated some readers to start supporting Voldemort/Alphard. For example, reader 32 commented that she was excited about the author's set up of Alphard and Voldemort as roommates. However, reader 33 also pointed out the reason the numbers of supporters of Voldemort/Alphard were fewer than those pairing Voldemort and Abraxas was because Alphard's characteristics were less rich and distinctive. Disagreeing with reader 33, reader 34 emphasised that Alphard was her favourite character as he was intelligent and talented. She firmly believed that Alphard was the best match with Voldemort. Although there were still disputes about Alphard's attractiveness, there was no controversy about Voldemort being regarded as the *gong* and Alphard as the *shou*.

Although the pairings Voldemort/Charles, Voldemort/Abraxas, Abraxas/Voldemort, and Voldemort/Alphard attracted many readers' support, the author was still not satisfied with these pairings. In chapter 14, the author clearly stated that she preferred portraying a male character who was equally strong, intelligent, and capable of taking risks to establish a relationship with Voldemort. If she failed to shape such a character, she would rather keep Voldemort single. According to these standards, the author portrayed an original character, Randal Ravenclaw, younger brother of Rowena Ravenclaw. Although Randal lived in an alternative universe with Voldemort, the author depicted Voldemort's powerfully magical strength triggering the spatiotemporal node in the chamber of secrets left by Ravenclaw, which meant that Voldemort could meet with Randal in an alternative universe. In the story, Randal was described as a like-minded powerful wizard with Voldemort, who was energetically curious about all kinds of magic, including life magic that was seen as taboo. The

author shaped Randal as the inventor of Horcrux, a supreme evil magic object, which can only be created by committing murder to allow a dark wizard or witch to achieve immortality through hiding a fragment of his or her soul. Although Randal invented such an evil magic object, he was not violent and wicked. Rather, Randal was described more like a fanatical scientist addicted to exploring magic.

The author's declaration of her preference for the dominant *gong*/dominant *shou* pairing and the character she created – Randal – immediately achieved support and fondness from her readers. For example, reader 35 commented that: "I am enthusiastic about Voldemort/Randal! The dominant *gong*/dominant *shou* is the best". Reader 36 also expressed her support for pairing Randal with Voldemort. Different from reader 35, reader 36 called for the mutual *gong*/*shou* model for Randal and Voldemort. Reader 37 even reported that she had given up supporting Voldemort/Abraxas and changed to support Randal partnering with Voldemort. Like reader 37, reader 38 also commented that it was time to support Randal rather than Abraxas having a relationship with Voldemort. Notably, referring to the pairing of Voldemort and Randal, there is no particular preference among readers for the *gong* and *shou* roles of Voldemort and Randal as they are equally dominant, powerful, and ambitious.

To summarise, in this section, I have discussed the *gong*/*shou* models in Chinese *HP* slash fan fiction on the SFFN. Different from Zhou et al.'s (2008) suggestion that Chinese BL fans always prefer pairing a more masculine *gong* with a more feminine *shou*, Chinese female *HP* slash fans' preferences are varied. As my interviewees reported, Chinese BL/*danmei* fans' preference for the dominant *gong*/submissive *shou* pattern is highly influenced by Japanese BL culture, in which the *shou* characters are always effeminate, submissive, and weak. However, with the popularity of *HP*, Chinese slash stories based on the *HP* universe are inevitably influenced by the cultural values embodied in the Anglo-American media texts. In terms of masculinity, the Japanese-style submissive *shou* characters become less preferred among Chinese *HP* slash fans. Instead, Chinese female *HP* slash fans tend to create more androgynous male characters and relatively equal relationships between *gong* and *shou* characters. Today dominant *gong*/dominant *shou* models and mutual *gong*/*shou* models have become mainstream in Chinese *HP* slash fan fiction on the SFFN. From this process (preferring Japanese style submissive *shou* to Anglo-American style dominant *shou*),

we can see the hetero-gendered roles embodied in Japanese style dominant *gong*/submissive *shou* have also been challenged by Chinese *HP* female slash fans.

In this section, I have paid more attention to the power relationship between *gong* and *shou* characters, although I have discussed fans' negotiation of masculinity by their construction of *gong* and *shou* characters. In the next section I focus on the male bodies and beauty portrayed in Chinese *HP* slash fan fiction on the SFFN.

4.2.3 Male Beauty and Female Fans' Sexual Pleasure in Chinese *HP* Slash Fan Fiction

Although not all slash is necessarily erotic, a large number of slash works contain explicit erotic depictions of sexual encounters between male partners in both Anglo-American and Chinese slash fandom (Keft-Kennedy 2008; Feng 2013; Tian 2015). Hellekson and Busse (2014, p.76) argue that "most discussions of fan fiction focus on explicit homoerotic fan writings" because these erotic writings "tend to present fan fiction's engagement with gender, sex, and sexuality at its fullest". In line with this view, in this section, I focus on Chinese *HP* female fans' erotic writing in their *HP* slash stories, to examine how fans employ male bodies as erotic objects to express their female sexual desires, as well as discussing which kinds of male beauty are eroticised by female fans.

In the early days of Chinese slash fan fiction, when the network supervision department had not started to strictly censor erotic content in online fiction, plenty of *HP* slash stories were explicitly erotic. As discussed in the censorship section, since the increasingly strict regulation of pornography and severe punishment for violators, recent *HP* slash stories on the SFFN do not contain any explicit pornographic descriptions of sex – the most intimate description is limited to kissing. The chapters containing erotic descriptions of early *HP* slash stories have been blocked by the SFFN – for example, four chapters of *Chaotic Era* are shown as locked on the SFFN. However, the blocked content is still widely circulated within fan communities through interpersonal communications and pirated websites that provide text downloads for free. Therefore, the sexual writings provided in this section are not

directly derived from the SFFN, but from my personal slash archive as an academic fan.

By examining the sexual description of Chinese *Three Kingdoms* slash, Tian (2015) suggests that slash writers are keen to portray scenes "watching the male body in sleep", which is "a passive state that renders the body an immobile object of a desiring gaze". Tian's (2015) argument applies well to *Retrospective Time*:

> At the moment, Harry is sleeping on his stomach. There are some aged scars on his wiry body. However, these scars do not make his silky-smooth skin lose its attractiveness. Rather, they make him more masculine. The sun passed through the window screen, leaving a layer of light on Harry's smooth and bare back, on which plenty of blue-coloured hickeys and bites outline a peerless picture.
>
> (*Retrospective Time*, chapter 129)

In this description, the male body of Harry, which presents obvious traces of sex, rests in a passive state (sleeping) as a motionless object observed by desirous female readers. The eroticised masculinity in the writer's words does not represent traditional aggressive masculinity. Instead, the author highlights Harry's "aged scars", "wiry body", "silky-smooth skin", "smooth and bare back" and "blue-coloured hickeys and bites", which incorporated some feminine features into Harry's masculinity and show that Harry took the passive *shou* position in his recent sexual encounter. Although representing female fans' desire for passive male bodies, it cannot be simply seen as a subversion of traditional masculinity, especially considering the special features of Chinese masculinity.

According to Louie (2012), traditional Chinese masculinity has been structured by the *wen* – *wu* paradigm, in which *wen* (literally gentle) refers to the gentle-scholar promoted by Confucian culture, and *wu* (literally physically powerful) as it relates to martial masculinity. Different from mainstream Anglo-American culture, the *wen* style of masculinity is highly prised in traditional Chinese culture and the *wu* style of masculinity is degraded as impolite and uncultivated. Tian (2015) also indicates that

wisdom and virtue are more likely to be considered as symbols of masculinity promoted in traditional Chinese culture rather than physically strong male bodies. Even in modern China, a physically masculine male body has for a long time been "associated with low social class and related to outdoor labour work" (Pang and Hill 2018, p.774).

Considering the praise for soft masculinity in Chinese culture, in terms of reshaping masculinity, Chinese female fans' descriptions of relatively androgynous masculinity cannot be seen as subversive. However, as Tian (2015, p.250) notes, "the subversiveness lies less in the transformation per se than in the pleasure female fans derive from the act of transforming and, more important, in their communal enjoyment of sexual fantasies about it". In *HP* slash fan fiction, female fans are not only passionate about gazing at passive and eroticised male bodies, but also actively enjoy sexual pleasure by identifying with either or both *gong* and *shou* characters. For example, in *Retrospective Time*, the author constantly switches narrative perspective, which leads readers to not only gaze at the male body in lust, but also to enjoy the sexual pleasure of being the *gong* and *shou* at the same time:

> The gift of Merlin appeared from Harry and Draco's ring finger. The two identical platinum gold rings shined a faint golden light when Harry and Draco's fingers were tightly clasped. The shower kept knocking the warm water drops on their face.
>
> With long black hair hanging over his shoulders, Harry limply leaned against one side of the white bathtub, who was held by Draco in his arms. The steam in the bathroom meant that Harry could not clearly see the face of Draco, who was rising and falling on his body. But Harry could imagine how tender Draco's brilliant silver eyes should be. With a warm smile at the corner of his mouth, Harry indulged himself in the whirlpool of desire.
>
> Draco, who received an enthusiastic response from his lover, infatuatedly kissed the Harry's clavicle, producing numerous rose-red and pink hickeys. Draco was obsessive about leaving his mark on Harry, even though they

would disappear again and again. As they could tell him how inseparable Harry and he were.

When the waves of pleasure came like a tide, Harry snorted, opened his lips and bit Draco's shoulder blades with long white-gold hair.

(*Retrospective Time*, chapter 171)

The author uses a third person narrative to depict the sex scene and the bathroom – a popular site for sex scenes in Chinese *HP* slash fan fiction and BL/*danmei* fiction in general – and the two desirable male characters, Harry and Draco. Then the author changed to describing Harry's feelings, the *shou* in this sexual encounter, which tends to immerse readers in the character's sexual pleasure, as he "indulged himself in the whirlpool of desire". After that, the author switches to portraying the actions and feelings of Draco, the *gong* character, to allow the readers to enjoy the pleasure of leading the sex. With the change of the author's narrative perspective, readers can become spectators to enjoy the intimacy and sex between the two men, or they can become Harry or Draco, or both of them, to enjoy the sexual pleasure of identifying with them.

In addition, the *shou* characters are not necessarily passive in sexual encounters in *HP* slash fan fiction. In *Chaotic Era*, in a sex scene between Harry and Snape, the author portrayed Snape, taking the *shou* position in this scene, as active during the sex:

"Push hard!" After the initial mild discomfort, Severus started groaning and swung his hips to cater to Harry's penetration.

Harry held Severus' hips with both hands and changed the posture. After a certain penetration, Severus moaned loudly. "Go on!" Severus closed his eyes and commanded loudly and twisted his body under Harry's.

(Chaotic Era, chapter 104)

In this sex scene, although Harry was the *gong*, the one who actively led this encounter was Snape, the *shou* here. During this process, it was Snape who took the initiative

through commanding language, such as “push hard” and “go on”, and active actions, such as swinging his hips and twisting his body. Considering the portrayals of sexually active *shou*, Zhou and colleagues’ (2018) argument that the hetero-gendered roles are reinforced in Chinese BL stories should be carefully re-examined. In Zhou and colleagues’ (2018) suggestion was that the *shou* characters in Chinese BL stories are “depicted more like the traditional feminine wife” as they are often guided and passive during sex. In their view, such a description was a representation of Chinese female fans’ heteronormative romantic ideals and reflected young women’s reinforcement of female gender roles and norms, which were sexual passive and being dominated by their male partners. However, the existence of sexually active *shou* characters in Chinese *HP* slash fan fiction challenges this argument, proving that even the *shou* characters are not necessarily passive, they can become the dominant partner. Moreover, as discussed earlier, female fans’ identification with *gong* and *shou* characters is fluid. Therefore, in reading slash stories in which *gong* characters are active and *shou* characters are passive, female fans do not necessarily identify with the passive *shou* characters, but may identify with the active *gong* characters, or enjoy the double sexual pleasure from imagining both roles.

To summarise, in this section, I have focused on the male body and male beauty as fantasised about by Chinese female slash fans on the SFFN. Considering the soft masculinity preferred in traditional Chinese culture, female fans’ portrayals of non-aggressive, gentle, and soft male bodies should not be seen as subversive. However, enthusiastically erotizing male bodies and male beauty for female sexual pleasure does subvert traditional Chinese female gender roles and the dominant ideology and discourse in sexuality. In Chinese *HP* slash fan fiction discussed in this section, female fans have actively expressed their sexual desires and fantasies. In their enthusiastic writing and reading practices, they are no longer sexual objects but subjects, freely enjoying the different kinds of sexual pleasure they prefer. They can be the spectators looking at the passionate sex between two desired men; they can identify with sexually active *gong* or *shou* to enjoy the pleasure of initiating and leading sex; they can become the sexually passive *gong* or *shou* to immerse themselves in the whirlpool of sex; and they can also switch freely among these multiple roles and enjoy different pleasures.

In the next section, I continue to discuss the trope of mpreg (male pregnancy) in Chinese *HP* slash fan fiction on the SFFN, with the focus on how Chinese female fans employ mpreg in *HP* slash to negotiate masculinity, heteronormativity, and LGBTQ+ rights in mainland China.

4.2.4 Male Pregnancy in Chinese *HP* slash fan fiction

Mpreg (male pregnancy), a popular trope involving men getting pregnant, is both fashionable and controversial within Chinese *HP* slash fandom and Chinese BL/*danmei* fandom in general. As magic exists in the *HP* universe, Chinese *HP* slash stories often suggest that a male can get pregnant by another man through a pregnancy-inducing potion – in *Chaotic Era*, both Harry and Snape get pregnant in this way (chapter 104). Although *Chaotic Era* contains mpreg, it only appears in the penultimate chapter, which is an inexhaustive but necessary supplement to a typical happy ending love story: the male partners eventually form their own family with children. Such desires of female fan authors and readers are not exclusive within Chinese *HP* fandom. As Busse (2013, p.292) argues, mpregs in Anglo-American slash fandom fulfil fans' "romantic need to create a love child between male lovers". Busse (2013) also points out that female fans can explore issues of reproduction, such as how pregnancy's emotional and physical changes can affect a relationship, without involving female bodies through the trope of mpreg. In *Chaotic Era*, although the author does not elaborate on the mpreg, she still describes the different physiological and emotional reactions of Harry and Snape to the pregnancy in detail, in which Harry's reactions follow certain conventions related to pregnancy in mainstream media and cultural norms. For instance, when Harry is troubled by morning sickness, his reaction is emotional:

> "It's all your fault!" Harry gently covered his own raised belly with one hand and pointed at the nose of another man in the room unscrupulously with his other hand.
>
> "We are pregnant together. Why do I feel sick and vomit every day, but you do not have any similar reaction at all, Ahahahahahah?" The dissatisfied roar of Harry-in-pregnancy sounded throughout Hogwarts.

(*Chaotic Era,* chapter 104)

In this description, the stereotypical pregnant woman's pose of gently touching her pregnant belly with her hand is transferred to Harry. At the same time, although Harry is portrayed as reasonable and calm in *Chaotic Era*, he changes to be very emotional during pregnancy, such as releasing his negative emotions onto his partner and screaming. The transposition of actions and emotions that are traditionally related to pregnant women onto men in mpreg stories has been criticised for reproducing conventionally heterosexual romance plots under the transgressive guise of mpreg (Åström 2010). In line with Åström (2010), Hunting (2012) also argues that the seemingly transgressive mpreg stories actually embody heteronormativity, which risks destroying the transgressive potential within queer-friendly canon texts like *Queer as Folk* (US, 2000-2005).

The views of my interview participants partially resonated with the conclusions of Åström (2010) and Hunting (2012). For example, writer B reported that she believed *HP* mpreg slash stories were "actually writing heterosexual romance in the form of *danmei*". Writer B also highlighted the unique influence of traditional Chinese culture on Chinese *HP* mpreg stories in which male partners always delivered a son as giving birth to a boy to continue the husband's bloodline is one of the most important tasks of heterosexual couples in Chinese society. Like writer B, reader G also claimed that *HP* mpreg stories are unacceptable, especially those containing plots where male couples give birth to a son. In reader G's words:

> [I dislike] the plot [in *HP* slash that the protagonists] must give birth to a son… I think this is a reflection of female writers' views and values on marriage and love in their writing. Some female writers think that the social pressure means that two males cannot be together legally. In their thoughts, the way to legalise male couples is by producing children. This is influenced by Chinese traditional culture. But I think it is very strange to force this concept into a *HP* slash story.

Reader G believed that mpreg was a reflection of heterosexual values on love and marriage in Chinese culture and society and giving birth to a son is used to legitimise male partners, who are otherwise blamed for betraying their responsibility to reproduce future generations. Producing future generations, and the preference for sons, has a long history in Chinese culture. Even in modern China, the traditional cultural belief that bearing a male heir for the family is the most important obligation of a couple still exists in a large number of Chinese citizens, especially in families living in rural areas (Chan et al. 2002). Such gender preference ideology also leads to gender discrimination in Chinese society. Although the modernisation of mainland China tends to offer women in rural areas the opportunities of education, jobs, and migration to urban areas, women are still treated unequally in relation to education and employment (Lee et al. 2009, Hu 2016). As Loo and colleagues (2009) note, although there is a compulsory education law in mainland China that all children must take at least nine years of education, the implementation of this law in rural areas is not optimistic. Compared with boys, girls in rural areas are more likely to suffer being deprived of educational opportunities. Given the Chinese social context of the One Child Policy (1979-2015), gender selection caused by a preference for sons has led to even worse consequences: some unborn baby girls are aborted, and more girls are abandoned after birth (Chan et al. 2002).

In contrast to rural families, Miller and Fang (2012) indicate that more highly educated parents in urban areas express less of a son preference and do not discriminate against their daughters. Given the characteristics of the SFFN's female users – 67% are from cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou and 15% are from overseas – most female authors and readers on SFFN would appear to belong to a group without a son preference ideology. However, as writer H and reader M complained in their interviews, *HP* mpreg slash stories featuring a plot with male partners eventually giving birth to a son were still highly visible, such as in *Retrospective Time*. Beginning serialisation in 2011 and completing in 2013, this full-length slash story has been bookmarked by 4,221 readers and received over 3,000 comments. At the beginning of *Retrospective Time*, Harry and Draco are male lovers who suffer tragedy when Draco is killed by Voldemort in the war and a heartbroken Harry perishes together with Voldemort. After the tragedy, *Retrospective Time* sees Harry's soul travelling back to his 15-year-old body during summer vacation after the end of his fourth grade. Harry

decided to employ his knowledge of the future to more effectively destroy Voldemort and protect his lover, family and friends. At the end of the story, Harry and Draco have a son and achieve the happiness they did not get in their previous lives.

The traditional Chinese cultural expectation of giving birth to a son to guarantee the continuation of the family tree as a necessarily filial obligation was represented in *Retrospective Time*, expressed by Lucius Malfoy, father of Draco:

> "Harry is my soulmate, and he will be my only companion. Checking the family tree, you will find that Harry's name is already there, and he is also a Malfoy now". Draco smirked and gave his shocked father the final stroke.
>
> "What are you talking about?" Lucius Malfoy and Severus Snape stood up from their seats and looked at the two boys in front of them incredulously.
>
> "Draco! You are joking, aren't you?" Lucius said, with a hurried voice, "This is impossible! You cannot terminate the continuation of our family tree by marrying a male!"
>
> (*Retrospective Time,* chapter 37)

In the conversation above, Lucius' objection to the marriage of Draco and Harry was that two males could not give birth to a son to continue the Malfoy family name, and this view was also mentioned by reader G, who commented on the Chinese style and outdated concept of fertility that made *HP* slash fan fiction appear very strange. The way *Retrospective Time* allowed Harry and Draco to solve the parental opposition was also typical as Harry told Lucius about the existence of a pregnancy-inducing potion that could allow males to get pregnant. Such a solution, in the eyes of readers and authors like reader G and writer B, is a compromise and a replication of traditional Chinese concepts of fertility.

In Anglo-American mpreg fandom, mpreg is often criticised as replicating heterosexual relationship norms in homosexual relationships, with the focus on its reaffirmation and transgression of traditional masculinity (Ingram-Waters 2015) and its risk of diminishing the transgressive potential of queerness (Hunting 2012).

However, in Chinese *HP* slash fandom, although those concerns of Anglo-American scholars do exist, Chinese female fans are more concerned about the son preference and traditional Chinese fertility concept represented in Chinese *HP* mpreg stories, as those issues are more related to their own experiences. Taking into account the gender inequalities caused by traditional Chinese values, such as the gender discrimination of women in the labour market and less educational opportunities or even survival opportunities for women (Chan et al. 2002; Loo et al. 2009), female slash fans' resistance to mpreg can be seen as expressing their dissatisfaction with unequal gender roles in real life. As reader J reported in her interview, she could fully understand that some couples believed that children could make their lives more complete, and she also supported LGBTQ+ adoption. However, as a high-income and enterprising woman, she was unwilling to have children because of the deep-rooted traditional values that women should give up their careers to take care of their children and families.

On the other hand, as Busse and Lothian (2018) suggest, debates over same-sex marriage, domestic narratives, and raising children in slash fan fiction should fully consider the cultural context, especially the political and social changes related to LGBTQ+ politics in real life. From this point of view, the examination of mpreg plots in Chinese *HP* slash fan fiction should also be linked to the queer policies and the current situation of LGBTQ+ groups in mainland China. In the introduction and literature review chapter, I discussed some socio-cultural dilemmas that LGBTQ+ groups suffer in mainland China. In this section, the mpreg *HP* slash stories and my participants' emphasis on the persistence of Chinese traditional culture around procreation remind us of the family pressures Chinese LGBTQ+ people face in their lives. In the dialogue from *Retrospective Time* discussed earlier, the family pressure Draco and Harry faced represents that which Chinese LGBTQ+ people, especially gay men, face in their real lives. In the slash story, Draco's father did not approve of Draco being with Harry because he worried that Harry and Draco could not have children to continue the Malfoy family name. In real life, Chinese gay men suffer significant discrimination and pressure, and even violence and abuse, from their families, if they do not marry women and have children (Hildebrandt 2019). Even if they come out, their parents still insist that they should marry women and have children like heterosexuals (Hildebrandt 2019). This phenomenon is also represented in *Black*

Technologies: when Abraxas Malfoy refuses the engagement his father arranged for him, the author portrays the following father-son dialogue:

> "It's about the paternal line of the Malfoy family, it's not up to you". Said the father of Abraxas imperially.
>
> Abraxas bit his lip, and tried to keep his eyes from turning red… He had always been proud to be a Malfoy, but now he wanted to throw away the aura of pure blood. Who knew how many generations of the Malfoy family had been scarified to keep the continuity of the Malfoy name?
>
> "Come to my study". Mr. Malfoy's voice was low, but it carried an irresistible patriarchal authority.
>
> [Then Malfoys hold a conversation in the father's study.]
>
> "We must always put our family first. We are pure-blood Slytherin. Keeping the honour of the family is not without cost. Everything you have got has its price. You must endure it". Said Mr. Malfoy emphatically, his voice now stronger.
>
> "Yes, father". Abraxas fought back tears, and the words he said were broken.
>
> "You are mature enough. I can tell you this: no one cares who you have sex with". His father's tone grew colder, "but you must marry a pure blood girl. You must".

In this plot, the image of the father was typical of the Chinese patriarchy. The father was the master of the whole family. In the author's description, the father was imperial, "carried an irresistible patriarchal authority", and was hard-hearted. As a son, Abraxas' personal will was not important, he must obey his father. In this plot, the father of Abraxas represented the attitude of most Chinese parents towards their LGBTQ+ children. In the story, the father tells Abraxas that "no one cares who you have sex with", "but you must marry a pure blood girl", which echoes the reality that many Chinese parents do not really care about their children's sexual orientation but insist that they must get married and have children.

Such huge family pressures that Chinese gay men face mean that the vast majority, approximately 80% to 90%, of Chinese gay men marry heterosexual women and produce children (Tang et al. 2020). Regarding gay wives, Yang and Xu (2016b) indicate the "various kinds of emotional and physical abuse" that women suffer as gay men's wives, and argues that "although gay men are subject to social discriminations, as long as they hide their sexual orientation, they could still enjoy many more privileges than women". Although Yang and Xu's (2016b) observations are accurate, they still risk completely attributing the gay wives phenomenon to the personal choice of gay men (gay men choosing to sacrifice straight women for their own benefit), thus ignoring the structural unfairness and discrimination of the wider society in mainland China. However, in Chinese *HP* slash fan fiction, many authors have touched on the structural issues faced in China. In their interview, reader K reported that "most of *HP* slash stories I read on the SFFN oversimplified the process of coming out, describing that wizarding world as different from the Muggle world, in which the culture of the wizarding world did not discriminate against homosexuals". Writer E also said that:

> In my *HP* slash stories, I always assume that the two great ancestors of the wizarding world are Merlin and King Arthur. They are a gay couple. Therefore, the entire wizarding world does not discriminate against homosexuals from the beginning. I also describe how the magical world has the potion which can allow males to have children, so that even noble families such as the Malfoys would not oppose male-male couples. Such settings are very mainstream on the SFFN, because writers do not want to write about the particularly tortuous process of coming out. What fans want to see is that the protagonists have a sweet relationship while defeating the devil. Portraying a tangled coming out plot is not to the taste of most fans.

As both reader K and writer E reported above, Chinese *HP* fans preferred to portray the magical world as an LGBTQ+ friendly world, where sexual minorities would not be discriminated against and had marriage rights. The description of the potion that allowed men to produce children was arguably a way for Chinese fans to respond to the child-bearing anxiety ingrained in Chinese society and culture. Although such

portrayals were considered to have "oversimplified the process of coming out" by reader K, it was actually a reshaping of the structural unfairness of the real world. The trope of mpreg in Chinese *HP* slash fan fiction is not so much a reinforcement of heteronormativity, but rather an attempt by female fans to ideally deal with the dilemma of Chinese LGBTQ+ groups, who are restrained and repressed by the traditional culture and patriarchal family pressures that value the continuity of the paternal line. Such attempts are utopian and unrealistic, but as reader M reported in their interview, "it is too difficult for Chinese gay men and lesbian women to achieve same-sex marriage rights".

I have discussed the trope of mpreg in Chinese *HP* slash fan fiction in this section. Through analysing the *HP* slash stories and my participants' views, I am conflicted about the trope of mpreg in Chinese *HP* slash stories. On the one hand, as my interviewees reported, the mpreg plots in Chinese *HP* slash fan fiction are highly influenced by traditional Chinese culture, which values male heirs and the continuity of the paternal line. Female fans who dislike mpreg plots regard them as a reinforcement of heteronormative ideologies and traditional Chinese values that produce gender inequality. On the other hand, considering the real-life politics in terms of LGBTQ+ groups in mainland China, where same-sex marriage and adoption are illegal and sexual minorities face strong family pressures to get married (heterosexually) and procreate, the mpreg plots in Chinese *HP* slash stories can also be seen as a response by female fans to the plight of Chinese sexual minorities and an idealised attempt to deal with this plight. Although it does not fundamentally subvert the traditional Chinese values of heterosexual marriage and fertility, it reflects the response of female fans to the structural discrimination against LGBTQ+ groups in mainland China.

4.2.5 Conclusion

In this section, by analysing selected Chinese *HP* slash stories from the SFFN and its related readers' comments, alongside my interview data, I have discussed how Chinese *HP* slash fan fiction female writers and readers negotiate gender and sexuality through their writing, reading, and communication practices (RQ1) and how their

negotiations are influenced by Chinese dominant culture, Japanese animation culture, and Anglo-American popular culture (RQ3).

Firstly, the use of gender change and time-travel tropes in Chinese *HP* slash fan fiction allow female writers and readers to blur the boundary between men and women, masculinity and femininity, and the heterosexual and homosexual. The gender changed protagonists are not simply male or female but truly become androgynous. In addition to such reconstruction of a fluid gender concept, the sexual orientation of gender changed protagonists is also fluid and difficult to define. Therefore, the gender change in Chinese *HP* slash fan fiction reveals female fans' yearning for subverting fixed gender norms. However, beyond these subversive potentials, the trope of gender change inevitably falls into the suspicion that only after turning into a male can the protagonist achieve success and power that they cannot achieve as a female.

In terms of rewriting masculinity, effeminate male characters that are highly influenced by Japanese BL culture are rare in Chinese *HP* slash fan fiction. We can only see a glimpse of Japanese cultural influence from some readers' constructions of their time-traveller characters, whose eyes and hair colours show clear Japanese manga characteristics. Chinese female fans' preferences for masculinity are complex and diverse except for the fragile, dependent, and weak masculinity. The masculinity that Chinese female fans construct in *HP* slash fan fiction is both impulsive and calm, cold and caring, powerful and vulnerable, passionate and quiet. As soft masculinity is also dominant masculinity in Chinese culture, the masculinity that Chinese female fans construct in *HP* slash fan fiction cannot be considered transgressive. The transgression of traditional gender norms and roles occurs when the masculinity, male bodies, and male beauty are eroticised and objectified to satisfy the subjective sexual desires and fantasies of female fans.

Similarly, when female readers construct their female time-traveller characters, their preferences are also complex and even contradictory. Some of them represent clear Japanese manga style facial features; some construct their images in terms of idealised modern Chinese feminine features; and some borrow female images from popular Anglo-American media. Although professional success and independence are also valued in these female fans' construction of femininity, we can also see some

conservative gender values embodied in their portrayals of their female appearances. However, the core of these femininity constructions should be highlighted: the female characters they construct are not objectified as in traditional patriarchal culture but changed to be active and desiring sexual subjects.

Another primary appeal of Chinese *HP* slash fan fiction is the equality in a loving relationship, evidenced by female fans' preference for the slash pairing of dominant *gong*/dominant *shou*. Just as the Japanese BL manga-style effeminate masculinity is disliked by Chinese female *HP* slash fans, the Japanese BL manga-style pairing of dominant *gong*/submissive *shou* is not those fans' preference either. For Chinese female *HP* slash fans, the pairing of Dumbledore and Grindelwald, who are equally powerful and dominant in the *HP* canon, is more attractive and desirable. When female fans 'ship' male characters with unequal power relations in the *HP* canon, they usually use the trope of time-travel to empower the powerless characters in the canon, which constructs the equality in their romantic relationship. By doing so, Chinese *HP* female fans reject the unequal hetero-gendered roles in heterosexual relationships in a patriarchal society, where women are always required to be submissive to men.

Finally, considering the dominant Chinese culture that highly values fertility and reproduction, and the policy issues encountered by LGBTQ+ groups in mainland China, the controversial mpreg trope in Chinese *HP* slash fan fiction should be interpreted from different angles. For some female fans, the mpreg plot, which is highly impacted by traditional Chinese culture that values male heirs and the continuity of the paternal line, is actually a reinforcement of heteronormative ideologies. Considering the family and workplace difficulties and discrimination that Chinese women encounter in real life brought about by issues of fertility, it is not difficult to understand why some female fans dislike mpreg slash stories. However, given that same-sex marriage and adoption are still illegal and LGBTQ+ groups are still facing strong family pressure to get married and procreate, the mpreg plots in Chinese *HP* slash fan fiction also have subversive potential. Although they do not fundamentally subvert the traditional Chinese cultural values of marriage and fertility, they portray a structural change regarding the real-life LGBTQ+ policies in mainland China. Compared with describing the male characters gaining an understanding of family and friends through their own hard work and struggle, Chinese mpreg *HP* slash

fan fiction structurally empowers sexual minorities by constructing a social system that is friendly to LGBTQ+ groups and supports same-sex marriage and even allows them to give birth to children.

In this section, I discussed how Chinese female fans negotiate gender and sexuality issues in their writing and reading of slash. Whether their negotiation and reconstruction of gender and sexuality in their fantasy world can affect their real life is also a question worth discussing. In the next section, through the interviews with Chinese female *HP* fans, I turn to focus on how Chinese female fans' reading and writing of *HP* slash fan fiction and communication with other *HP* slash fans influence their everyday lives (RQ2).

4.3 The Offline Lives of Chinese Female *HP* Slash Fans

In the previous section I focused on the impact of commercialisation of *HP* slash fan fiction on fans' negotiation of gender and sexuality, and the discussion touched on female fans' offline lives. As I have mentioned, for *HP* slash writers, such as writer D, writer E, and writer M, although they are not full-time writers, writing *HP* slash and other original BL/*danmei* stories after the de-commercialisation of *HP* slash has also become a part-time job that can generate an income for them. Therefore, writing slash and BL/*danmei* in general is part of their career in their offline lives (RQ2).

In this section, I focus on the impact of female fans' *HP* slash practices on their daily lives. From my interviews with *HP* slash writers and readers, when talking about their real lives, the most frequently appearing themes can be divided into two categories. The first is that writing or reading slash fan fiction and communication with their peers has become a part of their lives, whether or not they are 'out' as rotten girls to their families and friends, and whatever the impact of slash on their thinking about gender issues. The second theme is their support of LGBTQ+ groups, especially gay men, in real life. In this section, I explore these two themes in detail.

4.3.1 Slash is a Part of Life

Chinese female slash fans, and BL/*danmei* female fans in general, usually identify themselves as *funv*, a term take from the Japanese word *fujoshi*, which literally means

"rotten girls" (Galbraith 2011). Considering the traditional gender norms of women being sexually passive and conservative, to self-identify as rotten girls represents female fans' mockery of patriarchal female gender roles and norms. As discussed in previous chapters, Chinese female slash fans are stigmatised because of their transgressive subcultural tastes and practices (Liu 2009). Therefore, similar to Anglo-American female slash fans in the 1990s, who hid their slash practices from colleagues and parents, some of my interviewees also reported that they only communicated with their peers online and did not let their real-life peers and family discover that they are rotten girls, especially their parents, classmates, or colleagues. In their interview, writer A reported that her real-life family and friends did not know she was writing *HP* slash fan fiction:

> I won't tell them [that I am writing *HP* slash fan fiction]. My parents think it is abnormal [to like *danmei*]. As for my friends, they do not like Harry Potter books and films, they are not fans, so I won't intend to tell them that I am writing and reading *HP* slash fan fiction.

Like writer A, writer E reported that she only communicated with her peers online and did not willingly expose her rotten girl identity in real life. She was particularly concerned about her parents and professional life:

> My parents are quite traditional and conservative people. They certainly cannot accept *danmei*. I have tested my parents' attitude. At that time, the *danmei*-adapted drama *The Guardians* was very popular. I showed my parents this drama and told them that the two male protagonists who were friends in the drama were actually lovers in the original fiction. My parents could not accept it, saying that the novel was very abnormal and disgusting. So, I decided to continue to hide that I read BL and I write *HP* slash fan fiction.
>
> I also did not let my friends know I am a slash writer. I work and live in a small town, where the overall environment is very conservative. In terms of interpersonal relationships, there are intersections between my friends and my colleagues. If my friends know I am a slash writer, it is very likely that

> my colleagues will also know about it. This will affect my job, so I decide not to tell anyone [that I am writing and reading BL/*danmei* and slash].

In both writer A and writer E's reports, parents with conservative ideas caused them to be reluctant to disclose their rotten girl identities. For their conservative parents, being rotten girls meant being "abnormal" and "disgusting", which is in line with the social discrimination and stigmatisation of rotten girls and BL/*danmei* and slash culture in mainstream culture. However, concealing herself as a rotten girl in real life did not negatively impact writer E's emotions:

> I do not feel uncomfortable [about concealing my rotten girl identity]. Although my parents and other conservative people around me think that reading slash and *danmei* is abnormal or disgusting, I know they are wrong, and this is their prejudice. Not telling others that I am a rotten girl does not mean that I feel ashamed to be a rotten girl, I just do not want to argue with people or cause conflicts. I chat with other fan girls online almost every day. It is very enjoyable to talk with them and share good stories with each other. I think it is pretty good.

Writer E observes that she was satisfied with the spiritual pleasure gained from communicating with her peers online. The satisfying and pleasant online community of fan girls with similar cultural tastes also contributed to her firm confidence in her slash practices – although her parents and some real-life acquaintances considered rotten girls to be "abnormal" and "disgusting", she was convinced that it was just their prejudice and would not let herself feel anxious about it.

Not all female slash fans choose to hide their slash fan fiction writing and reading practices from friends and family in real life. In their interview, reader H confessed that her family knew that she was reading *HP* slash fan fiction:

> [Reading *HP* slash fan fiction] has no [negative] effect on my life. My family already knew about it. At first my mum felt my hobby was a little bit strange,

> but she had no [negative] opinions about it. So, I do not think reading *HP* slash fan fiction has any [negative] impact on my real life.

Compared with writer A and writer E, reader H's parents, especially her mother, were open-minded elders who accepted their daughter's hobby of reading *HP* slash fan fiction. Other interviewees did not mention their families, but they reported that their real-life friends were very accepting of their slash practices. For example, reader K stated:

> My friends are quite receptive [to my reading slash]. Although they may not necessarily read [*HP* slash and *danmei*] themselves, they know what I like, what I dislike, and what I am obsessed with recently.

Reader G even recommended *HP* slash stories to her friends who had never read slash in real life:

> At first, I will tell them it is a slash story and the main pairing of the story. If she can accept it, I will show her the story. If she cannot accept it, I won't force her to read. I do not worry she [who refused to accept slash] will have bad opinions on me, because there are no such people among my friends.

Reader G's assertion that there were no people with a prejudice against slash among her friends suggests that reading *HP* slash and BL/*danmei* in general had already influenced her criteria for choosing friends and building friendships in real life.

Slash also made writer C consider questions about gender, sex, and sexuality:

> I have thought about the issue of gender and sexual orientation before, and I am still very confused about the place of gender in our society, and what romantic love is.

Although writer C did not explicitly say that she was a feminist, her thinking and opinions about slash reflect some feminist consciousness to some degree:

> I think slash is a measure of the oppression of female consciousness. Because women are oppressed by patriarchal gender norms and roles, they cannot freely express their desire for the male body in the female-male relationship. If they write explicitly erotic sex scenes between men and women, or sex between one woman and multiple men, then they will feel ashamed psychologically. Slash is not the solution. As long as the public still expects women to be the passive/submissive party in any sex-related issues, the female consciousness cannot be truly liberated.

Writer C obtained pleasure from writing *HP* slash fan fiction, but also deeply thought about the meaning of slash, and the relationship between slash and the liberation of female consciousness.

For most of my interviewees, writing and reading slash fan fiction and communication with other fan girls were meaningful acts in themselves, and already formed a significant part of their lives. For writer B:

> Writing is a way to tell my thoughts and stories to others. If I am not allowed to write, I am afraid I will be suffocated to death.

Writer B regarded writing slash as essential as air, stating that if she could not continue to write, she would be suffocated. For writer B, writing slash was not just a hobby, but an indispensable part of her life. Writing and reading *HP* slash fan fiction and BL/*danmei* in general also occupied most of the daily leisure time of my interviewees. Reader J had read *HP* slash fan fiction on the SFFN for more than ten years, and she said she would spend four to five hours a day on the SFFN reading *HP* slash and other BL/*danmei* fiction. Reading had become part of her daily routine. Reader J explained in detail how reading *HP* slash and communication with other fans had become embedded in her daily life:

> When I am not working, I will read *HP* slash and other BL stories or chat with [slash fan] friends online. For example, when I took the underground to work in the morning, I would open the SFFN app to see whether the *HP* slash stories I was following had been updated with new chapters, or I would like to read slash stories recommended to me by friends, or open QQ group [a popular instant message app in China] to see what everyone was talking about. All of those filled my free time, such as my lunch breaks, the way back home, dinner time, and even bathroom time.

For reader J, reading *HP* slash fan fiction and BL stories in general and communication with other fans were infused through every part of her leisure and commuting time. When they become part of her daily routine, reading and communication were not just a hobby, but significant parts of her daily life.

To summarise, for female slash fans, reading and writing *HP* slash fan fiction, and BL/*danmei* in general, and communication with other fan girls, are no longer online leisure hobbies separated from female fans' offline lives. Fans' practices are integrated into their day-to-day activities and become a part of their daily routines. For some female fans, writing and reading slash is as important as the air they breathe. For others, the pleasure and satisfaction brought by reading and writing slash and communication with their peers constitute the spiritual food of their daily lives. Whether they have disclosed their rotten girl identities to their families and friends or not, they do not feel anxiety about their slash practices, which transgress traditional female gender norms. They draw power and self-confidence from the affirmation of the value of their cultural tastes and practices. Some fans have also started to think about the cultural significance of their slash practices, in which the reflection of female consciousness in slash fan fiction tends to contain some feminist ideas.

In the next section, continuing to address RQ2, I continue to discuss whether Chinese female fans' enthusiasm for male-male relationships in *HP* slash fandom translates into their support for LGBTQ+ groups in real life.

4.3.2 Slash and Fans' Support for Real-Life LGBTQ+ Groups

As discussed in the literature review chapter, taking into account the Chinese social context whereby homosexuality is still stigmatised and marginalised in Chinese society, slash and BL/*danmei* in general is one of few ways for young female fans to learn about homosexuality, although it is fictional and far removed from real life gay men (Zhang 2016). My interviewees' experiences echoed this observation. In their interview, writer E reported that she did not know about the existence of gay men before reading slash fan fiction:

> The first slash story I read was in a book full of *The Prince of Tennis* [a popular Japanese manga and animation] fan stories. The pairing was Tezuka/Fuji. I was shocked at the time because I never knew that a man could be in a relationship with another man. But I did not find it disgusting or difficult to understand. On the contrary, I felt that it was the truth. Because, you know, *The Prince of Tennis* itself was full of homosexual possibilities. Before I thought Tezuka and Fuji were very close friends. After reading the slash story, I realised that it was not friendship, it was love!

Writer E's knowledge about gay men started from reading slash fan fiction. Before that she "never knew that a man could be in a relationship with another man". As the original materials were full of homosexual tension, writer E accepted this outcome easily. Compared with writer E, *danmei* stories made writer A change her feelings and attitudes towards LGBTQ+ groups:

> I first read *danmei* fiction when I was in the first year of junior high school, recommend by my roommate. At that time, I felt homosexuality was disgusting. After reading *danmei* fiction, I changed my mind. I no longer discriminated against homosexuals, and I also took the initiative to find more *danmei* stories to read. As I grew up, I accepted and supported more diversity. At first, I only accepted *danmei*, then *baihe* [stories featuring female-female relationships], then gay men and lesbian women in real life, and then transgendered people, and more. If there was no *danmei* fiction to cause my

> enlightenment, my acceptance of sexual minorities might have come late, because there was no way to understand them.

Writer E mentions that, before reading *danmei* fiction, her feelings towards gay men was negative because "there was no way to understand them". Although *danmei* was fictional and far removed from real-life gay men, it served as a way for writer E to learn about them. In Zhang's (2016) argument, female fans tended to only appreciate fictional male-male relationships in BL/*danmei* fiction and their support for gay people was limited to their imagination. However, in writer E's case, her support for LGBTQ+ people went beyond her imagination and into her lived experience. Writer E considered *danmei* fiction as "enlightenment". Although she first only accepted the fictional male-male relationship in *danmei* and female-female relationship in *baihe*, she then extended her support to sexual minority groups in real life, including "gay men and lesbian women" and "transgendered people and more". Writer E's support for real-life LGBTQ+ groups went through a process, from fantasy to reality, from narrow to broad.

Reader L also reported that her support for LGBTQ+ groups in real life, especially gay men, had also experienced a complicated process:

> I felt disappointed when I first discovered that gay men in real life were different from those in slash and *danmei* stories. But when I grew up, I found that such thoughts were too naïve. No matter whether heterosexual or homosexual men and women, there were good guys and bad guys. Today, I will not stop supporting gay men and lesbian women acquiring legal rights just because there are bad guys among them. Last year when Weibo banned accounts related to homosexuality, I wrote and forwarded many posts to support LGBT groups.

Reader L also experienced a process that took her from support, to disappointment, and back to support again for LGBTQ+ groups. Age and life experience were key to these changes. Her support was also manifested through practice. The incident she

mentioned happened in 2018, when Weibo, a Twitter-like Chinese social media platform, banned accounts and posts related to homosexuality (Kuo 2018). Weibo users, including LGBTQ+ groups and their supporters, encouraged posts and hashtags to be generated to protest Weibo's actions. Among those supporters, female *danmei* and slash fans, such as reader L, actively participated in the online protest. The fierce online protest finally made Weibo lift the ban on homosexual related content (Ho 2018).

In addition to participating in online LGBTQ+ rights protests, my participants also claimed that they would accept and support same-sex love within their own families. For example, writer B reported:

> I once thought deeply, what would I do if my son had grown up and wanted to come out? The result is that I will support him.

In addition, writer B also reported that her husband was LGBTQ+ friendly:

> One of my husband's colleges is a gay man. They are friends and my husband also invited him to our house for a dinner together. I also have gay and lesbian friends. Neither my husband nor I discriminate against them in any way.

Like writer B, writer A also claimed that:

> In the future, whether my child is homosexual, willing to change sex, or transvestism, I will always support him or her. I think it is the positive impact of *danmei* on me.

As discussed earlier, writer A was not known as a rotten girl to her family because her parents believed "*danmei* was abnormal". Compared with her conservative and traditional parents, writer A was open-minded, firmly stating that she would support her child's personal choice and preference in terms of sexual orientation and gender.

The new generation of rotten girls are in sharp contrast with the older generation of their parents. It was precisely because of the new Chinese generation's open minds that my interviewees believed the future situation of Chinese LGBTQ+ groups would improve. As writer A explained:

> Although many rotten girls only like the male-male relationships in slash and *danmei* stories, they at least will not discriminate against LGBTQ+ groups. When we become parents, we will teach our children to treat love as equals. Our children will teach their children this way when they grow up. As new generations grow up, they will become increasingly friendly to LGBTQ+ groups. If things go on like this, I believe the situation of sexual minorities will get better and better.

Like writer A, reader K also believed that the support of the rotten girls to the LGBTQ+ groups was of practical and progressive significance:

> I think slash and *danmei* is a good catalyst for the change of reality. I know the male couples in slash and *danmei* are different from those in reality. But with the expansion of *danmei* culture and the increasing number of rotten girls, at least the public will be accustomed to the existence of same-sex relationships. If they can accept the existence of same-sex love now, I believe in the future they will totally eliminate prejudice. The sensitivity and radicalism of rotten girls are definitely beneficial to the LGBTQ+ equality movement. Even if in the process they may deviate slightly from the main road, as long as the direction is right, it is not difficult to make the correction.

In reader K's statement above, although she acknowledged that the male-male relationships in slash and *danmei* stories was far from reality, she still recognised the effect of *danmei* culture in popularizing same-sex knowledge and existence in mainland China. In reader K's opinion, slash and *danmei* stories had pedagogical meaning, especially considering the social context in which most Chinese public either

know nothing about LGBTQ+ groups or did not believe there are LGBTQ+ people in mainland China (Hildebrandt 2019).

In terms of the government's policy adjustments towards LGBTQ+ group rights, my participants' opinions were similar. On the one hand, they supported LGBTQ+ groups in pursuing equal legal rights such as same-sex marriage. On the other hand, they expressed concerns about the public in today's mainland China not yet having sufficient knowledge and understanding of LGBTQ+ groups, which leads to a lack of a cultural basis for policy changes. In writer F's words:

> I used to think [the government] should give equal rights for LGBTQ+ people as soon as possible, but now I am not that radical. The domestic cultural environment has not yet reached that level now, we need more time. But I am cautiously optimistic about seeing same-sex marriage legal in my lifetime.

Like writer F, writer B also reported that today's Chinese social and cultural environment and foundations were not yet ready for same-sex marriage. Talking about the legalisation of same-sex marriage in Taiwan, writer B stated:

> There were reasons why mainland China has not legalised same-sex marriage. The responsibilities and obligations between two partners, and the social ecology of ethnic Chinese are big issues. Taiwanese now are so happy because of the legali[s]ation of same-sex marriage. But thirty years later, when subsequent problems are exposed, such as the issue of elderly care for same-sex couples, I am afraid they will cry.

In writer B's opinion, she sharply suggests that Taiwan's current social development was not yet ready to legalise same-sex marriage. Therefore, she was pessimistic about Taiwan's same-sex policies.

As discussed above, my participants believed that today's mainland China does not yet have the preconditions for legalizing same-sex marriage. With the spread of

knowledge about homosexuality in mainland China, especially brought about by the spread of slash and BL/*danmei* culture, as well as the maturing and open-minded young generation, it is hopeful that LGBTQ+ groups in mainland China will obtain equal legal rights in the future. However, interviewees still ignored that the mainstream culture was still steeped in homophobia. Slash and BL/*danmei* in general have a certain influence on mainstream culture, but it is doubtful whether such influence could largely affect the Chinese broad public and promote policy changes. The absence of the government and mainstream culture's respect for LGBTQ+ groups and their promotion of LGBTQ+ related discourses should be criticised.

To summarise, in this section I discussed the impact of slash fan fiction and BL/*danmei* in general on fans' support of LGBTQ+ groups in real life. This addressed RQ2. Considering the Chinese social context whereby the public lacks ways to understand LGBTQ+ groups, female fans regard slash and BL/*danmei* that describe male-male relationships as a way for people to better understand same-sex relationships. When female fans discover there are differences between LGBTQ+ groups in real life, especially gay men, and the same-sex relationships in their favourite slash and BL/*danmei* stories, they inevitably feel disappointed. However, with maturity, experience, and communication between fans, female fans' attitudes are also changing. Today, female fans generally understand that slash and BL/*danmei* stories are inherently different from reality, and express their support for LGBTQ+ groups in real life. In addition to eliminating their own prejudice against the LGBTQ+ groups, they also actively participate in online protests to fight discrimination. However, in terms of the policy changes in mainland China, such as same-sex marriage rights, they generally believe that mainland China does not yet have the culture and public foundation to implement policy reforms. While affirming that the spread of slash and BL/*danmei* culture has contributed to the public's understanding of LGBTQ+ groups, they have also neglected the impact of the government and mainstream media, which play a leading role in promoting the understanding of LGBTQ+ groups but have always acted as oppressors, silencing the voices of sexual minorities.

[xiii] Red Candel Games is a Taiwanese video game developer who is most known for developing *Devotion*, a horror video game. As *Devotion* includes a satire of Chinese Communist Party general secretary Xi Jinping, it was withdrawn in mainland China in 2019 (Huang 2019)

5 Conclusion

As a female "aca-fan" (Jenkins 2006) researcher of fan studies, I am contributing to enhancing understanding of Chinese HP slash fandom and female slash fans in mainland China by documenting, introducing, and examining their activities, practices, and texts in my thesis. I worked with female fans from the Chinese *HP* slash fandom who write and read *HP* slash fan fiction on one of the largest commercial literature websites in China (the SFFN) and I conducted this project on fandom culture in the hope that my thesis will have a positive influence on the community with which I identify. My research took place between 2016 and 2021 and involved interviews with six *HP* slash writers and six *HP* slash readers and close textual analysis of six selected prominent HP slash stories (all over 140,000 words in length) published between 2007 and 2019 on the SFFN, together with reader and writer comments and interactions below the line.

In this thesis, I set out to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How do Chinese *HP* slash fan fiction writers and readers negotiate gender and sexuality through their writing, reading, and communication practices?

RQ2: How do their practices of reading and writing *HP* slash fan fiction and communication with other *HP* slash fans influence their everyday lives?

RQ3: How does Chinese dominant culture and Japanese and Anglo-American popular culture influence Chinese *HP* slash fans in their negotiation of gender and sexuality in *HP* slash fan fiction?

RQ4: How does the commercialisation and the online censorship of Chinese slash fan fiction affect Chinese slash fans in their attempts to negotiate gender and sexuality in *HP* slash fan fiction and their offline lives?

Scholars such as Wannamaker (2008) and Duggan (2021) have addressed the queer potential of the gender representation in the Harry Potter books. In my research,

Chinese female slash fans make such "genderqueer potential" visible in their HP slash stories. The term queer is foundationally described by Teresa De Lauretis as being present in "… the differently erotic mappings of the body, and in the imagining and enacting of new forms of community by the other-wise desiring subjects of this queer theory" (De Lauretis 1991, p. xvi). "Genderqueer" is defined by Dembroff (2020) as "gender identities outside of the binary" (Dembroff 2020, p. 3). Rather differently to Anglo-American gender bending slash stories, in which male characters' bodies often turn temporarily female (Busse and Lothian 2009), Chinese *HP* slash stories on the SFFN often employ the dual trope of female-to-male gender change and time-travel, which allow women to inhabit men's bodies. Through analysing the selected *HP* slash stories on the SFFN and their readers' comments, my research shows how Chinese female writers and readers have challenged fixed and dualistic gender norms and concepts by using these dual tropes (RQ1). The gender changed protagonists cannot be considered as either males or females, but they truly become androgynous or "genderqueer". When they have a romantic relationship with another male in slash fan fiction, their sexual orientations are hardly considered as either homosexual or heterosexual by writers and readers in my study. In the *HP* gender change slash fan fiction I studied (representative of that genre during the period 2007-2009 on the SFFN), the genders and sexual orientations reconstructed by female authors are fluid and difficult to define, which represents the disconnection between identities (gender and sexuality) and embodiment (Yang and Xu 2016b; Busse and Lothian 2019).

In addition, my research suggests the construction of powerful female-to-male gender changed characters represents these Chinese female authors' yearning for power and their resistance to the unequal status of females in their life experiences. Feng's (2013) argument that female-to-male gender change stories can be interpreted as female authors' rejection of their female bodies and disadvantageous gender identity also applies in my research. In the SFFN's HP slash stories discussed in this thesis, I argue that these female slash authors' preferences for portraying powerful females shedding their female bodies and inhabiting male bodies to pursue success can also be seen as a reinforcement of the patriarchal ideology in mainland China whereby men naturally embrace more power to succeed.

Moreover, Chinese female slash writers' and readers' constructions of masculinity are complicated and diverse. As my interviewees revealed, "effeminate" masculinity (cuteness and delicacy), which is highly influenced by Japanese BL culture (Wei 2014; Yang and Xu 2017), is rare in Chinese *HP* slash fan fiction on the SFFN. Amongst the popular stories I studied, from *Chaotic Era* to *Black Technologies*, male characters created by female authors and readers are both active and passive, powerful and vulnerable, impulsive and calm, cold and tender. This gender construction can be seen as androgynous in Anglo-American perspective, because it combines both Anglo-American masculine and feminine traits – in which, as Lamb and Veith (1986) described, the former is often represented as tough, being ambitious, strong, rational, and emotionally controlled and the latter is represented as tender, emotional, vulnerable, and intuitive. Hampton (2010, p.13) considers that androgynous masculinity has resistive potential, because it challenges the Anglo-American cultural norms whereby "men are taught from a young age to repress their emotions" and their vulnerability. However, considering how "soft masculinity" – "such as softness and emotional sensitivity" – is also valued and dominant in traditional Chinese culture (Li and Jankowiak 2016, p. 188, also see Louie 2012; Tian 2015), whether the gentle and tender male characters constructed by Chinese female *HP* fans can be seen as a subversion of hegemonic masculinity in a Chinese context is open to debate. However, the slash practices on the SFFN that eroticise and objectify male bodies, masculinity, and male beauty to fulfil subjective sexual desires, pleasure, and the fantasies of female authors and readers do indeed transgress traditional patriarchal gender norms and roles in a Chinese context.

Although males are at the centre of slash fan fiction, Chinese female authors and readers also portray lively and diverse female characters in Chinese *HP* slash fan fiction on the SFFN, which challenges the arguments that slash fan fiction often erases female characters and thus risks to misogyny (Segell 1997, Scodari 2003). Through analysing the female characters constructed by Chinese HP slash readers on the SFFN, I find that conservative gender values and female emancipation consciousness co-exist, which indicates that the power of narrative encodes both conservative and radical values, and particularly at an inflection point in time where women's roles in mainland China are both traditional in some senses and changing in others. The conservative

gender values are mainly reflected in many female fans' preference for the female appearance that aligns with the modest and decorous femininity valued in Chinese mainstream ideologies (Liu 2014). Beyond their preference for traditional feminine beauty, professional success and independence are also highlighted by Chinese *HP* female readers, which reflects Chinese women's yearning for being professionally successful and independent in their real lives. Unlike Zhang's (2016) argument that women in danmei stories are often portrayed as villains who oppose male protagonists' homosexuality, the female characters constructed by Chinese *HP* fans are described as supporters of male protagonists, which echoes the findings of Yang and Xu (2015).

Further, although the "equal relationship" assumption (Russ 1985; Lamb and Veith 1986) has been challenged by both Anglo-American slash studies (Busse 2002, Saxey 2002, Alexander 2004, Keft-Kennedy 2008) and Chinese danmei studies (Zhou et al. 2018), my research reveals that Chinese female *HP* fans still desire an ideally equal relationship, in which equally strong and tender partners are loyal to and respect each other and face difficulties and challenges together. My analysis on selected *HP* slash stories on the SFFN and my interviewees all show that the dominant *gong*/submissive *shou* pattern, which has been criticised as the reinforcement of heteronormative gender roles by Zhou et al. (2018), is relatively rare in Chinese *HP* slash fan fiction. In line with Wei's (2014) suggestion that Chinese Iron Man slash fans are keen to portray a rather equal relationship between male characters, my research also shows that dominant *gong*/dominant *shou* and mutual *gong-shou* models dominate Chinese *HP* slash fandom on the SFFN at the time of writing. In their construction of male-male relationships in Chinese *HP* slash fan fiction, we can see Chinese female fans' yearning for an ideal, equal, and intimate relationship, in which they can be independent, respected, and valued, even if they violate traditional gender norms and roles. Thus, echoing Yang and Xu's (2015) argument that danmei can be considered as "a revolutionary mental tool", which assists Chinese women to practice alternative gender roles, identities, and relationships in a patriarchal society, my research show that Chinese female *HP* fans on the SFFN desire to subvert the heterosexual relationships found in a Chinese patriarchal society that perpetuates notions of male dominance and female compliance.

Chinese female fans also negotiate heteronormativity by employing the controversial mpreg (male pregnancy) trope in Chinese *HP* slash fan fiction on the SFFN. On one hand, the findings of Madill et al. (2018) that Sinophone *HP* slash fan fiction prefers to portray male couples giving birth to sons is also borne out in my research. Therefore, some Chinese female fans, whom I have interviewed, believe that mpreg slash fan fiction tends to reinforce heteronormative ideologies, especially considering traditional Chinese culture that highly values fertility, male heirs and the continuity of the paternal line. The emphasis on procreation and the deprecation of female love labour is a key element of the workplace discrimination and family pressure that Chinese women suffer in their real lives. Therefore, for some Chinese female readers, *HP* slash stories portraying males getting pregnant and taking care of children do not provide a way for men to experience the pressure of women's reproduction and childcare, but instead address the discrimination and pressures women encounter in everyday life in a fantasy space that should make them feel relaxed and experience pleasure. However, following Busse and Lothian's (2018) suggestion that discussing marriage and child-rearing descriptions in slash fan fiction cannot be isolated from the social context in which slash fandom inhabits, examining Chinese *HP* slash fan fiction's portrayals of mpreg should also take into account the LGBTQ+ politics in today's Chinese society. Considering that same-sex marriage and adoption are still illegal in China, and LGBTQ+ groups still encounter strong family pressures to conform to heterosexual marriage and procreation, the mpreg trope in Chinese *HP* slash fan fiction also has a subversive potential. In Chinese *HP* slash fan fiction, female authors prefer to establish a utopian magical world where same-sex marriage is allowed, the public is LGBTQ+ friendly, and males can have children through magic potions, rather than describing how male characters finally obtain the understanding of their families and friends after struggling to come out. Although such portrayals do not fundamentally subvert the traditional Chinese cultural values of marriage and fertility, considering the real-life LGBTQ+ policies in mainland China, these fictional narratives can be understood as radical in some senses and even provide impetus for structural social change.

In addition to exploring Chinese female *HP* fans' online fannish practices, this thesis also highlights the impact of their online fannish activities on their lived experiences (RQ2). Just as the boundary between online and offline is often blurred (Hampton

2010), my research finds that writing and reading *HP* slash fan fiction and communication with other fans have been integrated into the day-to-day life experiences of Chinese female *HP* slash fans. In Martens' (2019, p.17) words, they are "fans every day" not "fans for a day". Different from the Anglo-American "Harry Potter Generation", whose identifications closely connect with the Harry Potter series and Harry Potter fan communities such as the Harry Potter Alliance (Martens 2019), for Chinese female *HP* fans I have interviewed, the "rotten girl" identity, which is borrowed from Japanese female fan culture but adapted for a Chinese context (Galbraith 2011; Wang 2011), is important to their self-identification, whether or not they disclose their rotten girl identities to their families and friends. From communicating with my interviewees, I find that to be a "rotten girl" is to be subversive of feminine social norms in some sense (in terms of writing and reading practices) and to belong to a community. This satisfying and pleasant online fan community makes female fans with similar cultural tastes confident about their subcultural practices and identities. Slash has also enlightened some female *HP* fans, such as Writer A, Writer C, and Writer D amongst my interviewees, to develop feminist thinking, which mainly focuses on the meaning of slash and their fannish practices, and the relationship between slash and the liberation of female consciousness.

Furthermore, unlike previous studies which have claimed that Chinese female fans' support for LGBTQ+ groups is limited (Yang and Xu 2016b; Zhang 2016), my interviewees confirmed their support for and understanding of real-life LGBTQ+ groups. Considering the Chinese social context, in which the general public lacks ways of understanding LGBTQ+ groups (Hildebrandt 2019), female slash fans in my study considered slash and BL/*danmei* in general to be a path to enlightenment for understanding same-sex relationships, although they know the male couples portrayed in slash and BL/*danmei* are different from those found in real life. Chinese *HP* slash female fans' support of LGBTQ+ groups is not only reflected in the elimination of their own discrimination against sexual minorities, but also includes participating in online protests against discrimination, as discussed by my interviewee Reader L. Chinese female *HP* slash fans in my interviews generally affirm that the widespread consumption of slash and BL/*danmei* has contributed to the public's understanding of LGBTQ+ groups, and optimistically predict that when the newly LGBTQ+ friendly

generations become the mainstream in Chinese society, sexual minorities will eventually be greeted with a future of equal legal rights and without discrimination. Therefore, Chinese *HP* slash fan's online practices have transformed, certainly in the case of my participants, into their support towards LGBTQ+ groups in their offline lives, although their overly optimistic opinions overlook that fact that the government, educational institutions, and mainstream media, which could promote the understanding of LGBTQ+ people among the public have always played the roles of oppressors in silencing LGBTQ+ voices.

In my research, I also addressed how Chinese *HP* slash fan fiction and female slash fans do not live in a narrative vacuum (RQ3). As Yang and Xu's (2017, p.8) remarked, most fans are "nomadic, constantly moving from one circle to another, bringing fan knowledge of previous circles to new ones". Chinese *HP* fans' negotiation of gender and sexuality is also impacted by the aesthetics and conventions of different danmei circles and cultures (RQ3). As an aca-fan of *HP* slash fan fiction (and Chinese BL/danmei in general), I have witnessed the changing fashion within Chinese *HP* slash fandom on the SFFN over ten years. When *HP* slash fan fiction started to gain popularity on the SFFN around 2008, Chinese slash fandom and the broader BL/danmei fandom were still dominated by Japanese BL culture, which made the new-born Chinese *HP* slash fandom on the SFFN the site where Japanese BL culture, Anglo-American slash culture, and Chinese dominant culture met. Therefore, in the earlier Chinese *HP* slash fan fiction on the SFFN, we can see female fans embed the three narrative cultures in the creation of female characters that can represent themselves in slash fan fiction, ranging from Japanese manga-style female images with 'strange' hair and eye colours, to the sexy sweetheart images from popular Anglo-American television dramas like *Gossip Girls*, to the elegant female images with Chinese cultural characteristics such as black eyes and hair, and gentle and decorous personalities (Liu 2014).

However, Chinese female *HP* fans' depiction of male relationships, in line with Wei's (2014, [4.15]) observations of Chinese Iron Man slash fandom, is "closer to Western slash fiction than to the Japanese BL genre". Just as the Japanese BL style of effeminate and submissive masculinity has lost favour among Chinese female slash writers and readers, the Japanese BL style dominant *gong*/submissive *shou* pattern is

also rare in Chinese *HP* slash fan fiction on the SFFN. Influenced by both the canon in *HP* books and Anglo-American slash fan fiction culture, Chinese female *HP* slash fans on the SFFN in my research often prefer slash stories with dominant *gong*/dominant *shou* and mutual *gong-shou* pairings. In the future, the characteristics of Chinese *HP* slash fan fiction will probably continue to change. For example, female Harry fan fiction, a sub-genre of *HP* fan fiction which describes Harry as a female, started to become popular from 2020. At that time, I was halfway through my research, thus my thesis does not cover this trending sub-genre, which may take another thesis to attempt a full critical investigation. When analysing Chinese slash fan fiction and Chinese female fans' gender and sexuality discourses contained therein, I particularly want to address how we should be aware that the fandom and its cultural tastes and preferences are always changing, or in the words of Busse and Hellekson (2006), are always works in progress. Without fully addressing the changes and the broader cultural context that fosters these changes, we cannot fully understand their fannish practices. For example, the early (2008-2010) female-to-male body change trope in Chinese *HP* slash fan fiction on the SFFN is influenced by the popularity of female-to-male body change Chinese danmei fiction on the SFFN at the time; however, the most recent Chinese female Harry stories are impacted by the same subgenre in Anglo-American HP slash fandom.

Finally, the power dynamic between Chinese female slash fans, the authoritative censorship, and the commercialisation of slash fan fiction and BL/*danmei* in general has been carefully addressed when discussing Chinese female *HP* fans' slash practices (RQ4). Slash fandom is usually considered to be a queer space where female fans can freely express and enjoy their non-heteronormative sexual and erotic fantasies, desires, and pleasures (Cumberland 2000, Lothian et al. 2007, Samutina 2013). Such an observation was true in the early stages of Chinese slash and BL/*danmei* fandom (Feng 2013, Tian 2015, Wei 2014). From 2014, with the increasingly strict anti-pornographic censorship campaigns in mainland China such as "Cleaning the Web 2014" (Reuters 2014), Chinese female fans' expressions and enjoyment of erotic desire, fantasy, and pleasure are largely suppressed (Bai 2021, Zheng 2019). On the SFFN, any explicit description of sex is forbidden, and the most intimate description stops at kissing, otherwise violators are severely punished, ranging from being banned on the SFFN to prison sentences. In these so-called anti-pornographic censorship campaigns, we can

still see the privileges of heterosexual men, as Writer M and Reader J revealed in our interviews, because it is men who can still easily access pornographic content, but women's queer cultural interests and tastes are largely banned as part of the patriarchal society.

In the face of state censorship, Chinese female *HP* slash fans consider commercial companies to be their allies, as is clear in my interviews with Reader J and Writer E, although female fans are actually exploited. Compared with big commercial companies (like the SFFN) that make profits from slash, BL/*danmei*, and their female fans, individual female writers earn little profit. However, slash fan fiction and BL/*danmei* in general in China exists in the constant struggle between big companies pursuing commercial interests (following demand for slash material) and the censorship of the authorities trying to ban the transgressive subcultures that contribute to creating and maintaining slash fan fiction as a queer space for Chinese female fans to express and enjoy their limited non-heteronormative fantasies, desires, and pleasures.

The power dynamic between Chinese female fans and commercialisation is complicated (RQ4). On one hand, the commercialisation of slash fan fiction and BL/*danmei* fiction in general is empowering for Chinese female fans, allowing them to have a real impact on commercial platforms such as the SFFN to make changes to its functions and layout to better satisfy readers' preferences and tastes. As gender and sexuality discourses are embodied in those functions and options on the SFFN, Chinese female fans who have made an impact on the SFFN contribute to reconstructing gender and sexuality discourses that are far removed from the traditional heteronormative ideologies. Moreover, the sense of professionalism brought about by becoming profitable writers emotionally empowers female slash writers, and the income from their writing also contributes to female writers' financial independence, as discussed by my writer interviewees. However, such empowerment is limited. In the case of the dilemma encountered by Chinese *HP* slash writers once Chinese *HP* slash fan fiction could no longer be commercialised on the SFFN, we can see that when women's favourite cultural products can no longer provide monetary value, women's voices, preferences, interests, and tastes are once again silenced and marginalised. In addition, Chinese female slash fans are not only exploited by big

companies, but they also take higher risks than commercial companies in the face of authoritative power, evidenced by Chinese female BL/*danmei* writers risking prison sentences whereas commercial companies such as the SFFN are only fined small amounts in comparison to their massive revenues.

As Tian (2015, p.249) reminds us, slash is "a complicated, multifaceted phenomenon, and one cannot generali[s]e about it and analy[s]e it as a monolithic collective undertaking in a one-size-fits-all manner". In this thesis, I have also recognised the complexity, fluidity and heterogeneity of Chinese *HP* slash fan fiction and have by no means attempted to draw a universal understanding of the practices of Chinese female slash writers and readers. Chinese *HP* slash fandom, and BL/*danmei* fandom in general, certainly continues to develop, expand, and change, and continues to tell stories that encourage "the possibility of a reflective, reflexive and remembering embodied just humanity" (Plummer 2019, p.155). I hope my work on *HP* slash on the SFFN contributes to the global body of scholarship on slash fandom and that this thesis serves as an invitation for future works to pay more attention to Chinese slash fan fiction and BL/*danmei* works in general.

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7 Appendices

7.1 Appendix 1 Participant Information Sheet

Participant information sheet

Slash Fan Fiction in China: Negotiating Gender and Sexuality in Chinese Female Fan Communities and Their Fan Texts

Invitation to participate in the study:

You are invited to participate in a research study. Before you decide whether or not you wish to do this, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. If there is anything you do not understand, or if you have any questions, please feel free to contact me, Ming Zhang. I am undertaking this study for my PhD. You will find my contact details at the end of this information sheet. Thank you for reading this.

What is the purpose of the study?

Primarily, the aim of this research is to undertake my PhD research study in the Bournemouth University.

Currently, a number of slash fan fiction studies have been conducted by Chinese scholars who are outside fan groups. As a Chinese slash fan fiction writer over the years, I also aim to bring my own experiences into my research, in order to provide unique insights into Chinese slash fan fiction and fan communities.

My research aims to answer these 4 questions:

RQ1. How do Chinese HP slash fan fiction writers and readers negotiate and reconstruct gender and sexuality through their writing, reading, and communication practice?

RQ2. How do their practices of reading and writing HP slash fan fiction, and communication with other HP slash fans influence their everyday lives?

RQ3. How does Chinese dominant culture, Japanese and Western popular culture influence Chinese HP slash fans in their representation and reconstruction of gender and sexuality in HP slash fan fiction?

RQ4. How does the commercialisation and the online censorship of Chinese slash fan fiction affect Chinese slash fans in their attempts to represent their reconstructions of gender and sexuality in HP slash fan fiction?

Why have I been chosen?

You have been chosen because you are an over 18 years old female and you are an HP slash fan fiction writer/reader in SFFN. You have been chosen because your slash fanfic contents, commentaries, and responses are of interest and, if you consent, they will be selected as textual samples which will be (anonymised and) analysed in this research, or you will be invited to take part in an interview via direct messaging.

Do I have to take part?

> It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you decide to take part please keep this information sheet. You will be asked to sign a participant information form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time up to the point of anonymisation (e.g. where the data are processed and become anonymous, so your identity cannot be determined").

What will happen if I decide to take part?

If you allow me to use your HP slash fanfic contents/ commentaries/ responses as textual samples, your original words will be translated into English and analysed in detail for this research. Your original Chinese words will not be presented in this research. Your pen name will not be directly quoted; I will use a different pseudonym to make sure you are not identified by it.

If you agree to take part in the online interview, you will be invited to take part in a series of interviews via direct messaging. Depending on your availability, 2-3 meetings over 2 hours in length in total will be held.

The interview will be divided into 4 main sections, focusing on general information, HP slash fanfic practices, life experiences, and your commercial experiences of slash fanfic (a sample of interview questions can be provided if required).

Depending on your availability, you can finish all questions in a single interview or you can finish them across several interviews. If you have any questions while answering these interview questions or you are not happy with these questions, you are welcome to let me know during interviews or give up answering any questions immediately.

Finally, all of these textual samples and interview answers will be translated into English by another Chinese PhD researcher and me to remain objective and to ensure anonymisation. If you agree to take part in this research, you will be asked to sign the participant agreement form.

What are the benefits of taking part?

I anticipate the findings will contribute to the knowledge, cultural and social values of Chinese slash fan fiction and fan communities.

Are there any disadvantages to taking part?

Even though your personal email address will not be present in the research and all interview information will be stored securely, you should be aware that web hosting companies may still be able to access this information.

However, because my research follows the guidelines of both the regulations of the UK and China, the risk of you being identified is not high. Personal information such as your real name, ID card number and telephone number are not required in this research.

Any quotes from your writing (provided you agree to take part in the study) will be translated and quoted in my PhD in English. They will not therefore be searchable online.

Will the information I provide be kept confidential?

All of your original textual contents and information will be viewed in private only by myself, another translator and members of my supervisory team for the purposes of the analysis. Your original Chinese slash fan fiction contents, commentaries, responses and pen name will not be cited in this research. All these textual samples will be translated into English. Even fans, who are familiar with Chinese HP slash fanfic, should not able to recognise your work. Therefore, your identity will be protected by several levels of data security.

All interview transcripts collected as part of this study will be seen only by myself, another translator and my supervisors and where requested, university research auditors. I will only log in my encrypted personal direct message and email account to view the interview transcripts on my encrypted personal computer. A pseudonym will be used referring to you.

All the information that I collect about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential. You will not be able to be identified in any reports or publications. All data relating to this study will be kept for 5 years on a BU password protected secure network. After that point, and the completion of my studies, I will store the data on a portable hard disk so that I can have access to it for future research. And the university will delete these data after that point.

As I sift and analyse the information, I will take steps to protect identities by changing names, locations and other significant information.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

I will write up the findings in my PhD thesis as well as for publication in media and cultural studies journals and journals that specialise in fan studies. It is anticipated that the findings of this study will contribute to a larger study of Chinese slash fan fiction and fan communities.

Who is funding the research?

The research is funded and conducted independently by myself, Ming Zhang.

Who has reviewed the study?

This study has been reviewed by academics from the Bournemouth University.

Contact for further information

If you have any further questions, please contact me and my supervisors.

The research:

Name: Ming Zhang

Email address: i7600034@bournemouth.ac.uk; zhangm@bournemouth.ac.uk

The supervisors:

Name: Dr. Bronwen Thomas

Telephone number: 01202 965325

Email address: bthomas@bournemouth.ac.uk

Address: Weymouth House W311, Talbot Campus, Fern Barrow, Poole, BH12 5BB.

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Name: Dr. William Proctor

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Telephone number: 01202 965092

Address: Weymouth House W332, Talbot Campus, Fern Barrow, Poole, BH12 5BB.

Complaints

Dr. Iain MacRury is the Deputy Dean of Research and Professional Practice in the Faculty of Media and Communication in Bournemouth University.

Email address: imacrury@bournemouth.ac.uk

Telephone number: 01202 962465

Address: Weymouth House W128, Talbot Campus, Fern Barrow, Poole, BH12 5BB.

Finally

You will be given a copy of the information sheet and, if appropriate, a separate signed participant agreement form to keep.

Thank you for taking the time to read through this information sheet.

7.2 Appendix 2 Participant Agreement Form

Participant Agreement Form

Full title of project: Slash Fan Fiction in China: Negotiating Gender, and Sexuality in Chinese Female Fan Communities and Their Fan Texts

Name	Position	Email	Phone number	Address
Ming Zhang	PhD student	i7600034@bournemouth.ac.uk; zhangm@bournemouth.ac.uk		
Dr. Bronwen Thomas	supervisor	bthomas@bournemouth.ac.uk	01202965325	Weymouth House W311, Talbot Campus, Poole, BH12 5BB.
Dr. Jenny Alexander	supervisor	alexanderj@bournemouth.ac.uk	01202962243	Weymouth House W441, Talbot Campus, Poole, BH12 5BB
Dr. William Proctor	supervisor	bproctor@bournemouth.ac.uk	01202965092	Weymouth House W332, Talbot Campus,

				Poole, BH12 5BB.

	Please Tick Here
I am over 18 years old.	☒
I have read and understood the participant information sheet for the above research project	☒
I confirm that I have had the opportunity to ask questions.	☒
I understand that my participation is voluntary.	☒
I understand that I am free to withdraw *up to the point where the data are processed and become anonymous, so my identity cannot be determined*	☒
During the interview, I am free to withdraw without giving reason and without there being any negative consequences.	☒
Should I not wish to answer any particular question(s), or give my textual samples, I am free to decline.	☒
I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my anonymised responses. I understand that my name will not be linked with the research materials, and I will not be identified or identifiable in the outputs that result from the research.	☒
I agree to take part in the above research project.	☒

_____		_____
_____		
Name of Participant	Date	Signature
_____		_____
_____		
Name of Researcher	Date	Signature

This form should be signed and dated by all parties after the participant receives a copy of the participant information sheet and any other written information provided to the participants. A copy of the signed and dated participant agreement form should be kept with the project's main documents which must be kept in a secure location.

7.3 Appendix 3 List of Interviewees

	Participant Pseudonym	Participant Gender	Participant Age	Participant Area of Employment	Numbers of Years Engagement with the SFFN (Reader/Writer)
1	A	Female	Rather Not Say	Rather Not Say	3 Years/Writer
2	B	Female	33	Education	9 Years/Writer
3	C	Female	Rather Not Say	Postgraduate Student	1 Year/Writer
4	D	Female	34	Housewife	8 Years/Writer
5	E	Female	31	Government Official	7 Years/Writer
6	F	Female	Rather Not Say	Rather Not Say	7 Years/Writer
7	G	Female	32	Publishing	10 Years/Reader
8	H	Female	Rather Not Say	Rather Not Say	7 Years/Reader
9	J	Female	35	Senior Manager	11 Years/Reader
10	K	Female	31	Rather Not Say	8 Years/Reader
11	L	Female	28	Accountant	4 Years/Reader
12	M	Female	32	Publishing	8 Years/Reader

Notes: In order to maintain the confidentiality of my participants, only anonymised names and generalised areas of work are given, which can help minimise the possibility of revealing their identities by both outsiders and insiders.

7.4 Appendix 4 Interview Questions

(1). Interview Questions for Writers

Q1: How long have you been writing HP slash fan fiction on the SFFN?

Q2: Which sub-genre(s), character pairings, and plots do you like or dislike in HP slash fan fiction? Why do you like or dislike them?

Q3: Why do you like or dislike writing erotic plots in your HP slash fan fiction?

Q4: How does the SFFN's censorship principles influence your HP slash fan fiction writing on the website?

Q5: Do you know about the arrest of danmei writers in recent years? How does this affect your HP slash fan fiction writing?

Q6: In addition to the SFFN, do you also write HP slash fan fiction on other platforms? If so, which platform do you prefer? Why do you like it?

Q7: What do you like or dislike about the SFFN?

Q8: How do you think about the VIP project of the SFFN?

Q9: Currently HP slash fan fiction cannot join the VIP project on the SFFN. How does this change influence your HP slash fan fiction writing on the SFFN?

Q10: Why do you like or dislike communicating with your readers on the SFFN?

Q11: Do readers' comments influence your writing?

Q12: How does writing HP slash fan fiction impact your understanding of the LGBGTQ+ groups in your live experience?

Q13: Do you write plots that concern gender equality and/or LGBTQ+ rights in your HP slash fan fiction? Why do you write or not write those plots?

Q14: How do you like to portray the coming-out scene in your HP slash fan fiction?

Q15: Have you done anything in your everyday life to support LGBTQ+ rights?

Q16: Why would or wouldn't you tell your parents and friends about writing HP slash fan fiction?

(2) Interview Questions for Readers

Q1: How long have you been reading HP slash fan fiction on the SFFN?

Q2: Which sub-genre(s), character pairings, and plots do you like or dislike in HP slash fan fiction? Why do you like or dislike them?

Q3: Why do you like or dislike reading erotic plots in HP slash fan fiction?

Q4: How do the SFFN's censorship principles influence your HP slash fan fiction reading experience on the website?
Q5: Do you know about the arrest of danmei writers in recent years? How do you think about it?
Q6: In addition to the SFFN, do you also read HP slash fan fiction on other platforms? If so, which platform do you prefer? Why do you like it?
Q7: What do you like or dislike about the SFFN?
Q8: How do you think about the VIP project of the SFFN? Do you pay to read HP slash fan fiction on the SFFN?
Q9: Currently HP slash fan fiction cannot join the VIP project on the SFFN. How does this change influence your HP slash fan fiction reading experience on the SFFN?
Q10: Why do you like or dislike commenting on HP slash fan fiction and communicating with HP slash fan fiction writers on the SFFN?
Q11: Have your comments influenced the HP slash author's writing?
Q12: How does reading HP slash fan fiction impact your understanding of the LGBGTQ+ groups in your live experience?
Q13: Do you like reading plots that concern gender equality and/or LGBTQ+ rights in HP slash fan fiction? Why?
Q14: What kind of coming out plots do you like reading in HP slash fan fiction?
Q15: Have you done anything in your everyday life to support LGBTQ+ rights?
Q16: Why would or wouldn't you tell your parents and friends about reading HP slash fan fiction?

Notes: This thesis employed the semi-structured interview. The interview questions above were the initial interview guides for HP slash fan fiction writers and readers. Because the interviews were conducted by chat-messenger, they often developed as longer conversation of back-and-forth. On average, each interview lasted for two hours.

7.5 Appendix 5 The HP Slash Stories Analysed in This Thesis

Translated and anonymised name of the *HP* slash story and author	Word-count	Year of first publication on the SFFN	Story statistics	Brief plot summary
About the Time-travel of Harry Potter By Xiao Mo	890, 000 words	2007/Completion	35,000 hits Over 20,457 reader comments Join the VIP project	This longform *HP* slash fan fiction portrays the soul of a modern Chinese woman named Bai Xue (literally 'Snow White' in Chinese) travelling back into the *HP* universe. When she regains consciousness, she has become the unborn male baby in Lily Potter's womb – Harry Potter. Like the source text, Snow-Harry experiences the pain of losing their parents, is raised by their muggle guardians (the

				Dursleys) and enters the magical world at the age of 11. However, Snow-Harry has an extremely strong and special magic ability (summoning and controlling plants) and physical power (skilled in Chinese Kung Fu and assassination) and retains the memories of the canonical narrative of the *HP* book series and films. These abilities and knowledge help Snow-Harry to alter the fate of many characters and defeat Voldemort. In the process of fighting Voldemort, Snow-Harry also falls in love with Severus Snape
[*HP and Marvel Cinematic*	141,000 words	2019/Work-in-progress	17,000 hits	A young Chinese man time-travels into the HP universe

Universe crossover] *To Be A Loser* By Hao Yun			Over 1,100 reader comments Do not join the VIP project	and becomes Joshua Stark, the younger male cousin of Tony Stark. After discovering that Voldemort killed his parents, Joshua was involved in a series of magical incidents. Meanwhile, he also makes friends with superheroes in Marvel Cinematic Universe. Until the last chapter of this work-in-progress story, Joshua did not have a romantic relationship with others.
[*HP*] *Differences* By Blue Bubbles	434,000 words	2016/Completion	21,000 hits Over 5,600 reader comments Do not join the VIP project	Voldemort believes that there are many similarities between Harry and him. However, Harry insists on they are different. In taming Harry, Voldemort finds himself falling in love with Harry.

				In the end, it is love that ends hatred and ambition.
[*HP*] *Chaotic Era* By Xiao Yuan	392,000 words	2009/Completion	13,000 hits Over 6,600 reader comments Join the VIP project in 2010	There are more than 200 time-travellers studying in the Hogwarts. Influenced by those time-travellers, Harry soon discovers that Snape has been protecting him. With the help of those time-travellers, Harry defeats Voldemort much easier. In this process, Harry also falls in love with Snape. At the end of the story, they get married and have two children.
Black Technologies in the Magic World By Smart Enough	179,000 words	2018/Work-in-progress	17,800 hits Over 4,200 reader comments Do not join the VIP project	In this story, baby Voldemort is adopted by a scientist couple from an orphanage and growing up in a warm, loving, and open-minded Muggle family. They encourage him

				to control, train, and discover his magic power. Influenced by his scientist parents, Voldemort is also interested in using science to improve the magic world. Until the last chapter of this work-in-progress story, more than five men are attracted by Voldemort, but he has not confirmed a romantic relationship with any of them.
Retrospective Time By Fang Fang	1,340,000 words	2011/Completion	13,700 hits Over 3,000 reader comments Join the VIP projects	At the beginning of *Retrospective Time*, Harry and Draco are male lovers who suffer tragedy when Draco is killed by Voldemort in the war and a heartbroken Harry perishes together with Voldemort. After the tragedy, *Retrospective Time* sees Harry's soul travelling back to his

				15-year-old body during summer vacation after the end of his fourth grade. Harry decided to employ his knowledge of the future to destroy Voldemort and protect his lover, family, and friends more effectively. At the end of the story, Harry and Draco have a son and achieve the happiness they did not get in their previous lives.