When a Subculture Goes Pop Platforms, Mavericks, and Capital in the Production of "Boys' Love" Web Series in China

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Abstract

This article examines the rise, demise, and afterlife of "Boys' Love" (BL) web series—or male/male romantic dramas—in China. Through the production of culture perspective, it examines how the localization and adaptation of BL in China take shape amid tensions and negotiations between state regulation, digital media production, and commercial interests. Foregrounding the roles of oligopolistic video platforms, private capital, and entrepreneurial writers/ directors (whom I conceptualize as cultural mavericks), this article looks at the paradoxical development of BL web series in China, where digital technology and capital catapult the subcultural genre into the limelight while subjecting it to the hegemonic incorporation by mainstream commercial culture. This article contributes to the growing body of work on BL subculture through an underexplored approach that underscores the organizational and industrial structures shaping local BL production. My analysis situates BL production within a transmedia ecosystem and approaches it not only as an emergent cultural phenomenon but also as an organic cultural economy. Through the case of Chinese BL web series, this article opens up broader discussions on the ontological dilemma of subcultures as well as the interplays between marginal and mainstream cultural formations.

Keywords: *china, subculture, capital, digital technology, video industry, Boys' Love, web series*

Introduction

In January 2016, a web series became an instant hit in China, garnering 10 million views on the day of its release. Within a month, the number of views reached 100 million, making it the second most-watched show on the popular video platform iQiyi.[2] The nature of the web series is, however, quite unorthodox in China's heteronormative media scene: it tells a story of two high school boys who gradually develop romantic feelings for each other despite their apparent heterosexuality. This series, entitled *Addicted* (2016), is adapted from an online fiction by a female writer under the pen name Chai Jidan. Although it is often labeled as a gay drama by the popular press, a more accurate characterization of the subcultural genre is BL ("Boys' Love"), or *danmei* in Chinese. The viral drama, however, was short-lived: three episodes before the season finale, the show was pulled offline from all video platforms in China by the order of the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT).[3]

A month later, Li Jingsheng, then-head of SAPPRFT's TV series unit, announced that web series would be subject to the same restrictions as those aired on broadcast TV channels. Li unveiled the *General Rules for Television Series Content Production*, mandating that shows depicting the so-called abnormal sexual relations or behavior—including "homosexuality"—be prohibited.[4] Such moves instigated a public outcry online against media censorship and heated discussions on gay rights in China.

This incident invites a reflection on the dynamics between subcultural and mainstream media production. Subject to stringent censorship and orthodox societal norms, the traditional television sphere has been exclusively heteronormative. Nonetheless, the increasing commercialization and digitization of TV shows have gradually pushed the boundaries of the visible and segmented viewership in China during the past decades.

Is the marriage between digital technology and capital conducive to the blossoming of BL subculture in China, especially the growth of BL web series? Centered on this question, this article starts with a brief overview of the root and history of Chinese BL adaptations. Then, it draws on a six-facet production of culture (POC) perspective[5] to investigate how different forces—political, economic, and technological—interact with one another to contribute to the rise and transmutation of BL web series in China. Although growing scholarly attention has been paid to the BL subculture—and more recently BL web series—in China and other Asian societies, much of the extant work draws on feminist psychoanalysis, textual analysis, and/or approaches from fandom studies to examine the representation in and consumption of BL texts. Moving beyond these existing approaches to BL, this article delves into the production of BL adaptations in China through a sociological perspective on culture, giving emphasis to the material-industrial structures co-shaping the representational dimension of Chinese BL productions. A central concern of this article is the hegemonic massification of the Chinese BL subculture, a process whereby originally fringe BL productions are strategically incorporated into the mainstream commercial culture, which further limits BL's subversive potential in sexual politics.

Chinese BL Subculture and Web Series: Roots and Development

BL Subculture and Its Localization in China

The BL subculture originated in the early 1970s from Japanese female-oriented manga revolving around homoromantic and/or homoerotic male relationships. As a subcultural genre, BL works are primarily created and consumed by young heterosexual women, who identify as *fujoshi* in Japanese or *funv* in Chinese, literally the "rotten girls"–"rotten" in the sense that their fantasies of sex are at odds with patriarchal values that associate sex with reproduction.[6] Insofar as it centers on relationships between male figures, BL is similar to m/m slash fiction in the West. Whereas slash typically remains within the bounds of a fan-based non-commercial economy, BL works in Japan can be amateur-created zine-like publications that circulate within a small non-commercial economy or commercial productions that are distributed more widely.[7]

Intended primarily for a female audience, BL manga differ from gay comics, namely homoerotic comics created for gay male readers. According to Mark McLelland,[8] unlike gay comics, BL manga tend to create a romantic atmosphere and emphasize the emotional dynamics between male characters as equals. His analysis points to how BL is intended to satisfy women's fantasies about men by transgressing the heterosexist framework. Although homoerotic depictions are characteristic of BL works, homosexuality is never unequivocally articulated in BL narratives, if not completely denied. Male protagonists in BL narratives are typically not identified as gay despite their affection for other male characters. Notwithstanding its female-oriented nature, BL works, in reality, may also be consumed by a male audience, especially gay men, who relate to the characters in their own ways.

The genre was introduced to China in the early 1990s through Japanese manga and anime and has developed into a localized and internet-based cultural form.[9] Given the party-state's strict regulation of imported cultural products and its prohibition of homoromantic and homoerotic content, BL entered China through illegitimate channels. Ling Yang and Yanrui Xu construe Chinese BL fandom as "a form of low-end globalization that involves numerous semilegal or illegal transactions of information, works, goods, and money across the Taiwan Strait and in East Asia."[10] Piracy and fan labor, such as scanlation (scanning and translation), underpinned the informal circuits of BL works sneaked into China's underground fan community.[11]

In the late 1990s, localized BL works started to blossom in China with the aid of digital technologies. Anime and comics fan sites and female-oriented online discussion boards provided fertile ground for the mushrooming of amateur-based BL fictions. Early BL forums remained relatively closed off as they regulated visitors' access via registration systems in order to evade the attention of the general public and state censors.[12] Later, public-facing commercial websites (e.g., Jinjiang Literature City and Liancheng Read) and platforms (e.g., Baidu Tieba and Sina Weibo) became hubs for BL writers and fans. These online spaces have cultivated a gift economy where writers share their works with a reader community, one

that lies outside of traditional cultural industries. Although commercial literature sites have successively adopted a freemium business model since the early 2000s, they have continued to leverage the fan-based gift economy. For instance, Jinjiang, home to one of the largest collections of online BL fictions, valorizes user comments and promotes the exchange between readers and writers.[13]

The original BL fictions provide the very foundation for the development of male/male romantic dramas online. A host of BL writers, such as Chai Jidan, Lan Lin, and Angelina, rose to fame within the circle, whose works have been adapted into web series. A transmedia BL narrative universe has thus come into existence. A few recent studies cast light on some popular BL-adapted series such as *Addicted* (2016), *Guardian* (2018), and *S.C.I. Mystery* (2018).[14] Nonetheless, these studies tend to focus on individual cases, especially the textual and representational dimensions of particular BL productions and/or the producer–fan interactions. Moving beyond these scattered case studies, this article seeks to systematically map out the contour of an evolving Chinese BL televisual universe online, situating its development within the context of the larger video industry.

BL Web Series: A Brief History

Although the first Chinese BL fictions surfaced in the late 1990s, it was not until 2014 that the first BL web series came to light. Unlike self-published online fictions, web series are more capital-intensive. In examining BL web series, the specificity of video as a medium in China's cultural economy needs to be taken seriously. The adaptation of BL fictions into web series was made possible by the formalization of video platforms in China, the market-oriented reforms in the cultural sector, and increasing flows of private capital into the production of entertainment programs. In what follows, I sketch out a brief history of Chinese BL web series, from its emergence and an ephemeral golden age to its reformation.

In 2014, the first BL adaptation, *Like Love* (2014), was released. Adapted from BL writer Angelina's novel *I Love You as a Man*, it tells the story of two college students: Mai Ding, an unappealing boy-next-door, and An Ziyan, a rich and mysterious eye-candy. Although it is far from a high-quality production as compared to subsequent BL series, it sets a bold precedent. The director, Chen Peng, is popularly dubbed as the founding father of Chinese BL dramas. This may seem unconventional considering that the BL subculture is often associated with young women. Yet BL series in China have also been popular among gay male viewers and been conflated with gay dramas. Since this project, Chen founded his own production companies.

In 2015 and 2016, BL web series witnessed an ephemeral golden age, where an increasing number of BL series were released on Chinese video platforms, some of which achieved great popularity, including *Falling in Love with a Rival* (2015), *Irresistible Love 1 & 2* (2016), and *Addicted* (2016). Most BL series in this period were realistic romantic dramas. *Falling in Love with a Rival* (2015) is writer-turned-producer Chai Jidan's first BL adaptation, co-produced by her studio and Chen Peng's production company. Based on Chai Jidan's novel *Counterattack*, the short series consists of eight episodes, each about 20 minutes long. Chai founded her own production company in late 2015, which co-produced the hit series *Addicted* (2016) that marked the heyday of BL web series. However, the virality of *Addicted* (2016) engendered

a paradox of visibility: while the series gave unprecedented visibility to the BL subculture, it also prompted the actions of state censors. The entry of BL into the mainstream media space portended its imminent demise and its subsequent reformation.

Although Chinese BL adaptations continued to be produced since 2016, most of them heavily altered the storyline and characterization in the original fictions due to tightening censorship, downplaying or axing the romance between male characters while highlighting other dramatic components such as fantasy, mystery, action, crime, and history. Producers of BL adaptations began to maneuver between a lucrative mainstream market and state censors with increasing caution. Chen Peng came back with two period dramas in late 2016 and early 2017, *Love Is More than a Word* (2016) and *Till Death Tear Us Apart* (2017), both adapted from the works of Jinjiang writers. Despite the fervently romantic names, the two dramas are almost purged of explicit homoromantic depictions, with more emphasis placed on how the protagonists work together to solve mysteries or combat enemies. This mainstreaming trend deepened in 2018 and 2019, culminating in the commercial success of two adaptations of Jinjiang BL novels, *Guardian* (2018) and *The Untamed* (2019). Not only did the two dramas each garner several billion views online, but the leading actors thereof also attained huge fame. In 2020, a few other BL adaptations were distributed on major video sites—albeit with less commercial success—including *Forward Forever* (2020), *Winter Begonia* (2020), and *The Sleuth of Ming Dynasty* (2020). The following year, *Word of Honor* (2021) was released and received massive views and discussion online.

These recent cases signify the reformation, or afterlife, of BL series and an ongoing process in which BL is incorporated into mainstream commercial entertainment. Video platforms, private capital, and entrepreneurial writers/directors all play significant roles in bringing this subculture to the fore. The POC perspective lends itself to the analysis of Chinese BL series/adaptations because it foregrounds the material, organizational, and industrial structures that shape the content of cultural products.

Making BL Web Series in China: The POC Perspective

The POC approach in organizational sociology was first systematically articulated in the 1970s.[15] It is often utilized to examine how the organization of cultural and artistic production affects the content of creative works.[16] Under this framework, researchers construe a creative work as the result of the coordination and cooperation of different people involved, including people conceiving the idea of the work, those executing it, those providing necessary materials, and those consuming it.[17] The POC framework is suited to examining the development of BL web series in China, particularly its incorporation into the mainstream commercial culture, where different political, economic, and technological forces intersect and negotiate with one another. The following analysis of Chinese BL web series draws on Peterson and Anand's reiteration of the POC approach, with emphasis on six constraints: technology, law, industry structure, organizational structure, market, and occupational careers.[18]

For the purpose of this POC-informed analysis, I identified and studied 22 BL adaptations released online from 2014 to 2021 in Mainland China. Not only did I watch all the 22 BL

dramas with a critical-analytic eye, but most importantly I put together an array of materials for my contextual analysis, composed mainly of online news coverage and discussions of these BL dramas, online interviews with their crews and casts (textual and video), online videos of their launch events and fan meetings, public data about their production companies and crews, as well as policy documents on the regulation of web series. These materials constitute crucial para-texts[19] and meta-texts of the BL adaptations, which, along with the BL televisual texts, enable me to analyze the transformation of Chinese BL web series over time.

Digital Technologies, Law, and Regulations

Since the early 1980s, the structure of Chinese TV broadcasting has been penetrated by the administrative-ideological system of the state and the party.[20] Despite the marketization and corporatization of TV broadcasters since the 1990s, censorship on television production and broadcasting remains stringent.

The emergence of video sites has greatly altered people's viewing experiences and unsettled the traditional structure of program production and consumption. Following the launch of YouTube in 2005, local video-sharing platforms mushroomed in China, thanks to a massive influx of "hot money"—particularly private equity and foreign investment—into the burgeoning online video industry.[21] The number of video sites reached several hundred in their heyday during the mid-2000s, most of which operated without authorization.[22]

Video platforms have long been subject to more lenient censorship as compared to broadcast TV channels. In the early phase, they were hotbeds for both piracy and amateur videos. Since the early and mid-2000s, the online video industry has been regulated through a self-censorship mechanism. Luzhou Li interprets this differential treatment of video platforms as the result of a cultural "zoning" strategy that the state deploys to boost the growing cultural economy.[23] That said, state regulation has been gradually catching up to combat piracy and elbow out unruly and undesirable market players.

By the end of 2007, regulators had begun to penalize online copyright infringement, withholding the licenses of copyright-infringing websites.[24] The tightening regulation signaled the growing formalization of China's video-streaming industry, where video platforms increasingly gravitated toward professionally produced and copyrighted content. To circumvent the soaring licensing costs, video platforms began exploring in-house (co-)production and content commissioning after 2008.[25] They would partner with or acquire media production companies to develop, produce, and distribute media content, such as micro movies and web series.

These web series were usually shorter dramas with smaller budgets than those aired on broadcast television; they were often less formal in terms of their style and production, although they have become increasingly formalized over time. Subject to less stringent censorship than broadcast television, the online video sector provides space for alternative media content and various subcultural genres such as BL. The unconventional BL web series should thus be contextualized within this less formal sector of video production. That said, the tightening regulation after 2016 resulted in the sanitization of BL series, contributing to its convergence with mainstream productions.

Industrial and Organizational Structures

Online video started as an informal sector but has undergone a state-orchestrated process of structural formalization, which has resulted in the concentration of ownership in the hands of a few conglomerates. Mergers and acquisitions of big market players have increased since 2009,[26] eventually leading to the market domination by three tech giants: Alibaba (which acquired Youku Tudou), Baidu (which acquired iQiyi), and Tencent (which owns Tencent Video). The consolidation of ownership enables video platforms to become financially viable so as to invest in the production of a massive amount of web series. These tech giants constantly mediate between the regulators and the consumers, striking a balance between contradictory interests and demands. Although the regulators act as a powerful normalizing force, these tech giants may push the boundary to maximize profits.

While the video-streaming field is characterized by a tri-polar oligopolistic structure, the video production field is more of an open and dispersed system composed of both a handful of large companies that produce the most capital-intensive and lucrative products, and a great many smaller ones that produce the most innovative output targeting niche markets. Over the years, the number of private production companies has grown exponentially, owing to the influx of capital on the one hand and the lowering costs and barriers to entry for digitized media production on the other.

As video platforms shift their strategic focus toward in-house (co-)production, their collaborations with private production companies become commonplace. Fluid, ad hoc, and project-based relationships have been formed between oligopolistic video platforms and various decentralized production companies. The former has increasingly moved upstream to proactively invest, acquire, and/or create production units to become copyright owners.

It is against this backdrop that a web-based BL televisual universe has taken shape. Early BL web series were relatively small-budget projects spearheaded by entrepreneurial production companies.[27] According to public information on Chinese business data platforms, most of these small entrepreneurial production companies have a registered capital of no more than 10 million RMB (or 1.4 million USD). Some have garnered the investment from larger enterprises. For instance, Enlight Media, one of the largest film and TV production companies in China, made an investment in Chai Jidan's company in 2016, which exemplifies the dynamic interactions between big and small players in cultural production. Smaller companies typically have a flatter organizational structure, which is conducive to innovative and flexible production. Due to their low economic and social capital, they usually partner with video platforms rather than mainstream television stations to produce and distribute their products.

Video platforms have thus become a crucial intermediary that connects creative labor, investment capital, and diverse consumers. The vitality of video platforms, in the homogeneity-inducing market competition, resides in their capacity to deliver and monetize innovative output in a sustainable manner. In the open system of video production, innovation often takes place in the periphery and becomes popularized once a novel experiment is reified as a new genre. In some sense, BL web series are products of such innovation emerging from the periphery of the video industry. Due to uncertainty in market returns, it is a coping strategy for dominant

video platforms and production companies to outsource some of the burden and risks of innovation to smaller, independent, and entrepreneurial players in the periphery. The former's investment in and acquisition of smaller production units facilitate the normalization of innovative outputs, as seen in the cases where BL production studios received support from larger enterprises. Furthermore, since the parent companies of major video platforms, such as Tencent and Alibaba, also have holdings in adjacent sectors such as e-book publishing and media production, the synergies between video platforms and content producers within a particular conglomerate clear the ground for transmedia adaptations of BL works.

Occupational Careers

The peripheral status of entrepreneurial individuals and companies enables them to innovate boldly and to enact ad hoc networks of working relationships at the porous boundary of the mainstream cultural industry. The entrepreneurial producers and directors of BL web series started off their careers as peripheral actors in the field of cultural production. Borrowing Howard Becker's typology of artists, I conceptualize these entrepreneurial producers and directors as cultural "mavericks."[28] Becker defines mavericks as creative workers who are part of the conventional world where they operate professionally, but who also seek to break away from the constraints of their professional convention.[29] Maverickness, according to Becker, is a relational concept: it is "not an inherent characteristic of a work [or artist], but rather is to be found in the relation between the work [or artist] and the conventional art world."[30] Mavericks often have some professional training in their area of expertise, but they differ from integrated professionals in that they distance themselves from the convention. To understand maverickness as relational also means that it is unstable and subject to change if the structural relation between a work/artist and the conventional art world changes.

The entrepreneurial producers and directors of BL web series started off as cultural mavericks in the sense that their structural positions at the outset differed from integrated or mainstream creators, although their maverickness was later forfeited as they moved toward the mainstream and became more widely known to the general public. Chai Jidan kicked off her career as an online BL writer on a site called Liancheng and turned herself into a screenwriter as she adapted her fictions into screenplays. Chen Peng embarked on his career as a director by making micro-movies—small-budget productions for online distribution only; before that, he had been a stage actor. Sun Chengzhi, the director of *Irresistible Love I & II* (2016), set his foot in the entertainment industry by appearing in a TV series in 2007; he began his directing career through making BL adaptations. Their career paths also showcase the role of digital technologies in reshaping the access to and the boundaries of China's cultural industry.

The booming video industry affords alternative channels for the discovery of talents and lowers the entry barriers into the entertainment industry, enlisting labor and resources at the boundary of the professional field. BL web series, in particular, often cast amateurs and novice actors due to their limited budget. In some cases, new actors are scouted and recruited through social media and even interpersonal connections, from the margins of or outside of the entertainment industry.[31] Many of these newcomers (e.g., leading actors in *Addicted*) later achieved mainstream success. In this manner, the BL production circle

operates as an interstitial or liminal[32] space loaded with unpredictability and potentialities, where those outside of or newly initiated into the industry gain visibility and even spring-board to fame. Within this liminal space, entrepreneurial producers, directors, and companies function as brokers and "boundary spanning personnel,"[33] who enact open, fluid, and interstitial networks of cultural production that link together conventionally discrete circles, entities, and resources. Working directly with video platforms, they are able to bypass the traditional decision chain dominated by established and elite individuals or groups in the show business. This liminal space is situated between the formal and informal sectors of the cultural industry and demonstrates how the formal and the informal have always been symbiotic rather than dichotomous categories.

Markets

Compared to traditional television, the laxly regulated online video industry has witnessed a drastic multiplication of dramatic genres, catering to heterogeneous consumer tastes. With the gradual institutionalization of the video industry, Chinese BL adaptations that initially emerged as sporadic subcultural productions have been reified into a mature genre, both commercially and aesthetically.

In the early phase, BL web series, such as *Like Love* (2014) and *Falling in Love with a Rival* (2015), were firmly grounded in the subcultural fan communities. BL production teams developed intimate relationships with fans and tapped into the fan economy. Part of their revenue came from the sales of DVDs and ancillary products such as celebrity calendars and mugs. In addition to online releases, some production companies also held limited offline screenings for fans. It was also a norm to organize offline launch events and fan meetings to promote the series. Recordings of these offline events were crucial extensions of the web series, where actors continued their performance of homoromantic attachment. Ticket sales of these events constituted another stream of revenue. BL productions thus leveraged a community-based ethos for commercial returns.

Although fan meetings continue as a promotional strategy even as BL adaptations have become increasingly mainstreamed, the subterranean cultural intimacy has been chipped away. As BL adaptations tone down the homoromantic component, they are aimed to capture broader audiences.

The aforementioned constraints, such as technology, law, industry structure, organizational structure, market, and occupational careers, collectively shape the development of BL web series in China from its rise to its reformation.

Discussion: Hegemonic Massification of the BL Subculture

The emergence of BL web series largely pushed the envelope of cultural production and appeared to challenge the orthodox heteronormativity in the Chinese media scene. BL

enables female audience to actively gaze upon men and to playfully deconstruct the patriarchal order from a more transcendent vantage point.[34] BL also allows for "the public performance of queer identities and open discussion of non-normative sexualities."[35] Nonetheless, BL's subversive potential is restricted by both its own ambivalence in sexual politics (endogenous constraint) and the influence of commercial interests (exogenous pressure).

To begin with, BL itself is an ambivalent genre due to its simultaneous "resistance and capitulation to heteronormativity."[36] BL has long been subject to criticisms regarding its relationship to gender hierarchy and real-life LGBTQ politics. The *seme-uke* (penetrator-receiver) dichotomy in BL works is critiqued for reproducing the binary gender power dynamics in female fantasy[37] Moreover, this realm of female fantasy has a fraught relationship with real-world LGBTQ politics, exemplified by the "yaoi debate" in the early 1990s between gay activists and BL fans/artists, where BL was denounced for the "plundering" and commodification of gay male images, for its underlying homophobia, and for its silencing of authentic queer voices.[38]

This tension is important for understanding Chinese BL web series' simultaneously subversive and conservative tendencies. Admittedly, Chinese BL web series are not without problems in their representation of sexual minorities; nor are they intended to engage with real-world LGBTQ politics. Nonetheless, when *Addicted* was banned on video platforms, fans voiced online their indignation toward the censors and their support for gay communities, pushing back against the state's normalizing power. More broadly, the BL culture carries over a particular—and somewhat transgressive—way of seeing male–male bonds to the larger media scene, reinforcing the "shipping" culture in show business, where celebrities of the same sex are paired by fans. This unique way of seeing homosocial bonding as homoromantic (or homoerotic) is sometimes referred to as "yaoi eyes" or "yaoi glasses."[39] One case in point is Chinese netizens' "shipping" of two male celebrities who performed together in the 2012 Spring Festival Gala broadcasted by the state-run television CCTV. This instance shows how the BL-informed way of seeing widely challenges the state-imposed heteronormativity.

However, this particular way of seeing is readily subsumed or exploited by profit-oriented media producers and investors who seek to attract eyeballs without fundamentally challenging the orthodox ideology. There has been a surging interest in the massification of BL web series.

Yet media producers and investors in China have to constantly negotiate with strict state censorship, probably more so than their counterparts in other Asian societies. In 2007, for instance, the SARFT labeled the portrayal of homosexuality as unhealthy content to be promptly deleted.[40] When it comes to BL content, there have been periods of escalated censorship, such as the arrest of over 30 female BL fiction writers in 2011[41] and the tightened regulation over BL series since early 2016. In June 2017, China Netcasting Services Association issued strict censorship guidelines for online audiovisual programs, banning portrayals of homosexuality. In a more extreme case of 2018, a BL writer received a ten-year prison sentence for writing and distributing homoerotic content.[42] Producers of BL web series have been compelled to adhere to heteronormative values. Meanwhile, they have succumbed to the mainstream market in order to maximize profits.

As a result, the entrepreneurial producers/directors who pioneered BL web series have forfeited their maverickness. The mainstreaming of BL adaptations entails radical expurgation of homoromantic and homoerotic depictions. Producers of BL adaptations have started to rebrand their productions as mainstream dramas, accentuating the non-romantic aspects of the stories. For instance, *Love Is More than a Word* (2016) was rebranded as a period costume drama, *Till Death Tear Us Apart* (2017) a spy drama, and *S.C. I. Mystery* (2018) a crime drama, to name just a few.

As producers manage to secure more investment, BL adaptations since 2016 have seen a significant improvement in production quality and converged with mainstream dramas ideologically, aesthetically, and financially. Moving beyond eros, they have revolved around sublimated themes, promoting officially sanctioned values such as positivity, moral uprightness, diligence, and self-actualization. Two dramas achieved remarkable commercial success: *Guardian* (2018) and *The Untamed* (2019). Based on BL novels by Jingjiang writers, both dramas pivot to enticing elements of mystery and fantasy, where leading male characters work together to solve puzzles. Both dramas are unmoored from the BL world and cater toward a broader market.

When it comes to the representation of male bonding, BL adaptations since 2016 have passed as mainstream dramas through the transmutation of male/male romance into brotherly camaraderie. In *Guardian* (2018), the love stories between the male protagonists, Shen Wei and Zhao Yunlan, are purged, with their relationship remolded as pure friendship or, at best, bromance. Similarly, in the series *Love Is More than a Word* (2017), when the protagonists Tao Mo and Gu She first meet, Tao explains his interest in Gu as a feeling of brotherhood. Some series go further to replace the BL narratives with BG (boy-and-girl) storylines. One telling example is *Revive* (2016), where the romance between the male characters, Du yunxiu and Feng Jing, gives way to the former's relationships with two female characters. Similarly, in *The Sleuth of Ming Dynasty* (2020), a female character is added in the adaptation as the male protagonist Tang Fan's love interest. These series are thus straightwashed to survive censorship and accommodate mainstream tastes.

Such erasure of homoromantic portrayals is denounced by fans of original fictions as "diabolical alteration" (*mo gai*), namely excessive alterations that go against the authorial intent of original works. Nonetheless, the sanitization of BL works does not completely prevent fans from adopting queer readings. They could, in Sedgwick's term, "smuggle" the non-heteronormative representations back into the expurgated (visual) texts.[43] Even when reading mainstream heterosexist texts, they are able to mine the semiotic excesses and bend the authorial intention to extract homoromantic fantasies. Mainstreamed and sanitized BL adaptations exploit viewers' (supposedly critical) disposition of text-bending to attract more eyeballs. For instance, in one scene of the series *S.C.I Mystery* (2018), the protagonist Bai Yutong performs a mouth-to-mouth resuscitation on his colleague-cum-buddy Zhan Yao to save the latter from drowning. The scene leaves space for BL fantasy, where the interaction can be reimagined as an intimate kiss, thus alluring viewers without challenging the heteronormative order of representation.

Furthermore, viewers' inclination toward text-bending has been exploited even by mainstream television producers. Mainstream TV series may imitate the representational

ambiguity of BL works to entice curious viewers. A case in point is a star-studded series called *Swords of Legends* (2014), in which homoromantic suggestiveness is not only realized through ambiguous hints in the narrative arc but also utilized in promotion campaigns via the intimate interactions of the male leads. Such strategic use of homoromantic suggestiveness trivializes alternative sexualities as pure spectacles.

Homoromantic suggestiveness in Chinese TV series is a local inflection of a global phenomenon, where gay imagery and culture have been proliferated via consumerism[44] and converted into mere style, innocuous and seductive. In relation to Chinese media and society, Jamie J. Zhao characterized this development as a type of "queer sensationalism," where "nonnormative personas and performances are commercialized and showcased as profitable elements within China's globalized media environment" without posing any challenge to the heteronormative media system.[45] The difference is thus depoliticized under the logic of the post-Fordist global capitalism.

The commercialization and capitalization of BL adaptations threaten the very integrity of the BL subculture. When a localized Chinese BL culture first sprouted on female-oriented literature sites, it brought together an intimate subcultural community of writers and readers. Facilitated by the influx of capital, the adaptation of BL fictions into web series opened up this subcultural genre for a broader market and for a deepening process of capitalization. At the outset, BL web series were more of a "light" medium outside of legitimate cultures; they were "light" in the sense that they had lower production costs and profit gains, had smaller intellectual and artistic ambitions, and supported a more private way of viewing.[46] However, over the years, the BL televisual universe has completed its gradual transition into a mature heterocultural system targeting broad and heterogeneous audiences, with big market players allocating vital economic rewards.[47] Thus, a subcultural form is reified into a mass cultural commodity. When BL web series gain more visibility, they paradoxically lose their ontological status as a subcultural genre—they transmute into their very antithesis.

Both Dick Hebdige[48] and Peterson and Anand[49] touch upon the massification and commodification of subcultural forms, which provide useful frameworks for analyzing the mainstreaming of BL series. Peterson and Anand point to the dialectics of resistance and appropriation: the subaltern enacts resistant cultural style by appropriating popular cultural products; the authorities react to the resistant cultural groups, which attracts media attention and mass emulation; the industry then "denudes the resistance of any symbolic force" and mass-markets the sanitized symbols back to the consumers.[50] On a related note, Hebdige observes two ways in which a subculture is incorporated into mainstream culture—commercial and ideological.[51] At the commercial level, subcultural signs can be converted into mass cultural products. At the ideological level, a subversive cultural form can be redefined by the dominant groups; it can be trivialized, domesticated, or "transformed into meaningless exotica."[52]

Both the mainstreaming of BL web series and the mainstream co-optation of homoromantic suggestiveness speak to a broader ontological dilemma of subcultures in increasingly digitized and commercialized media ecosystems. Subcultures often operate in alternative media spaces and enclave economies, involving de-professionalized, de-capitalized, and

de-institutionalized practices.[53] Commercial video platforms, while bringing subcultures to the fore, function to alter their basis of existence. BL web series lose their subcultural status after their indiscriminate online distribution to a mass audience. Private equity and investment capital accelerate the professionalization and institutionalization of the field of BL adaptations, turning the supposed niche web series into lucrative mass cultural commodities. Therefore, BL web series have been cut loose from the subcultural taste, belonging, and identity in which they were initially anchored.

There is an unresolved paradox for subcultures between gaining visibility/viability on the one hand and retaining integrity on the other. The former ensures the reproducibility of subcultural forms, while the latter the survival of subcultural meanings. The contradictory demands for financial viability and artistic integrity are hard to reconcile, which poses an ontological dilemma for subcultures. A subculture relies, for its own existence, on an independent, secluded, and community-based economy, which becomes untenable when resources and labor for cultural (re)production are insufficiently compensated. The temptation and pressure for a subculture to enter a scalable economy of reproduction are immense. However, once it enters the economy of scale and reproduces its style in commodity forms, the subculture betrays its own basis of existence and loses its integrity.

Conclusion

Drawing on the POC perspective, this article traces and analyzes the rise, demise, and reformation of BL web series in China. Although BL adaptations are produced in quite a few Asian societies including Japan, Taiwan, and Thailand, the development of BL series in China follows a unique trajectory given the distinct configuration of political, economic, and technological forces in the party-state. The synergy among oligopolistic video platforms, private capital, and entrepreneurial writers/directors makes possible the production of BL web series in China. Nonetheless, digital technology and capital play a paradoxical role, facilitating the multiplication of BL adaptions on the one hand while accelerating their incorporation into the mainstream commercial culture on the other. The demands of both the mainstream market and the vigilant state regulators contribute to the sanitization of BL adaptations.

The development of BL web series in China reveals the dynamic interplay between the informal and the formal, the periphery and the center, the subcultural and the mainstream of the media industry. Although the emergence of BL web series in China seemed to present opportunities in changing the dominant heteronormative order, their ready incorporation into the mainstream commercial culture suggests otherwise. In lieu of promoting the democratization of taste, the commercialization of BL culture trivializes differences by turning them into mere spectacles. The case of BL web series opens the door to a broader reflection on the ontological dilemma of subcultures in the current digital age, not least the tensions and interplays between marginal and mainstream cultural formations.

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2 Charlie Campbell (2016, February 25), Chinese censors have taken a popular gay drama offline and viewers aren't happy. *Time*. http://time.com/4236864/china-gay-drama-homosexuality/

3 SAPPRFT (State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television of China) was established in 2013 as a merger between the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT) and the General Administration of Press and Publication (GAPP). It was replaced by the National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA) in 2018.

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11 Ibid.

12 Yang & Xu, "Danmei, Xianqing, and the making of a queer online public sphere in China."

13 Jin Feng (2009, "Addicted to beauty": Consuming and producing web-based Chinese "Danmei" fiction at Jinjiang. *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, 21(2), 1–41.

14 Alvin K. Wong (2020), Towards a queer affective economy of boys' love in contemporary Chinese media. *Continuum*, 34(4), 500–513; Eve Ng, & Li, Xiaomeng (2020), A queer "socialist brotherhood": The Guardian web series, boys' love fandom, and the Chinese state. *Feminist Media Studies*, 20(4), 479–495; Tingting Hu, & Wang, Cathy Yue (2020, July 3), Who is the counterpublic? Bromance-as-masquerade

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15 Richard A. Peterson (1976), The production of culture: A prolegomenon. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 19(6), 669–684; Howard S. Becker (1976), Art worlds and social types. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 19(6), 703–718; Diana Crane (1976), Reward systems in art, science, and religion. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 19(6), 719–734.

16 John Ryan (2007), The production of culture perspective. In Clifton D. Bryant & Dennis L. Peck (Eds.), *21st century sociology: A reference handbook* (pp. 222–230). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

17 Becker, Art worlds and social types.

18 Peterson & Anand, The production of culture perspective.

19 Jonathan Gray (2010), *Show sold separately. Promos, spoilers, and other media paratexts*. New York: New York University Press.

20 Joseph Man Chan (2003), Administrative boundaries and media marketization. In Chin-Chuan Lee (Ed.), *Chinese media, global contexts* (pp. 156–172). London: Routledge Curzon.

21 Luzhou Li (2019), *Zoning China: Online video, popular culture, and the state*. MIT Press.

22 Kelly Hu (2014), Competition and collaboration: Chinese video websites, subtitle groups, state regulation and market. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 17(5), 437–51.

23 Li, *Zoning China*.

24 Wei-Ching Wang, Cao, Shule, & Dai, Jia (2017), Copyright regulations as political and economic leverage: The case of the online video industry of China. *Chinese Journal of Communication*, 10(2), 176–191.

25 Ibid.

26 Elaine Jing Zhao (2016), Online entertainment| professionalization of amateur production in online screen entertainment in China: Hopes, frustrations and uncertainties. *International Journal of Communication*, 10, 19.

27 For instance, the production cost of *Falling in Love with a Rival* (2015) was only 1.4 million RMB (or 220k USD); Addicted (2016) received an investment of 5 million RMB (or 776k USD), which pales in comparison with the amount of investment in *Untamed* (2019) that topped 200 million RMB (or 31 million USD).

28 Becker, Art worlds and social types.

29 Ibid., 708.

30 Ibid., 710.

31 The cast of *Addicted* (2016) shared in an interview that the leading roles in the series were identified and contacted through social media and interpersonal connections. These casual means of casting and recruitment illustrate the peripheral status of BL web series and the liminal networks of production behind this subcultural genre.

32 Victor Turner construes the "liminal" condition as a transitory and in-between stage in a rite of passage, where a subject is neither in nor out of a social order; see Victor W. Turner (1967), *The forest of symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. I use this term to emphasize the situatedness of BL production networks between formal and informal cultural sectors.

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[35] Yang & Xu, "Danmei, Xianqing, and the making of a queer online public sphere in China, 253.

[36] Zhang, Loving boys twice as much, 252.

[37] Ibid., 251.

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[48] Dick Hebdige (2002), *Subculture: The meaning of style*. London; New York: Routledge.

[49] Peterson & Anand, The production of culture perspective.

[50] Ibid., 325.

[51] Hebdige, *Subculture: The meaning of style*, p. 97.

[52] Ibid.

[53] James F. Hamilton (2000), Alternative media: Conceptual difficulties, critical possibilities. *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 24(4), 357–378.

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