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RUNNING HEAD: HETERONORMATIVE FRAME

**The Heteronormative Frame in Chinese *Yaoi*: Integrating Female Chinese Fan
Interviews with Sinophone and Anglophone Survey Data**

Yao Zhao, School of Psychology, Lifton Place, University of Leeds, LS2 9JT, UK

ps13yz@leeds.ac.uk

Biographical note: Yao Zhao is a doctoral student in the School of Psychology, University of Leeds, UK. Her thesis is titled 'Understanding *Yaoi*/Boys' Love Chinese Fandom' and she is supervised by Professor Anna Madill. Yao was born in Kunming in Yunnan Province in South West China and obtained her Bachelor of Science in Psychology at the Australian National University.

***Anna Madill**, PhD., School of Psychology, Lifton Place, University of Leeds, LS2 9JT, UK

a.l.madill@leeds.ac.uk 0113 343 5750 <https://twitter.com/UKFujoshi>

<https://www.facebook.com/UKFujoshi/> <https://leeds.academia.edu/AnnaMadill>

*Corresponding author

Biographical note: Anna Madill is Chair of Qualitative Inquiry in the School of Psychology, University of Leeds, UK. She is a Fellow of the British Psychological Society and of the Academy of Social Sciences. She co-founded and chaired (2008-11) the BPS Qualitative Methods in Psychology Section, is associate editor of the British Journal of Clinical Psychology and on the editorial boards of Qualitative Psychology and Qualitative Research in

Psychology. Anna's projects include research funded by the British Academy on Boys' Love manga. She tweets @UKFujoshi and her work can be found at <https://leeds.academia.edu/AnnaMadill>.

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Geolocation Information

This research was conducted in China and the United Kingdom. It incorporates interview data generated face-to-face and verbally online in China and the UK with survey data collected online in Chinese and in English.

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We would like to thank all the people who took part in interviews and who completed our surveys for their generosity in sharing with us their experiences and opinions. The authors' online fandom survey can be found in Chinese at <http://www.sojump.com/m/3989081.aspx> and in English at <https://leeds.onlinesurveys.ac.uk/blfandomsurvey>.

Abstract

This article addresses the research question: *How do Chinese Yaoi fans read Yaoi stories?*

Yaoi is a female-oriented genre of Japanese popular culture which describes romantic and erotic relationships between men. We interviewed twenty Chinese nationals who are self-defined fans of *Yaoi* (mean age=23.5 years). Although men were not excluded, none volunteered. A *Yaoi* fandom survey was created in Chinese and in English with five sections: demographics, *Yaoi* materials, feelings about *Yaoi*, social relationships, and other erotic materials (Chinese N=1085; Anglophone N=1615). Thematic Analysis of the interviews produced five themes suggesting the existence of a heteronormative frame: social and family approval, everlasting romantic relationship, heteronormative couple, dislike reversible relationship, and gay relationships in reality. We then selected questions from the survey for statistical analysis on the rationale that these items might inform this frame and help us interpret and contextualise the qualitative analysis. Our survey results support our thematic analysis that Chinese *Yaoi* fans tend to read *Yaoi* through a heteronormative frame and, importantly, that in comparison with Anglophone fans, this is differential to Chinese culture.

Keywords: Boys' Love, BL, *Danmei*, fan fiction, heteronormative, slash, *Yaoi*

The Heteronormative Frame in Chinese *Yaoi*: Integrating Female Chinese Fan Interviews with Sinophone and Anglophone Survey Data

Yaoi is a female-oriented genre of popular culture, present in manga, light novels, anime, video games, fan art, and fan fiction, which describes romantic and erotic relationships between men. *Yaoi* originated in Japanese *Shojo* (girls) manga in the 1970s, the original variant called *Shonen-ai* – literally ‘boy love’ – which focused on stories of pure love between beautiful boys (Toku, 2007). In the 1980s, simpler, more explicitly sexual, fan art and fan fiction about male-male relationships developed which were described playfully as having ‘no peak, no fall, no meaning’ (‘yama nashi, ochi nashi, imi nashi’ in Japanese): hence the acronym ‘*Yaoi*’ (Ingulsrud, 2009; Kotani 2007). Today there are many terms for female-oriented homoerotica. *Danmei* is a specifically Chinese term, *slash* a Western designation, while the term *Boys’ Love* (BL) covers the broadest range of material and is the most common contemporary term in Japan (Akiko, 2003). The term *Yaoi* is widely accepted in the West and is commonly used by North American manga publishers, as well as with regard to numerous other media forms (Jones, 2005).

An uncountable number of *kanji* (written characters) are identical, or very similar, in Japanese and Chinese, although may carry different meanings. With the influence of Japanese popular culture in China, many subcultural terms have been taken-up along with their Japanese meanings. ‘*Tanbi*’ (耽美) is a key example. While in the original Japanese, *Tanbi* means ‘aesthetic literature’, it has become the widest designation of Chinese *Yaoi* culture called *Danmei* which has taken the direct Chinese pronunciation of the Japanese characters. *Danmei* embraces all types of romance and fantasy about male-male relationship from the gently suggestive to the sexually-explicit, literary works and sequential art. Similarly, the Japanese term for ardent female fans of *Yaoi* - *fujoshi* (腐女子) – literally ‘rotten girls’

(Mizoguchi, 2010), has been transplanted into Chinese culture. Here, not only are the written characters identical, the 'fu' (腐) can mean 'rotten' and 'joshi' (女子) mean 'female' in both languages. Moreover, the Japanese terms *seme* (攻) and *uke* (受), which describe the 'top' and 'bottom' roles that tend to structure the male-male relationship in *Yaoi* material, have shared kanji meanings: 'attacker' and 'receiver', respectively (Zanghellini, 2009).

Japanese popular culture has swept the world and *Yaoi* is no exception. *Yaoi* culture was *Yaoi* is a female-oriented genre of popular culture, present in manga, light novels, anime, video games, fan art, and fan fiction, which describes romantic and erotic relationships between men. and translated Japanese manga and novels have been published in abundance in Taiwan and Hong Kong. Many more have been fan translated and uploaded to the internet for public consumption, and many thousands of home-grown, Chinese authors post original novels and series online. Chinese *Yaoi* has developed a unique style in which male-male romance is portrayed utilising a range of settings and genres including contemporary everyday life and science fiction, but also invoking motifs from Chinese mythology, history, legends, and *Wuxia* (Chinese fantasy genre based on Asian martial arts). The most popular *Yaoi* website holding original novels and fan fiction is probably *Jinjiang Literature*, which is reported to enjoy more than 2 million log-ins a day (China Daily, 2014) - and log-in is not even required for basic online reading.

Yaoi has drawn increasing attention from Chinese academics in line with the boom in Chinese *Yaoi* culture from about 2006. A review of the Chinese research on *Yaoi* conducted by the present authors identified the following major foci: sexual liberation, paradox of gender identity, the fandom, social influence, and the internet and legal issues. In general, the research has explored *Yaoi* in relation to a possible burgeoning feminism and concern that young Chinese women are rejecting traditional female identity. In this respect, some articles have provided a negative interpretation of *Yaoi* materials and culture within this context (e.g.,

Sun, 2014; Yan, 2015; Zhao, 2016). *Yaoi*-type elements are increasingly evident in ordinary public media, involving well-known Chinese celebrities, public figures, and performers, and have proved to have considerable commercial value and social influence. This has caused controversy given the conservative social values of traditional Chinese culture and the official prohibition on sexually explicit material and public acknowledgement of homosexuality (e.g., Wu, 2015; Zhao, 2016).

There is also a growing research literature which is more open to the creative and socially transformative potential of *Yaoi* in China, much of which is conducted by young Chinese women who have grown-up with *Yaoi* culture (e.g., Liu, 2014). Of particular interest in relation to the current article, is rigorous research on Chinese *Yaoi* fandom which attempts to present the culture from the perspective of the fans themselves (e.g., Yang & Xu, 2015a&b). Similarly, this article addresses the research question: *How do Chinese Yaoi fans read Yaoi stories?* In asking this question, we are interested in discerning if there are a set of assumptions, or a frame, differential to Chinese culture which colours fans understanding of this material.

A key direction in this still very small literature is the suggestion that, although *Yaoi* presents male-male relationships, Chinese fans are reading *Yaoi* through a heteronormative lens (e.g., Zhou, Paul, & Sherman, 2017). The concept ‘heteronormativity’ refers to a set of assumptions and beliefs according to which people are considered to fall into two distinct genders, and that sexual attraction between people of opposite gender deemed normal, natural and the basis of social standards (Warner, 1991). As will be demonstrated, our research concurs that Chinese *Yaoi* has a heteronormative frame. However, our study takes the novel approach of integrating female Chinese fan interviews with Sinophone and Anglophone survey data and adding nuance to the growing literature.

Method

Ethical approval for research was obtained from the School of Psychology Ethics Committee, University of Leeds, UK. Informed consent was obtained for all interviewees and completion and submission of the online survey was deemed to constitute informed consent to use the data for research purposes. Participants are anonymised throughout. This is a mixed methods study which integrates female Chinese fan interviews with Sinophone and Anglophone survey data, analysed using Thematic Analysis and statistics, respectively. We mix these methods within a pragmatic paradigm in which we understand the qualitative and quantitative approaches to cohere at the level of a critical realist epistemology, meaning that both accept an object of inquiry (i.e., *Yaoi* fans), while analysis is considered to incorporate an element of interpretation (Madill & Gough, 2008).

Interview Data

Interviewees met the inclusion criteria of being a Chinese national, at least 16 years old, and a self-defined fan of *Yaoi*. They were recruited by word of mouth, at Chinese manga events, at seminars and other relevant meetings, and through a request for interviewees at the beginning of our online *Yaoi* surveys (see below). Interviews were conducted in Chinese by the first author, a native Chinese speaker, except the self-pilot which was conducted by the second author in English with the first author as interviewee. Interviews took a semi-structured format meaning that, while guided by a schedule, this was used flexibly and participants were free to raise new issues. The schedule involved questions about what Chinese fans think about *Yaoi* culture, how they engage, whether they create *Yaoi* and, if so, what the work is about, preferences regarding *Yaoi* creators and materials, and legal concerns about *Yaoi* in China.

Twenty interviews were conducted between March 2014 and April 2016 (Table 1). Although men were not excluded, none volunteered. Participant age ranges from 17-28 years (M=23.5); two were in high school, five undergraduates, eight postgraduates, three in white

collar and two in freelance employment; one identified as homosexual, 13 as heterosexual, one was unsure of her sexuality, and the sexuality of the other interviewees is unknown. Nine interviews were conducted face-to-face and 11 online with audio-recording. Interviews lasted between 45-135 minutes and were transcribed verbatim by the first author.

Table 1: Description of interviewees in the order in which interviews conducted

Interviewee	Age (yrs)	Occupation	Sexual orientation	Recruitment	Mode	Length (mins)
1	26	Master student	Heterosexual	Self-pilot	Face-to-face	88
2	26	Master student	Heterosexual	Snowball	Face-to-face	75
3	26	White collar worker	Heterosexual	Snowball	Face-to-face	125
4	25	Master student	Heterosexual	Snowball	Face-to-face	55
5	17	High school student	Unknown	Survey response	Online	65
6	23	Master student	Heterosexual	Snowball	Face-to-face	50
7	24	Master student	Heterosexual	Snowball	Face-to-face	75
8	28	PhD student	Homosexual	Snowball	Face-to-face	75
9	27	PhD student	Heterosexual	Snowball	Face-to-face	135
10	27	White collar worker	Not sure	Snowball	Online	90
11	27	Freelancer	Heterosexual	Snowball	Online	75
12	26	White collar worker	Unknown	Survey response	Online	60
13	21	Undergraduate student	Heterosexual	Survey response	Online	70
14	27	Freelancer	Heterosexual	Snowball	Online	75
15	25	PhD student	Unknown	Snowball	Face-to-face	85
16	20	Undergraduate student	Unknown	Survey response	Online	50
17	19	Undergraduate student	Unknown	Manga event	Online	45
18	17	High school student	Heterosexual	Manga event	Online	60
19	20	Undergraduate student	Heterosexual	Seminar	Online	80
20	19	Undergraduate student	Heterosexual	Seminar	Online	50

Interview Analysis

The interview data were analysed using Thematic Analysis (TA: Braun & Clarke, 2006). TA focuses on identifying patterns within qualitative data via coding in order to explore specific

research questions. Braun and Clarke set-out four dialectical decisions that are required when deciding the kind of TA conducted: whether the epistemology tends towards realism or constructionism; whether the analysis is a rich description of the entire data set or detailed account of one particular aspect of it; whether the analysis is inductive ('bottom-up') or theoretically-driven ('top-down'); and whether the themes presented are 'semantic' (stay true to the participant's own apparent meanings) or 'latent' (developed through analytical interpretation). The thematic analysis presented here is critical realistic in accepting that bodies and social structures exist and have effects, while are open to different meanings; is a rich description of the data set; was conducted inductively; and presents some themes that are semantic and some that are latent (Table 3).

Thematic Analysis: Analytical Procedure

The research question explored in this study is: *How do Chinese Yaoi fans read Yaoi stories?*

The first author transcribed all the interviews in Chinese (except for Interviewee 1, whose interview was conducted in English). She then read the transcriptions and listened to the audio-recordings several times while taking notes about initial ideas. Through this process, she noticed that interviewees often appeared to describe *Yaoi* in ways, and using concepts, familiar to heterosexual relationships. She therefore collected relevant quotes from the interviews into an excel sheet, noting from which interviewee each quote belonged. Themes were then developed based on her notes and a close consideration of the quotes identified. Initially, this process was driven semantically (i.e., staying close to the interviewees' words) and then, if a more conceptual meaning was perceived, the analysis became more interpretative and the latent meaning of some themes was articulated. It was also noticed that the same interviewee could provide both supportive and opposing evidence with regard to the same theme. The process of refining the themes and their labels was conducted in iterative cycles under the supervision of the second author. Eventually five themes were identified:

four with supportive/opposing subthemes and the fifth with three subthemes. Finally, an overarching concept was developed which integrated these five themes at the most parsimonious level: that is, the ‘heteronormative frame’.

Survey Data

A *Yaoi* fandom survey was created, one version in English and an almost identical version in Chinese. The survey consists of likert-scale and open-ended questions in five sections: demographics, *Yaoi* materials, feelings about *Yaoi*, social relationships, and other erotic materials. The Anglophone survey opened in November 2014 and the Chinese survey in March 2015. The surveys were promoted via relevant internet forums and social network websites, and by contacting anime and manga clubs. Leaflets about the study were also distributed at universities in Kunming China, via an online Chinese *Yaoi* shop, and at manga events in China during 2015-16, at which a paper version of the survey was provided for immediate completion and collection. Data analysed in this article was collected until March 2017 (Chinese N=1085, Anglophone N=1615, the latter including only participants who noted their first language to be English) (Table 2).

Table 2: Survey participant demographics by culture and gender

Culture	Gender			Total
	Female	Male	Other	
Chinese	949	120	16	1085
Anglophone	1203	268	144	1615
Total	2152	388	160	2700

People identifying as other than male- or female-gendered is much higher in the Anglophone survey (N=16; 1% of Chinese participants; N=144; 9% of Anglophone participants). Due to the small number of Chinese in this group, other-gendered people are not included in the statistical analyses presented in this article. A Chi-square test of independence was calculated comparing the frequency of women and men completing the Chinese and the Anglophone surveys. The relation between these variables was significant, χ^2

(1, N=2540) = 23.40, $p < .001$ with women more likely to have completed the survey in the Chinese group (N=949; 87%) than the Anglophone group (N=1203; 74%). *Yaoi* is known to be female-oriented, and two former surveys of Chinese *Yaoi* fandom also have high female participation rates of 96.4% (N=1107; Song & Wang, 2001) and 100% (N=434; Cui, 2014).

Survey Analysis

Having identified through analysis of the interview material the pattern we have called the ‘heteronormative frame’ in Chinese *Yaoi*, we selected specific questions from the survey for statistical analysis on the rationale that these items might inform this frame and help us interpret and contextualise the qualitative analysis. Specifically, survey questions were selected that might illuminate further the themes devised in the qualitative analysis. Hence, we selected the following seven questions from our 43-question survey: *I like BL¹ stories that are mostly romance and no sex* (5-point likert scale, ‘never’ to ‘extensively’ calculated as 1 to 5); *How acceptable are male-male sexual relationship to you in real life?* (5-point likert scale, ‘never’ to ‘always’, calculated as 1 to 5); *How acceptable are female-female sexual relationship to you in real life?* (5-point likert scale, ‘never’ to ‘always’, calculated as 1 to 5); *Who do you identify with most?* (‘seme’, ‘uke’, ‘other’ [this was a follow-on question for participants who indicated that ‘When I engage with BL, I put myself in the place of the characters’]), and further analysis of the free-form responses provided when ‘other’ was endorsed; *Which specific elements do you particularly enjoy in BL?* (Four relevant elements from a list of nine provided); *Please select the types of seme you particularly like* (list of 6 provided); *Please select the types of uke you particularly like* (list of 6 provided). For the latter three questions, participants could endorse as many options as they liked. Anglophone participants provided a relatively higher number of endorsement than Chinese participants, and female participants provided a relatively higher number of endorsement than male

¹ ‘BL’ (Boys’ Love) in this context is interchangeable with ‘Yaoi’.

participants (Chinese female M=3.16, 2.94, 3.12; Chinese male M=2.03, 2.10, 2.30; Anglophone female M=3.42, 3.23, 3.38; Anglophone male M=2.61, 2.51, 2.75). Hence, our statistical analysis needs to be interpreted in light of the lower mean endorsements on these questions by Chinese participants, particularly men.

Analysing a restricted number of survey questions selected for theoretical relevance to the qualitative analysis of the interview data helps minimise Type I errors (false positives) in the statistical analysis. To minimise Type I errors further, we set the demanding significance level of $p < .001$ and, given that our qualitative analysis is focused on Chinese women, limited our statistical comparisons to Chinese women versus Chinese men (to assess Chinese-culture gender differences) and Chinese women versus Anglophone women (to assess female-gender cultural differences). The Chi-Square test of independence was used to determine if two categorical variables (e.g. Chinese women and Anglophone women) are associated with one another for each observational unit (e.g., *seme* type). The likert scale response data selected for analysis were not normally distributed, so a non-parametric test – the Mann-Whitney U – was used to test for differences in median between groups.

Analysis

We demonstrate how the ‘heteronormative frame’ of Chinese *Yaoi* was identified in the interviews, providing evidence through quotes selected from the interviews, and integrate the thematic analysis of the interview material with statistical analysis of selected survey questions.

Interview Analysis: The Heteronormative Frame

The heteronormative frame of Chinese *Yaoi* as developed through our analysis of the interviews consists of five themes: social and family approval, everlasting romantic relationship, heteronormative couple, dislike reversible relationship, and gay relationships in reality. Table 3 shows how each interviewee contributed to the themes in terms of providing

supportive and/or opposing information. For the last theme – gay relationships in reality – we identify if interviewees contributed information that was normalising, open-minded, or rejecting. All but one participant (Interviewee 1, the first author) contributed information substantiating our interpretation of the heteronormative frame (Table 3). Table 4 provides a summary of statistical analysis of theoretically-selected survey questions indicating whether or not significance reached at $p < .001$ for the groups contrasted and the relevant effect size, Pearson's r and Cramer's V , where a trivial effect size is < 0.1 , a small effect size is $0.1 \leq 0.3$ and a medium effect size is $0.3 \leq 0.5$ (Shekin, 2003). The extended description for *seme* and *uke* types provided in the survey are given in footnotes to Table 4.

Table 3: Interviewee contribution to themes

Theme label	Social and family approval		Everlasting romantic relationship		Heteronormative couple		Dislike reversible relationship		Gay relationships in reality		
Theme type	Latent		Semantic		Latent		Semantic		Latent	Semantic	Semantic
Interviewee	Support	Opposing	Support	Opposing	Support	Opposing	Support	Opposing	Normalise	Open-minded	Reject
1						√		√			
2	√		√		√	√	√			√	
3	√				√	√	√				√
4			√		√	√			√		
5	√				√				√	√	
6					√	√			√	√	
7	√		√		√	√	√		√		
8					√		√		√		
9			√		√		√				
10	√		√		√				√		
11	√			√	√	√					
12			√		√	√					
13			√		√	√	√				
14	√		√		√	√		√	√		
15					√				√		
16			√		√				√		
17					√	√					
18							√				
19	√		√						√		
20					√		√			√	

Table 4: Summary statistical results for survey questions analysed: Chinese-culture gender differences and female-gender cultural differences

Survey question and test used	Chinese female vs. Chinese male	Effect size	Chinese female vs. Anglo female	Effect size
Mann-Whitney U				
<i>I like BL stories that are mostly romance and no sex</i>				
	CF	small	CF	medium
<i>How acceptable are male-male sexual relationship to you in real life?</i>				
	CF	small	AF	medium
<i>How acceptable are female-female sexual relationship to you in real life?</i>				
	/	/	AF	medium
Chi-Square test of independence				
<i>Which specific elements do you particularly enjoy in BL?</i>				
Cross-dressing	CF	small	AF	small
Gender change	/	/	/	/
Male pregnancy	CF	small	CF	small
Marriage/wedding	CF*	small	AF**	small
<i>Please select the types of seme you particularly like</i>				
Black Heart ²	CF*	small	CF**	small
Cowardice ³	/	small	AF	small
Natural ⁴	/	/	AF	small
King ⁵	CF*	small	CF**	small
Standoffish ⁶	CF*	small	AF**	small
Loyal Dog ⁷	CF*	small	CF**	/
<i>Please select the types of uke you particularly like</i>				
Princess ⁸	/	/	AF	small
Wife ⁹	CF*	small	/**	/
Tempter ¹⁰	CF*	small	/**	/
Queen ¹¹	CF*	small	CF*	small
Natural ¹²	CF*	small	AF**	small
Standoffish ¹³	CF*	small	/**	/

Notes: CF=significantly higher Chinese female endorsement, AF=significantly higher Anglophone female endorsement, /=no significant difference between groups or trivial effect, *=endorsement 50+% of group indicated, **=endorsement 50+% of both groups contrasted

² Black Heart: Calculating, sophisticated, intelligent but might be a double-dealer.
³ Cowardice: Wimpy, meek, undemanding. He may not have the nerve to make the first move and once things get going he is probably under the *uke*'s control.
⁴ Natural: Innocent, usually inexperienced, may be shy. Often looks like he ought to be the *uke*.
⁵ King: Generally from a good family and with high social status, he achieves success, wins recognition, and sticks to principles.
⁶ Standoffish: Initially cold and even hostile before gradually showing his warm side.
⁷ Loyal Dog: Devoted and determined, he will fawn over his *uke* like a puppy and doggedly pursue the *uke* until he gets him despite constant rejection.
⁸ Princess: Beautiful, elegant, and strong-willed. May be arrogant, demanding, or expect to be treated like royalty. Often from a wealthy family.
⁹ Wife: Focuses on family, good at housework, relatively mature, and could be either aggressive or submissive.
¹⁰ Tempter: Puts the moves on his *seme*. Might be an aggressive submissive.
¹¹ Queen: Supercilious, dominant, and takes charge of the relationship and of daily life.
¹² Natural: Naïve, innocent, cheerful, kind-hearted.
¹³ Standoffish: Initially cold and even hostile before showing his warm side.

Theme 1: Social and Family Approval (8 support; 0 oppose)

When interviewees mentioned social and family approval, they made clear that they preferred stories where the relationship between the men could be accepted by their families and admitted in public: ‘I like the explicit, clear and obvious relationship, like pregnancy and children born within stories’ (Interviewee 10). When stories involve plots about family and social tolerance, the perfect ending would be that the protagonists win support and acceptance. For example, Interviewee 7 explained that ‘I wrote a *Yaoi* story before. I described how the couple went to tell their parents. One family did not agree with their decision but another family accepted them, and later the disapproving family gradually understood and accepted them.’ Moreover, for participants such as Interviewee 19, the ability for the couple to be open about their relationship was important: ‘I like stories about actors who start to fall in love and finally come out in public.’

Link to Quantitative Analysis

We selected for analysis the survey question: *Which specific elements do you particularly enjoy in BL?*, analysing responses for four relevant elements from a list of nine provided.

Survey responses by culture and gender for two of these - male pregnancy and marriage/wedding - are provided in Table 5. Participants could endorse as many elements as they liked, hence Table 5 reports the percentage of each group who endorsed each element.

Table 5: Which specific elements do you particularly enjoy in BL? - Chinese and Anglophone survey % response by gender

	Female		Male	
	Chinese (N=949)	Anglo (N=1203)	Chinese (N=120)	Anglo (N=268)
Male pregnancy	33.33%	22.94%	9.20%	15.67%
Marriage/wedding	51.60%	61.85%	27.47%	48.51%

Chi-square tests of independence were calculated comparing the frequency endorsement of (a) Chinese women and Chinese men and (b) Chinese women and Anglophone women for the two selected elements. Chinese women were more likely to endorse male pregnancy

(N=317; 33.33%) than Chinese men (N=11; 9.20%), $\chi^2(1, N=1069) = 29.42, p < .001$, Cramer's V is .166 (small effect); Chinese women were more likely to endorse male pregnancy (N=317, 33.33%) than Anglophone women (N=276, 22.94%), $\chi^2(1, N=2152) = 29.08, p < .001$, Cramer's V is .12 (small effect); Chinese women were more likely to endorse marriage/wedding (N=490; 51.60%) than Chinese men (N=33; 27.47%), $\chi^2(1, N=1069) = 24.83, p < .001$, Cramer's V is .152 (small effect); Anglophone women were more likely to endorse marriage/wedding (N=744, 61.85%) than Chinese women (N=490, 51.60%), $\chi^2(1, N=2152) = 22.62, p < .001$, Cramer's V is .10 (small effect).

The statistical analysis of this survey question: *Which specific elements do you particularly enjoy in BL?*, supports the theme from our qualitative analysis 'Social and family approval' in that it is women in particular who like male-male marriage and it is Chinese women who like male pregnancy relatively more than the other groups. Marriage in itself is a form of social and family sanction and reproduction is a social expectation in China.

Theme 2: Everlasting Romantic Relationship (10 support; 1 oppose)

Half of the interviewees spontaneously mentioned a preference for the development of a permanent relationship between the *uke* and *seme* and how if the *uke* or *seme* changed their mind about their relationship it might reduce their enjoyment of the story. Interviewee 19 explained: 'I like stories about childhood sweethearts. I like to watch them growing up and finally being together.' And Interviewee 16 said: 'I enjoy *Yaoi* stories about standing aloof from worldly success. The best thing is only that the *seme* and *uke* live together forever.' Participants liked the *seme* and *uke* to overcome all difficulties to maintain their relationship, including an *uke* who is willing to wait and forgive the *seme* who has made many mistakes. In this regard, Interviewee 2 said: 'I do not like stories with a change of *seme* even if he may be not good enough or did some bad things to the *uke*. I want this scum-*seme* to reform and come back to make amends to the *uke*.'

Participants, such as Interviewee 10, also liked *semes* with a more patient and gentle disposition who would like to be the companion or protector of the *uke* and willing to make any sacrifice to maintain the relationship: ‘Feiliu [*uke* as interviewee identified] is pure and simple. Su [*seme*] is a unique and special person in his world. He only likes Su- nothing else.’ On the other hand, one interviewee had a different point of view and said: ‘I accept stories about one *uke* with more than one *seme* in relationship at the same time, but not one *seme* with more than one *uke*’ (Interviewee 11). Hence, she demonstrated tolerance for *Yaoi* relationships which involve multiple and changing partners and - most contrary to the heteronormative frame - that this is acceptable for the *uke* but not for the *seme*.

Link to Quantitative Analysis

We selected for analysis the survey question: *I like BL stories that are mostly romance and no sex*. The survey responses by culture and gender are provided in Table 6.

Table 6: I like BL stories that are mostly romance and no sex – Chinese and Anglophone survey % response by gender

	Female		Male	
	Chinese (N=949)	Anglo (N=1203)	Chinese (N=120)	Anglo (N=268)
Never	4.82%	2.41%	23.08%	4.85%
Sometimes	15.01%	43.72%	15.38%	39.18%
Often	25.90%	29.84%	19.78%	29.48%
Very often	36.23%	17.71%	27.47%	18.28%
Extensively	18.04%	6.32%	14.29%	8.21%

Mann-Whitney tests indicated that liking for BL stories that are mostly romance and no sex was greater for Chinese women (Mdn=4.0) than for Chinese men (Mdn=3.0), U=42800.5 (z=-4.60), p<.001, using Cohen’s effect size r=-.14 (small effect); and greater for Chinese women (Mdn=4.0) than for Anglophone women (Mdn=3.0), U=368467.5 (z=-14.67), p<.001, using Cohen’s effect size r=-.46 (medium effect). The statistical analysis of this survey question: *I like BL stories that are mostly romance and no sex*, supports the theme from our

qualitative analysis ‘*Everlasting romantic relationship*’ in that it is Chinese women in particular who read *Yaoi* as romance.

Theme 3: Heteronormative Couple (7 support; 10 mixed; 1 oppose)

Seven interviewees had sole preference for the *seme* and *uke* to maintain the traditionally masculine and feminine binary respectively, and to follow gender stereotypes in appearance, personality, and social role. For example, Interviewee 9 describes liking ‘the *uke* who can make a great sacrifice for the *seme*. It is unrealistic but attracts me a lot. I like a strong and powerful *seme* and healing *uke*. The best couple is the wounded but powerful *seme* and healing *uke* who comforts the *seme*.’

Ten interviewees provided both supporting and opposing evidence. They highlighted their liking for differences between *seme* and *uke* but preferred that both are portrayed as fully masculine. For example, Interviewee 12 said that she liked ‘the *uke* showing a very lovable and adorable personality - and the *seme* taking care of the *uke* - but not talkative and not expressing himself very much. But I still want masculine behaviour like a man, even if he is the *uke*’. Similarly, Interviewee 17, said: ‘I like an *uke* who is beautiful, soft, and smart, but not too sissy.’ And while Interviewee 13 mentioned that ‘I like the strong and powerful *seme* who is able to control everything in his life while the *uke* is cute, pure and sweet’, she also said: ‘but I don’t want the story to look like a man and woman romance story. I hope the *uke* keeps masculine features in some way, even he is beautiful and soft.’ Only Interviewee 1 expressed a sole liking for the *Yaoi* couple to consist of two very masculine men: ‘Many *Yaoi* manga are about very feminine men. I think if you read something like that it may be the same as reading some stories between men and women. It may be no different from *Yaoi* and normal relationship. So if I read some *Yaoi* work, I prefer masculine men.’

Link to Quantitative Analysis

We selected for analysis the survey question: *Please select the types of seme you particularly like*, and we analysed responses to all 6 types provided. Survey responses by culture and gender are provided in Table 7. Participants could endorse as many *seme* types as they liked, hence Table 7 reports the percentage of each group who endorsed each type.

Table 7: Please select the types of seme you particularly like - Chinese and Anglophone survey % response by gender

	Female		Male	
	Chinese (N=949)	Anglo (N=1203)	Chinese (N=120)	Anglo (N=268)
Black Heart	71.76%	54.45%	32.50%	36.19%
Cowardice	7.10%	22.53%	13.30%	21.27%
Natural	30.80%	46.47%	37.50%	49.25%
King	64.40%	54.03%	22.50%	38.43%
Standoffish	54.30%	64.75%	30.80%	47.76%
Loyal Dog	63.50%	54.28%	33.33%	51.87%

Chi-square tests of independence were calculated comparing the frequency endorsement of (a) Chinese women and Chinese men and (b) Chinese women and Anglophone women for each of the six *seme* types. The relation between variables was significant for the following contrasts. Chinese women were more likely to endorse Black Heart (N=680; 71.76%) than Chinese men (N=39; 32.50%), $\chi^2(1, N=1069) = 74.16, p < .001$, Cramer’s V is .26 (small effect); Chinese women were more likely to endorse Black Heart (N=680, 71.76%) than Anglophone women (N=655, 54.45%), $\chi^2(1, N=2152) = 66.70, p < .001$, Cramer’s V is .18 (small effect); Anglophone women were more likely to endorse Cowardice (N=271, 22.53%) and Natural (N=559, 46.47%) than Chinese women (N=67, 7.10%; N=292, 30.80%), $\chi^2(1, N=2152) = 95.86, p < .001$, $\chi^2(1, N=2152) = 54.68, p < .001$, Cramer’s V is .21 (small effect) and .16 (small effect); Chinese women were more likely to endorse King (N=611; 64.40%) than Chinese men (N=27; 22.50%), $\chi^2(1, N=1069) = 77.66, p < .001$, Cramer’s V is .27 (small effect); Chinese women were more likely to endorse King (N=611, 64.40%) than Anglophone women (N=650, 54.03%), $\chi^2(1, N=2152) = 23.43, p < .001$, Cramer’s V is .10

(small effect); Chinese women were more likely to endorse Standoffish (N=515; 54.30%) than Chinese men (N=37; 30.80%), $\chi^2(1, N=1069) = 23.43, p < .00$, Cramer's V is .15 (small effect); Anglophone women were more likely to endorse Standoffish (N=779, 64.75%) than Chinese women (N=515, 54.30%), $\chi^2(1, N=2152) = 24.38, p < .001$, Cramer's V is .10 (small effect); Chinese women were more likely to endorse Loyal Dog (N=603; 63.50%) than Chinese men (N=40; 33.33%), $\chi^2(1, N=1069) = 40.55, p < .001$, Cramer's V is .20 (small effect); Chinese women were more likely to endorse Loyal Dog (N=603, 63.50%) than Anglophone women (N=653, 54.28%), $\chi^2(1, N=2152) = 18.72, p < .001$, Cramer's V is .09 (trivial effect).

The statistical analysis of this survey question, *Please select the types of seme you particularly like*, supports the theme from our qualitative analysis '*Heteronormative couple*' in that it is Chinese women in particular who like the more masculine types of *seme* (Black Heart, King, and Loyal Dog).

We also selected for analysis survey question: *Please select the types of uke you particularly like*, analysing responses to all 6 types provided. Survey responses by culture and gender are provided in table 8. Participants could endorse as many *uke* types as they liked, hence table 8 reports the percentage of each group who endorsed each type.

Table 8: *Please select the types of uke you particularly like - Chinese and Anglophone survey % response by gender*

	Female		Male	
	Chinese (N=949)	Anglo (N=1203)	Chinese (N=120)	Anglo (N=268)
Princess	12.60%	38.32%	19.20%	31.72%
Wife	51.30%	51.70%	32.50%	41.79%
Tempter	53.80%	57.86%	35.80%	51.87%
Queen	50.00%	30.50%	21.70%	24.25%
Natural	59.30%	70.40%	39.56%	66.79%
Standoffish	66.60%	59.93%	36.70%	45.52%

Chi-square tests of independence were calculated comparing the frequency endorsement of (a) Chinese women and Chinese men and (b) Chinese women and Anglophone women for each of the six *uke* types. The relation between variables was significant for the following contrasts. Anglophone women were more likely to endorse Princess (N=469, 38.32 %) than Chinese women (N=120, 12.60%), $\chi^2(1, N=2152) = 185.17, p < .001$, Cramer's V is .29 (small effect); Chinese women were more likely to endorse Wife (N=487; 51.30%) than Chinese men (N=39; 32.50%), $\chi^2(1, N=1069) = 15.09, p < .001$, Cramer's V is .20 (small effect); Chinese women were more likely to endorse Tempter (N=511; 53.80%) than Chinese men (N=43; 35.80%), $\chi^2(1, N=1069) = 13.84, p < .001$, Cramer's V is .11 (small effect); Chinese women were more likely to endorse Queen (N=474; 50.00%) than Chinese men (N=26; 21.70%), $\chi^2(1, N=1069) = 34.22, p < .001$, Cramer's V is .18 (small effect); Chinese women were more likely to endorse Queen (N=474, 50.0%) than Anglophone women (N=367, 30.50%), $\chi^2(1, N=2152) = 84.21, p < .001$, Cramer's V is .20 (small effect); Chinese women were more likely to endorse Natural (N=563; 59.30%) than Chinese men (N=48; 39.56%), $\chi^2(1, N=1069) = 16.25, p < .001$, Cramer's V is .12 (small effect); Anglophone women were more likely to endorse Natural (N=847, 70.40%) than Chinese women (N=563; 59.30%), $\chi^2(1, N=2152) = 28.84, p < .001$, Cramer's V is .12 (small effect); Chinese women were more likely to endorse Standoffish (N=632; 66.60%) than Chinese men (N=44; 36.70%), $\chi^2(1, N=1069) = 41.05, p < .001$, Cramer's V is .20 (small effect).

The statistical analysis of this survey question, *Please select the types of uke you particularly like*, supports the theme from our qualitative analysis '*Heteronormative couple*' in that it is Chinese women in particular who like the *uke* to present some masculine qualities while maintaining the *uke* role (i.e., dislike Princess but like Queen).

Finally, we chose to analyse the survey question: *Who do you identify with most?* ('*seme*', '*uke*', '*other*') [this was a follow-on question for participants who indicated that

‘When I engage with BL, I put myself in the place of the characters’]). Survey responses by culture and gender are provided in Table 9.

Table 9: Who do you identify with most? - Chinese and Anglophone survey % response by gender

	Female		Male	
	Chinese (N=949)	Anglo (N=1203)	Chinese (N=120)	Anglo (N=268)
% endorse an identification	47.93%	85.62%	50.55%	89.55%
<i>Seme</i>	19.83%	18.64%	41.30%	23.75%
<i>Uke</i>	46.26%	49.13%	36.96%	53.33%
Other	33.91%	32.23%	21.74%	22.92%

Raw percentages indicate that: (a) Anglophone participants are more likely to agree with the statement: *When I engage with BL, I put myself in the place of the characters*, than are Chinese participants; and (b) where participants identify with the *uke* or *seme*, more than twice as many female participants and Anglophone men identify with the *uke* while Chinese men tend to identify with the *seme*. Of the 154 Chinese women who endorsed ‘other’, 73 provided a useful explanation: 14 identified with other characters and 60 identified with either *seme* or *uke* depending on the story, the author, and character personality, description or representation. Of the 332 Anglophone women who endorsed ‘other’, 294 provided a useful explanation: 7 identified with other characters and 287 identified with either *seme* or *uke* depending on the story, character personality, situation and mood, with some indicating a preference for a *switch*, *versatile*, and *seke* (i.e., a character who can be both a *seme* and an *uke* in a reversible couple).

The statistical analysis of this survey question: *Who do you identify with most?*, supports the theme from our qualitative analysis ‘*Heteronormative couple*’ in that it is women in particular who identify with the *uke*, i.e., the more feminine role, while Anglophone women - but not Chinese women - are more likely to identify with a reversible character.

Theme 4: *Dislike Reversible Relationship* (8 support; 2 oppose)

The ‘reversible’ relationship in *Yaoi* is one in which both partners can be ‘penetrating’ or ‘receptive’ in sexual activities. Where this was alluded to in the interviews, most disliked this kind of relationship. For example, Interviewee 2 said: ‘I do not like reversible relationships. I do not want to find the *seme*’s and *uke*’s role reversed.’ Interviewee 8 concurred: ‘I do not like the *uke* to take the *seme* role’. Some participants suggest that a reversible relationship would spoil their enjoyment because it would disrupt the expected storyline. For instance, Interviewee 18 observed, ‘When I read *Yaoi* stories, fiction or manga and find the *seme* and *uke* role not as I expect, I feel unwell. I do not like that.’ It seems that ‘reversibility’ could be interpreted as a disruption of the implied binary relationship but, interestingly, two interviewees were not averse to reversible relationships. For example, Interviewee 14 said that ‘the *seme* and *uke* should be equal in various ways including the top-bottom role. The reversible role should be normal.’

Link to Quantitative Analysis

We selected for analysis survey question: *Which specific elements do you particularly enjoy in BL?*, analysing responses for four relevant elements from a list of nine provided. Survey responses by culture and gender for two of these – cross-dressing and gender change - are provided in Table 10. Participants could endorse as many elements as they liked, hence Table 10 reports the percentage of each group who endorsed each element.

Table 10: Which specific elements do you particularly enjoy in BL? - Chinese and Anglophone survey % response by gender

	Female		Male	
	Chinese (N=949)	Anglo (N=1203)	Chinese (N=120)	Anglo (N=268)
Cross-dressing	25.70%	45.55%	9.20%	40.30%
Gender change	14.90%	16.29%	16.70%	19.78%

Chi-square tests of independence were calculated comparing the frequency endorsement of (a) Chinese women and Chinese men and (b) Chinese women and Anglophone women for

each of the two elements. The relation between variables was significant for the following contrasts. Chinese women were more likely to endorse cross-dressing (N=244; 25.70%) than Chinese men (N=11; 9.20%), $\chi^2(1, N=1069) = 16.05, p < .001$, Cramer's V is .12 (small effect); Anglophone women were more likely to endorse cross-dressing (N=548, 45.55%) than Chinese women (N=244, 25.70%), $\chi^2(1, N=2152) = 89.80, p < .001$, Cramer's V is .20 (small effect).

The statistical analysis of this survey question: *Which specific elements do you particularly enjoy in BL?*, supports the theme from our qualitative analysis 'Dislike reversible relationship' in that gender change is not highly endorsed by any of the three contrasted groups. However, it is Chinese women who like cross-dressing relatively more than Chinese men, but less so than Anglophone women who still do not endorse cross-dressing highly.

Theme 5: Gay Relationships in Reality (8 normalise; 2 open-minded; 2 normalise/open-minded; 1 reject)

Of the 20 interviewees, 13 provided information about their opinion of gay relationships in reality. Eight were considered to normalise gay relationships, two to be open-minded, another two to both normalise and be open-minded, and one to reject gay relationships in reality.

Interviewee 4 provides an example of (hetero-)normalising gay relationships as being little different from those between men and women: 'I prefer *Yaoi* stories to represent the realistic homosexual world: not too fantasy. But I still think a beautiful romantic story will be same for homosexuals.' As another example, Interviewee 15 supports the normalisation of gay relationships through public acceptance: 'I am in strong opposition to restriction on homosexual topics or issues in public media by the authorities.' Interviewee 6 explains how *Yaoi* has made her more open-minded: 'After reading *Yaoi* stories, I recognized different sexual orientations in the world and it makes me better accept different things and makes me more open-minded.' And Interviewee 20 considers this characteristic of fans: 'I think *fujoshi*

are more open-minded because they can accept different things, no matter what sexual orientation or other things.’ Some interviewees expressed both normalising and open-minded perspectives, such as Interviewee 5 who said: ‘The *Yaoi* story is the pathway of possibility to understanding and knowing the real LGBT group. It made me for the first time pay attention to homosexual groups.’ However, one participant, Interviewee 3, although a reader and creator of *Yaoi* for 10 years, said: ‘I reject homosexual relationships in real life. I think family responsibility is the most important thing.’

Link to Quantitative Analysis

We selected for analysis the survey question: *How acceptable are male-male sexual relationship to you in real life?* Survey responses by culture and gender are provided in Table 11.

Table 11: How acceptable are male-male sexual relationships to you in real life? - Chinese and Anglophone survey % response by gender

	Female		Male	
	Chinese (N=949)	Anglo (N=1203)	Chinese (N=120)	Anglo (N=268)
Never	8.13%	0.58%	32.92%	0.75%
Sometimes	7.58%	1.91%	16.48%	2.61%
Often	5.65%	2.74%	6.59%	3.73%
Very often	24.79%	5.40%	18.68%	8.21%
Extensively	53.86%	89.36%	25.27%	84.70%

Mann-Whitney tests indicated that acceptability of male-male sexual relationships in real life was greater for Chinese women (Mdn=5.0) than for Chinese men (Mdn=2.5), $U=32699.0$ ($z=-8.26$), $p<.001$, according Cohen’s effect size $r=-.25$ (small), but greater for Anglophone women (Mdn=5.0) than for Chinese women (Mdn=5.0), $U=368467.5$ ($z=-18.11$), $p<.001$, according Cohen’s effect size $r=-.33$ (medium). The statistical analysis of this survey question: ‘*How acceptable are male-male sexual relationship to you in real life?*’, supports the theme from our qualitative analysis, ‘*gay relationships in reality*’, in that Chinese women

are relatively accepting of male-male sexual relationships, if less so than are Anglophone women.

We also selected the survey question: *How acceptable are female-female sexual relationship to you in real life?* Survey responses by culture and gender are provided in Table 12.

Table 12: How acceptable are female-female sexual relationships to you in real life? - Chinese and Anglophone survey % response by gender

	Female		Male	
	Chinese (N=949)	Anglo (N=1203)	Chinese (N=120)	Anglo (N=268)
Never	15.01%	1.25%	17.58%	2.24%
Sometimes	11.43%	3.66%	13.19%	0.75%
Often	9.5%	4.24%	7.69%	2.24%
Very often	24.24%	6.23%	14.29%	7.84%
Extensively	39.81%	89.28%	47.25%	82.46%

Mann-Whitney tests indicated that acceptability of female-female sexual relationships in real life did not differ between Chinese women (Mdn=4.0) and Chinese men (Mdn=4.0), $U=56055.0$ ($z=-.29$), $p=.771$, according Cohen’s effect size $r=-.0009$ (trivial effect), but was greater for Anglophone women (Mdn=5.0) than for Chinese women (Mdn=4.0), $U=312246.0$ ($z=-21.37$), $p<.001$, according Cohen’s effect size $r=-.32$ (medium effect). The statistical analysis of this survey question: ‘*How acceptable are female-female sexual relationship to you in real life?*’, adds to our understanding of the theme from our qualitative analysis ‘*gay relationships in reality*’ in that Chinese women’s relative acceptance of gay relationships is limited to those between men, unlike Anglophone women.

Discussion

This article addresses the research question: *How do Chinese Yaoi fans read Yaoi stories?* We are particularly interested in discerning if there are a set of assumptions which colour fans understanding of this material. In line with a small research literature (e.g., Zhou et al., 2017), our study concurs that, in China, *Yaoi* tends to be read through a heteronormative

frame. Specifically, our integrated analysis of female Chinese fan interviews and Sinophone and Anglophone survey data supports five themes comprising this heteronormative frame: social and family approval, everlasting romantic relationship, heteronormative couple, dislike reversible relationship, and gay relationships in reality.

Social and Family Approval

According to Chinese mainstream values, family is a constitutive unit of society and filial piety is its cornerstone. Moreover, as a collectivist culture, public acceptance is important and Chinese people pay a great deal of attention to how other people see them. As a result, a ‘good’ or ‘serious’ romantic relationship is one that is openly revealed and approved by parents and society. In terms of specific elements most enjoyed in BL, both Chinese and Anglophone fans provided the highest endorsement for marriage/wedding. This arguably reflects the continuing importance of love, romance and commitment in modern life (Timothy, 2010). However, in China, the traditional understanding is that a marriage is first and foremost an agreement between families (Long, 2015) and filial piety requires that children, even as adults, be submissive to parents (Gu, 2015). This includes marrying an ‘appropriate’ person, given that both families will be deeply involved in the couple’s life (Wu, 2016), and some parents even make the decisions with regard to their children’s spouse (Karoline, 2017). This is the context within which our Chinese interviewees enjoyed the *seme-uke* couple succeeding in their efforts to win social and family approval as an essential element conferring completion and perfection to the romance.

Although male pregnancy is not highly popular with Chinese or Anglophone participants, the gap in endorsement between ‘marriage’ and ‘pregnancy’ is much smaller for Chinese fans as is supported by the small effect size in favour of Chinese women on ‘male pregnancy’. Sustaining the family through creating the next generation is a vital aspect of filial piety (Gu, 2015). Hence, for the Chinese, marriage implicates procreation and, in

Chinese traditional family ethics, homosexuality is tolerated as long as it is not prejudicial to family continuity (Zhang, 2001). However, the assumption that gay people do not have children fuels criticism of homosexuality in contemporary China. Male pregnancy in *Yaoi* can be interpreted as defusing this issue such that the obligations of heterosexuality can be satisfied within fantasy male-male relationships.

Another of our studies, which compared Chinese and Anglophone *Harry Potter Yaoi* fan fiction, also found that family approval for the *seme-uke* relationship played an essential role in Chinese, but not Anglophone, *Yaoi* (Madill, Zhao & Fan, in press). And, to consolidate social approval, it seemed an important part of Chinese fan fiction that the couple have a grand wedding and produce children. Hence, regarding social and family approval, and the related phenomena of male-male marriage and male pregnancy, the preferences of Chinese *Yaoi* fans may support central expectations of heterosexuality in Chinese culture.

Everlasting Romantic Relationship

Analysis of the survey data showed that it is Chinese women who most preferred romantic *Yaoi* stories while the interview analysis illustrated how such fans liked the relationship to have its roots in childhood and to be maintained through the sacrifice or forgiveness of the *uke*, regardless of cost. Therefore, the couple that ultimately commit to each other forever appears to be an essential element of ideal romance for female Chinese *Yaoi* fans.

According to traditional Chinese morality, women are required to show unconditional tolerance, patience, and forgiveness towards their spouse – even for sexual misdemeanours. This perspective is still ingrained (Lin & Ho, 2009), although increasingly criticised (Wang & Abbott, 2013), and in contemporary China there is a 50% divorce rate for young couples with women initiating nearly 60% such separations, at least in Shanxian province where statistics are readily available (Li, 2013). This suggests that some young Chinese women may be taking more control of their life, but it is often at the cost of significant economic loss not

suffered by their male peers (Fincher, 2015). Arguably, the everlasting romantic relationship has become a potent fantasy as Chinese women like to see traditional values in *Yaoi* that are increasingly out of place in modern life but yet to be replaced with a satisfactory alternative.

Heteronormative Couple and Dislike Reversible Relationship

Possibly the most novel and subtle aspect of our findings is revealed in the combined implications of our themes ‘Heteronormative couple’ and ‘Dislike reversible relationships’. First, female Chinese *Yaoi* fans showed a preference for masculine *semes* and masculine *ukes*. However, second, these fans also tended to want *semes* and *ukes* to remain in roles that mirror that of traditional heterosexual relationships (see for example, Madill, Zhao & Fan, 2018). These seemingly paradoxical findings make sense if we consider that female Chinese fans, at least, are reading *Yaoi* within a heteronormative frame. That is, as (predominantly) heterosexual women, they enjoy sexy stories about masculine men but also want these stories to portray a form of relationship they recognise and can read themselves into.

Research on *Yaoi* in the West concurs that fans tend to reject very feminine *ukes* but suggest, rather, that the *seme-uke* model differs from that of traditional heterosexual relationships in being more ‘equal’ (Pagliassotti, 2010). The culturally-differential interpretation is supported by our finding that, if they identified with a character, Chinese fans tended to do so in accord with their gender role (e.g., Chinese women tended to put themselves in the place of the *uke*) and did not also identify with reversible-types as did the Anglophone women. This is somewhat in tension with Chinese scholars, such as Chao (2017; Li, 2009; Zhang, 2015), who suggests that *Yaoi* stories “deconstruct the male/female binary” (p.71) whereby the female spectator practices a cross-gender gaze to identify with either the *seme* or *uke* and, rather, suggests that the gender binary is a particular influence on Chinese fans reading. Chao (2017) also reports that the most common patterns in Chinese *Yaoi* are of a strong *seme* with a strong *uke* and of a strong *seme* with a weak *uke*: ‘strong’ and ‘weak’

referring to capacity, physical condition, and/or disposition of the character. While the ‘strong-weak’ pattern appears straightforward within our argument of a heteronormative frame in Chinese *Yaoi*, the ‘strong-strong’ combination recalls Radway’s (1984) identification in heterosexual romantic fiction of heroines who, while independent and intelligent, maintain feminine traits (such as beauty, tenderness, and consideration) while searching for the ‘right - stereotypically masculine - ‘man’ (see also Chao, 2017, Zhou & Sherman, 2017).

Masculinity and femininity as opposites is a Western concept and very different from the traditional Chinese ideal man who combines both masculine and feminine traits called *Wen* and *Wu* (Kam, 2002). Moreover, in Chinese ethics, in the two of the three central relationship types – emperor and subject, father and son, and husband and wife – men can be positioned in both the superior and inferior role, with even the emperor in the son and subject role in his youth. Hence, a man with a soft, gentle, and deferential disposition is fitted into social norms and has a position in Chinese morality (Gu, 2015). Moreover, cross-dressing performers are common in East Asia, for example in Beijing Opera, Noh, and Kabuki, with the Chinese aesthetic appreciating feminine beauty in men (e.g., in the ‘Dream of the Red Chamber’ which is a classic of Chinese literature: Kang, 2016). Even now, androgynous male stars are popular in China, Japan, and Korea (Hsu, 2014). However, importantly, although Chinese culture accepts the ‘effeminate man’, the heteronormative order is affirmed in reality and in *Yaoi* fantasy.

Gay Relationships in Reality

Compared with Anglophone *Yaoi* fans, the Chinese showed relatively low acceptance of homosexual relationships in reality. However, Chinese *Yaoi* fans appear more accepting of homosexuality than are the Chinese general public. That is, an anonymous, random phone call survey (N=400), revealed that only around 20% of Chinese considered that homosexuality was not wrong at all, 30% that there was something wrong with

homosexuality, 40% that homosexuality was completely wrong, and 10% were not sure (Li & Zheng, 2013). Moreover, research on Chinese university students (N=1762) showed that, while around 70% agreed homosexuality to be normal, only about 25% would accept homosexual friends and family (Liang & Hang, 2012).

More specifically, our study suggests that, of Chinese *Yaoi* fans, it is women who have the highest relative acceptance of gay relationships but that this tends to be limited to those between men: which is, perhaps, not surprising given that *Yaoi* focuses on male-male sexuality. However, our interviews suggest that the relative tolerance of male-male sexuality demonstrated by female Chinese fans may be in the direction of (hetero-)normalising, for example supporting the legalisation of same sex marriage. However, some interviewees also discussed the way in which, although they were initially shocked, *Yaoi* stories made them more open-minded towards male-male relationships that take a different form to the traditional relationship between men and women (see also Chen, 2014; Zhang, 2015).

These findings make sense given the conflicted situation vis-à-vis homosexuality in contemporary China. There is no state regulation or prohibition of homosexuality but also no encouragement by the authorities to mention, support, or show homosexuality in mainstream media. This provides the context within which the Chinese Netcasting Services Association (CNSA, 2017) - the biggest national-level industry organisation – was able to publish audit standards forbidding representations of homosexuality (Keating, 2017). On the other hand, in the 21st century, there has been an exponential increase in the visibility of Chinese scholars of minority gender and sexuality, and academic interest both in support of minority rights (e.g., Gao, 2016; Ma, 2016), and reporting concern over destabilisation of traditional values (e.g., Guo, 2009). Hence, although less accepting of gay relationships in real life than their Anglophone counterparts, Chinese fans are reading *Yaoi* in a very different cultural context

and demonstrating relative openness, if tending to a heteronormative frame supporting traditional values.

Evaluation and Conclusion

Although *Yaoi* is a female-oriented subculture, the large survey samples alongside the relatively small number of male respondents, made it important to consider effect size as well as significance levels because the former avoids confounding the size of the difference with the size of the samples. However, to lessen the chance of false positive results, we also had to limit the contrasts we tested to gender within Chinese culture and women between Chinese and Anglophone culture. This meant that we made a decision not to explore other possible interesting contrasts (e.g., between non-heterosexual Chinese and Anglophone respondents). All interviews were with women. Hence, although the survey points to the heteronormative frame of Chinese *Yaoi* as not gender specific, we have no in-depth qualitative data on male Chinese fans. Many of the interviewees were friends of the first author, or referred by friends, and this may affect the representative of the sample. For example, the mean age of interviewees is 23.5 years while for Chinese survey respondents it is 19.4 years. This period spans commencing to graduating from higher education during which outlook and focus may change. Finally, although the first author is a long-term *Yaoi* fan and Chinese national, so bringing an insider perspective, her self-pilot interview (Participant 1) demonstrated her to be a relative outlier, meaning that she may have an outlook that differs from the majority of fans.

A huge strength of our study is that we are able to offer a perspective on Chinese *Yaoi* fans through contrasting them, at least on survey data, with their Anglophone counterparts and to our knowledge this is the first study to do so. Moreover, our research is particularly rigorous in having triangulated qualitative and quantitative analysis. Specifically, we have demonstrated that, in addressing the research question: *How do Chinese Yaoi fans read Yaoi stories?*, our survey results support our thematic analysis that Chinese *Yaoi* fans tend to read

Yaoi through a heteronormative frame and, importantly, that in comparison with Anglophone fans, this is differential to Chinese culture.

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