

## Book Review

*Maud Lavin, Yang Ling, and Zhao Jing Jamie, eds. 2017. Boy's Love, Cosplay, and Androgynous Idols: Queer Fan Cultures in Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Hong Kong University Press.*

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I started reviewing *Boy's Love, Cosplay, and Androgynous Idols: Queer Fan Cultures in Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan* (2017) soon before a large online censorship incident targeting fans took place on the Chinese Internet. It occurred on Douban, a social media platform known for hosting reviews of and communities surrounding films, books, and music. Interestingly, the site has also attracted over six hundred thousand celebrity news fans. Right before October 2019, which marked the seventieth anniversary of the People's Republic of China, a Douban Group (in which many of these fans gathered) triggered a website-wide shutdown. To this particular "Group" titled *Douban E Zu* (Douban Geese Group), such a closure also happened immediately before June 4, 2019 (the thirtieth anniversary of the Tiananmen Square Incident). Yet, strangely, the reason for the shutdowns was not political dissidence, which often prompts censorship; the Group was shut down because of overly patriotic threads that policed users whose stances on issues such as the 2019 Hong Kong protests seemed disloyal to China (*Nei.st* 2019).

As a foreign-based Chinese user of Douban who uses it for the liberal-minded social media it has created around films, books, and music, I had been subconsciously linking the celebrity news-interested Group to enthusiastic nationalism. Meanwhile, I am not sure when and how certain fan circles became intensely interested in political topics,

to an extent that they would bypass using popular culture as the medium to discuss politics (a practice analyzed in depth in chapter two). But perhaps questioning when and how the Communist Party of China won the favour of fans does not allow one to understand the dynamics behind this phenomenon, since it presumes those fans are politically monolithic and unwilling or unable to form discourses. As *Boy's Love, Cosplay, and Androgynous Idols* presents alternative narratives to the "capitulation model of fandoms" (Lavin et al. 2017, xxi), it has inspired me to alter my perception of fandoms in mainland China.

On the one hand, the book, edited by Maud Lavin, Ling Yang, and Jing Jamie Zhao, adds greatly to the study of non-Western and non-Japanese queer fan cultures with its focus on Sinitic-language queer fandoms. Typically, many Euro-American scholars would have been more familiar with scholarship focusing on slash in the U.S. and ACG (Anime, Comic, and Games) practices in Japan, if they were knowledgeable about fan studies. On the other hand, this volume provides valuable ways of comprehending a group of divergent queer fan practices that converge because of their Chinese-speaking environments. The anthology touches on issues that scholars in other fields grapple with: feminism, femininity, gender, homosociality, sexuality, homonormativity, transnationality, geopolitics, linguistics, hybridity, fluidity, popular culture,

digital media, etc. At the same time, this book explores in-depth queer fandoms in mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Individual practices are contextualized, and comparisons among distinct practices and specific practitioners are made and analyzed by both the editors and contributors to give refreshing insights.

The book is divided into ten chapters, six of which are devoted to case studies from mainland China, making research of this geographical area an indisputable highlight. Chapter seven and eight are dedicated to research in Hong Kong, and chapter nine and ten focus on Taiwan. This division that leans heavily toward mainland China is rather sensible, as within the three Sinitic-language cultures, mainland China has the least amount of existing literature that considers its highly transnational, yet localized queer fandoms.<sup>1</sup>

Discourses that take into account the three regions are articulated by the editors as Sinophonic (Lavin et al. 2017, xix). This gesture to overlap the volume with Sinophone studies could bear some further examination. Shu-mei Shih, whose book *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations across the Pacific* (2007)—which is often considered to have inaugurated Sinophone studies—is mentioned here to help support the Sinophone context that the editors consider suitable for the volume. However, in Shih's book, she stated that the Sinophone is “a network of places of cultural production outside China and on the margins of China and Chineseness” (Shih 2007, 4). Geographical and conceptual heterogeneities to univocal definitions of China and Chineseness are key in the formulation of the Sinophone. While queer fandoms in mainland China are in many ways marginal to “a monolithic China and Chinese culture” due to their subcultural status, they are produced in mainland China, and they often remain relevant to the popular culture there, which is by no means marginal (5). Additionally, Howard Chiang's (2014) words on the Sinophone as quoted in the introduction are also probably not best suited for helping frame this volume within parameters of the Sinophone. This is because, in both “(De)Provincializing China: Queer Historicism and Sinophone Postcolonial Critique” and the rest of his co-edited book, Chiang investigates overlaps between queer

and Sinophone studies demonstrated in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, etc.—in other words, from perspectives not based in China (2014, 20).<sup>2</sup>

As much as the chapters on mainland China might not fall strictly under Sinophone studies, it does not indicate that those chapters break little ground. Besides the fact that they are new to fan studies, those chapters have valuably explored intersections between censorship and queer fandoms, linking the volume to studies dealing with “queer Sinophone contexts” (Lavin et al. 2017, xix). Chapter five by Shuyan Zhou serves as a great example. It details how the gossip surrounding the sexuality of transnational Asian pop singer Wang Leehom and classical pianist Li Yundi was generated, instrumentalized by official media, and finally denied by the very media in and out of the Chinese cyberspace. In Zhou's analysis, both the official media and the grassroots fantasy are not fixed in nature: the former could sponsor a nationally broadcast performance with the two celebrities after the gossip had gone viral, while the latter was not necessarily engaging in a political discourse when gossiping about the two. Chapter six by Egret Lulu Zhou also touches on censorship by engaging in depth with the popular “transgender” fictional literary and television character Dongfang Bubai, whose gender and sexuality are differently speculated from drama to drama and from thread to thread. I will come back to this meaningful withdrawal of queer cyberspace from its easily presumed resistance status. For now, it is crucial to note that scholars focusing on queer fandoms in China, such as Shuyan Zhou and Egret Lulu Zhou, pay a great amount of attention to government censorship issues where legality and criminality are at stake but do not overdetermine it.

As previously mentioned, queer studies form another area with which this anthology overlaps. Quoting from Andrew Parker's “Foucault's Tongue,” Zhao, Yang, and Lavin maintain that “‘queer’ is employed as a productive analytical lens that ‘defines itself diacritically not against heterosexuality but against the normative’ (Lavin et al. 2017, xii). It serves here as an umbrella term to “loosely refer to all kinds of nonnormative representations” (xii). I agree that “queer” should not be defined strictly in relation to whom the word

was used to defame—genders and sexualities are ever changing, and to equate “queer” with historical identities is an act of policing that maintains the stability of identity. Simultaneously, to open up the reference of the word, which stresses on one’s self-exiling from normalcy, to anything non-normative but not necessarily defiant is somewhat arguable (Getsy 2016, 15). Stemming from activist activities since the 1980s, queer tactics thrive on disruptions beyond providing alternatives, whereas many queer fandoms, as the editors have eloquently put it, are caught up in “some disquieting ambivalence” (Lavin et al. 2017, xiv), meaning that those fandoms embody entanglements with political authorities and profit-driven media industries beyond having transgressive potentials. That said, since subjects of those fandoms often contest categories of gender and sexuality, and many fandoms have gone through or are still in legally and morally gray territories, it would be unfair to detach the volume from queer studies. Perhaps it is some extra caution that we as scholars need when we mobilize the term “queer.”

Chapter four by Zhao on the Chinese fans’ gossip about American actor Katherine Moennig, chapter seven by Eva Cheuk Yin Li on the fandom around Hong Kong singer Denise Ho before and after her coming-out, and chapter ten by Fran Martin on the culture of Taiwanese women reading Boy’s Love (BL)—“a genre of male-male romance created by and for women and sexual minorities”—provide excellent examples where the identity-based queerness of the characters/subjects has incited debates on gender and sexuality among fans (3). The Taiwanese BL “world” based on but removed from Japan and Chinese fans’ culturally self-reflexive “Occidentalism” demonstrates a factor of fantasy in queer fandoms. This fantastical element not only makes fans’ identification experience more pleasurable, it also invites fans to comment on their real life experience of gender and sexuality. More specifically, in chapter ten, for Fran Martin, the BL world is “a discursive arena for ongoing arguments around the meaning and politics of nonstraight sexualities,” which impacts the female readership’s considerations of their own gender roles and sexualities (203). For Zhao, even though the Occidentalism based on homonorma-

tive desires (which are less commonly accepted by mainstream Chinese society than they are by its U.S. counterpart) differs from the much more care-free “world” argued by Martin, the two imaginings can still find commonality in how they allow fans to think differently from the mainstream (65–66). Hong-Kong fans of Denise Ho that Li focuses on might favour debating Denise Ho’s sexuality over collectively imagining her in homoerotic narratives as they lack a common fantasy. Nonetheless, their comparisons of Denise Ho to themselves and her views to their own indicate that the discussion of Denise Ho has facilitated a forum on sexuality.

Besides researching the influence of queer fandoms on fans’ real-life desires, all the above essays note that they deal mostly with female fans. This gender aspect is also heeded to in Lavin’s chapter on mainland-born, Hong Kong-based fans of mainland Chinese singer Li Yuchun, as well as in Yang and Yanrui Xu’s chapter on the fandom around *danmei* (Chinese BL), and to a lesser extent in Weijung Chang’s chapter nine on *fujoshi* (girls who enjoy BL texts and manga) in Taiwan. Correspondingly, the editors have stated that “[this] gendering not only corresponds to the demographics of Chinese-speaking queer fandoms but also points to the key role of these sites as countering the evident gender hierarchy in the sweep of active fandoms in general” (Lavin et al. 2017, xiv–xv). This countering of gender inequality is brought by Lavin’s chapter into a complex that also holds reflections on national and local identifications. Chapter eight illustrates how the cosmopolitan androgyny (*zhongxing* in Mandarin) fashioned by Li marks her fluidity in national, local, gender, and sexual belongings, which university-educated female fans of Li from the mainland but living in Hong Kong can particularly resonate with.

Almost all chapters have taken transnationality into consideration. This attention to transnationality is particularly precious in contexts of the People’s Republic of China, where censorship seems to have taken the strong hold and disallowed liberalism of sorts. This stereotypical view of China contrasts with liberal depictions of Hong Kong and Taiwan, necessitating the editors to explicate the term “transnational” in regional contexts along with its likes (“transregional” and “cross-cultural”).

They instantiate border crossings in queer fandoms with facts including the origin of mainland Chinese BL and GL (Girls' Love) in Japan by way of Taiwan; and Mandarin speakers' extensive use of the Cantonese transliteration of "gay" into *ji* (Lavin et al. 2017, xii).

Chapter one to three serve as great examples for cross-cultural, transnational, and transregional flows in the People's Republic of China. In chapter one, having given grassroots distribution networks and communities of *danmei* materials a thorough review, Yang and Xu also capture the anxious convergence of transnationality and nationalism within *danmei* communities. Shih-chen Chao's chapter two first locates transnationality in the subject of the fandom—the China-based Alice Cos Group consisting of male cosplayers of female roles from or inspired by Japanese manga/anime and Korean girl pop groups. Then, Chao brings the feminine cuteness that the male cosplayers deliver into an East Asian context by emphasizing the regional prevalence of the performativity of normative femininity while also indicating that the Group has queered the very cuteness. Yang's chapter on the BL fandom around the Japanese manga/anime series *Axis Power Hetalia* (*Hetalia*) analyzes contradictions within the community regarding the series as a transnational product. As China is seen in ambitious characters depicted in *Hetalia*-inspired, Chinese-language *tongrenzhi* (fanzines), these anthropomorphisms of China in relation to those of other countries aid in understanding how nationalism and transnational cultural flows coexist. Interestingly, the mixed feelings held by mainland Chinese BL fans toward Japan contrasts greatly with the Japanophilia of the BL fandom in Taiwan—the latter is the focus of Chang's chapter nine.

Whether their considerations are of nationalism or homonormativity, the scholars of this volume attend to political and ideological conflicts appearing within fandoms, and the analyses of such appearances provide some of the best insights of the book. To give a few final examples: those conflicts have "[shown] that fans of transnational pop culture are not necessarily more liberal about national politics than nonfans" (Lavin et al. 2017, 14); they have been viewed "as an emblem of a cultural hybridity" and thereby "[recalibrated] the significance

of Chinese queer agency and subjectivity" (66); and they provided "a discursive arena for ongoing arguments" (203). However, this grasp of conflicted transgressions of the mainstream somewhat lacks the representation it deserves in the introduction. The book does not dedicate as much theoretical attention to the understanding of these conflicted transgressions as it does to describing the research in Sinophone and queer contexts, which are not always fitting. Moreover, as much as the division of sections highlights the necessity for more scholarship on mainland China, the division discourages the reader from engaging with cross-cultural issues on a thematic level. Yet, overall, *Boy's Love, Cosplay, and Androgynous Idols* has reinscribed fan studies, especially those in East Asia, by suggesting alternatives to existing cases and giving them informed analyses. It is a great read not only for those who are academically interested in Sinitic-language fandoms. It is also valuable to anyone who is willing to better appreciate the complexity of fandoms that might seem ubiquitous.

### Notes

1. The editors have stated that they intend to have the volume "right the imbalance in the scholarly literature on queer East Asia." In the relevant existing literature, Hong Kong and Taiwanese cultural aspects are dealt with more often than those from mainland China (Lavin et al. 2017, xiii.)
2. This statement applies, with the exception of a part of the chapter that discusses Chen Ran's writing; Chen Ran is a Chinese writer based in Beijing (see Alvin Ka Hin 2013).

### References

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